

OLLI Central Course Description and Syllabus– Fall 2022

**Beyond GDP: The Ongoing Search to Measure “Wellbeing”**

Wednesday afternoons, 1-3pm (Mountain Time); Online, 8 weeks, beginning 9/14/2022

Co-Facilitators: David Carlson and Paul Belanger

**Course Description**

Over the past 30 years, several states have developed and promoted economic, environmental, and social indicators to signify collectively “quality of life,” “progress,” “sustainability” and related concepts. Similar projects are also underway at national and international levels to move beyond the growing dominance of economic growth indicators in public policy and decision-making, such as Gross Domestic Product and stock market valuations. One of the best-known examples of going “beyond GDP” is the set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> unanimously adopted by the United Nations in September 2015.

This course will examine the case for going beyond GDP and other economic growth indicators as proxies for “wellbeing” and review several examples of going beyond GDP at state, national, and international levels for group discussion. This will include a “deep dive” into the strengths and limitations of the U.N.’s framework of SDGs, targets, and indicators and its relevance for local and state-level organizations and agencies. Throughout the course, we shall consider “health” to be a fundamental proxy for “wellbeing”—not only human health, but social and environmental health as well.

Guiding questions include: What is meant by “wellbeing” and can it be credibly measured? Is there evidence that Beyond GDP projects and programs can influence public policy and decision-making at state, national, and global levels? And should Colorado join other states in developing and promoting a consensus “dashboard” of 30-50 key indicators that span economic, social, and ecological dimensions of wellbeing?

**Co-Facilitator Bios**

**David Carlson** [davidcarlson824@gmail.com](mailto:davidcarlson824@gmail.com)

Team Co-Leader, “Beyond GDP Colorado” pilot project, Grand Challenges Initiative, University of Denver (2019-); Founder and Convener, Ethics and Ecological Economics (EEE) Forum (2014-21, [www.eeeforum.org](http://www.eeeforum.org)); adjunct faculty member, Korbel School of Int’l. Studies at DU (spring 2016); Lecturer/Facilitator, OLLI course (fall 2014), “Science and Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?”; Ph.D. from Joint DU-Illiff School of Theology Program in Religious and Theological Studies (2013); policy analyst, Colorado Dept. of Agriculture (1976-2003); Ph.D. from CU Boulder (1971, mathematics).

**Paul Belanger** [PEBelanger@glassdesignresources.com](mailto:PEBelanger@glassdesignresources.com)

Paul is a retired geologist with a first-hand research background in paleoclimate and paleoceanography (B.S., Univ. of Washington; M.S. and Ph.D., Brown University). He is a past facilitator/co-facilitator for many DU-OLLI courses on climate change, solutions, and weather (2014-19). As EEE Forum webmaster and co-moderator with David, Paul is also well-versed on related energy and socio-economic sustainability issues and solutions. He has also engaged these topics deeply in leading the Denver Climate Study Group ([www.denverclimatestudygroup.com](http://www.denverclimatestudygroup.com)) since 2006. In 1995-96 Paul was a research scientist of the International Ocean Discovery Program (IODP) to better understand past-climate influences in the Western Mediterranean. Professionally, he has also worked in oil and gas exploration: Amoco, Arco and others.

## Brief Description of Sessions

- **Session #1 -- The case for going “Beyond GDP”**  
Economic growth measures such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and stock market valuations have come to dominate analysis, discussion, and decision-making in the public square. For many, these indicators have come to serve as proxies for the “quality of life” or “wellbeing.” What if “health”—not only human health, but societal and environmental health as well—were the basis for articulating and tracking the multiple dimensions of wellbeing?
- **Session #2 – Have attempts to “Fix” GDP by incorporating social and environmental factors been successful?**  
Early attempts in the 1970s and 80s led to the creation of the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) in 1995. The basic idea is to “tweak” GDP by including the value of unpaid labor (e.g., housework and volunteering) and subtracting the negative effects of producing goods and services upon society and environment (e.g., loss of leisure time, pollution, depletion of natural resources). Until 1980 GDP and GPI for the U.S. and Colorado tracked quite closely until 1980 and then began to diverge. Why?
- **Session #3 – What can we learn from other states that have launched “Beyond GDP” programs?**  
States with programs include OR, MN, NJ, VA, HA, AZ, and MA. What led to the formation of these programs? Is there a “dashboard” or other framework to cluster indicators by categories or themes? How is “wellbeing” expressed or formulated? Is the concept of “equity” included in a central way? And to what extent are there “beyond GDP” programs in Colorado?
- **Session #4 – Sustainable development, equity, and the U.N.; how relevant are the SDGs for NGOs and other groups?**  
*The Brundtland Report* (1987) provided the initial conceptual formulation of “sustainable development.” In 2015, U.N. member states unanimously adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); 169 targets and 232 indicators were developed in 2016 to track progress toward meeting each SDG by 2030. ***During the remainder of the course, participants will be encouraged to explore possible connections between the SDGs and the goals and indicators of an organization (NGO, agency, business, etc.) of personal and/or professional interest and involvement.***
- **Session #5 – The SDG indicator crisis and a robust response by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network.**  
Reliable global data and consensus statistical methodologies were found to be available for only 40% (98 out of 232) of the original SDG indicators. [SDSN](#), a UN affiliate since 2012, has led a global network of centers of research and knowledge to develop and publish a common set of reliable country-level quantitative indicators to track progress each year. Similar reports are available to track progress by U.S. states (2018) and major U.S. cities (2019).
- **Session #6 – The “Doughnut” model, “Doughnut” economics, and the SDGs.**  
In advance of the 2012 U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development, Oxfam ecological economist Kate Raworth developed a “doughnut” model to visualize 11 key domains of human wellbeing, encircled by nine environmental global thresholds that must not be breached. We trace the evolution of this visually compelling model of human and ecological wellbeing, connections with the SDGs, and its application by the city of Amsterdam.

- **Session #7 – Other noteworthy frameworks of human and ecological wellbeing; participant feedback on SDG exercise.**

Two examples: The 12-page [2022 Colorado County Health Rankings Report](#) features a common set of 35 indicators for ranking the counties in Colorado that gives equal weight to Health Outcomes and Health Factors. Similar reports for each state have been published since 2010. Since 2014, the [Social Progress Imperative](#) has produced a Social Progress Index (SPI) of 50+ social and environmental indicators for most countries annually and for U.S. states in 2018. ***Participants share feedback on connections between SDGs and the goals and indicators of an NGO or agency of interest/involvement.***

- **Session #8 – Promoting measures of human and ecological wellbeing (HEW) in Colorado—what’s next?**

Some guiding questions: Should Colorado join other states in developing and promoting a consensus “dashboard” of 30-50 key indicators that span economic, social, and ecological dimensions of wellbeing? What about convening an annual or biennial Forum and/or report? Would a “clearinghouse” that tracks several different HEW frameworks with measures of wellbeing for Colorado be useful?

### Recommended Books or Materials

Carlson, David L. 2016. “WTO reforms, sustainable development and climate clubs: calls for new thinking,” *Journal of Energy & Natural Resources Law*. Vol. 34, No. 1, 126-136. See especially pp127-130 for a brief U.N. history with sustainable development. *I’m trying to find out if OLLI students can access this article at no cost through the DU library system (David Carlson).*

Cobb, Clifford, Gary Sue Goodman, and Mathis Wackernagel. 1999. *Why Bigger Isn’t Better: The Genuine Progress Indicator—1999 Update*. Redefining Progress. Available at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.458.3771&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Daly, Herman E. 2015. “Economics for a Full World.” This essay has been adapted from a speech on the occasion of the Blue Planet Prize, Tokyo, November 2014. Available at <https://greattransition.org/images/Daly-Economics-Full-World.pdf>

Raworth, Kate. 2014. “Why It’s Time for Doughnut Economics.” TEDx talk [17 minutes]. Available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BHOfIzxPjI> .

Stiglitz, Joseph E., Jean-Paul Fitoussi, and Martine Durand. 2019. *Measuring What Counts: The Global Movement for Well-Being--The Movement for New Metrics, Beyond GDP*. New York: The New Press. Available in paperback.

United Nations. 2015. “Sustainable Development Goals.” Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.