

Many Rivers, One Ocean: An Initiative for Contemplative Study and Practice

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The Initiative for Contemplative Study and Practice Vision:
"To be a catalyst to create space for inner work, outer engagement,
inspiration, and transformation."

Contemplative practices, with their intentions toward well-being, authentic relationships, and deep learning, are beneficial to a community. Therefore, a sense of responsibility exists for universities to explore avenues for developing a culture of contemplative inquiry. This article describes a process embarked upon by members of a large state university community in their intentional pursuit to develop a more pervasive contemplative community on campus. Several faculty and staff with well-established personal practices in mind-body exercise, meditation, and mindfulness were motivated, within their respective professional roles, to incorporate contemplative work in classrooms and programs. Such integration is increasingly common at universities of this size. But how does a university evolve from this isolated integration to a campus-wide collaborative culture of contemplative study and practice? This article offers a description of this process from the perspectives of the initiative's originators, through interviews in which they share their vision, development, and planning of actionable goals. The critical functions of a formalized strategic planning process are presented as helpful in institutionalizing a campuswide initiative to promote contemplative practices. We offer the story of our journey, one path among many in facilitating the development of such an initiative, in the hope that it may be useful to others across higher education settings.

ORIGINS

We have seen a movement across institutions of higher education to acknowledge the benefit of contemplative practices on well-being and learning. Research is emerging to support the benefits of mindfulness in coursework for college students (Schwind et al., 2017). When students, faculty, and staff are provided opportunities to develop contemplative awareness and skills, they can move beyond perceived limitations. This is achieved in part through an understanding of how we are

conditioned by historical, social, and cultural influences to develop our thinking and behavioral habits. There is a transactional process that occurs, with the individual being influenced by their environment as well as the environment being influenced by the individual. When students are provided an opportunity to see how their own core belief systems have evolved and to increase their understanding of self, they may experience a more informed, contextual perspective that is less egocentric. Increased awareness of how our thoughts and behaviors are influenced by our history and culture frees us from judgment of the self and others; this less judgmental perspective facilitates acceptance and interconnectedness. Meditation and mindfulness enhance the ability to move beyond entrenched patterns in the mind that limit understanding of the self, others, and the interconnected world (Robinson, 2004). By simply watching habits of mind and emotion, one is able to cultivate a place within that provides a little objectivity on powerful thoughts and emotions.

The benefits of contemplative practices for cultivating peace and meaningful lives have been acknowledged (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), and there has been significant investment in developing contemplative centers at major universities, the most notable in our own state being the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia (<http://www.uvacontemplation.org>). In contrast to these dedicated spaces, Napora (2017) and Coutant and Caldwell (2017) describe movements that are not reliant on a central building but are successfully growing through the creation of community and changes in perception. In this vein, the authors of this article present a description of James Madison University's (JMU) Initiative for Contemplative Study and Practice (ICSP), which has engaged students, academics, and student affairs personnel in an inclusive process of organization and dedication; other campus communities, particularly those in which funding is limited, can learn from challenges and opportunities this initiative has faced. Moving a large institution in the direction of contemplative community requires sensitivity to available resources and to the challenges of competing priorities within the system. A significant contribution to identifying resources and managing challenges was the use of a formalized mission and strategic planning process. The processes and outcomes of these planning sessions are highlighted for clarity in this article, as a mechanism for movement in impacting campus culture.

The strategic planning process presented here also depicts a process for considering Tierney's (2008) cultural assessment framework, which includes the cultural elements of mission, environment, socialization, information sharing, strategy, and leadership. Coutant and Caldwell (2017) applied these six elements to frame their interview questions for a case study of a university incorporating contemplative practices. Our description of the ICSP represents the emergence of these same elements throughout the development of the mission, vision, values, and strategic plan. In considering varying methods for applying Tierney's framework, we have found encouraging support for the utility of this theoretical framework for university initiatives in cultivating contemplative culture.

METHODS

This story of the ICSP is shared through the eyes of several members of a 10-person steering committee, whose focus was the study and use of contemplative practices for cultivating mindfulness, connection, and engaged learning in the university community. The five secondary authors were interviewed by the lead author, a graduate psychology professor, to create an understanding of the experiences and motivations of individuals who came forth from isolated practice to have a broader, lasting influence.

The authors of this article comprise two psychology professors; the Associate Vice President (AVP) for Wellness, Orientation & Multicultural Engagement, whose office provides support, guidance, and advocacy for the Center for Multicultural Student Services, the Counseling Center, the University Health Center, the Orientation Office, and the University Recreation Center; the associate director of the University Writing Center, which works with students, faculty, and staff to support development of writing and critical thinking skills by providing personalized consultations, resources, and programs that strengthen writing across campus; the assistant director of the Center for Faculty Innovation (CFI), which provides comprehensive professional development opportunities for instructional faculty at all levels and stages of their careers and designs initiatives to build community and create opportunities for growth and innovation in teaching, scholarship, and career planning; and the Coordinator for Mad4U Student Activities, a campus organization created to energize student union spaces through a variety of weekly and annual programs. We provide these descriptions to illustrate the connections represented by the steering committee and those who shared their stories, as well as the breadth of university involvement in and commitment of resources to the initiative.

The interviews were conducted as one-hour individual conversations guided by eight prompts. They began with discussion of previous experiences with contemplative practices on campus prior to the initiative, then focused on subjects' motivations for involvement as well as their experiences of the group coming together, what they valued about the initiative, and the campus resources available to them. The conversations concluded with comments on what has been helpful in moving the initiative forward and hopes for the future of ICSP on campus. The narrative presented here is a culmination of the responses gathered.

THE STORY THAT EMERGED FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Prior to the initiative to promote a contemplative university culture, there were already notable pockets of individuals on campus integrating mindfulness practices in classrooms, as well as organized programs for meditation and practices across various professional disciplines. One of the larger-scale university programs in Student Affairs provides a daily open space known as Madison Meditates, where students, faculty, and staff attend contemplative lunch-hour offerings. Additional programming in Academic

Affairs has focused on development for instructional faculty through Writing Renewal retreats and Social Justice Renewal retreats.

One steering committee member, the director of the University Writing Center, reported a long-standing interest in increasing contemplative practices offered on campus. For several years he sought out like-minded people by listening to others, holding conversations to actively identify people to meet with, and offering workshops in meditation and tai chi. As connections were made, he was invited more and more frequently to lead meditations, mindfulness retreats and contemplative practices in classrooms. His network expanded through his connection with the CFI, where staff generated an initiative to support a faculty interest group on contemplative practices in teaching. This provided opportunities for expanding the network of interested university staff and planted seeds for a body of individuals interested in contemplative science and practice.

Interestingly, it was off-campus conferences that facilitated some of the camaraderie within the university community, with individual faculty members recognizing one another at the 2012 Mindfulness in Education Conference and the 2016 Contemplative Practices for 21st Century Higher Education Conference. After making these connections, these faculty began a process of knitting together a network of individuals with similar goals for contemplative work on campus. A small community was forming, though all activities were still decentralized.

After engaging with the broader community of contemplatives in higher education, this small group of interested individuals, including the authors of this study along with professors of anthropology and nursing, began to understand how prevalent it was becoming for universities to provide contemplative experiences for students. With other state universities establishing contemplative centers, JMU faculty and staff were inspired to begin coordinating their efforts more formally and creating a community at their home institution. While this body of interested persons were engaged in splintered conversations with one another, they were not formalized as an organized group.

For the initiative to be successful in a state university of JMU's size, the initiative needed a leader of influence and a body of individuals who shared the same vision. Its chairperson—the AVP for Wellness, Orientation, and Multicultural Engagement—was well positioned to seek higher administrative support from Student Affairs in organizing the first meeting of interested persons. She invited those individuals she knew were interested and reached out to academic department heads, especially targeting Nursing and Psychology, to identify others. It was also beneficial to have a committee member connected to the student population through the Students Activities and Involvement office, which reached out to solicit student participation. These initiators and the significant response to their initial call moved us from isolated contemplative practitioners to an organized group of institutional change agents.

Although the work done for this initiative is not mentioned in anyone's job description, it holds substantive value to the committee members as a transformative force within their own lives, providing an internal motivation to commit the time and effort needed to move forward. For example, the initiative's chairperson reported having

benefitted from incorporating mindfulness into her own life, describing a long-standing interest in stress management and mindfulness that initially emerged after an eight-week course in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). This personal interest in contemplative practice was echoed by other steering committee members.

Some of the steering committee members' motivation is accentuated by the fact that they were introduced to contemplative practices during their undergraduate years, when they provided direction and transformation. One described participating in contemplative circles on campus as an undergraduate student; he found nourishment in connecting with others for meditation, prayer, chanting, and sharing. Those who had such experiences were motivated to bring similar opportunities to the university and integrate them as a source of support for students facing the challenges of young adult life. It is poignant that the centering, clarity, and peace that contemplative practice has brought into the lives of university staff has played a major role in sustaining their investment in this initiative. This was not just another committee obligation for them; this was personally meaningful.

Beyond personal experiences, the desire to integrate contemplative practice on campus has been legitimized by current literature and research on the benefits of mindfulness and meditation (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). The benefits of self-awareness and interconnection across variable belief systems have also aligned with the scholarly interests of faculty involved in the initiative: a few members are publishing peer-reviewed journal articles on topics of mindfulness, and another is writing a book that integrates contemplative approaches to culturally competent engagement. This alignment of research and personal experience supports the legitimacy of investing resources in higher education for teaching contemplative practices as an opportunity to increase self-awareness and understanding of others.

A critical aspect of the first meeting for all interested persons in the initiative was providing an open and safe space for the variety of individuals' practices and beliefs. Some attendees had decades of experience in a particular contemplative tradition. Some were teachers of yoga, tai chi, or meditation. Others were novices in their contemplative practices but very interested in the initiative. People came from different spiritual traditions, university divisions, and age groups. Attendees identified this diversity as a strength for the group and a culture of acceptance as a key element of its success. Intimidation could have been a roadblock to moving forward, but the open space of the meeting encouraged cohesiveness rather than exclusiveness. The first group meeting established the culture and set expectations for members by offering each the opportunity to share their own experiences with contemplative practice in a nonjudgmental setting. The openness of the group supported the sharing of a broad spectrum of individual journeys and interests and created an energy for learning from one another and working collaboratively to promote a culture for contemplative practices on campus and in the community. Inclusiveness was articulated as a value and later included in the construction of value statements for the initiative.

UNIFICATION AND INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT

A key element in creating a strong foundation for this initiative was understanding and articulating the connection between contemplative practice and the James Madison University (2008) mission: “We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives.” The work of the initiative also spoke to the university’s vision: “To be a national model of the engaged university—engaged with ideas and the world” (James Madison University, 2018).

After some discussion, all members of the initiative agreed that the work of ICSP was very much in line with JMU’s mission on multiple levels; that it would support JMU’s values and promote movement toward fulfilling its vision; and that contemplative practices, like the university itself, support healthier individuals and healthier communities. Group members of the initiative began to see contemplative study and practice as a means for deepening the mission and vision instead of a strange tangent or rogue movement. Having this institutional alignment gave the group confidence to justify its own establishment and, if necessary, defend this use of time and resources.

The early meetings of full group membership of the initiative showed that gentle leadership, committed participants, and participation in contemplative practice were valued. The leadership style in this initiative could be described as a gentle corralling of individuals, a process that included open invitations to complete tasks, mutual acknowledgment of all members, and asking for updates in an accepting manner. The process benefitted from an expectation that participants attend whatever meetings they could attend without being judged. Because university professionals often experience a lot of pressure, both external and internal, in their work environment, it was important for this group to be different.

Guiding Statements and a Plan

With the commitment of members in place, the steering committee began the next phase of development to create a mission, vision, values, and strategic plan. During the third semester of the initiative, the chairperson organized a strategic planning process involving input from all 45 members of the initiative. Utilizing a professional internal to the university who was trained in strategic planning limited the cost of the two full-day sessions to food costs, funded by a budget line in Student Affairs. Facilitated by professional Human Resources staff, the development of the mission and vision was an inclusive and efficient process that promoted thoughtfulness and input from all members; participants included university staff, students, academic administrators, and instructional faculty.

One of the lessons learned was the value of structure for this process: its highly structured yet flexible format inherently provided a safe space for open discussion of ideas, inclusiveness, small group work, and consensus. The facilitator engaged in a specific communication style that emphasized sticking to time limits while also ensuring that everyone was heard. As statements were clarified to develop mission, vision, and value statements, some negotiating was required and conflict was man-

aged through mutual listening. What is referred to as *contemplative, mindfulness, or meditation* may vary across disciplines and practices, but throughout the process the participants evolved a common language, which was valuable for communication and community-building. The rules of engagement for our meetings were also congruent with the values of contemplative practices, in that they included openness, listening to understand, staying engaged, speaking up, relaxing, and enjoying ourselves.

A brief reading called “The Eight-Word Mission Statement” (Starr, 2012), which was assigned to all participants prior to the initial strategic planning meeting, poses several questions that depict the mission statement as a crucial tool for organizational decision-making: “1) Is this the best way to get there? 2) Is there anything else we should be doing to accelerate along the path? and 3) Is everything we’re doing really focused on getting there?” (para. 8). With this article setting the stage for the ICSP’s thinking, members were positioned to begin the planning sessions with a common foundation of being concise and direct in their mission statement and clear on its value and purpose, as well as an emphasis on the need to establish methods of measuring the initiative’s impact on campus. Measurement of results can be a challenge for contemplative practice initiatives in higher education; therefore, the attention paid to its importance at the group’s inception provided helpful direction.

Additional preparation for the development of the group’s mission, vision, values, and strategic planning involved an online survey comprised of 11 questions to frame our thinking, beginning with a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis and also addressing targeted audience, group purpose, ranking of values, and future aspirations. Responses were shared with the group, providing an understanding of the similarities and differences in thought within it and creating a sense of community through acknowledgment of all members’ voices and perceptions without judgment.

Mission and vision. The resulting mission of the ICSP states that “we cultivate wellness, connection, and engaged learning in the JMU community through the study, experience, and application of contemplative practices,” while its vision is “to be a catalyst to create space for inner work, outer engagement, inspiration, and transformation.”

Values. The values selected were awareness, balance, collaboration, compassion, inclusiveness, and learning.

Awareness. As we study, experience, and apply contemplative practices, we value developing and encouraging the understanding of self, others, and the world.

- Noticing body, breath, feelings, and thoughts without judgment
- Describing connections between our thoughts, feelings, and actions
- Experiencing enhanced clarity and focus

Balance. The movement towards equilibrium amongst the various components of the JMU community and beyond.

- Appreciation of diverse ideas, individuals, and experiences
- Cultivation of respectful, appreciative, collaborative interactions within the JMU community
- Creation of equilibrium through thoughtful consideration of all perspectives

- Demonstrated evidence of increasing well-being and tranquility in the JMU community

Collaboration. We consistently work towards shared goals, utilizing the talents, skills and abilities of the JMU community towards a vision that is global and inclusive.

- We practice deep listening, striving to be present, reflecting back what we have heard, and asking clarifying questions to gain understanding.
- We practice patience with each other, listening as ideas are communicated, working through disagreement and misunderstanding, and encouraging processing and reflection.
- We actively seek and invite collaboration from unlikely places.

Compassion. Tuning in to others in a kind and sensitive way in order to alleviate suffering and create loving connections.

- The JMU community reports feeling supported in the pursuit of contemplative studies and practices.
- Observable acts of kindness are the norm.
- The JMU community practices deep listening.

Inclusiveness. Creating a welcoming environment where all people, including those with marginalized voices, feel accepted and free to participate.

- Embracing a broad spectrum of contemplative practices
- Contributing to a culture where all members feel their voices are valued and their contributions are essential
- Inviting and welcoming all individuals from the JMU community to engage in and explore contemplative practices

Learning. The arising of personal or universal insight through study, dialogue, teaching, or practice.

- We practice letting go of preconceptions, cherished notions, and allegiances that might inhibit direct, authentic experience.
- The community reports expansion and deeper cognitive awareness through mindfulness and a wide range of contemplative practices.
- We are committed to the ongoing and ever-evolving unfolding of truth.

These values were the foundation for formulating a strategic action plan. This plan, also facilitated by a professional at the university, was developed from collective goals to provide specific direction for action.

Strategic plan. Specific action goals included:

- Creating a web presence with development of a website to include hosting a research database
- Mapping courses, practices, and programs that are available to the campus community. Begin mapping process with a university-wide survey
- Enhancing and promoting existing programming and creating new programming for faculty, students, and staff
- Conducting research and assessment, including measuring student outcomes

- Identifying and pursuing financing through grants, current financial resources, and collaborative opportunities
- Networking with organizations, departments, and individuals
- Developing a pool of ambassadors made up of practitioners and educators
- Developing a “case” for contemplative practice on campus and in the community
- Establishing truly collaborative opportunities based on results of mapping survey
- Hosting a regional contemplative conference
- Coordinating overarching communication efforts

Timelines and champions for the cause were then identified for each of the strategic planning goals. The initial priorities the ICSP chose to focus on were website development, mapping practices on campus, identifying funding sources, conducting research on student outcomes, networking, establishing collaborative opportunities, developing a case for a contemplative practice model, and hosting a conference.

The strategic plan and action groups then became the driving mechanism for this work. Group members committed themselves to various action subgroups to accomplish the goals of planning events, conducting research that included a university survey of current contemplative practices, and developing the current ICSP website (<http://www.jmu.edu/mindful/>), which presents an overview of the conceptual work of the group to date and introduces a platform for organizing information regarding future activities on campus. This process proved to be very effective in accomplishing specific tasks and expanding the initiative to the broader campus, laying a foundation for realizing the mission and vision.

The strategic planning process was valuable not only for moving forward with intentional action goals but also in facilitating collaboration and open communication. A nonhierarchical togetherness was formed among administrative, staff, faculty, and student members. One steering committee member indicated that some time and attention was needed to promote a non-hierarchical climate due to some members holding positions of power and the potential perception of an “inner circle” of members; however, this individual reported that the strategic planning process was very effective in leveling position and power through an open forum for sharing and discussion.

PROCESS UNDERLYING STRATEGIC PLANNING

The ICSP sees its mission, vision, values, and strategic-planning processes as encompassing the same six-factor cultural assessment framework (Tierney, 2008) adopted by Coutant and Caldwell (2017). But whereas Coutant and Caldwell applied Tierney’s six elements of culture to frame interview questions for assessing the cultural framework of a mindful campus, the ICSP embedded these elements in its own mission and strategic planning process, our description of which references all six elements: mission organization, environment, socialization of new members, information sharing, strategy, and leadership. Retrospective analysis supports the utility of this framework in cultivating a

contemplative culture, even without intentionality. A more explicit description of the specific elements embedded in the strategic plan is provided below.

Organization mission. As mentioned previously, ICSP members carefully considered the university mission statement and concluded that contemplative study and practices were consistent with and supportive of the university mission. This process was helpful during the initial work of the initiative in validating its purpose and understanding how it could find its place within the larger system.

Environment. Throughout the strategic planning process, references were made to the elements of the environment that already supported contemplative practices. The vast campus includes an arboretum with nature walking trails, a duck pond, a labyrinth, and locations designated for meditation and relaxation. Although a center for contemplative practices is not present, the campus setting does offer an environment for meditation and mindfulness.

Socialization. Compassion, collaboration, and inclusiveness were three of the six values designated by the ICSP strategic plan. There was an emphasis on inclusiveness and the acceptance of potentially marginalized individuals. The socialization of new members included the sharing of goals and abilities towards a global and inclusive vision.

Information Sharing. The value of learning and the specific strategic action of developing a website were included as critical elements for expanding deeper cognitive awareness. The ICSP website provides access to the mission and the programming of contemplative practices on campus. While there are many structures within the university available for information sharing, email is the primary avenue for disseminating information for the university. Though it relies on communication via email for planning purposes, the ICSP also strives to make personal connections through the specific strategic action of developing a pool of ambassadors made up of practitioners and educators.

Leadership. The benefits of gentle leadership, which we found conducive to unifying this initiative, have already been described here. But the strategic planning process, during which every strategic action was assigned a “champion” to lead its direction and completion, facilitated identifying a culture of *shared leadership* as another key aspect of the initiative.

Although our process of applying Tierney’s (2008) framework for assessing culture in contemplative initiatives was only retrospective, the consistency with which the six elements surfaced throughout both the interviews and the development of our mission, vision, values, and strategic actions indicates their value to universities moving toward a contemplative culture.

COMING HOME

From the beginning and throughout subsequent meetings, there was a high level of response and interest in the initiative. Several steering committee members indicated in interviews that the unification of ICSP validated their sense of contemplative study and practice as legitimate ways to deepen learning and community in a university setting.

Members were energized through the group's unified embrace of the potential and importance of advancing a contemplative focus for students. Within the context of busy university life, there must be certain dynamics at play to motivate the investment of any additional time commitment; in the ICSP's case, the sense of validation felt within the group confirmed its belief in its own purpose, energizing members to be present and involved in the work of moving forward. One member noted that for years he had hoped for a forum for cultivating contemplative practices on campus; he said that being connected to this work was "like coming home."

Interviews with steering committee members unveiled a previously unmentioned but valued quality that was also significant in solidifying commitment to the initiative: kindness. Members highlighted as motivations the desire to bring peace and loving-kindness to the campus and the feeling of working with knowledgeable and enthusiastic people. Individuals also reported enjoyment and peace for themselves through the connections and time spent with this emerging community; because the time spent sharing and working together encompassed genuine respect and listening to one another and differences in perspective were valued rather than discouraged, individuals experienced a sense of belonging. This was representative of the additional layer of discovery that the initiative was hoping to bring to students' learning experiences: the level of genuine connection with others in our community that is critical to successfully cultivating wellness and preparing students to lead productive and meaningful lives.

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

An important step in ICSP's development was getting a more comprehensive picture of the ways in which contemplative practice was already being integrated at the university. The results of a university-wide survey highlighted an integration of current contemplative practices across areas of teaching, administration, and research that span the departments of Math, Religious Studies and Philosophy, Art Education, Art History, Theater, Psychology, Graduate Psychology, Biology, Early Elementary and Reading Education, Writing Rhetoric and Technical Communication, and English as well as the offices of Student Affairs, Student Activities and Involvement, and the University Writing Center.

The survey data listed a dozen courses related to contemplative studies and practices as well as contemplative activities that included walking meditation in the university arboretum, setting intention for classes by reading an earth prayer each day, using a talking stick to promote listening to one another, reflective journaling, a five-minute centering at the beginning of class, practical voice and movement exercises integrating breath and sensory awareness, deep breathing exercises before exams, and writing reflections on the natural environment. Current contemplative programming on campus includes Writing Renewal Retreats for faculty, Contemplative Pedagogies Workshops for faculty, Contemplative Practices to Sustain the Scholar, Madison Meditates, Mindful Experience Retreat Day, Koru Mindfulness courses, and Teacher Wellness Program services for public schools.

In addition to these reported programs, the university offers meditation, mindfulness, and yoga through the Recreation Center; Student Counseling Center resources on mindfulness and relaxation; yoga and wellness opportunities through the Talent Development department, and a contemplative student organization known as Turning In. Also, through Contemplative Practices for Self Care (Faculty Community), offered in a campus library every Wednesday during the noon hour, all faculty have the opportunity to explore contemplative practice in a community of peers and discuss their experiences with it and its application to other aspects of their teaching, scholarship, careers, and work-life integration.

With such an abundance of previously established practices and programs on campus, ICSP had a strong foundation to build upon; these programs and practices and the individuals involved in them are its primary energy source. Although their existence does not solve ICSP's issue of funding or campus visibility, it does provide some infrastructure to work with and evidence of the successful integration of contemplative practice in this environment.

Some practical resources, such as meeting space and funding to support retreats and conference attendance, are needed to gain momentum. Although funding is currently decentralized, some minimal resources have been made available to support specific activities. For some faculty, having contemplative study or practice tied to their scholarship or service was key to receiving departmental funding. Additional university resources were also available through Human Resources and the CFI.

TIMELINE

For clarity, a broad, sweeping timeline is presented below, depicting the progress of the initiative by semester across a three-year period. The movement toward broad goals represented here is reflective of the accomplishments and ongoing work of individuals and committees.

- Spring 2015: First gathering to assess faculty, staff, and student interest
- Summer 2015: Full retreat for identifying the group and setting intentions
- Fall 2015: Formation of steering committee
- Winter 2016: Strategic planning sessions to develop mission, vision, and values
- Spring 2016: Development of action plan for achieving goals
- Fall 2016: Commitment of group members to specific action plans in four areas: website development, course mapping, enhancement and development of contemplative programming, and research development
- Spring 2017: website launch; completion of course mapping survey; interviews conducted for this article
- Fall 2017: Application for funding under Madison Trust Grant (not funded)
- Spring 2018: Obtainment of permission to host the 2019 Contemplative Practices in 21st Century Higher Education Conference on campus

CHALLENGES

Challenges and threats to the initiative are similar to those reported by others working through institutional barriers and building community among those involved in contemplative practice (Napora, 2017). The initial interviews conducted with the authors provided some understanding of their concerns about the lack of an inherent structure for contemplative practice and study within existing university structures.

There were also concerns about non-practicing individuals' lack of awareness of the potential of contemplative practices to meaningfully impact the education of university students. This was experienced as ICSP pursued a university-sponsored grant opportunity: although the initiative was successful in moving through the first round of projects considered for funding, feedback indicated that funders did not choose ICSP Mindfulness Week due to unfamiliarity with and lack of understanding of the educational relevance of contemplative practices. One possible way to heighten awareness and understanding among non-practitioners on campus is for JMU to host a contemplative conference; it is our hope that the presence of the 2019 Contemplative Practices in 21st Century Higher Education Conference in the near future will provide this opportunity for broadening perception of contemplative practices and study as a viable educational focus.

ICSP approaches the presentation of programs and its own growth plans with an attitude of open acceptance of all contemplative practices; this approach is facilitated by the diversity of representation in the larger ICSP group, comprised of individuals with varying practices and religious orientations. But building community among individuals with variable practices can be challenging; contemplatives with similar practices have a natural sense of community, possibly resulting in others feeling marginalized. In an effort to build a greater sense of community, ICSP developed a committee to generate a variety of gatherings with broad appeal, inviting the larger group to participate in activities such as nature walks, teas, sound meditation, and story circles. As a recently added action plan, this community-building approach will be evaluated and adjusted to create additional outreach based on attendance and feedback from participants.

MOVING FORWARD

The continued focus of the ICSP involves acquiring clear recognition as an ongoing university program with institutional support, based on an acknowledgment of its value. The ICSP is focused on communicating the potential of contemplative practices for transforming university culture and student learning. We hope to create a broader awareness of how the contemplative mind can enhance the well-being of students, build interconnectedness, and facilitate deep learning. Long-range goals include an impact on the community surrounding the campus and the communities where students build their lives in the future.

With the strategic plan as a guide for action, we are intentionally moving forward to accomplish our vision and goals. This plan was organized into a table for easy reference, and the most obtainable action steps were selected as priority for current focus. One such priority area is conducting research and assessment. The research committee

is working toward measuring student and faculty outcomes, as part of the continual process of validating the mission: areas of interest include assessing the role of contemplative practices in reducing student stress, increasing inner engagement, enhancing outer engagement, and deepening learning. We also anticipate that a contemplative culture on campus could be shown to contribute to student and staff recruitment as well as staff retention.

Our direction going forward focuses on action plans for pursuing financing through grants and collaborative opportunities. The mapping survey has identified current programming and practices on campus that can facilitate future networking—including the development of the pool of ambassadors mentioned earlier—and collaborations with individuals, departments, and organizations. Additionally, the Contemplative Practices in 21st Century Higher Education Conference, which the committee chairperson has arranged for JMU to host in the spring of 2019, is expected to further promote contemplative study and practice through shared learning and new connections, moving us closer to addressing the current challenges of institutional barriers to community-building. Our dreams also include establishing a contemplative study and practice center that would further centralize resources for promoting existing programming and creating new programming for faculty, staff, and students.

Intentions for the future direction of the initiative are dependent on coordinating communication. Every actionable goal, including coordinating communication, now has an identified group of committed individuals focused on the goal. Organizing and prioritizing specific actions through the use of the strategic plan will provide the focus for accomplishing these goals. As we communicate our vision across the campus, Tierney's (2008) framework may be helpful in monitoring our progress.

Underlying the plan is our hope for the momentum to continue. We anticipate increasing faculty and staff involvement, development of course activities, and advancement of contemplative practices across many venues, all of which will create new opportunities for studying the benefits of contemplative practice. Determining the desired student outcomes and the measures for assessing these outcomes will help guide the design of programming for students, and expanding contemplative practices across university programs—creating a variety of opportunities for engagement in inner work—can provide opportunities to differentiate best practices for maximizing these outcomes, further informing the direction of program planning. We anticipate an expansion of available research evidence as universities implement contemplative practices with greater zeal. As we move forward with our practices, we will also move forward with our contemplative studies: focusing on research, hosting more conferences, identifying more funding sources, and collaborating with new partners.

CONCLUSION

Within the time-consuming work of university life, it is important to prioritize the work that will maximize our impact on individuals and communities in meaningful ways. Contemplative practice provides opportunities for individuals to pursue paths of inner work

that enable them to relate to others with greater love and understanding. Our initiative has only begun to enhance contemplative practices across the university; we offer its story as a point of encouragement for other institutions of higher learning to engage in their own initiatives.

The stepping stones for beginning a journey such as ours are shared here to highlight the idea that, though each journey will vary depending on resources and limitations, there is a central thread for moving forward. Who we are in the construction of a contemplative initiative is core to how the process will unfold. An intent for equanimity in the building of the initiative itself lays the foundation for the productive work of changing an institution and, more broadly, transforming higher education. We believe in the opportunity for each member of the university community to find their own path, with discernment, for living a contemplative life. We are hopeful in consideration of the many paths available in higher education for embedding contemplative studies and practices to promote transformation, understanding, and kindness.

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