

# Building Just Communities

**F**or this special issue, we were guided by the theme in the Call for Papers: How can contemplative approaches nurture more ethical, compassionate, and socially just communities in higher education in a way that recognizes and honors differences with a commitment to the common flourishing of all? We received a wide spectrum of inspiring research and reflections that illustrate the components and means for creating more socially just communities through contemplative practices.

All the articles we chose provide pedagogical tools and evidence of positive impacts on inner awareness as well as the sense of connectedness either in the classroom, amongst faculty and staff, or across universities and related communities in their geographic area. With respect to the impacts of contemplative practices more specifically related to socially just communities, you will find innovative examples in this journal. Kevin Healey provides critical-historical context for the music of John Cage and John Coltrane that focuses on issues of sexual and racial identity. Mary Keator, Warren J. Savage, Alessa Foley, Matthew Furtado, Hibo Hussein, Meytal Raikhman, and Jessica Gray share an interfaith dialogue that explores the art of listening as contemplative practice for building socially just communities amongst diverse faculty and Christian, Jewish, and Muslim students. Kakali Bhattacharya and Meaghan Cochrane create an understanding of self, self in relation to others, and understanding social structures of oppression as manifested through un/earned privileges.

Although some articles are more explicitly about social justice, they all provide tools and evidence that contemplative practices strengthen the foundations for social justice: awareness and connectedness. Karen Ragoonaden examines the similarities between mindfulness practices and traditional teachings of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis First Peoples of Canada. Carey Marie Noland, Cigdem Talgar, Jessica Speed-Wiley, and Jacob Depue demonstrate how a simple and intentional gratitude practice build shared experience and positive impacts on student learning, student happiness, and relationships amongst the whole class. Jane Compson explores how incorporating contemplative practices into online courses cultivates community in cyberspace. Laura Biagi introduces contemplative practices in an Italian Studies course on Dante's Paradise to create holistic learning experiences and group sharing that transcends cultural boundaries.

With such variety, we must return to the basic question, what is contemplative practice? Ameena Batada, Keith Chichester, Melissa J. Himelein, and Richard Chess explicitly explore how contemplative practices are already happening in our classrooms without being named as such. They ask if finding out about them might elucidate opportunities to support faculty in deepening and expanding current efforts. In their reflection, Donald McCown and Josie Billington show their use of text

to create ethical spaces that create community. In a sensitive dialogue of letters to each other they explain how they create what they call “atmosphere,” although their contemplative methods are very different. Through their discussion on creating atmosphere, we discover that we are always sharing spaces, yet we do not always perceive that as something we do and create together. Coming to know these spaces and how we occupy them is about social justice.

Though contemplative practices have been present for millennia within numerous cultures and religions, this is still a new field in contemporary higher education. Not all the questions suggested in the call for papers were explicitly addressed. For example, there were no manuscripts that referred to campus labor unions and none that explicitly addressed “transforming white guilt and fragility into responsibility and resilience.” Yet there were clearly implications for how such questions may be addressed. Campus labor unions could easily become included in the far-reaching, inter-institutional collaborative described by Lisa Napora. And the study on the development of social and emotional competence by Emily Scida and Jill Jones could be expanded from the general focus on stress to include transformative experiences of guilt and fragility.

From such variety, we see that the [Tree of Contemplative Practices](#) on the Contemplative Mind web site has flowers and fruit not shown in the picture. In several of the studies mentioned above, readers see how exploring inner narratives reshapes people’s relationships to systemic issues. We move from the impacts of contemplative practices on individual learning to the impacts on social identities and emerging communities in higher education. Another over-arching paper is that of Linda Coutant and Karen Caldwell, who break down the component parts of creating a mindful campus. They argue, and illustrate to an extent, that to realize deep institutional changes, contemplative practices used within the classroom need to be supported by physical spaces and places for contemplative practices to occur; organizational structures (e.g., learning communities and meditation clubs); financial structures (e.g., grants and professorates); and communication networks throughout the institution. These institutional changes become the embodiment and means to integrate contemplative practices in the curricula and pedagogies that faculty, staff, and students develop.

We recognize the need for more research, research that meets the rigorous requirements of academia without becoming reductionist. We hope this issue stimulates an interest in mixed methods research combining qualitative and quantitative measures, longitudinal studies, and even deeper personal reflection. We have a long way to go, yet we believe the inspiration and determination of these authors augurs well for more socially just communities in higher education.

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