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Linda B. Domenitz
Capital Community College

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The Compassion Project: A Community College Case Study on Cultivating Compassion and Understanding Through Mindfulness

Linda B. Domenitz

Capital Community College

Community colleges are a valuable and important part of the United States higher educational landscape; however, completion rates are low, particularly for the low-income students who frequent these institutions. Many efforts to strengthen retention and persistence have focused on academic and financial support, and college administrators have become more knowledgeable about ameliorating some of the conditions that contribute to these challenges, but there is much yet to learn. Affiliation, trust, and security—qualities that can be increased through contemplative practices when enculturated in the learning community—may be particularly supportive to vulnerable learners, who typically have multiple stressors in their lives. These practices, when embraced, also have a way of creating bidirectional influence, which shapes the very institutional culture that supports them. This report explains the history, evolution, and recent outcomes of one New England community college’s endeavor to explore how contemplative practices might cultivate greater capacities for compassion and understanding amongst students, faculty, staff, and administrators. There is evidence that contemplative and meditative practices benefit learners by creating greater self-regulation and equanimity.

BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM

“We live in a time when science is validating what humans have known throughout the ages; that compassion is not a luxury; it is a necessity for our wellbeing, resilience and survival” (Halifax, 2012, para. 18). National concern has been expressed regarding the retention and completion rates of students attending pub-

lic community colleges; the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's 2015 report indicates a six-year completion rate of 37% (Shapiro et al., 2015). The new demographic of first-generation college students, many of whom are dependent on financial aid for tuition, is entering higher education less prepared to meet its rigorous demands (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2018). Nationwide data reveal that while there has been an increase in the percentage of high school students attending college, more than one in five fail to return for a second year (Marcus, 2018). Students who have not been raised in environments which help cultivate scholastic habits are more likely to stop out or drop out rather than ask for support.

Approximately 46% of the community college population receives federal financial aid indicating they are living at or below the poverty level, and poverty is highly correlated with identifiable patterns commonly found to result from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Felitti et al. (1998) studied ACEs as 10 characteristics within the three categories of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. In this study of close to 10,000 adults, 50% reported at least one ACE, and one fourth reported two or more. It was concluded that individuals who experienced ACEs before the age of 18 suffered from anxiety and depression at higher rates than those who did not; were more likely to use alcohol, drugs, and tobacco; and were more likely to have chronic health problems such as obesity and heart disease. Those with a history of ACEs were more likely to be influenced by social, emotional, physical, and mental challenges (Felitti et al., 1998).

As Herzog and Schmahl write,

At the present time, there is clear evidence that ACE and ACE-related disorders are associated with enduring effects and function of neural stress-regulatory circuits such as for example the hippocampus, the amygdala or the ACC [anterior cingulate cortex] and promote alterations in stress sensitivity and emotion regulation in later life. The respective brain regions could be especially vulnerable to the impact of ACE due to high density of glucocorticoid receptors and high vulnerability to the

effects of glucocorticoids via damage, dendritic atrophy and neurogenesis suppression. (2018)

Colleges have most often addressed student needs and academic underpreparedness by offering add-on services such as academic tutoring, advising, and developmental education courses (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016b). While community colleges have focused on addressing academic underpreparedness as a central goal, the public K-12 system has identified serious academic, social, and behavioral problems due to ACEs as the root cause and have bolstered curricula to include social-emotional learning. Some systems have developed “trauma-sensitive” or “trauma-informed” education as a way of systematically addressing the challenges of educating children impacted by trauma (Health and Medicine Policy Research Group, n.d.).

This paper describes a pilot program which was inspired by three decades of stories told in confidence by community college students in the course of their intake interviews and career development meetings. The story has taken on greater meaning and importance in the context of scientific and educational advancements which have shed light on the mental and physical sequelae of ACEs. This project would never have come into being had it not been for the students who urged the author to tell their stories so that they could be more visible and better understood, not for their deficits but for their resilience in spite of them. It soon became evident that while the details might vary, these students’ issues and challenges remained very consistent and evidenced the strength that they showed in “hoping for better” in the face of so much difficulty and with so little support. This is what really impressed the author and motivated this largely student-driven project.

The project drew upon the voluntary recruitment of a cross-section of community college faculty, staff, students, and institutional administrators and included the training of faculty and staff about the signs, symptoms, and sequelae of ACEs. Empathy and compassion training using mindfulness, contemplative practices, and theater exercises as strategies for cultivating these capacities provided the curriculum. The goal of the project was to observe and note how building affiliative relationships between staff, faculty, and students without concerns or worries about

power and status might have bidirectional relevance and influence the very culture of the institution. While the data are still emergent with regard to affiliation and resilience, this was an opportunity to specifically focus on the affective side of student experience in a way different from the usual classroom and co-curricular experiences, where there are specifically defined roles and boundaries identified by power and position. Using this cohort of volunteers, observations and feedback were reported by all constituents of the project. This project did not emanate from an authoritative body of the college but evolved as a result of the observations and collected anecdotal reports offered by the author, a member of the staff and faculty.

Research Questions

While this was not intended to be a formal study or a case study at the outset, the primary questions that developed as a natural outcome of the project experience included:

1. Would learning about ACEs engender a more compassionate and understanding response to students from college faculty and staff?
2. Would students benefit from having this psychoeducation and, if so, in what specific ways?
3. Would contemplative practices such as meditation facilitate more student self-regulatory behavior, self-efficacy, and affiliative relationships and influence student engagement and retention?
4. What would be the investment of time, energy, and money and how would the institution view this use of resources?

Observations and discoveries are discussed along with suggestions for further cross-disciplinary study and investigation. The pilot project (2016-2018), grant-funded by the college foundation and a local consortium for higher education, was named the Compassion Project.

Strauss et al. (2016) defined compassion as:

a cognitive, affective, and behavioral process consisting of the following five elements that refer to both self- and other-compassion: 1) Recognizing suffering; 2) Understanding the universality of suffering in human experience;

3) Feeling empathy for the person suffering and connecting with the distress (emotional resonance); 4) Tolerating uncomfortable feelings aroused in response to the suffering person (e.g. distress, anger, fear) so remaining open to and accepting of the person suffering; and 5) Motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering. (p. 19)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Neuroscientific and technological advancements have provided growing evidence that human nervous systems, while impacted in the long term by life stressors, may have more resilience due to neuroplastic qualities. Practices of cultivating mindfulness and self-compassion have offered promise with regard to ameliorating the debilitating impact stress has on the human nervous system. For example, the simple act of increasing awareness and attention on one's breath has a way of calming the nervous system and bringing oneself into greater regulation.

Agencies and organizations such as the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) at The University of Texas at Austin, when consulting with college leadership about student engagement and degree completion, have primarily focused on academic underpreparedness and developing a menu of services and strategies to address student needs. Hinojosa, Nguyen, Sellers, and Elassar (2018) studied 525 students and reported that those with one or more ACEs faced greater health- and family-related difficulties resulting in increased academic barriers. Brodgen (2015) also identified this issue in her doctoral dissertation; her findings revealed that community college students with three or more ACEs were more likely to be depressed and anxious, to report that they didn't believe they could succeed or didn't deserve to succeed, and to experience overwhelming stress while attending college. Most of them reported ongoing involvement with ACE-related events and episodes while working toward their degrees. In this study of over 500 students, one of the factors that positively correlated with student persistence was close connection with staff, faculty, and other students. Resiliency factors such as attachment and belonging were also identified by Masten (2009).

The construct of resilience still poses some operational concern for researchers. Davidson et al. (2012) reported that MRI scans show how brain circuits used to identify emotions and affect can be influenced and developed by extensive meditation practice. They explained that when attention is more regulated (a byproduct of mindfulness), it leads to greater interpersonal cooperation and other types of social-emotional learning such as empathy and compassion, qualities that are known to lead to greater success in life. The link between affiliation and resilience remains an interesting question. Future research holds potential for learning more about how practicing mindfulness meditation as a group may influence group cohesion and affiliative and relational skills. Do cultivation of and attention to the affective side of learning, an area not often targeted in college, have unrecognized importance?

In examining national benchmark data from the CCCSE's (2019) Community College Survey of Student Engagement, it is worth noting that the relational indices measured with regard to student-faculty interaction are as follows:

1. Used email communication with an instructor.
2. Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor.
3. Talked about career plans with an instructor or advisor.
4. Discussed ideas from readings or classes with instructor outside of class.
5. Received prompt feedback from instructors about your performance.
6. Worked with instructors on activities other than coursework.

These indices are very proscribed within a narrow range of possibilities. In response to Item 6, which would be the most atypical affiliative experience between faculty and students, 65% of those surveyed reported that they never had worked with instructors outside of their coursework. If affiliation is an important factor linked to persistence and resilience amongst community college students, the CCSSE might offer some further areas of exploration around the construct of affiliation. It is through reciprocity in our early relationships with caregivers that the autonomic nervous system learns to regulate itself, resulting in the development of self-regulation. Positive attunement and resonance with

a caring other serve to create the reciprocity characteristic of co-regulation, which is a first step in cultivating self-regulatory function. While co-regulation is often a missing experience in the lives of individuals with a history of ACEs, it is still possible for them to cultivate co-regulatory relationships, through which self-regulation develops, later in adulthood. Self-regulation—the ability to be self-aware and self-directed—is a capacity which occurs more naturally when children are enculturated in safe, secure, and trusting environments. Secure individuals who have self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-direction are more likely to be able to navigate the complexities of higher education and to trust others; accordingly, they are also more naturally inclined to seek out and benefit from resources and support when needed (Dana, 2018). “Self-regulatory skills associated with emotion and attention, self-representations and prosocial dispositions...can induce plastic changes in brain function and structure, supporting pro-social behavior and academic success” (Davidson et al., 2012, p. 146). While contemplative practices are known to improve the regulation of attention, emotion, motivation, social cognition, and behavior, more rigorous and systematic cross-disciplinary study of the forms and frequencies of practice is necessary to better understand the variances with regard to their efficacy and effectiveness (Davidson et al., 2012).

Community colleges facing the challenges of maintaining student engagement, motivation, and persistence have largely neglected to recognize the impact of ACEs. In K-12 education, ACEs have received more attention, influencing greater proliferation of what is now referred to as “trauma-informed education” (Hochman, 2017). The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has been instrumental in describing trauma-informed education and has produced a study outlining a model that has been useful to others interested in ACEs; this model focuses on attachment, regulation, and competency (ARC). Higher education institutions have struggled with how to best support academically vulnerable students but have not identified them as having ACEs, instead offering a menu of services such as tutoring, advising, and developmental education, which mostly target developmental lags in skills and abilities.

Many in higher education have been perplexed by the sequelae of this hidden and silent problem plaguing students who are at high risk for

stop-out and drop-out. The CCCSE (2016a) identified add-on services and resources, but there has been little if any effort to identify students with ACEs or discuss changing the institutional culture to align with these hidden barriers to success. In addition, the CCCSE (2016a) report indicated that:

[w]hile more than 80% of students believe they are academically prepared to succeed in college, 67% of students who report taking a placement test also report placing into at least one developmental education class. These data demonstrate the disconnect between students' expectations for college and the reality that many are not ready for college-level work. (p. 13)

Levesque (2018) discussed structural and motivational barriers as potential ways to ameliorate low community college completion rates. Her report suggested that colleges should be increasingly aware of labor market outcomes associated with various fields of study. Further, it recommended that colleges abandon the cafeteria-style system of providing resources and add extensive advising and clear, guided pathways to academic goals so that students are not left to navigate their college careers on their own. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, reported that colleges which undertook these kinds of reforms, which involved significantly increased contact with advisors and college personnel, allowing for a more personalized touch, had measurable and significant benefits, providing further evidence that "high-touch" strategies or affiliative experiences with staff and faculty may be instrumental in better retention outcomes (Levesque, 2018).

Similarly, in a report by the American Association of Community Colleges' (2014) 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, the call to action focused on numerous measures to reset the community college system. While some of the suggested strategies would result in increased student affiliation and increased capacity for self-regulation, these qualities were not specifically identified as important constructs to measure with regard to the completion agenda. However, one section of the report does suggest that faculty engagement

needs to be encouraged and cultivated, mentioning the Achieving the Dream initiative (Achieving the Dream, 2019), which likewise recommends broad faculty engagement in student success. The specifics of the faculty engagement agenda are focused on academic engagement and advising but may, in the future, look to the more affective aspects of higher education, including a greater understanding of the unique needs of the population of students who can be identified as having ACEs.

The emerging field of affective neuroscience is providing promising possibilities with regard to widening the understanding of and response to the increased risks associated with ACEs. Teicher et al. (2003) found evidence of significant differences in the hippocampus, amygdala, and cerebellum in the brains of individuals with ACEs, resulting in adaptive pathways designed to enable individuals to adapt to excessive stress. The neurobiological basis of trauma is still an emergent science, and three areas have been identified by researchers Thomason and Marusak (2017) for advancing the understanding of how brain networks evolve, grow, and adapt to shifts in cognition: “1. Discovery of neurobehavioral associations within a longitudinal context, 2. Dissociation of trauma types and of trauma versus chronic stress, and 3. better localization of neural circuitry” (p. 63).

Mindfulness and contemplative practices, now being more prominently addressed in K-12 education systems around the country, hold some promise as a potential way to attend to both affect and affiliation, two constructs which could have importance for student persistence in community college culture. Masten (2009) identified community affiliation, spirituality and religion, belonging and attachment, and personal skills as aspects of resilience that help those who evidence ACEs. Masten’s model of resilience has been used by the Washington Family Policy Council to guide institutional changes; incorporated as part of this model is the importance of attachment, bonding, and belonging, along with building positive supportive relationships and cultivating self-efficacy and self-regulation (believed to be correlates of resilience). Studies of resilience have been largely empirically driven, and there is growing evidence that when vulnerable individuals have the benefit of a caring and competent adult in their lives they are more able to recover from chronic adversity and more likely to make successful adaptations to their circum-

stances (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory and her work on positive emotions and the relationship between positive affect and cognitive flexibility suggest that the human capacity to experience positive emotions may be central to the capacity for optimal well-being. Fredrickson argued that positive emotions lead to greater potential to expand one's personal resources, which also become a reservoir of specific action tendencies available when needed in the future. These findings raise questions with regard to how co-regulatory functioning, which builds the capacity for safe and secure early relationships with parents, influences the cultivation of lifelong positive emotions, which may be linked to adult resilience. Is it possible for an institution to become a co-regulatory agent through the cultivation of mindful pedagogy, practices, and policies, believed to be so valuable for human well-being? The constructs of mindfulness, resilience, affiliation, positive emotions, and their interrelationships may offer us valuable information regarding a paradigm shift to more effectively serving vulnerable first-generation community college students.

Under a grant from the Northeast Consortium on Higher Education (NCHE), resiliency was identified as an important index associated with student success (*Achieving the Dream*, 2019). Students, staff, and faculty, through focus groups at the member colleges of the NCHE, developed five core competencies which were considered important indices of resilience and which contributed to the cultivation of compassion: critical thinking, adaptability, self-awareness, reflective learning, and collaboration. Through this grant, resiliency was defined as adaptation when one faces threats, trauma, accidents, and other tragedies or adverse circumstances: the process of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral return to the state the individual was in prior to the experience. Cohen (2018) has described it as bouncing back or achieving positive outcomes using strategies which are strengthening even in the face of fear or threats (Cohen, 2018). Resilience is fostered when individuals differentiate themselves from that which is aversive to them and experience a clear and felt sense in the transformative process. This is what leads to the experience of compassion (Russell, 2015).

Walpow, Johnson, Hertel, and Kincaid (2009) advocated for six principles of compassionate instruction to build resiliency: “(1) always empower, never disempower; (2) provide unconditional positive regard; (3) maintain high expectations; (4) check assumptions, observe, and question; (5) be a relationship coach; and (6) provide guided opportunities for helpful participation” (p. xix). They also discussed guidelines for faculty and staff self-care.

According to Immordino-Yang (2011), the challenge for educators is to reconcile neuroscientific findings with established educational theories to learn whether and how this information can lead to improvements in learning and teaching. The emerging field of affective neuroscience is influenced by the interplay of the body and the brain, and successful interactions in the world are influenced by an individual’s ability to integrate cognition, physiology, and emotion (Damasio et al., 2000). Evidence from the limited research in neuroscience, cognitive science, developmental psychology, and education suggests that self-regulatory skills associated with emotion and attention and prosocial dispositions such as empathy and compassion are central to the goals of 21st-century education (Davidson et al., 2012), which holds promising implications for higher education.

METHODS

Timeline, Site, and Student Demographics

Between 1985 and 2018, the author, as a member of the student services staff, collected observations and informal interviews with approximately 10,000 certificate- and degree-seeking students at an urban community college in Connecticut. The pattern of enrollment, which stayed consistent, is described here using fall 2018 data as an example, which showed a headcount credit enrollment of approximately 3,300 students with 1,700 enrolled full-time. The student body is 64% female, 80% part-time, 38% African American, 30% Hispanic, 22% Caucasian, 5% Asian, and 5% other ethnicities. The average student age is 29 (23 for full-time students and 31 for part time). Of the 223 faculty, 63 are full-time and 60% are female. While age and ethnicity statistics for faculty and staff changed over the course of this period and may be considered an important variable, these data were not collected.

The college is a Hispanic-Serving Institution and is one of New England's most diverse campuses. It is also designated as an Achieving the Dream Leader College and a participant in the national initiative to reduce achievement gaps and create college opportunity among educationally disadvantaged students.

Data Collection

Observations and anecdotal reports were collected as part of the career planning interviews with students but not permanently recorded. Meetings were voluntary, and students came by walk in, self-referral, or referral by faculty or staff. Career planning services were made known to students through the college website, college publications, and weekly bulletins. Interviews typically included recording some personal and academic history along with an exploration of personal and career goals and informal and formal assessments of values, interests, and aptitudes. Students received support and help in preparing for internships and employment. As required by the college, electronic records were maintained with regard to academic and career information but not personal histories.

Care was taken not to embed undue researcher bias into the collection of interviews by permitting any student interested in participating to do so regardless of their demographic background, time in college, or academic program. Student bias may have been present, in that students self-selected to participate in these interviews; thus they may have demonstrated a more future-oriented, self-reliant, optimistic, or determined problem-solving attitude, which may have enhanced their ability to self-regulate and succeed in a college setting.

Data Analysis

Individual interview notes, reflective coding, and peer review were the primary methods of data analysis. Over the course of the three decades, the examiner noted that the vast majority of students, regardless of age or country of birth, exhibited some form and degree of undue hardship or adversity which contributed to academic and economic barriers to their welfare and success. While individual details varied, as would be expected, there were consistent patterns of remarkable life circumstances

in the students' histories. Through these interviews, the author learned that students were not likely to reveal their personal stories to other students or to faculty or staff. They also reported that they did not expect faculty and staff to have an interest in their personal histories. These anecdotal reports were very stirring and inspired the author to make the circumstances of the students more publicly known (while preserving their confidentiality) and, in the face of mounting concerns regarding student retention and engagement and the local and national focus on what might be considered more academically oriented "fixes," to begin looking to K-12 reports and learning about post-9/11 findings regarding trauma's impact on student learning. Questions regarding resilience, affiliation, and the domain of social-emotional learning became of interest in the face of the downward spiral of student engagement and persistence.

Researcher bias is a challenge in a qualitative case study that emerged out of practice. The author's role at the college and her ethical obligation to serve all students with impartiality, along with her role working with a team of other professionals who had to adhere to college policy, helped mitigate potential bias in the data collection and analysis phases, but the author acknowledges her curiosity and assumptions regarding the correlation between student incidences of trauma or stress, neuroscience, compassion, self-regulation, and success. This case study represents the early stages of a more rigorous line of scientific research that the author intends to pursue. It provides an exploratory foundation upon which other research may be built.

OUTCOMES AND FINDINGS

Education and Training of College Stakeholders

The observations and anecdotal recordings early in this case study led the author to write about, present, and discuss with colleagues emerging information about ACEs, adversity and resilience, neuroscientific findings regarding neuroplasticity, and the role of mindfulness and contemplative practices. As a key stakeholder in the college's strategic retention and enrollment effort, the author shared what had been learned about the personal situations of the student body, urging the college to organize its efforts with regard to how to best address and focus atten-

tion on affective issues related to the student experience. Many if not most of the college's faculty and staff, who did not have the opportunity to meet with and know students as the author had, were not aware of the scope of challenges that they faced and might still be facing. ACEs were not yet a topic at higher education meetings and conferences locally or nationally.

While there was evidence of interest on the part of staff and faculty, the project was as of yet unformed, as it required the vision and effort of the collective. Thus, the outreach and recruitment effort was designed to touch those who were interested in collaborative visioning about activities that would build on relationships and affiliation. While it had become more customary for the college to view students as coming from a place of disadvantage or lack of preparedness, the group's hope was to stimulate interest in seeing and supporting their strength and ability to manage multiple adversities. Could the college shift its lens to viewing students as resilient rather than deficient?

Thus began the Discovery phase, as the group utilized the appreciative inquiry 4-D (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny) model (Markova & Holland, 2005; Richer, Ritchie, & Marchionni, 2010) as a way of organizing the process. This model engages participants in identifying strengths and best practices. As our group began to discuss the stories of the students and engage with them in the Compassion Circle (see Appendix A), it became easier to see them as resourceful and strong rather than deficient. This served to motivate us toward the next phase of the process, the Dream phase.

Institutional Support and Recruitment

Through presentations by the author and guest speakers, the college administration became more interested in and amenable to learning about ACEs, though some staff and faculty remained skeptical about the value of the project. Several small grants were awarded by the college's foundation and a community partner, a consortium for higher education. A local professional theater company volunteered to provide onsite faculty and staff training in theater games and activities as a way of teaching empathy and understanding through character role-plays. Public relations

staff marketed the project to faculty and staff, and a train-the-trainer video was created for those who were unable to attend. A group of students who had been part of the inspiration for the project continued on as volunteers to recruit other students.

Collaborative Planning and Programming

Using appreciative inquiry (Markova & Holland, 2005; Richer et al., 2010) as a model to shape the vision, the small cohort of volunteers sought out others who were interested in experimenting with a bottom-up-inspired project. Even without a full understanding of the project, some faculty showed interest and curiosity, while others were wary or negatively judgmental. Representatives from almost every department of the college were engaged. The group focused on a vision for the future, one in which students were included among the designers. The group adopted the core principles of appreciative inquiry, which included examining members' perspectives, developing an appreciative eye rather than seeing what was deficient, developing a sense of curiosity and wonder, and believing that the group could create what it envisioned. It was understood that change takes place in small steps and that a collective vision would guide decision-making. The college administration requested that the group become a subcommittee of the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, and the author and a colleague became the working group's reporting agents to this body.

The core group of faculty, staff, and students met weekly for hour-long sessions involving meditation, discussion, and meditation-related art and writing activities over the course of two years (see Appendices A and B). Two staff psychologists familiar with mindfulness practices led the practice groups. The subcommittee, which consisted of a smaller cross-section of this group, met twice monthly for planning sessions. The group learned about each other as members meditated together. The usual boundaries of role and status fell away; understanding and acceptance of one another came as a natural consequence of the safe and accepting environment that was created. This group came to be called the Compassion Circle.

Public Disclosure and Building Interest and Engagement

During both years a culminating activity was planned and presented to the entire college body. Its purpose was to showcase the work of the faculty, staff, and students and to bring forth and enact the students' stories as live theater, addressing the central questions posed to them: *Have you ever experienced compassion and understanding when you expected to be judged or criticized? What was the impact of this? Tell your story using whatever resources you need.* These culminating events were instrumental in educating the institution about the adversities and resilience of the student body, which were revelatory for most of the faculty and staff, who had not known much about students' personal circumstances.

Approximately 50 students responded to the recruitment announcement and were interviewed by a group of faculty. Ten students were selected by the committee to prepare to tell their stories, and the remaining students were offered the chance to become active actors in the those stories. Selection was made on the basis of a basic scoring rubric developed by the faculty/staff cohort. Students were paired with faculty and staff mentors who worked with them to craft their stories for public presentation. Several staff worked with the faculty teams to support their work with students so there was supportive scaffolding throughout the development of the project. The theater company was also available for consultation and presented strategies to help faculty coach students in cultivating and staging their stories. Each student was matched with a team of two faculty who worked collaboratively as their coaches and then served as agents on their behalf in the presentation of their personal story. Following the coaching process, a small cohort from the committee viewed the presentations and made further suggestions and recommendations to help shape the stories prior to their public airing. To protect and honor their personal voices, student storytellers were given the final say with regard to their presentations (see Appendix C).

The first year's culminating event took place on the college's reading day, when the college would normally be very quiet, as classes were cancelled. The event was held in the college auditorium with a standing-room-only audience of 300 people. It ran for more than three hours on a day when there would normally be little if any traffic in the build-

ing. For days afterward there was excited discussion about this program amongst the faculty, staff, and students, with much of the feedback expressing amazement. Many students approached those who had come forward to thank them for their courage and to express appreciation for having helped them to believe that they too could tell their stories.

For the following year's event a similar process ensued, with some minor changes: this time, faculty mentors introduced the students' stories, and after each presentation there was a brief mindful interlude in which the audience was asked to spend a few minutes reflecting on that presentation. This created more emphasis on the mindful aspect of the work that had been going on yearlong in the meditation group.

Both events were filmed and edited by a professional filmmaker and were made available on the college website and used in off-campus presentations on the program.

Institutional Ripple Effects

Students were asked in interviews if they could imagine the community college as an institution dedicated to embedding compassion into its pedagogy, practices, and policies. They reported that they were able to envision an institution which enculturated the quality of compassion as having a huge impact on their own success and that of their peers. They imagined increased graduation rates and admissions, expressing enthusiasm as they described these outcomes. When asked to describe how the college would finance this institutional change, there were some who responded: "We all have the potential as human beings to be more aware, caring and sensitive to each other; why should this cost anything?" These questions and their responses fueled the group in beginning to imagine what could be possible if the college became a safe, warm, secure, and supportive environment, and how that might be an improvement not only for students but also for faculty and staff. The exploration of cultural change encouraged the group to dream more of this quality into its collective work, as evidenced by the increased cooperation and collaboration that came from this cohort of faculty, staff, and students.

As part of the Destiny phase, the group needed to find a home at the college: a place of accountability. With the guidance of the college CEO,

the group became an official subcommittee of the college's Committee on Diversity and Inclusion. This gave the project a legitimate budget line, a strategic partnership, and the likelihood of a future. Every student, faculty, and staff member who had participated in the first Compassion Project reported that after going through this experience—hearing each other's personal histories—they viewed their peers and students in an entirely different way. One student, in her final presentation, told a story of having been about to drop out of her program when a simple compassionate act by a professor completely turned her around: she graduated and was able to transfer to a four-year institution with a stellar letter of support from this faculty member, who had formerly had no interest in her because of her history of absences. Faculty who participated in both the Compassion Circle and the Compassion Project expressed pride at being transformative agents rather than viewing themselves as teachers of unprepared first-generation college students:

- “I feel newly invigorated in the classroom as a result of engaging myself and my students in these practices.”
- “Instead of viewing my students as underprepared, I now see them as courageous and able.”
- “When I am in the classroom now I see souls.”
- “I feel inspired in the classroom in a new way.”

This is what has been attempted through the Compassion Project's monthly meditation programs and through the overall cultivation of an academic culture which is inclined to respond to students with understanding and compassion rather than judgment and criticism. It was intended to help students take a U-turn in how they responded to themselves by encouraging them to believe that self-care was not selfish or wrong but necessary for cultivating self-regulation, a quality known to positively influence self leadership, accountability and resilience.

Neff and Dahm (2015) make a powerful case in support of self-compassion and mindfulness as practices that can be learned and cultivated to increase emotional resilience and well-being. When one is able to bring mindful self-compassion to distress, it can reduce reactivity and enable more responsiveness and, accordingly, more productivity at the very time that productivity is threatened by anxiety. This form of self-care

is often absent in populations which have experienced early childhood trauma. Mindfulness has been linked to increased self-regulation, which may reduce anxiety and stress—factors known to negatively impact goal attainment and sustainability—and counteract less productive ways of dealing with anxiety.

A member of the humanities faculty requested that the group submit a proposal for presenting at that year's regional conference, the Two-Year College English Association's Northeast Conference. The program was also accepted for presentation at a Capital Regional Education Council (CREC) conference on mindfulness in education and as a poster session and panel discussion at two Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) conferences. As a result of presenting at CREC, this project attracted other institutions, which led to the development of a small multi-institution grant through the consortium of higher education. The college's leadership program, The National Society for Leadership and Success, requested that the group present at a regional conference and invited it to establish a special leadership program focused on cultivating compassionate student leadership, allowing the program to count toward the public service requirements for leadership induction.

The college's Center for Teaching scheduled the first presentation of the Compassion Project steering committee in the fall of 2016. Since this time the Center for Teaching has invited outside scholars to the college to speak on this topic. In total, the group has now had five professional development programs on this topic since its initiation. Further, the college's foundation, with the endorsement of the college president, increased its funding support by several thousand dollars during succeeding years, demonstrating the ripple effects and public recognition of this project, which support its merits.

With funds contributed by a silent donor, the Compassion Project steering committee produced and distributed hundreds of bookmarks with sayings meant to inspire compassionate practices to students, faculty, and staff. The committee also created a "Wall of Compassion" which displayed the thoughts of students, faculty, staff, and visitors over the course of a full year. A staff member developed a system of gathering quotations about compassion from students and faculty and sharing them weekly through college-wide emails throughout the academic

year. With funding from the college library, a section of the library was identified to hold a collection of books on the topic of compassion as expressed in various career fields.

Anecdotally, the employment community provided feedback that the career preparation the college provided students was missing instruction on successful communication in a global community and workplace, reporting that new professionals needed to be prepared to understand the multiple points of view now common in the global marketplace. The ability to stand in the shoes of another has been known to facilitate greater understanding and ease leading to increased flexibility and cooperation in working relationships. While the project doesn't measure this skill, it was evident that this became a naturally occurring consequence amongst the faculty and staff working on this project. While the project doesn't measure this skill, it is likely that the affiliations created through this project inspired greater ease in collaboration and cooperation on other work assignments.

Napora (2017) described how the strategic advocacy work of "bridging" and "framing" (p. 190) provided her academic community at the University at Buffalo with ways of meeting the cultural resistance that rises up in the face of efforts to create cultural innovation. Bridging was used to translate familiar language concepts with new emerging language, and framing was used similarly to enable the community to understand that the innovations—in this case contemplative pedagogy—were already integral to the vision, mission, values, and strategic plans of the institution. These strategies created a shared narrative which helped transform old perceptions so that there was more of a sense of united purpose; with this, acceptance grew, making deeper-level changes possible. Napora stated that "[t]he key to success lies in finding the most powerful, relevant bridge and frame specific to your institutional context and culture" (p. 191) and went on to describe the quality of "presencing," which can be "understood as the blending of sensing and presence. Sensing involves a perceptual focus on the whole, whereas presencing places perception on connecting with 'the source of an emerging future—to a future possibility that is seeking to emerge' (Sharmer, 2009, p.163)" (p. 198). Students expressed appreciation for the experience of

feeling seen, felt, and heard; they felt the faculty and staff's presence, and it was observable that this presence mattered. When one knows that they are visible, it is more possible to feel that they matter and that their absence would be of concern to others.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This project provided evidence that a small group of students along with dedicated faculty and staff can influence institutional culture from the bottom up. These grassroots efforts resulted in recognition from the college's foundation and CEO, which led to additional seed grants. The high impact of the students' publicly told stories had many internal and external ripple effects. The project's recognition in the community led to the development of a grant with another private four-year college that had a similar interest in mindfulness and compassion. The opportunity to cross-fertilize with the humanities division and a local professional theater company to create a train-the-trainer program for program sustainability was an additional outcome. Students who may have previously felt shame about their circumstances came to understand that they were not unworthy or less than others, gaining a greater sense of self-agency and motivation to overcome their circumstances. As many of them came to view themselves with greater self-understanding and respect, it was evident that the college's staff, faculty, and administration also began to shift perspective, becoming more readily able to view students as resilient and able rather than deficient and underprepared. It was evident that those faculty who had been most hands-on with the project experienced increased pride, not only as faculty but as agents of potential student transformation.

While there were no measurements of the indices of student engagement and retention, the video presentations that were produced give testimony to the impact of cultivating an island of safety, trust, and acceptance amongst a status-free cohort of faculty, staff, and students. In addition to students' moving stories about benefitting and growing from the experience, there was equally moving testimony from faculty and staff, who were clearly touched and influenced in a positive way from being part of the cohort. Almost all of the faculty reported that they had made changes in their pedagogy as a result of being participants. Most

described seeing students with “new eyes” and having greater admiration and respect for them, which then influenced how they addressed them about their academic challenges. Faculty shared their insights and experiences with each other which helped to make recruitment efforts for the second year of the project much easier. Several faculty began to experiment with bringing mindfulness and compassion practices into the classroom and talked with students about how they were affected.

In the author’s four decades of working in higher education, this was an opportunity to witness a project which most definitely had bidirectional influence, demonstrating that faculty could be moved and touched such that they began to see the student body from a new perspective, one which offered the opportunity to see and care about students in new ways. The original questions concerning the interrelationships between mindfulness, compassion, resilience, and affiliation, as well as their impact on student engagement and retention, remain compelling and relevant in educating and serving community-college students. The CCCSE and other agencies focused on college outcomes might explore looking more deeply at faculty-staff interaction and affiliation. A new coaching program, *Catalyze*, created by the nonprofit AmeriCorps organization *College Possible* and involving several private and public universities, is, along with the *Compassion Project*, one of the first efforts to recognize affiliation as a key factor along with the usual support services in improving retention metrics. It suggests a comprehensive “high-touch” mentoring approach pairing vulnerable students with AmeriCorps coaches with similar socioeconomic backgrounds in a buddy system. Preliminary reports are very favorable (Anderson, 2019).

Institutional culture with regard to qualities of trust, safety, and affiliation may be of particular importance for student populations where high percentages have had adverse childhood experiences. The role of mindfulness and compassion practices as a strategy to help students as well as faculty and staff warrants further exploration based upon the bidirectional benefits that were reported. Likewise, the positive experiences of sharing a meditative hour in a group free of roles and status may yield interesting findings on the importance of cultivating a kinder and gentler community. There is reason to believe that cultivating this kind of institutional culture matters more than is currently understood.

NOTE

A video of the author's presentation at the 2018 ACMHE Conference is available for viewing at <https://youtu.be/KHQJyqgdbSU>.

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APPENDIX A

THE COMPASSION CIRCLE

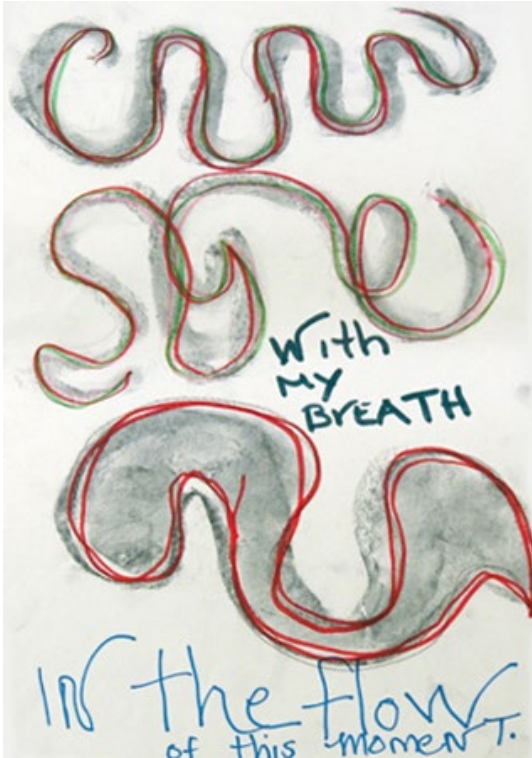
The Compassion Circle was a meditative circle which met twice monthly for 60-90 minutes in a designated space. In the circle, staff, faculty, and students met for the purposes of experiencing meditation. Two psychologists on staff volunteered to facilitate the circle experience. Twice monthly the staff/faculty/student Compassion Project steering committee met to plan the circle meditation experience, reflect on the Compassion Circle process, and plan the culminating public compassion event, which showcased students' compassion stories and the Compassion Museum or "Compassionezium" (see Appendix C).

Compassion Circle began with a brief welcome and statement of purpose followed by a reading of meditative slogans chosen by each participant. After participants listened to a 20-30-minute guided meditation, they were encouraged to use a wide array of art materials to create a drawing which was a reflection on their meditation experience. Participants were invited to describe their experiences and share their artistic renderings in the circle or to anonymously write comments which were read by another member of the circle. (Self-compassion.org served as the source for many of the guided meditations and exercises.) The circle concluded with a one-word or one-gesture response from each participant, on a voluntary basis.

The Compassion Project steering committee was a subcommittee which was integrated into the college governance structure and reported to the college's Committee on Diversity and Inclusion. Other activities generated by the committee included

- creating a collection of books and resources on compassion in the college library,
- creating bookmarks with inspirational messages about compassion,
- developing a "Wall of Compassion," visible to the entire community, to which compassion sayings could be added anonymously, and
- developing a weekly compassion message to the college community, generated by students and distributed through email.

APPENDIX B
ART IN RESPONSE TO MEDITATION







APPENDIX C

THE THEATER/COLLEGE COLLABORATION

The theater company that volunteered to work with the college on this project met with a select group of interested staff and faculty to discuss how this core group planned to use theater arts to showcase the transformational capacity of compassionate response. This collaboration led to a live theater presentation and a living Compassion Museum or “Compassionezium.”

Project A: Live Theater Performance

Through a strategic college-wide public-relations effort, students were recruited and selected as program participants. Students were selected based on their responses to a question prompt: **“Have you ever experienced compassion and understanding when you expected to be judged and/or criticized? And if so, what was the outcome of that experience?”** This prompt was used to generate personal stories demonstrating the transformational potential of compassion.

Students could choose to be the storyteller or work with a cohort of student actors and take on the role of creative director. Once the story-writer decided on their role they were paired with two staff/faculty mentors who assisted them in crafting their story into a performance piece. Coaches met with their student cohorts to refine the story in preparation for the culminating college-wide performance at the end of the semester.

The theater company prepared a train-the-trainer program based upon the collaborative principles of devised theater. Using theater games and exercises, faculty and staff were introduced to drama techniques including

- tableaux or freeze frames, which use body shapes and postures to represent characters or objects;
- thought tracking, used to express the thoughts and feelings of a character in a freeze frame;
- role play, taught as a way of helping individuals step into the shoes of the characters; and
- monologue and dialogue, which were developed to shape the story for dramatic presentation.

Project B: The Compassion Museum or “Compassionezium”

The purpose of the Compassion Museum was to offer students another opportunity to demonstrate the experience of taking on the identity of a character as a way of learning about multiple perspectives and cultivating compassion and understanding through the actual embodiment of that character.

Students selected clothing and props and created biographical stories about their chosen character. They were placed in a gallery space for a designated time and were interactive with their audiences. The statuesque characters came to life as members of the audience approached them. This gave students the opportunity to develop empathy and compassion for a real or fictional character while creatively expressing that character in order to awaken a sympathetic response from their audience.