

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Pucino, Amy (2022) "Lessons from the Blurring of the Frontstage and Backstage: Community College Personnel's Experiences and Use of Contemplative Practices During the Pandemic," *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*. Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol9/iss2/7>

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# Lessons from the Blurring of the Frontstage and Backstage: Community College Personnel's Experiences and Use of Contemplative Practices During the Pandemic

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*This article explores the pandemic and contemplative practice experiences of faculty and staff at a Mid-Atlantic, multi-campus community college. Twenty-three respondents, representing diverse disciplines and programs, were interviewed. Findings include the following: most respondents experienced major and "stressful" work and wellbeing changes during the pandemic; changes included shifting work to remote home environments, wearing masks, social distancing, and social isolation; coping strategies included deepening community, doing contemplative practices, and creating spaces for practices; and advantages of the pandemic included the increased accessibility of online practices and more time available for practices. Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of dramaturgy, emphasizing the frontstage and backstage, grounded this research to show the blurring of public and private sectors during the pandemic. The lessons from the blurring offer ideas on how campuses might enhance the wellbeing of college communities by providing free and accessible space for contemplative practices and building community.*

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The beginning of 2020 brought extraordinary changes to our communities, leaving society scrambling to react to the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions of trust and security about our health, education, economy, and overall way of life, resulted in the stress response for many. Though the virus could infect any of us (O'Brien, 2021), inequity became obvious. Notably, Black and Brown people as well as people experienc-

ing economic insecurity saw higher rates of educational insecurity, job loss, infection, and death (Center for Disease Control and Intervention, 2020; Getachew et al., 2020; Gould & Wilson, 2020; Yaphet et al., 2020). With social distancing, traveling restrictions, and business and organization closures, people suffered social isolation (Panchal et al., 2021), unable to see family, friends, and healthcare providers, while facing elevated grief and anxiety (Center for Disease Control and Intervention, 2020b).

Yet, there was a notable change in pace and sense of community. The ecological environment initially shifted with fewer toxic emissions and better air quality (Rume & Didar-Ui Islam, 2020). Relationships changed, community support systems emerged (O'Brien, 2021), and electronic communication expanded (Nguyen et al., 2020). Dimensions of personal and public life blurred, as more people were working and schooling remotely. Importantly, these changes (some of them positive) were also not equally accessible to all people (Nguyen et al., 2020; Lake & Makori, 2020), but they gave a glimpse of alternatives to the status quo pace and offered a vision of opportunities for change. As contemplative educator, Laura Hill (2020), describes: "We are at a point where the pandemic is inviting us to realize a new way of living. If we can come to agree what is most vital, then the pandemic offers an opportunity to magnify the power of our collective will" (p. 113).

Community colleges saw major changes, too. Across the United States, majority of colleges moved many courses online (Johnson et al., 2020). By moving work online, personnel and students, some with limited experience doing so, worked remotely, utilizing online videoconferencing to create virtual synchronous classrooms and meetings. Students withdrew or chose not to enroll at higher rates than before the pandemic, a trend disproportionately impacting community college students and Black and Brown students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). Community college personnel hastened to shift programming and were trained to teach and work in a heavily remote environment and to protect themselves in a face-to-face environment. Such rapid change elevated the stress response; in fact, college presidents reported growing concern about the mental health of their communities (American Council on Education, 2020).

Importantly, many community colleges are diverse. Students range in age, race, ethnicity, immigration status, economic status, ability, among other demographics. Many students work and have families they support. All students commute to campus, and many take public transportation. Being cognizant of this diversity was necessary for college personnel when making the pandemic-necessitated changes to learning and work. As such, community colleges may have much to teach other colleges about resilience during the pandemic, with their diversity, support services, and training programs (Wang, 2020).

Because of the major changes taking place and the related grief, uncertainty, and anxiety, stress relief practices, like contemplative practices, are essential. Yet, many changes also occurred in the arena of contemplative practice because places of worship, fitness studios, and meditation spaces cut programming or closed, requiring that people shift their practices to home, online, or outdoors. Thus, practices often moved to the private sector.

The fast and vast changes to work and contemplative practice experienced by personnel at community colleges deserves research both to understand an unprecedented historical time in contemplative education and to shed light on ways to best support a diverse community going forward. Therefore, the research described in this article sought to explore the pandemic experiences and contemplative practices of community college personnel. Interview research was conducted with 23 faculty and staff at a Mid-Atlantic, multi-campus community college. Particularly, this research explored the following: 1) the ways the pandemic impacted the work and wellbeing of faculty and staff; 2) the importance of contemplative practices used; and 3) the ways that practices changed during the pandemic, as the boundaries of public work and private home worlds blurred.

### **Defining Contemplative Practice and Its Benefits**

Contemplative practices involve “learning from our own unique, personal experiences” through introspective, reflective practice (CMind, 2021). Contemplative practices can range from stillness to movement practices: they may include meditation, breathwork, visualization, jour-

naling, contemplative art, deep listening, volunteering, yoga, walking, creating spiritual spaces, and more. As described by Barbezat and Bush (2014), "The types of contemplation are varied.... What unites them is a focus on personal awareness, leading to insight" (p. 10). Moreover, practices share the objectives of cultivating focus, attention, introspection, compassion, and creativity (p. 11).

Contemplative practices have benefits for student learning and wellbeing. Practices help students get into the mode of class, enhance self-awareness, and develop appreciation for social connectedness across differences (Song & Muschert, 2014). Practices aid student problem solving and build peer and community connections (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Zajonc, 2014). Practices often simultaneously relieve stress and anxiety (Liss et al., 2020; Siegel, 2011), particularly helpful during the pandemic.

Contemplative practices advantage college personnel, too, because they encourage compassion and understanding among students, faculty, and staff (Domenitz, 2019). Faculty who do contemplative practices can strengthen students' academic inquiry and overall educational experiences (Blake, 2018). Contemplative practices help faculty sit with emotions that arise in the classroom, offering time to choose a reaction. As described by John Baugher (2014), "Perhaps the most formidable barrier to transformative education is not the emotions of students, but teachers' own fears of emotions in the classroom" (p. 235).

Research and reflections have begun to uncover how contemplative practices play a role in supporting people through the pandemic. The pandemic has increased stress (American Council on Education, 2020; Peters et al., 2020) and screen fatigue (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020) and made it difficult to disconnect from work (Routley, 2020). Fortunately, contemplative practices help employees disconnect, improve attention, and ease screen fatigue (Toniolo-Barrios et al., 2021). Also, practices like breath awareness, mindfulness meditation, and body scan can assist people through difficult transitions (Samhita & Varma, 2020) and alleviate anxiety and depression associated with the pandemic (Conversano et al., 2020; Khandelwal, 2020; Matiz et al., 2020). Contemplative practices also can be effectively incorporated in online mediums (see

Kirk & Axelsen, 2020; Palas et al., 2020; Simmons & Redman, 2018). Online practices may create proactive contemplative routines and reduce psychological distress of faculty and students (Farris, et al., 2021; Reilly, 2020). Uniquely, online engagement brings together the private and public spheres.

## Theory

The theory of dramaturgy by Erving Goffman (1959) is useful for explaining interactions in public and private sectors and was utilized in this research to explore the blurring borders between public and private life. Dramaturgy uses the metaphor of the stage to explain social interactions. In public spaces, individuals often put on a performance based on what is expected within their societal statuses and roles. Goffman (1959) described regions of the stage performance, including the *frontstage* and *backstage*. The frontstage is “the place where the performance is given” (p. 107). Goffman (1959) explained that in American society,

The performance is usually given in a highly bounded region, to which boundaries with respect to time are often added... any individual located in this space-time manifold will be in a position to observe the performance and be guided by the definition of the situation which the performance fosters. (p. 107)

For example, in the classroom, there are clear boundaries of space and time. Students and professors arrive to the same classroom at the same time each day. Participants have a good idea of what will be performed: students will sit in chairs facing the professor, and each person will perform according to their socially defined roles. Additionally, the professor and students are part of what Goffman (1959) called a *team* or “any set of individuals who co-operate in the staging of a single routine” (p. 79). The team interacts in the frontstage, where their performance unfolds.

The frontstage is regulated by certain standards of decorum, which fall into two categories, including *standards for interaction* with others, and *instrumental standards*, which include “care of property, maintenance of work levels, etc.” (Goffman, 1959, p. 107). Rules for engagement are called *situational priorities* (Goffman, 1963, p. 22). If

individuals do not follow situational priorities, they may be *stigmatized* (Goffman, 1963), leading others to create social distance between themselves and the stigmatized individual (Cano et al., 2020, p. 40).

With the many rules of the frontstage, actors need rest. When a professor returns to her office and students leave the classroom to go home for the day, they leave the frontstage and move to the backstage or off stage altogether. The backstage is where people rest and prepare for the performance. Goffman (1959) describes, "Here the performer can relax... and step out of character" (p. 112).

Socially defined behavior standards appropriate for the frontstage and backstage of college settings changed during the pandemic. For example, regardless of whether individuals worked in the office or from home, all were required to social distance and wear masks (O'Brien, 2021). These and other quick changes made it difficult to keep up with new situational priorities, causing confusion and stress. To illustrate, interview research with graduate students grounded in dramaturgy found that pandemic changes led to uncertainty and a desire for "explicit guidelines" (Turner et al., 2020, p. 95). For those personnel and students who worked and studied from home during the pandemic, the closer proximity to the backstage may have felt like a "collision of frontstage and backstage" (p. 76). Instead of transitioning from the backstage to the frontstage via a commute, faculty, staff, and students transitioned quickly with a "click of their computer" (p. 84).

Specifically, learning and working by videoconference created interaction between the frontstage and backstage (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Gilmore, 2020; Hogan, 2010; Pearson, 2009). The virtual world, continually spent near or in the backstage, could have implications for overall wellbeing because of the consequences of seeing oneself and others on video while being physically disconnected (O'Brien, 2021). Moreover, too much time in the backstage away from socially defined performance roles may yield feelings of social disconnection.

Now more than ever, online contemplative practices are available. Yet contemplative spaces are not immune from this frontstage/backstage blurring because many practices moved online. Exploring the

lessons from the blurring is important for learning how contemplative practices can be best used going forward.

## **Methods**

This study explored the pandemic and contemplative practice experiences of personnel at a Mid-Atlantic, multi-campus community college. One-hour, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 23 faculty and staff via Zoom during March and April 2021. This research addressed the following research questions:

- How did the pandemic impact the work and wellbeing of faculty and staff?
- What was the importance of contemplative practices for faculty and staff during the pandemic?
- In what ways did contemplative practice use change, particularly as work more often took place in private settings?

## **Participants**

Faculty participants came from a variety of disciplines and roles and included fulltime and part-time respondents, as well as a supervisor, coordinator, and chair. Art, English for Speakers of Other Languages, humanities, library science, social and behavioral science, STEM, and wellness faculty were represented. Staff personnel represented departments including campus facilities, campus outreach and administration for non-credit students, administration for youth programs, honors programming, intercultural programming, public safety, STEM transition, and writing and tutoring. Exact roles and names are excluded from this research to protect confidentiality. Instead, respondents chose pseudonyms.

Respondent characteristics are included in Table 1. Eleven respondents were faculty, ten staff, and two faculty/staff combined. Participants were also split regarding age: 21-40 (5), 41-60 (10), 61-80 (8). Most respondents described themselves as women (19) and White (18). This mirrors the overall college data, as over 60% of faculty and staff



Table 1

*Interview Respondent Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age Range	Contemplative Practices Used	Years Practicing	Years Practicing with Students	Community College Position
Adam	Man	White	41-60	Yoga Sound emersion	5	None	Faculty Fulltime
Catherine	Woman	White	41-60	Storytelling	10	4	Faculty/Staff Fulltime
Evalyn	Woman	White	41-60	Dance Walking Breath work Art	26	3	Faculty Fulltime
Francis	Woman	White	61-80	Breath work Walking Meditation	25	10	Faculty Part-time
Hope	Woman	White	41-60	Meditation Visualization Yoga	10	10	Faculty Fulltime
Jowee	Woman	White	61-80	Meditation Walking Bird Watching Swimming	50	30	Staff Part-time
Kit	Woman	White Hispanic	41-60	Yoga Breath work	20	15	Faculty Fulltime
Laddoo	Woman	Asian	21-40	Yoga	30	2	Faculty Fulltime
Lynne	Woman	White	21-40	Breath work	10+	None	Staff Fulltime
Madeline	Woman	White	61-80	Walking Breath work	2	None	Staff Fulltime
Marilyn	Woman	White	21-40	Breath work	26	8	Staff Fulltime

Table 1, continued

*Interview Respondent Characteristics*

Maud'Dib	Man	White	41-60	Meditation Yoga Walking	30	5	Faculty Fulltime
Mike	Man	Black	21-40	Meditation Breath Work	8	8	Staff Part-time
Mimi	Woman	White	61-80	Yoga Walking	20	None	Staff Part-time
Nia	Woman	Black Hispanic	41-60	Acupuncture Meditation Yoga	23	None	Faculty Fulltime
Nid	Woman	Asian	61-80	Yoga Walking	20	None	Staff Fulltime
Pete	Man	White	61-80	Meditation Visualization	50	None	Faculty Fulltime
Rebecca	Woman	Brown Hispanic	61-80	Meditation Reading	7	3	Staff/Faculty Fulltime
Sadie	Woman	White	41-60	Breath work	Unsure	None	Staff Fulltime
Seamus	Woman	White	41-60	Yoga Animal care	10	5	Faculty Fulltime
Sheila	Woman	White	61-80	Yoga Meditation Swimming	8	None, but 8 years encouraging students to use	Staff Part-time
Stella	Woman	White Hispanic	21-40	Meditation	15	1	Staff Fulltime
Ursula	Woman	White	41-60	Breath work Walking	25	5	Faculty Part-time

are women, and over 60% are White. Two participants described themselves as Asian, two as Black, and one as Brown. Of all participants, four described themselves as Hispanic. Most respondents (17) had done contemplative practices for 10 years or more, and most (15) shared practices with students. Practices were diverse across respondents, including breathwork, meditation, yoga, walking, art, and more.

### *Interview Procedures and Data Analysis*

The convenience sample of 23 participants was accessed during the sabbatical of the author when a contemplative practice survey was sent to all personnel at the community college. Survey respondents provided their email addresses if they were willing to participate in interviews. Interviews were conducted via Zoom to ensure safety during the pandemic. A semi-structured interview guide was created, which included possible questions related to the overall research questions. Interviews each lasted one hour and were transcribed within two days.

After transcription, interviews were coded. Pre-conceived codes were not imposed on the interviews; rather, “open coding” was used by initially reading through the data and noting relevant statements (Neuman, 2003). The constant comparative method was used (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Roulston, 2010), where after reading the transcription several times “selective coding” was conducted, and codes derived from previous readings were revised. Because this method retraced steps, it strengthened research quality. Themes emerged related to the research questions, and results were compared to previous research and explored using Goffman’s theory (Goffman, 1959).

## **Results**

### *Question 1: How did the pandemic impact the work and wellbeing of faculty and staff?*

**Work Changes:** All respondents mentioned work changes, which were described as “stressful.” For example, Mike became unemployed for six months prior to accessing a part-time job at the community college, and Madeline, Mimi, and Sadie described co-workers leaving the job, placing new responsibilities on their shoulders. Sadie qualified this by stating,

“In a way the pandemic is helping us because, yes, we have more to do, but there are less people on campus.” She expressed concern regarding how the workload with fewer staff would be handled once more people return to campus. Mimi also expressed concern about returning to campus. Describing herself as an introvert who works better at home, Mimi wondered about re-entry anxiety. She explained she didn’t have any co-workers and her office space is “small” and “cramped.”

Moreover, the nature of work changed. Twelve of the 13 faculty and three staff personnel reported moving classes to remote learning. Additionally, two staff respondents’ jobs changed to meet the specific needs of the pandemic: one from campus facilities was required to ensure the meeting of State and Federal CDC expanded guidelines of cleanliness, and one from human resources who was part of the contact tracing team that sometimes had to work until 10 p.m. and on weekends.

**Wellbeing Changes:** In some cases, these changes deteriorated physical wellbeing. Mimi described, “Part of [the impact] is physical. We don’t move as much during the pandemic” and shared that a day could go by without leaving the couch. Similarly, Stella noticed a “languishing like a weird stagnation” resulting in body swelling. Ursula described that, “physically, I notice my body can do less.” Sadie, who’s job required more rather than less physical activity, summed it up by sharing, “If I showed you a picture of me probably about two years ago, I think that I’ve aged.”

Respondents also noticed changes to their mental wellbeing and that of colleagues and students. For example, Nid said moving courses online created “a tremendous amount of anxiety,” and Madeline and Sadie also described elevated stress related to increased workload. For example, Sadie shared “Whether [you find the job more or less stressful during the pandemic] depends on your position and what you do because mine has definitely been more stressful.” A faculty person and department chair echoed this sentiment describing that they didn’t think all employees experienced the pandemic changes in the same way; some employees were in “crisis mode” experiencing “exhaustion” and “burnout.”

Other stressors beyond work emerged as well. Evalyn, Francis, Kit, Lynne, and Marilyn described new and different emotional stressors related to living alone and social isolation. Marilyn shared, “I live alone. So, the only time I see people is if I go to the grocery store and when I go to work. So, it’s really stressful.” Evalyn echoed the challenge of isolation: “Sometimes just getting into motion was harder because of the heaviness that I felt during the pandemic and the isolation.” Pete described that he noticed the pandemic “turned up the heat” on societal stressors. In describing the stressors of the times, three respondents even teared up during the interview.

Respondents also noticed wellbeing changes in other people. The respondents who work in personnel or student relations said they noticed people experiencing elevated stress. Madeline noticed colleagues crying more or suffering with higher levels of anxiety. Jowee, Lynee, and Mimi, each staff who interface with students, said students shared how stressful their lives had become. One respondent who works in financial aid described: “[The students’ stress is] more so now because parents are out of work and money is very tight... they need to pay the rent or the car payment or even buy food, so they’re very anxious about it.”

One staff respondent who does outreach services for students described that particularly since the pandemic began, people who call in “don’t have a lot of people to talk to.” She further explained, “They share stories about things I can’t help with, but I still listen, and if I can offer a resource, I do.” Hope and Rebecca described students reporting higher levels of general anxiety. Rebecca explained that this is the first time students have begged her not to fail them before the course started because “people are on the verge of a nervous breakdown.” Importantly, Hope and Francis pointed out that on top of pandemic stressors, students have many other stressors, too, including school, work, relationships, and technology.

Despite often having ongoing exposure to technology, some respondents described that new technology use required of faculty and students during the pandemic also caused anxiousness. Kit explained

that technology was particularly stressful because both she and her students struggled: “I’m not a tech wizard. When students are struggling with tech and I’m struggling with tech and can’t help them, there is no teaching and learning going on.” Adam, on the other hand, described that he does not find technology intimidating, and so works to be a “calming force” for his struggling students.

***Building Connections and Community During the Pandemic:*** Changes in work and wellbeing led to respondents needing connections, community, and contemplative practices. Most respondents described engaging in contemplative practices with others in community. Lakshmi, Seamus, and Stella did yoga or other practices with family members and friends. Mike described engaging in meditation and breathing exercises within a coaching mentorship program:

I did some meditation work with one of my coaches... We recognize that stilling ourselves to be able to focus on something much, much deeper going on right now... It relaxes the mind, relaxes the body, and you get a much better result because you’re letting go of all the stress.

Additionally, Jowee, Nid, Madeline, Stella, and Ursula described going on walks or hikes with family members. Madeline’s example stood out, as she and her husband went on walks in cemeteries, hoping to stay distanced from people. She brought her camera and took photographs, describing the experience as “spiritual.”

Other respondents simply built more intentional communication practices with family members. Adam described “communicating more effectively especially with my wife,” and Laddoo shared that while the pandemic mostly troubled her, she enjoyed more time with family: “I’m enjoying myself now that I can hug the kids whenever...it’s nice to have them here so I can give them food when it’s hot.”

Additionally, work communities emerged in new ways. Maud’Dib described the contemplative circle created by faculty and staff at the college, which was sustained during the pandemic by moving all contemplative practices online. Additionally, Adam and Mimi described that

the college really “stepped up” to keep people informed. One notable example brought up by Jowee, Mimi, Madeline, and Pete were weekly online chats by the college President to discuss college, societal, and personal happenings. Respondents particularly enjoyed the President sharing about her personal life. Mimi mentioned “[The President] is a human being. She jumped right in and even shared personal stories.” One respondent said the President mentioned being a cat owner in one of the chats, and she emailed the President to share her own cat story.

Students also developed community and shared vulnerability. Francis explained, “In terms of the pandemic, talking with my students about, you know, feeling lonely and isolated. I felt more comfortable talking about that and I feel like that helped them talk about it as well.” Adam, Kit, Pete, and Rebecca shared that they gave special help and were more forgiving of students’ late work or absence. Jowee and Pete described a growing reciprocity and gratitude between teachers and students.

***Question 2: What was the importance of contemplative practices for faculty and staff during the pandemic?***

Respondents revealed needing contemplative practices in more and different ways. First, practices helped respondents cope with societal change and stress. Mike needed meditation to get in the “right frame of mind” after losing his job. Evalyn, Nid, Madeline, and Ursala used contemplative walking for focus and clarity. Marilyn described that when experiencing loneliness, she would journal: “when I journal, I get those feelings out. And so it’s almost like I’m talking to someone, you know getting it down so it’s not inside anymore.” Also, Jowee, Lynne, and Mimi used contemplative listening and “empathy” to work with stressed out students.

Additionally, breathwork became relevant and essential for a few respondents. Adam explained, “Contemplative practice [gets] people to recognize when I’m taking a breath or breathe the same air, that’s how we could have gotten sick from COVID.” In other words, the breathing practice could also teach about current societal happenings and build empathy. Sharing the same air meant having to religiously wear masks,

which Mike, who worked mostly on campus, described as stress-inducing. Marilyn, who also worked mostly on campus, similarly explained, “I do notice that I don’t breathe as deeply when I’m wearing a mask and then I get more anxious especially if there’s, you know, a lot going on... I just have to stop and actually do deep breathing.” Marilyn explained that once she used the coping strategy of deep breathing, she noticed feeling more ease wearing the mask.

For those respondents working remotely, contemplative practices helped make transitions from home life to videoconferencing. Adam, Kit, and Maud’Dib described that teaching in remote learning settings takes a special energy and effort. Kit shared, “I had to arrange my classes so that there were breaks in between.... I have really struggled this year, and everybody acts like they’re not struggling. I can’t sit in front of my computer another minute.”

Maud’Dib said that sitting in front of the computer can be alienating: “There’s the alienation of not being around people, but then there’s also the alienation of talking to a screen.” Both Adam and Maud’Dib used contemplative practices to transition into and out of online classrooms. Adam explained having Zoom classes back-to-back with just 15 minutes in-between:

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I have very long days, so I tend to find myself trying to really center myself before I start each class.... There is a rather large space behind me in this guest room, and it serves for a nice space for me to do small walking meditations. All I need is a small circle and I deliberately practice the walking meditation in that small circle. So as long as I’m moving I’m okay.... I’ll get my headphones out and lay back on the floor completely flat and do an immersion meditation just to become present.

Jowee, Madeline, Nid, Stella, and Ursula centered and distanced themselves from remote work via outdoor practices. Stella’s example stood out, as she went on contemplative walks around her block with noise-cancelling headphones and simply listened to her breath.



**Question 3: In what ways did contemplative practice use change, particularly as work more often took place in private settings?**

**Accessibility of Contemplative Practices During the Pandemic:** Respondents noticed the pandemic both hampered and helped their contemplative practice routines. Barriers included the canceling or closing of respondents' typical practice spaces, like studios, gyms, and retreats. Additionally, work constraints made practice difficult. Madeline had started chair yoga before the pandemic, but once her workload responsibilities increased, she couldn't make time. Also, several respondents met roadblocks to sharing practices with students. Francis, who used "breath of joy" and journaling practices with students during face-to-face class, found it difficult to implement the same practices over videoconferencing. Also unfortunate was that Ursula needed to delay the implementation of a grant project to incorporate "theater of the oppressed" contemplative practice until returning face-to-face. She also said standardized online course curriculums were inflexible leaving little leeway to incorporate contemplative practices.

While the remote setting seemed to produce roadblocks for some, it aided practices for others. Catherine, Hope, Kit, Laddoo, Lynne, and Sheila used online contemplative platforms and applications. Trained in online learning, Catherine implemented an online storytelling curriculum. Laddoo, who teaches in the STEM field, described that taking contemplative breaks for yoga and breathing with students was much easier in remote settings because of not having to find adequate campus space. Francis found online contemplative communities made accessible only because of the pandemic.

By far the advantage mentioned most often across interviews (9) was that contemplative practices became easier during the pandemic because of less time commuting. Additionally, respondents mentioned fewer distractions and work interruptions (Jowee, Adam, and Seamus), which resulted in what Madeline described as "having more control over my schedule." Pete said that if he were to describe the status of contemplative practice during the pandemic he would say, the "surf's up," to iterate the increased opportunity for practices because of what he called a "governor" on life distractions. Moreover, because of limita-

tions on indoor gathering, most respondents turned outdoors for practice, something they didn't do as often prior to the pandemic. Evalyn expressed gratitude for the pandemic: "And honestly I've been grateful to the pandemic, as awful as it was for so many, because it offered me this chance to slow down, take walks, do some reading, listen to podcasts and things like that."

***Creating Space for Contemplative Practice:*** Most respondents found or created space for contemplative practice during the pandemic. Such space was not readily available at the office, but respondents could create such spaces at home. Sheila shared, "I mean, it's a luxury that I have that empty room with nothing but my yoga mat, some weights, and two windows. There's a lot of light in there. It's just a lovely space." Adam converted his guest room to his Zoom classroom and kept most of the space empty for walking meditations between classes. Mimi created a contemplative space for yoga that was decorated with joyful family pictures. She found this space more comfortable than her "cramped" campus office. Though Lynne didn't create a separate space for practices, she did portion off her home: "I made sure to separate my work and living areas. I live in a one-bedroom apartment. So, it's a little bit tight. So, I converted my dining room to an office area and made sure I wasn't working anywhere but in that area." She explained that she could feel a discernable energy shift between the spaces. She said, "especially as I transition from space to space, just doing deep breathing kind of helps you reset." A couple of respondents didn't feel they needed to devote a particular space to practice. Instead, Nia and Francis found spaces that were convenient in the moment. Evalyn said her practices were "portable," and Stella explained hers were "engrained" in her; both felt able to take practices to various spaces rather than needing designated spaces.

Several respondents found or created outdoor spaces. Maud'Dib and Nid described their back porches as their contemplative spaces. Nid shared that the outdoors "really keeps me sane because... I could clean my porch, drag my yoga mat out there, and the first thing I do in the morning is get up and do my yoga. Then I could really sit down and focus on work." Maud'Dib noted the importance of the outdoor space: "There's a certain psychology, a physical affinity to that space, and so

for me going out for a walk or going outside and sitting on the porch, that's much more of a contemplative space to me than indoors." Ursula and Madeline described choosing outdoors to get out of the house and stay socially distanced.

The found and created contemplative spaces of the home and outdoor environment contrasted the work environment, where most respondents found it challenging to do contemplative practices. Several respondents expressed not having adequate office space to do practices. Mimi's office is "cramped," Francis shares an office with all other part-time faculty and described she would feel "weird" doing practices there, and Stella doesn't have an office because she began work during the pandemic and hasn't been assigned one. Marilyn described that her office, shared with students, has harsh florescent lighting that gives her a headache. She explained that during the pandemic, a student came into the office and asked to turn off the lights to be more comfortable.

However, even respondents who had adequate office space expressed hesitation about doing practices because of too much work, associating the campus with assigned work only, and feeling self-conscious. Adam, Catherine, Madeline, Marilyn, Maud'Dib, and Seamus described that they did not do practices at work because of the workload or because they associated the office only with assigned work. For example, Adam said that even though he has a "decent office" with a "fantastic office mate," practices on campus are harder to do because "You know how it is when you're on campus. It's very hard to find away time." Describing contemplative practice as "away time" meant that it wasn't associated for him with campus "work."

Other respondents felt self-conscious or unsure about doing practices at work. For example, Maud'Dib described that his office is adequate for practice but he does not do practices there because there is a window and a "little element of self-consciousness." Similarly, Seamus described not wishing to be seen doing practices, describing her office as a "two-sided fishbowl" with windows to the outside and inside of the building. More problematically, a couple of respondents shared that they felt they may be stigmatized for doing practices. Nia described that she was unsure about the message doing practices would commu-

nicate at work, particularly for her as a woman of color: “I always kind of go back and forth in terms of if I do something like that. Particularly as a woman of color, do I look like I’m not doing my job?” Importantly, Nia’s response showed that the campus space does not feel equally safe for all people to practice.

While most respondents were uncomfortable practicing on campus, there were a few exceptions. Rebecca’s office is roomy with high ceilings, providing space for centering practices. She also keeps a tea maker there to share tea with colleagues and students. She mentioned doing one practice a week from her office but described that the thought crossed her mind that people would walk by the window. However, she quickly affirmed, “I really don’t care even if they peek and see this woman on the floor doing some bowing.” Similarly, Sheila also described a change of heart, mentioning that when she first began working at the college, she was wrapped up in work and felt she couldn’t pull herself away. But over time, as she developed a name on campus and had administrative support, she felt able to do contemplative practices in her office and take on-campus yoga classes. Ultimately, she felt doing practices made her a “good role model for students,” and she encouraged other faculty and students to model the same. Additionally, Francis, Madeline, Maud’Dib, Nid, Rebecca, and Seamus mentioned intentionally taking walks outside on campus, which Maud’Dib described as “consciously getting out of the office.” These respondents shared their appreciation for contemplative outdoor campus spaces. For example, Rebecca enjoyed the walking labyrinth on her campus and shared it with students. Seamus described walking with a colleague, noting the sun and the trees and “pulling away from the grind.”

While outdoor contemplative space seemed ample, indoor campus space was less available. Francis described that besides taking walks, she could not think of other opportunities for practices on campus. Several respondents mentioned wanting indoor campus practice space. Mimi expressed that such a space should not be the gym but instead a dedicated space “where people can practice for free.” Notably, Seamus shared that she is working with several college departments to research the possibility of providing contemplative college spaces.

## **Discussion**

### ***Results in Connection with Previous Research***

Via semi-structured interviews, this research explored the pandemic and contemplative practice experiences of 23 faculty and staff of a Mid-Atlantic, multi-campus community college. Notably, all respondents described work changes due to the pandemic. In keeping with the national trend (Johnson et al., 2020), the majority of faculty in this study moved their courses to videoconferencing, away from the public campus. Except for two respondents from public safety and facilities, all respondents experienced at least partial at-home work. These changes were coupled with wellbeing changes. Most respondents reported new stressors similar to those reported in society at large (Center for Disease Control and Intervention, 2020; 2020b), including adjusting to new routines, screen fatigue, mask fatigue, financial or job insecurity, and social isolation and anxiety. Language used to describe the pandemic experiences such as “languishing,” “stagnation,” “difficulty focusing,” and “difficulty moving,” as well as the teary eyes of several respondents during interviews, showed the visceral challenges respondents faced. Respondents also described colleagues and students experiencing growing stressors, too, related to finances, technology, family, and social isolation.

At the same time, respondents connected with community in different and deeper ways. The community college was not an exception to O’Brien’s (2021) notions that communities step up during pandemics. Respondents revealed that their families and the college pulled together. Particularly, respondents described the college keeping lines of communication open and the President sharing weekly real-time video chats about societal and college happenings and personal stories with the campus community. Additionally, most respondents reported connecting differently with students, reciprocally sharing pandemic challenges. These new relationships were characterized with words like “leniency,” “forgiveness,” and “gratitude.” According to respondents, this type of shared vulnerability wasn’t as common before the pandemic but seemed a welcome and useful approach for building community. Such

positivity bolsters the argument of Wang (2020) that there is much community colleges can teach society about coping during the pandemic.

The value of using contemplative practices to cope with pandemic challenges described in previous research (Conversano et al., 2020; Khandelwal, 2020; Matiz et al., 2020), was also noted by respondents in this research. Respondents used practices like mindfulness meditation, breathwork, walking meditation, contemplative listening, journaling, storytelling, yoga, and contemplative photography. These practices helped them transition from home to work responsibilities, cope with mask and screen fatigue, get out of the house, cope with anxiety and social isolation, share empathy with others, increase focus and motivation, and, as Mike said, “get in the right frame of mind.”

In many cases, respondents said the pandemic benefited their contemplative practice routines because of less time commuting, less time gathered socially, and more time in the private sphere to do practices. Some respondents were able to use technology tools such as mindfulness applications and online contemplative communities, and others created at-home indoor and outdoor spaces for practices, mirroring themes from previous research (Farris et al., 2021; Reilly, 2020; Toniolo-Barrios et al., 2021). Notably Sheila described this as a “luxury,” aware of the privilege of being able to convert home spaces to contemplative ones.

For those respondents who remained mostly on campus and had to work more hours in order to accommodate new COVID-19 regulations of cleanliness and contact tracing, scheduling time for contemplative practices was harder. Additionally, though several respondents encouraged students to use contemplative practices via online platforms, most faculty who generally incorporated practices with students in the face-to-face setting found it more difficult in the online environment. Challenges faced included the difficulty of creating a “community feel” online, struggles with technology use and accessibility, and restrictions related to standardized online courses. There were several exceptions, as Laddoo found strategies to remotely teach yoga, and Catherine was able to teach remote storytelling. Unfortunately, with a couple of exceptions, while faculty and staff were able to keep contemplative practices

going, they were not as able to ensure that students were exposed to practices.

### ***Understanding Results using Goffman's Dramaturgy***

The research findings can be positioned within Goffman's theory of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959). Just as was described by Turner et al. (2020), there seemed to be a "collision of frontstage and backstage" (p. 76), as reported by respondents. The frontstage performance, which for most respondents was originally on campus as faculty and staff, was now moved in many cases to the home environment, typically a site of the backstage, usually reserved for rest and rejuvenation from the performance. This was a drastic change because performers are typically given "highly bounded regions" and "boundaries of time" as part of their performance environment (p. 107). Campuses with scheduled class periods are highly bounded regions with time and space specifications, while the home environment is not similarly characterized.

With the merger of the frontstage and backstage, transitioning between the two became more challenging. Now, just as shared by Turner et al. (2020), instead of a commute between the backstage and frontstage, there was only a click of the computer. In order to accommodate this quick transition, respondents created separate homelife and work-life spaces and utilized contemplative practices, like meditation, breathwork, and mindful walking, to transition from the videoconferencing frontstage to the home environment backstage. While transitioning was challenging, respondents reported greatly appreciating the extra time for contemplative practice accessible because of less time devoted to commuting and fewer distractions and social engagements. However, fewer social engagements had a downside, as those respondents who lived alone each felt social isolation. Potentially because spending indefinite time in the backstage without Goffman's notion of a team of performers to reinforce a socially defined role, performers experienced loneliness, anxiety, and role confusion.

The contrast between their homelife experience of contemplative practices and campus use of practices described by most respondents revealed a hesitancy to do practices on campus compared to home.

Though contemplative practices are shown to enhance the educational experience (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Song & Muschert, 2014; Zajonc, 2014), the office work environment may not always feel conducive to practices. Respondents shared that lack of office or other contemplative space, work demands, time constraints, and self-consciousness made them less likely to do practices on campus. According to Goffman's (1959) theory, instrumental standards, including work levels, effect the situational priorities of performers on the frontstage. In other words, the campus may feel like a place where only work as it has been socially defined by the college can take place; *that work* is the priority, and contemplation on the other hand, is not seen as a legitimized frontstage activity based on the perceived institutional work ethic. Resultantly, respondents may feel that they would be stigmatized or negatively sanctioned if they did practices on campus, particularly individuals who may have other statuses problematically stigmatized related to race (described by Nia), or part-time status (described by Sheila and Francis). This may yield a less authentic experience for faculty and staff, who use and benefit from practices but do not feel they can do them on campus.

It seemed that in many cases, contemplative practices were experienced by respondents as backstage behavior. One notable exception to this trend of avoiding practice on campus was the use of contemplative walking. Respondents shared that the campuses have intentional outdoor spaces that made walking appealing. Because the college has made it explicitly clear through the architecture of beautiful outdoor space that walking is welcome, people do it. However, there is not yet a free and accessible indoor space specifically devoted to and open for contemplative practice. Of course, the pandemic has made the use of indoor space variable, but the lack of such space before and during the pandemic potentially and unfortunately communicates that the socially defined purpose of the campus does not include engagement in these restorative practices.

### **Applications, Limitations, and Future Research**

The blurred boundaries between the frontstage and backstage that took place during the pandemic teaches valuable lessons. It seems



that though contemplative practices are useful for coping with the frontstage, they are often associated with private life, or the backstage, useful for rejuvenating behind the scenes. Yet, respondents found practices useful when integrated throughout the workday. This research encourages considering new and creative ways to incorporate contemplative practices in the campus environment in order to communicate that practices are respected and necessary for work. One possible intervention is creating designated and free campus spaces for contemplative practice for everyone, regardless of the status of the personnel or student.

Considering accessibility of contemplative practices for students in face-to-face and remote environments is also important. Most faculty found it difficult to use contemplative practices with students online, revealing an area of possible improvement. It should not be the case that faculty and staff enjoy greater experience of practices during the pandemic, while students cannot access these same advantages. Last, though not often associated with frontstage behavior, the shared vulnerability between team members during the pandemic, such as weekly chats about professional and personal matters by the President, and shared discussions among faculty, staff, and students about the challenges of the times, were greatly appreciated by respondents and built a sense of community.

Potentially, these lessons on contemplative practices and community found during the forced blurring of the backstage and frontstage can be implemented in ways that enhance faculty, staff, and student wellbeing, and strengthen community connection going forward. Assets such as the contemplative circle of faculty and staff at the college show that the college already has much lined up for using practices to strengthen the wellbeing of the campus community. Continued public endorsements by college faculty, staff, and leaders regarding free and accessible practices may build a culture of contemplative practice, making it part of the legitimized institutional work ethic.

Though this research makes important contributions to understanding contemplative practice as one of few articles centered on the community college environment during the pandemic, it has several

limitations that are ripe for future research. Of course, this research is qualitative and solely sought responses from faculty and staff. Though the qualitative depth of analysis reveals important considerations, the findings are not generalizable. Additionally, respondents were only consulted once. Triangulating qualitative with longitudinal quantitative analysis could make findings more generalizable and yield information about how contemplative practices are used over time as people move back to campus spaces.

Future research might explore how other 2020 occurrences, including the societal racial trauma and corresponding racial justice movements, contentious election season, spike in mass shootings, and other events, also may have impacted the stress response and contemplative practice usage of college personnel. Additionally, research on contemplative practices used during the pandemic should include the perspectives of students, especially exploring the use of online practices with students. Finally, research should explore how the built environment and the use of campus space messages the value of the wellbeing of the campus community.

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