

# Summary

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## Contemplative Practice in Higher Education

An Assessment of the Contemplative Practice  
Fellowship Program, 1997 – 2009

*Researched and Written by*

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## **Executive Summary**

The 2010 evaluation of the Contemplative Practice Fellowship program used a mixed methods research design to elicit and document the experiences of 158 faculty fellows in the program over the 12-year period from 1997 to 2009. Data for the evaluation was gathered from a close reading and analysis of 12 years of Fellows' reports; previous program evaluations completed in 2000 and 2003; in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 10 Fellows from among the 45 who volunteered to be interviewed; and the responses of the 72 Fellows responding to a comprehensive online survey (47% response rate). A diverse and representative group of Fellows responded to the survey, in terms of academic discipline, gender, institution, and year of Fellowship.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Key findings from the evaluation include the effects of the use of contemplative pedagogies on the Fellows and their students; the institutional responses and impacts of the Contemplative Practice Fellowships at the 107 Fellowship institutions; and the outlook for the future of contemplative pedagogy in higher education.

#### *Impact of the Fellowships on the Fellows*

About 65% of the Fellows still use contemplative approaches in their teaching and research; over a quarter of the Fellows have been teaching using contemplative practice (CP) in their academic work for over 10 years. According to the survey, 82% of the Fellows reported that the most significant impact of the Fellowships has been the 'deeper sense of personal and professional integration' they have gained by using contemplative practice and pedagogy in their academic work.

The evaluation results confirmed the need for an encouraging and compassionate community of peers as a crucial component in supporting faculty facing the challenges of moving out of their professional and perhaps personal comfort zones, working to integrate contemplative approaches into their busy academic lives, and developing and offering new courses at their teaching edge. Because most faculty in higher education identify more closely with their academic disciplines and departments than they do with their institutions, academic conferences and journals are organized by discipline, and many important decisions at the institutional level (e.g. recommendations for promotion and tenure) are initiated within the academic departments. For faculty such as the CP Fellows, striking out in a direction not shared by their departmental and disciplinary colleagues can be a daunting and solitary act. One surprising survey finding was that fully 86% of the Fellows reported that 'just knowing there were other Fellows out there' was beneficial or extremely important to them as they began using CP in their teaching and research. While there are other factors that could support and encourage Fellows to continue incorporating CP into their academic work, the current evaluation looked specifically at the influence of communication and contact with the Center for Contemplative Mind, faculty's interaction with other Fellows, and their participation in the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education.

In their Fellowship reports, on the survey, and in the interviews, Fellows consistently reported that the Fellowship structure developed by the Center for Contemplative Mind provided them with a supportive community of practice around CP in teaching and research. One of the most striking results shown on the survey was the overwhelming importance of the Fellows' meetings. Eighty-three percent of the Fellows responding to the survey reported that the Fellows' meeting they attended was a 'beneficial' or 'personally and professionally significant experience' in helping them to become part of the community of CP Fellows. Participating in this community and seeking out collaborative research opportunities with other CP faculty appear to be significant factors in a faculty member's probability of continuing this work.

### *Effects of contemplative pedagogy on students*

Based on enrollment estimates from the Fellows' reports, more than 2,600 students studied in the 130 courses taught by the entire cohort of 158 Fellows during the year of their original fellowships. This number is only a fraction of the students reached by the program overall, as many Fellows have continued to teach using CP after their Fellowship experience.

The majority of Fellows report that using CP in their teaching facilitates a more positive classroom environment than that of their other courses (without CP) and that most students respond positively to the use of CP in their courses. Moreover, nearly 80% of the Fellows responding to the survey reported that students had expressed appreciation to them for incorporating CP, including student assertions that the course had been a personally transformative or life-changing experience for them. Fully 75% of the Fellows reported that their students said CP had helped them in their daily lives beyond the course itself. Fewer than half the Fellows reported any student discomfort or opposition to their use of CP in class; nearly a quarter insisted that they had not experienced any student resistance at all. When faced with occasional student resistance, some of the Fellows have anticipated and prepared for possible objections, while others have found creative ways to honor and show their understanding of student concerns.

The majority of Fellows reported that their use of CP in academic courses improved the classroom learning experience and had a significant positive impact on students' personal lives. Some Fellows reported that they had waiting lists for their CP courses, and others said that students had requested them to teach additional courses incorporating CP. However, because the evaluation did not gather performance data directly from students, it is difficult to assess the effects of CP on student academic achievement. Moreover, on the survey Fellows displayed strong uncertainty in response to questions about the nature and extent of CP's influence on student academic performance.

Faculty impressions of student satisfaction are useful indicators of the success of the program; however, direct measures of student performance (graded papers and projects, performance assessments, class presentations, etc.) are needed to provide convincing evidence of the academic efficacy of contemplative pedagogies. The evaluation results strongly suggest that a research priority for the Center for Contemplative Mind in the near future should be developing ways to collect and evaluate hard data on student performance through the assessment of

direct measures of academic progress and disciplinary achievement. One way to address this task might be to encourage Fellows and other faculty versed in assessment methods to design and evaluate studies of academic outcomes in matched pairs of disciplinary courses (e.g. a CP course and a control group course without CP). This is clearly a long-term effort, but systems and mechanisms could be developed and put in place now to collect assessment and attitude data on the experience of CP courses from the student perspective. In collaboration with assessment-oriented Fellows, the Center could also develop an end-of-course survey or other assessment instrument and ask Fellows to distribute it to students in their current and future courses. Over the course of several years, the combined results of such assessments could yield valuable insights into the student experience of academic courses that incorporate CP.

In the interim, Fellows need to become conversant in appropriate methods of evaluating the contemplative component of their courses. In response to a survey question asking why their faculty colleagues did not also use CP, several Fellows indicated that ‘a lack of clear outcomes from this approach’ may discourage other faculty from incorporating CP into their teaching. Because the Fellows themselves are the greatest advocates for the use of CP, the Center should enlist their support in working with their campus teaching centers to offer faculty development seminars and programs incorporating contemplative pedagogies and assessment techniques.

#### *Institutional impact of the Contemplative Practice Fellowships*

One of the major objectives of the evaluation was to assess the program’s impact across the range of Fellowship institutions. According to analyses of the evaluation results, familiarity with contemplative practice, as well as the acceptance of its use in academic courses and research, is increasing across a variety of institutional types, sizes, and geographic locations. Fellows have been instrumental in introducing courses, establishing academic programs, and increasing the number of faculty using CP at their institutions. Moreover, half of the survey respondents reported colleagues on their campuses using CP in departments other than their own, indicating that there are growing ‘pockets of support’ at these institutions that extend beyond one Fellow, one academic discipline, or one department or program.

The evaluation results indicated that beyond simply increasing the number of faculty using CP in teaching or research, diversifying the range of disciplines where faculty are infusing CP is an important benchmark in establishing CP in the curriculum and in gaining institutional credibility for contemplative approaches in academia. The ten Fellows who were interviewed provided detailed histories of the Honors Program at Marquette University and the ‘Difficult Dialogues’ program at Clark University, both of which integrally include CP courses. Other Fellows have been using CP in credit-bearing courses within professional programs such as those in law, architecture, and business for over a decade, and interest in the use of CP is increasing among disciplinary organizations such as the ‘Balance in Legal Education’ division of the Association of American Law Schools and the ‘Management, Spirituality, and Religion’ division of the Academy of Management.

At least two-thirds of those Fellows who responded to the survey reported that their use of CP is accepted and supported on their campuses. Only 18% reported any direct institutional

opposition, while about 40% indicated that they had met little or no resistance from colleagues or administrators. Based on the survey and interview data, predominant institutional attitudes toward contemplative pedagogy were reported to be skepticism, lack of understanding, or disinterest, rather than opposition. Evaluation results confirmed that there is wide variability in the institutional response to faculty's use of CP at the 107 Fellowship institutions and that there is no one ideal situation or institutional profile for the establishment of CP. However, the survey and interview results do provide limited evidence that contemplative approaches can become established successfully at baccalaureate colleges, doctoral research institutions, and professional schools, on public state-supported as well as private campuses, including faith-related institutions.

While many Fellows reported that they could not identify any specific barriers to the adoption of CP on their campuses, nearly 40% indicated that other faculty interested in using CP are reticent to do so because they have no personal contemplative practice of their own and thus feel unqualified to teach using CP. Moreover, Fellows' survey responses indicate that several of the apparent barriers to the acceptance of CP may in fact be apprehensions or misperceptions on the part of some of the Fellows themselves. Finally, about 15% of the Fellows surveyed reported general institutional or economic conditions (time pressures on faculty, lack of funding) unfavorable to the establishment of CP on their campuses. Thus while there are larger societal and cultural factors contributing to climate changes in academia, as well as some resistance to CP, the experiences of the Contemplative Practice Fellows serve as significant indicators of the direction and intensity of these changes as they impact the use of CP.

### **The Future of Contemplative Practice in Higher Education**

The evaluation included in-depth interviews with 10 Fellows selected from across the entire range of Fellowship years and comprising a diverse and representative group of the Fellows in terms of academic discipline, gender, institutional type, and geographic location. These interviews provided a closer look at how circumstances have changed over the past decade in relation to the use of CP, as well as how the field might develop in the future. The Fellows interviewed all agreed that their campuses had become more open to the use of CP over the past ten years. Several attributed this change in part to the increasing interest in and acceptance of CP in the media and wider society, as well as the growing scientific evidence on the positive effects of CP now being published in the academic press. While no generalizations can be made concerning conditions across the larger group of the 107 Fellowship institutions, the progress in establishing CP at each of these diverse campuses is indicative of the growing acceptance of contemplative practice and pedagogy in academia.

Another important issue discussed in the interviews was the value of using CP in academic programs. The current emphasis on interdisciplinarity is a point of intersection for CP with the values of the academy, as contemplative pedagogies can provide a bridge between disparate disciplines. CP creates a thinking space for students to reflect upon what it means to them to bring together several very different pieces of information from diverse disciplinary fields, thus increasing interdisciplinary learning and creative thinking. Contemplative approaches also facilitate transformative education by enabling students to cultivate mindfulness and

compassion as legitimate aspects of higher education, and by encouraging them to engage in making a difference in the world, especially in ways that address human suffering and enhance human flourishing. Fellows also pointed out the importance of incorporating CP in academic programs, noting that because of the complexity and demands of college life and the use of technology at increasingly younger ages, students are taxed on many levels and rarely have opportunities outside of the classroom to simply be quiet and reflect on the connections between their lives and their educational experiences. Fellows related that student alumni who had taken their CP Fellowship courses, and were now out in the community working and relying on the practices, subsequently wrote or came back to tell students in their current classes how the practices were positively influencing their daily lives and work.

Finally, Fellows talked about the future of contemplative practice and pedagogy in higher education. One of the most significant aspects of the Fellowship program over the past ten years has been that it has helped open up a dialogue about CP on the 107 Fellowship institutions and within academia in general. Points of intersection where contemplative pedagogy could be used effectively to promote and enhance several of the core values of higher education include interdisciplinary learning, general education, and student personal development. In reflecting on next steps in the development of CP in higher education, Fellows suggested holding conferences promoting cross-disciplinary interaction among diverse faculty; introducing contemplative pedagogies at university teaching centers and in doctoral programs where young faculty are being trained as teachers; building relationships with the upper levels of administrative structures of institutions in order to form a network of higher education administrators in CP; and developing the Center's web presence to include innovative ways of building a community of practice in contemplative pedagogy and as a forum for exchanging material and ideas (e.g. CP course syllabi accompanied by narratives of Fellows' teaching experiences, an online journal in contemplative pedagogy, guidelines on developing and evaluating CP course materials).

### **Evaluation Outcomes**

The key findings of this evaluation provide an intermediate benchmark against which to assess future changes in the acceptance and incorporation of contemplative practice in higher education courses and programs. By taking a retrospective look back over the past 12 years of the use of CP in academia by the Contemplative Practice Fellows, the evaluation provides a window into the early years and documents the subsequent development of contemplative pedagogy. The evaluation report presents a comprehensive description of the data collected during the evaluation period, a thorough discussion of the general themes and trends that emerged from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, and an interpretation of the key findings generated by the evaluation. Finally, the report summarizes the evaluator's program recommendations to the Center for Contemplative Mind. Drawing on the valuable experiences of the Fellows, and considering the current issues and directions in higher education, the Center for Contemplative Mind and others interested in CP can use the evaluation findings to help chart a course for institutionalizing contemplative practice in higher education.