



Senior Capstone Project: Dialoguing with Difference

UNITE (U.S. Air Force Academy-Naropa Inclusion Team)-Phase III

Pushing Cross-Cultural Boundaries of Comfort to Develop and Assess Respect for Human Dignity

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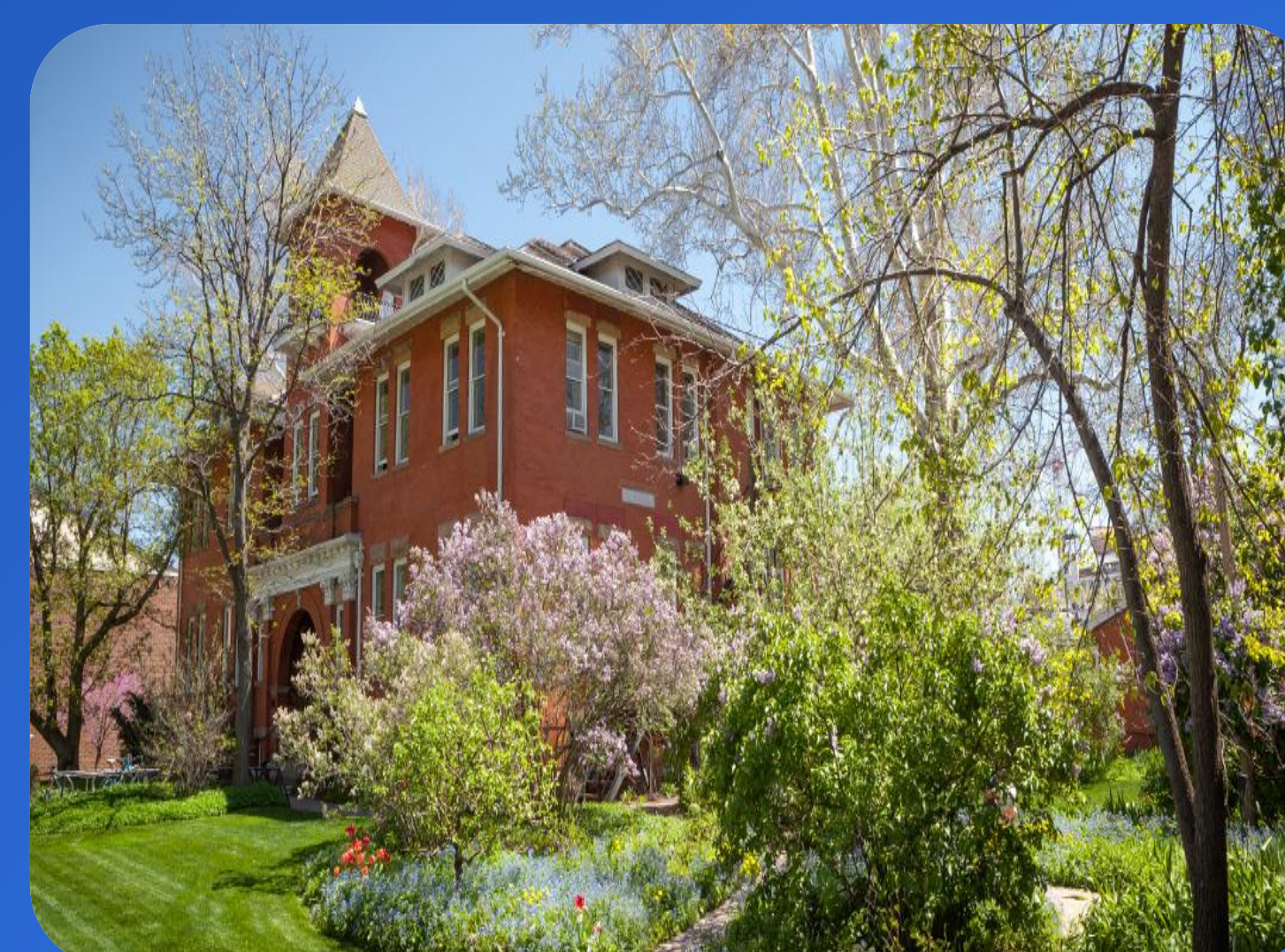
Background

Naropa University is a Buddhist-inspired institution whose mission is “to employ rigorous academics, contemplative practice, and experiential learning to prepare people with knowledge, wisdom, and skills so they can ‘be the change’ in their workplaces and communities, and live joyous, meaningful lives.” Naropa “fiercely embraces diversity and inclusivity through fostering an environment of belonging with differences, working consciously to include persons of different races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, veteran status, perspectives, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, disabilities, national origins, and, of course, religions (www.naropa.edu).” Naropa values respect for human dignity and inclusivity in all that it does.

The mission of the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) is “to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to our nation.” A critical component of that mission is to intentionally develop respectful and inclusive leadership practices (www.usafa.af.mil). Together these pieces serve as an intercultural bridge to learn from each other.

Literature

We used “Leading Consciously and Inclusively” by Herrera, DeAngelis, & Samuels (USAFA, 2015) to develop the rationale for this project. Using the Department of Defense’s emphasis on diversity in the Air Force, the article states that effective leadership involves intentional inclusion practices. Inclusion is defined as how people who are in the minority are treated and how they *feel* about being part of the group. But how can a group promote inclusion? One method is perspective taking, or in common terms, try to walk in another person’s shoes and see through the lens of their story. Allport (1954) first proposed Intergroup Contact Theory, which proposes that contact between groups under optimal conditions could effectively reduce intergroup prejudice (in Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The optimal conditions needed include equal status among participants, cooperation on common goals between groups, and institutional support (Hewstone & Swart, 2011). Using this theory as well as multi-year work from Butler, Scharff & DeAngelis (2019) (bringing cadets together with different individuals; deaf, blind, brain-injured, spinal cord injured, homeless, to develop understanding and respect), we designed high-impact, face-to-face experiences between military cadets and students at a Buddhist-inspired university. The groups continue to learn from one another developing a culture of mutual respect.



This Senior Capstone Project aims to develop inclusive leadership practices. Senior cadets coordinate and design high-impact experiences for other cadets to also develop these skills.



Project Design

We use the scientist-educator model (Halpern, 2010) to guide every step of our process. Using this framework, we: 1) create goals, 2) learn about teaching, 3) design measures to assess learning/design learning activities, 4) deliver the activities/measure outcomes, and 5) seek feedback for improvement.

Step 1: Create learning goals

The primary goal for this project is to develop respect and inclusive practices between students at Naropa and USAFA. Our secondary goal is to borrow ideas/practices from each culture to improve practices at the home institutions.

Step 2: Learn about teaching/other culture

To become informed about relevant pedagogy and Naropa’s culture, we immersed ourselves in the literature while simultaneously spending time at Naropa for real world experiences. This included periodic meetings and discussions among faculty, staff, and students, and a full day immersion in contemplative practice and pedagogy. Staff from Naropa have also participated in immersion experiences at USAFA which included: noon meal formation, lunch with 4K cadets in 15 min. and a visit to the Buddhist chapel. This work fosters mutual understanding of the two cultures and establishes a foundation of trust.

Before we create a more targeted experience that can be formally assessed, we will continue fostering our relationship and building on our progress to date. Our current schedule includes USAFA cadets and Naropa students engaging in an inclusive leadership exchange at Naropa and a second tour for Naropa faculty/staff/students to visit USAFA.

Step 3: Design learning activities/design assessments

As we continue to learn about each other, we will be in a better position later to firm up a targeted high-impact learning experience between cadets and Naropa students to develop respect and inclusion. We plan on collecting pre/post informal feedback for future experiences. Based on what we learn from this, we will be able to refine the targeted experience better next year and conduct a formal research study. Steps 4 (deliver course/measure outcome) and 5 (disseminate/feedback) will follow.



Cadets visit meditation hall at Naropa



Naropa visits USAFA

Future Directions

We continue to refine Stages 1, 2 and 3 while simultaneously engaging in Stage 5. Though we have begun to implement a course of action, we believe once the timing is right for both institutions, we will truly begin developing programs that can be delivered and assessed (Stage 4) at USAFA & Naropa based on contemplative and mindfulness practices. This will include intentionally building sustainability and reproducibility into institutional processes.

Lessons Learned

- When you want to engage and/or collaborate with people from another culture, you must approach the experience with care, humility, and persistence.
- Search for people who will support and help develop the vision.
- Differences between individuals are chances for significant learning and growth.
- Search for continuous change, not episodic change.
- A shared learning experience takes time and patience.
- An open mind is essential for considering the perspective of another culture.
- Connecting with people eases the discomfort of an unfamiliar culture.
- Butler and Scharff’s work has paved the way for this applied project. Even without formal assessment, it mirrors themes of previous studies.

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