



Senior Capstone Project: Dialoguing with Difference UNITe (U.S. Air Force Academy-Naropa Inclusion Team)-Phase IV

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

Michelle A. Butler, U.S. Air Force Academy, C1C Iriolexis Encalada, C1C Crimson Shoemake

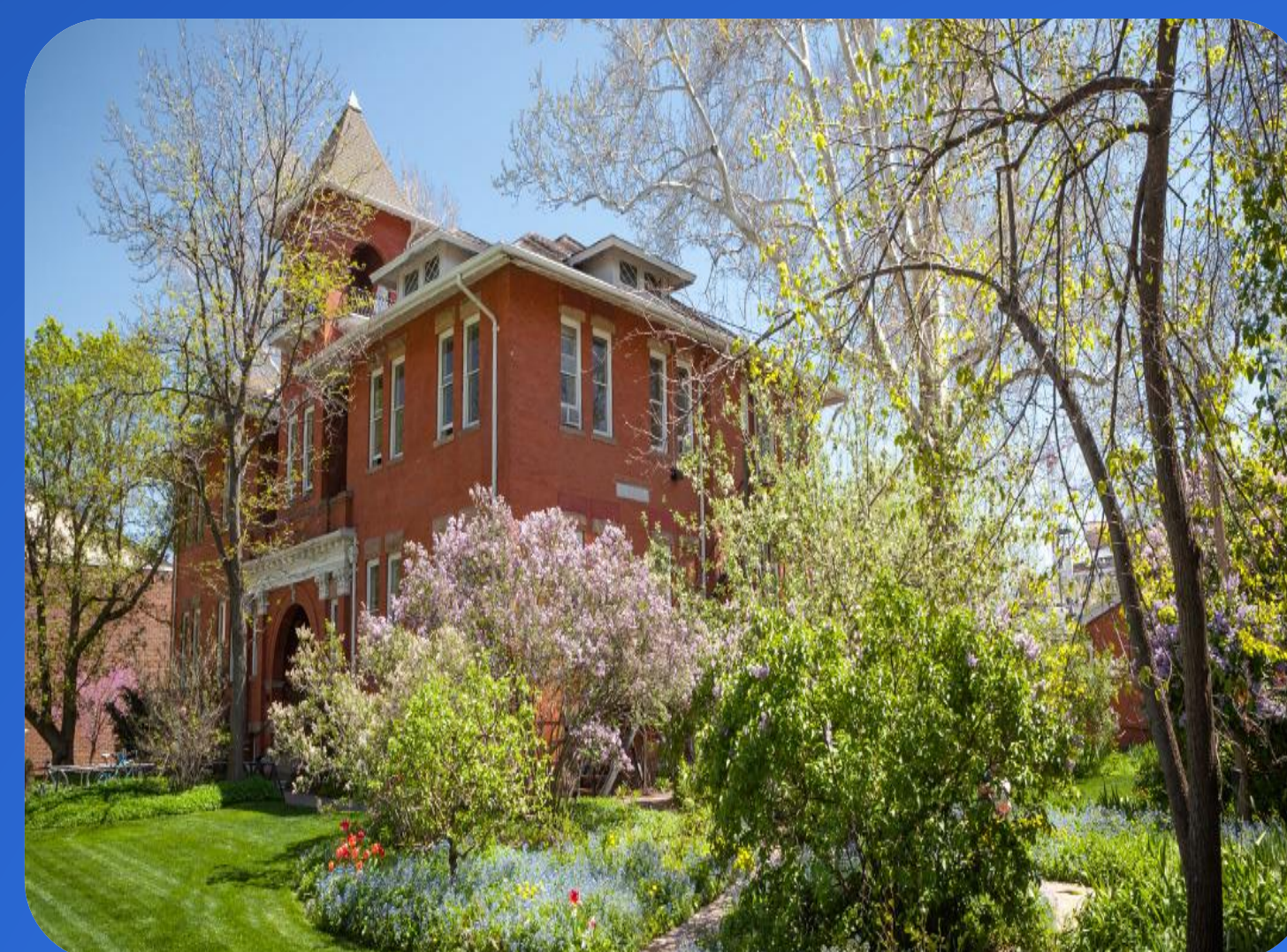
Background

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

The scientist-educator model (Bernstein, et al., 2010) guides 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. This is where we implement Naropa’s motto, “Transform yourself, transform the world” with each culture learning how to achieve this goal in a more meaningful way related to each institution’s individual goals.

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 hands on experiences. This included periodic meetings and discussions among faculty, staff, and students, and 3 full day immersions in contemplative practice and pedagogy. During one of our visits to Naropa, we brought 13 other cadets with us that integrated themselves into the Practice Day to fully experience the Naropa culture in a respectful and engaging manner. We have also built an impressive roster of individuals at both institutions who have agreed to partner with us to advance the work.

Step 3 and 4: Design learning activities/design assessments and deliver activities/outcomes

This past year, we developed a pre and post experience course feedback survey to give to students (13) that were going on the Naropa trips. These informal surveys were meant to see how we can improve future trips, what the cadets found the most meaningful, and how their attitudes changed from before and after the day. We also designed a discussion on discipline and mindfulness to use at the first Practice Day in the fall. We then led this hour-long discussion with about 20 Naropa students and faculty to see how their perceptions of discipline and mindfulness are similar and different to ours.

Step 5: Seek feedback for improvement

The informal survey results provided us with much needed outside feedback about the trips to Naropa University. Cadets detailed how their openness to the experience before stayed the same or increased afterward. The major concern prior to attending was about offending the other culture, but every cadet surveyed found Naropa culture to be surprisingly accepting and fostering of discussion. Overall, cadets felt comfortable and accepted and overwhelmingly detailed that they would highly recommend the experience to others.



Cadets visit Naropa for Practice Day.



Possible UNITe Project Logo.

Future Directions

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

Lessons Learned

- Get USAFA/AOC approval to send a wing-wide email to recruit students and offer positive Forms 10 /approval for more sleep. Provide free meal if possible. Frame opportunity as “highly competitive, cultural immersion.” This year we had our first waiting list.
- “Experience Naropa” was another valuable immersion experience in addition to Practice Day. USAFA van saves on cost.
- Continue to provide pre/post feedback survey. Although survey was informal and not research-based, preliminary reports seem to mirror prior research with other groups (deaf, blind, neuro, homeless) indicating a path for future research. Students reported the experience as “very valuable.”
- 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 of this project and have them involved regularly.
- 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.

References

- Air Force Instruction 36-3527, Commissioning Education Program. (2012). *Warrior ethos as airmen and citizens*. Retrieved October 2, 2017, from <https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/Warrior-Ethos-White-Paper-approved.pdf>
- Butler, M. A., Scharff, L., & DeAngelis, K. (2019). Pushing boundaries of comfort to develop and assess respect for human dignity for different types of others. *Society for Personality and Social Psychology Conference*, Portland, OR, Feb.
- Chödrön, P., & Boucher, S. (2007). *Practicing peace in times of war*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Bernstein, D. J., Addison, W., Altman, C., Hollister, D., Komarraju, M., Prieto, L., Rocheleau, C.A., & Shore, C. (2010). Toward a scientist-educator model of teaching psychology. In D. F. Halpern (Ed.), *Undergraduate education in psychology: A blueprint for the future* (pp. 29-45). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Herrera, M., DeAngelis, K., & Samuels, S. (2015). USAFA Course Paper-*Leading consciously and inclusively*.
- Hewstone, M., & Swart, H. (2011). Fifty-odd years of inter-group contact: From hypothesis to integrated theory. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(3), 374-386. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8309.2011.02047.x
- Kahane, A. (2017). *Collaborating with the enemy*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Naropa University Mission Statement | Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado. (n.d.). Retrieved January 22, 2018, from <http://catalog.naropa.edu/current/general-information/naropa-university-mission-statement.php>
- Outcomes. (n.d.). Retrieved January 22, 2018, from <https://www.usafa.edu/academics/outcomes/>
- Palmer, P. J., Zajonc, A., & Scribner, M. (2010). *The heart of higher education: A call to renewal: Transforming the academy through collegial conversations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751-783.
- Trungpa, C., & Gimian, C. R. (2015). *Shambhala: The sacred path of the warrior*. Boston, Mass.: Shambhala.
- Acknowledgement: We are grateful for Naropa’s hospitality, generosity and support, without which none of this would be possible.