



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

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.



Project Design

We use the scientist-educator model (Bernstein et al., 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, a Veteran’s Day Dialogue, and a full day immersion in contemplative practice. This created an environment where mutual understanding of the two cultures could foster and establish a foundation of trust and friendship from which we continued. We have also built an impressive roster of individuals at both institutions who have agreed to partner with us to advance the work.

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 tentative schedule includes cadets attending the contemplative practice day at Naropa, a tour of USAFA for Naropa students and a focus group discussion for cadets to provide input into the next steps.

Step 3: Design learning activities/design assessments

As we continue to learn about each other, we will be in a better position later in the spring 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.



Future Directions

We are currently in stage 2 of the model as we learn about teaching and each other’s culture. Once Naropa and USAFA participants firmly feel a relationship has been developed, we will begin developing programs that can be implemented and assessed at USAFA based on contemplative and mindfulness practices.

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.
- Contrasts between people are chances for significant learning.
- Search for continuous change, not episodic change.
- A shared learning experience takes time and patience.
- An open mind is essential for taking the perspective of another culture.
- Connecting with people eases the discomfort of an unfamiliar culture.

Literature

We decided to use the article “Leading Consciously and Inclusively (Herrera, De Angelis, and Samuels 2015) to develop the rationale for the collaboration and project. Using the Department of Defense’s emphasis on diversity in the Air Force, the article states, “Effective leadership involves intentional inclusion practices” (Herrera, De Angelis, and Samuels 2015). They also define inclusion as “how people who are in the minority are treated and how they feel about being part of the group” (Herrera, De Angelis and Samuels 2015). But how can a group create 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, stating, “contact between groups under optimal conditions could effectively reduce intergroup prejudice” (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). The optimal conditions needed include: equal status among participants, cooperation on common goals between groups, and institutional support” (Hewstone and Swart 2011);(Allport 1954). The environment of Naropa allowed us to maximize the recommendations of intergroup contact theory. Through high-impact, face-to-face experiences, we have been able to bring cadets together with students from a Buddhist-inspired university to learn from one another and develop a culture of mutual respect.

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