ABSTRACT

Why Mindful Service-learning? While over 30 years of service-learning has yielded many benefits, I have found that students today are more stressed than ever, that meaningful and effective preparation for reciprocal service-learning can be lacking, and that an exclusively Western perspective could be expanded to include Eastern views, thereby better preparing students for a global world. Mindful Service-learning draws on established service-learning practices, the Eastern practice of mindfulness, and Asset-Based Community Development to foster healthful student learning and meaningful university-community collaboration. Specifically, mindful service-learning utilizes Eastern tools—being present, beginner's mind, deep listening, compassion—in addition to more individualistic and analytical practices, to broaden the contemporary approach to service-learning. Focused on an intersectional perspective, it is an innovative way to address privilege, oppression, identity and power dynamics in all environments, but especially in complex urban settings. As I will demonstrate through a review of past practice as well as a study of contemporary student experience, this approach can help students from different backgrounds and various academic disciplines engage in authentic service-learning partnerships as well as learn lifelong wellness skills.

MINDFUL SERVICE-LEARNING: AN INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Tend the World and You Tend Yourself: Tend Yourself and You Tend the World

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Student Testimony From Study:
I was 100% affected by the mindfulness aspect of class. I used to be a whirl of action, execution, homework, details; I had no purpose of learning, doing. I am present now in what I do in service-learning. I received my best grades through mindfulness and I think I did my best work with community.

Introduction to Mindful Service-learning and Its Foundation

The case study presented here provides a guide to (1) relevant service-learning, mindfulness, and ABCD literature; (2) a study of perspectives from undergraduate interviews and written work from DePaul University (Chicago); and (3) the integration of the two in order to explore the benefits of a mindful approach to service-learning. As a feminist professor and service-learning administrator who fosters faculty engagement, I have evolved a Mindful Service-Learning approach that incorporates Eastern and Western perspectives, and an asset-based lens, in courses such as "Mindful Activism" and a Community Service Studies Capstone Internship course. While it is difficult to include perspectives from other institutions here, given the apparent rarity of examples, I have developed this approach through courses taught at a private liberal arts college, a medical school, an Ivy League institution, and a large urban university, creating an inclusive and possibly transferable model.

Apropos of a combined Eastern-Western perspective, Buddhist educator Jack Kornfield asks,

Here we are at this time on the earth – what kind of seeds are we planting and tending? There are unhealthy seeds of ignorance, greed, fear, hatred, and delusion—when we plant these seeds and allow them to grow they bring enormous suffering… But there are other seeds, there are seeds of generosity, clarity, gratitude, compassion, and mutual respect….Which ones will you water?

Kornfield (1986), The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology

These are questions that we may ask our students, and their community partners, to address through service-learning, but do we always provide the tools to consider them, answer them, and promote health and lifelong learning? All partners bring assets to the enterprise of service-learning, but when faculty, community partners, and students work interdependently, we introduce complications of identity and experience and systems. While we have traditionally addressed them through critical reflection, such reflection has often occurred after the experience (Jacoby, 2017; Eyler, et al, 2001). In a more proactive and learning-centered approach, interested faculty must first be trained in mindful practices; they can then convey to their students the capacity to be present, listen deeply, and practice compassion toward themselves and others. This does not mean, however, that critical analysis and a focus on citizenship have to be left behind.

Mindful Service-Learning practice gives us the opportunity (1) to think back to the roots of service-learning in both Western and Eastern traditions, (2) to consider and apply contemplative practice to deepen student-community reflection and promote personal well-being, and (3) to apply asset-based approaches in work in the community. In so doing, we can introduce and combine wide-ranging perspectives through the study of authors around the globe, enriching our approach to service-learning (Mitchell, 2008, 2020; Stoecker, 2009), and work toward more egalitarian or decolonizing our community engagement (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). And by engaging conceptually and practically in the same real-world spaces with a wide variety of community members we can make progress toward meaningful, productive, and sustained relationships, while at the same time supporting all participants' emotional health (Thompson, 2023).

Although the term "service-learning" was not coined until the 1970s, the foundation of mindful service-learning was present much earlier (Busch, 2002). The roots of service-learning can be found in Indigenous, Eastern, and early Western traditions. For example, Wilma Mankiller employed the long-standing traditional Cherokee practice of *gadugi*, based on interdependency and reciprocity among clans and families, before and during the service component of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project in the 1970s. Today the national service family joins the global community in marking Nelson Mandela International Day celebrating the "public servant of the people" who believed that service to others should be embraced as a cultural norm (Damon-Moore, 2000).

Oft-cited, Paolo Freire emphasized education that aimed to empower, especially those who were economically and socially marginalized. He believed in education that raised critical consciousness *(Conscientizacao*) and enabled students to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and then take action against the oppressive elements of society (Freire, 1968). Myles Horton and others founded the Highlander School, which advanced similar ideas of emancipatory education, working through the Labor Movement and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. (Busch, 2002) Thich Nhat Hanh came to espouse Engaged Buddhism, which combined a reflective monastic life with meaningful involvement in local communities and working for change in the larger world. Today, Kamilah Majied, black feminist educator and Buddhist activist, calls for "joyfully just" engagement in the community. While Freire is commonly referenced, the others are seldom cited in the body of service-learning literature, but they and others afford a wealth of innovative and multicultural approaches to teaching students about privilege, power, and oppression through service. (hooks, 1940; Magee, 2019; Berila, 2022; Barbezat, 2004; Majied, 2024)

Traditional, Critical/Decolonizing, Asset-Based Pedagogical Context

Just as it has roots in multicultural earlier forms of service, Mindful Service-learning is grounded in contemporary service-learning practices, and mindful and asset-based approaches. As Namdrol, et al (2020) note, over the past decades community-engagement scholars have built a solid foundation of knowledge that explores ways in which interaction with the community affects students, community members and organizations, faculty, and institutions. (Holland, et al, 2001; Giles & Eyler, et al,1994; Kescskes, 2015; Chupp, 2020; Howard, 2004). Much of this work has focused on further developing skills, attitudes, and behaviors associated with Western democratic or civic principles (Jacoby, 2017; Howard, 2001; Johnson, 2017; Ehrlich, 2000). Leadership and social responsibility are emphasized in local, national, and global multicultural society (Jacoby, 1996). Traditional service-learning also features reflection after the activity more than preparation before. It is criticized by subsequent service theorists for having little systemic, bigger picture analysis (Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker, 2016) and for being most often initiated by faculty, not in concert with community (Cruz, 1990). From an ABCD lens, the conventional motivation has too often been that the community needs "help," i.e., a deficit analysis (McKnight, 1988; Hamerlinck and Plaut, eds., 2014). Finally, rewards are largely formal and extrinsic—e.g., grades, credit hours (Mitchell, 2008; Wade, 2002; Pompa, 2000; Hernandez, 2016) and students are not viewed as leaders in partnerships (Zlotkowski, et al, 2002). The critical model emerges in the early 2000s in reaction to traditional service-learning, asserting that students should challenge root structures and avoid paternalism, forced volunteerism, and a condescending concept of charity (Mitchell, 2008; Prentice and Robinson, 2010; Gallini and Moely, 2003; Cress, 2004). Further, decolonized service-learning involves rejecting and dismantling the colonial, racist and inapplicable model of privileged (assumed white) college students helping needy community members (assumed to be of color). As Santiago-Ortiz says, "With the recent shift of global politics to the right and the ever-present neo liberalization of

higher education, there is a need to envision pedagogies that disrupt complicity with the neoliberal and settler colonial project in education." (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Hurtado, 2018).

Since DePaul University is located in two separate geographic locations, placing 4000 students each year in service-learning courses and internships across the city of Chicago and in nearby suburbs, I use ABCD with my students and community partners more as a lens and a process than as a strictly neighborhood-based practice, grounded in a feminist engaged pedagogy. Students work at what ABCD practitioners call the "association" or "institution" level with schools, after-school programs, food pantries, mindfulness programs, and a variety of other organized activities and deepen their connection to classroom material.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness encompasses a wide variety of practices, processes and characteristics, including the capacities of close attention, awareness, memory/retention, and discernment/acceptance (Van Dam et al, 2018; Kabat-Zinn, 2018). Prior to using a mindful approach, my students typically felt educated and enlightened by their readings and critical analyses, but they also too often felt disempowered or even paralyzed. Connecting the dots from a recognition of systemic oppression to the positive tools for engagement offered by mindfulness and ABCD is one of my original motivations for incorporating these approaches into service-learning practice. With regard to ABCD, Mindful Service-learning offers students—and faculty and staff--an invitation to be more active, intentional, and reflective about their work in the community; it must be *practiced*. Thich Nhat Hanh said that mindfulness "shows us what is happening in our bodies, our emotions, and hearts…and sees it as a process that allows us to avoiding harming others or ourselves." (Steinfeld, 2018). The Buddhist concept of the Bodhisattva, that is, to "tend oneself is to tend the world and to tend the world is to tend oneself," is a profound expression of the concerns for human flourishing, active citizenship, and advocacy.

The benefits of mindfulness and meditation for college students are well-documented (Davidson, 2012). In short, such a practice, even if minimally undertaken, can help students to

- manage stress more effectively and work through it more quickly;
- improve their cognitive performance;
- achieve academic success in a variety of ways; and
- experience greater resilience.

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Mindful Service-learning Pedagogy

My courses feature challenging and fulfilling work for students through their internships or group projects in Chicago non-profit and grassroots organizations. Community partners using an implicit mindful approach--possible to replicate at most sites--have included Mindfulness Leader, which has served over 8,700 Chicago Public School middle and high school students in the last 5 years with its mindful

curriculum; as well as San Miguel Middle School, Lakeview Pantry, The Family Place, Just Harvest, Chicago River Alliance, Parole Illinois, Chicago Votes, and a number more. Mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy invites students to situate themselves within the content of the courses and then apply their learning to their lives and their work with their community partners, as Beth Barila puts it, in "a clear parallel to anti-oppression pedagogy." As in traditional service-learning practice, students create websites, research water quality, seek grant opportunities, advocate in food justice campaigns, but with the intention of

1. Focus and attention building through mental exercises
2. Compassion, connection to others through service
3. Contemplation and introspection through reflection
4. Inquiry into the nature of their minds, personal meaning, insight and social action *(Adapted from Barbezat and Bush, 2014, 11)*

Student Testimony From Study:
A garden won't grow on its own; it takes everyone; and in turn it will nurture everyone. I am a better person in the community/earth; climate change is very important to me for ex. The world gives us fruit, beauty, what we need to live. The community is better; we need to be authentic people in exchange.

In the face of the challenging concepts such as diversity, privilege, and systemic oppression present in the readings that I have always taught, I have included selections from Sharon Salzburg's *Real Change: Mindfulness to Heal Ourselves and the World;* Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness*; Pema Chodron's *Welcoming the Unwelcome*; Rhonda Magee's *The Inner Work of Racial Justice;* Jack *Kornfield's The Wise Heart*; Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*, Kamilah Majied's *Joyfully Just*, and Dan Harris's, *10% Happier*, among others, providing positive and multicultural tools for critical analysis, coping, and thriving. As their professor I have always asked students to consider and frame their community work in light of challenging issues, but our mindful reflection has added an element of skillful and healthy "presence" that has seemed to provide a way forward to be more responsible on my part as an educator. Given the potential for service-learning to "promote," in the words of Chupp and Joseph, "paternalistic attitudes and stereotypes" the "tend the world" approach should "be carefully designed to expose students to the root causes of social problems." (Chupp, et al, 2021)

The Study—Methodology and Results

After evolving a mindful engagement approach over the years and observing mainly positive effects, I embarked on a comprehensive literature review related to service-learning, mindfulness, and ABCD, which yielded only the Loy and Namdrol/Kesckes articles cited below, despite the possibilities for application across institutions and disciplines and bridging theory and practice.

I framed my study in light of the findings of Namdrol and Kesckes (2020) and Loy (2019), to interrogate the benefits of mindfulness as associated with service-learning. In addition, I sought to evaluate the impact of mindful service-learning in light of "Student Difficulties in Service-learning," a compilation of studies noting that undergraduate students who "participate in service-learning are, while experiencing many positive outcomes, (Seider et al, 2012; Weiler et al, 2013; Wilson, 2011; Burfe, et al, 2016) are also likely to report

- a lack of classroom organization in service-learning
- safety and transportation concerns
- anxiety regarding their new role
- unmet expectations
- interactions with other students
- connecting with community members

While I do not believe that such an approach is a panacea, I do believe that each of these concerns can be addressed by a mindful and strengths-based approach having seen positive effects over the years, as demonstrated by my 2022-2023 study and evaluation.

I sought to understand more formally students' experiences of serving communities through courses and internships. Of the 16 students interviewed for this study, 3 were Juniors and 13 were Seniors. They were all advanced students for whom the future was uppermost in their minds. While the sample was small, I interviewed each student for 1.5-2 hours, yielding much information. In addition, I analyzed 24 student papers, together yielding an ample amount of relevant material. (Catlett, et al, 2018) Since I invited just two classes (in addition to interns) to participate in the interviews, I was pleasantly surprised when 6 men agreed to participate (disproportionate to the number of men in each of my classes, which reflects national gendered trends in who participates in service-learning (some studies demonstrate that 75% of participants are women, which has implications for society as a whole). I think this may indicate young men's receptivity to the universality of mindfulness as an approach (Busch, 2022; Rykov, 2014). Given the skills they had learned in class, men as well as women saw mindfulness as well as ABCD as a valuable way to connect with the community.

According to Yin (2014); and Kesckes (2020) an exploratory research design is most appropriate when there is no pre-determined outcome for the research, and when there is no hypothesis to be tested. Thus, in this case, in addition to the literature review, human subjects' approval was obtained and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed for the data collection phase. A second reader surveyed my notes. (Gelmon, 2018; Kesckes, 2020) The study was comprised of the experiences of DePaul University undergraduate students who had completed my Mindful Activism or Community Service Studies Internship Capstone courses. Each course featured significant community engagement, asset-based development, and mindfulness components. Interviews were conducted by Zoom well after completion of each course. Interviews were audio recorded as well as transcribed and coded independently by a third party

(Ravitch, et al, 2019). I surveyed fourteen students from the Capstone Internship courses of 2021 and 2022; two students from the "Mindful Activism" course (taught prior to the pandemic); and scanned 24 student papers from the past 4 years for related commentary.

Research Questions and Data Analysis: What, So what, Now what?

Did mindfulness affect your learning skills/style, and, if so, how? *38 students answered in the affirmative.* *Virtually all students reported that mindfulness had helped them significantly with study skills and reflection. Two of the class cohorts I interviewed had been enrolled during the pandemic.*
Did mindfulness help you with focus, time management, or stress? 34 students answered in the affirmative. *Two of the class cohorts I surveyed had been enrolled during the pandemic and students and community partners found them especially stressful. One student said, "I felt like I was in a 'black box' in the pandemic, and mindfulness in our course was a way out of that." Students generally became aware of the benefits of focus, prioritizing, not procrastinating but taking breaks, and of paying attention more mindfully in class, including online when they turned off other devices.*
Did mindfulness affect your internship work in the community, and, if so, how? *31 students answered in the affirmative.* *The study revealed that students have learned from and utilized the rich resource of the mindful approach with the organizations where they were engaged, "tending the world" with this tool to make social change. Mindfulness exercises and engagement were clearly helpful in coping with projects undertaken with colleagues and community partners only on Zoom.*

Did mindfulness affect your relationships with classmates?

21 students answered in the affirmative.

As one student said, "*as Community Service Studies Minors, we came into this capstone class already knowing one another. So it didn't affect me much either way."*

Seventeen students said that they grew closer as a group and that mindfulness aided their group work. Of their own accord they gained a larger understanding of their communities' and the world's issues and created a cohort, or as Buddhists would name it, a "sangha," with whom to do it. "We were called to start with an open mind, listened deeply, and began to recognize their own assets as a group as well as those of the community to call upon in working for social change," one student shared.

Did you see any connection between asset-based community development and mindfulness?

18 students answered in the affirmative.

Students from 2020-2022 were more likely to answer this question in the affirmative, since I have addressed it and applied more in later iterations of the courses. Those who did suggested that "mindfulness and ABCD helped us see possibilities in the face of challenges in the bigger picture."

How did you come to consider and understand "Tend the world, I tend myself; tend myself I tend the world?"

The study revealed that students have learned from and utilized the rich resource of the mindful approach with the organizations where they were engaged, "tending the world" with this tool to make social change.

For example, a student who had worked at a food pantry for three years reported that it was "challenging because of emotions," saying that she had "paused" mindfully when a patron screamed because she had been denied food at the pantry "and we all felt our vulnerability. I learned," she said, "to respond rather than react and to let go of things I had really brooded about before. I gave grace versus pushing through." She shared this challenging situation in class, without using names, of course, and her classmates encouraged her to pursue the situation at her site, i.e., to tend the world, for the client's sake, for the staff's sake—and for her own. Her professional colleagues at the pantry had been supportive of her work in general but there was no systematic training on how to cope with the difficult emotions that might arise for a service learner or intern. "Our class is where I learned that" she said. "I discerned many assets at my site, but basic needs for

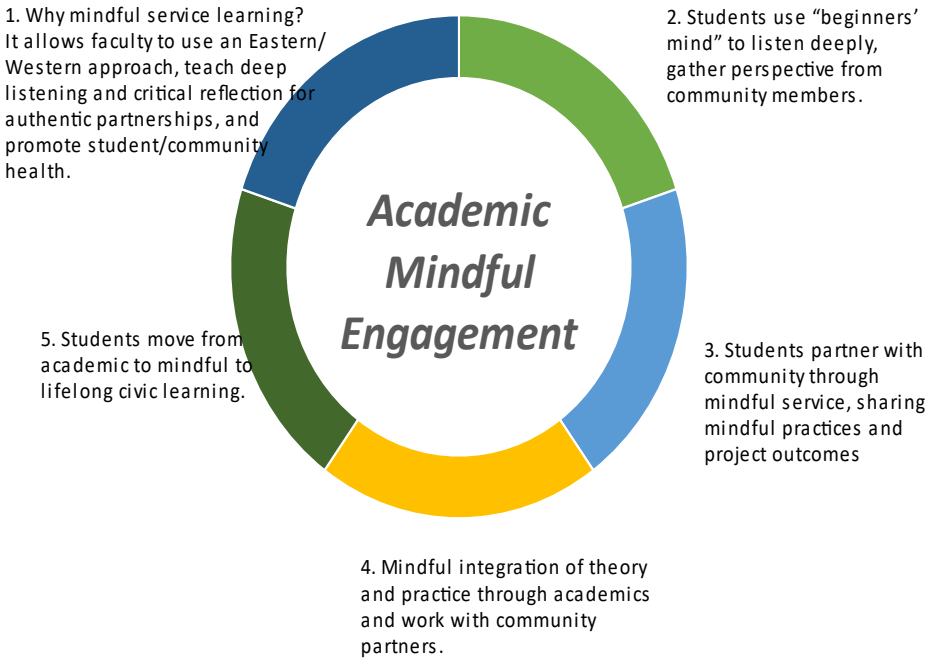
such coping were not being met." As a result of her deep listening, this student broached with her colleagues the creation of a training program for interns, which she, a Human Resources major, later helped to create.
Have you practiced some type of mindfulness post-class? *8 students answered in the affirmative.* *A challenge of the study is that I teach almost only seniors, and I did not predict the study for those who were graduating. But those I was able to reach 2 years or out reported some kind of practice, whether it be as simple as mindful eating, or using Headspace Meditation, or volunteering to teach mindfulness in the schools. All graduates with whom I talked tried to be mindful in their daily living.*
) Is there anything you would like to add? "*Mindful service-learning helps you know what you are good at (your "gifts"). That's the first thing folks from the community ask of volunteers—beyond their resume. And it's great if you can answer that mindfully. Then you can really work with them."*

On the best days, given all the complications of their lives, during their work together with their community partners and with one another students came to feel gratitude and joy in their work. In my interviews they celebrated their engaged education and attested to the lasting impact of their work in the community, their class bond, and their own self-image.

Rooted in Buddhism and with many secular applications in psychology and education, mindfulness can be taught and practiced in the classroom and, through structured exercises and the cultivated habit of paying careful attention in daily life, in the community beyond (Davidson, 2012), making it relevant to the challenging task of any service-learning endeavor as well as pedagogical approaches in general. It is a high impact practice that can help to boost engagement for men as women and the confidence of first-generation and students with mental health issues, thereby offering faculty significant teaching opportunities.

Community-based Service-learning Course Strategy

As the diagram demonstrates, my courses feature preparation for service through "beginner's mind" and deep listening to both oneself (positionality) and to community members, thereby helping to establish the connection between "tending the self" and "tending the world."They sometimes feature asset-mapping in conjunction with the community. Lelong learning is furthered. Academic content, ABCD instruction, and preparing to partner through mindful practices are all shared in parallel. And students seem to retain this process orientation, as my study shows.



Mindful pedagogy can result in deep reflection, healthier students, more compassionate partnerships with the community, and fostering the common good.

Student Testimony From Study:
I had heard about ABCD through classes, but our consideration of mindfulness made me much more intentional about stepping into a physical or mental space in the community. It also made me think more about what "stepping out" (leaving) when I was done would be like, and there was no easy answer to that.

Another way to represent Mindful Service-learning is through the Bohdi Tree image. Common in Buddhist practice the tree represents the blend of Western and Eastern approaches, which better approximates the liberatory approach espoused by Freire and contemporary scholars (Mitchell, etc.)

Conclusion

Mindful Service-learning can be secular or spiritual in nature and adapted to all disciplines (Barbezat; Pink, et al; Kesckes, et al). It is important to be respectful of the "tending" practice in relation to our community work and to tend cooperatively *with*, rather than in a patronizing way *for* the community. "Tend" is a word that my courses interrogate from both a Western and an Eastern perspective emphasizing a positionality and systems analysis and the goal of working together. The full concept—"Tend Yourself, You Tend the World; *Tend the World, You Tend Yourself*, suggests a balance that students easily grasp no matter what their personal circumstances, the challenging issues we are considering, or the community members with whom they work. While not "saving the world," a stance which service advocates at their most ardent can promote, I have found that students and community members can tend their corners of the world in ways which tilt toward social justice. For example, one of my interviewed students worked with "Repair the World" on issues of Jewish rights while another developed curriculum for a Mecca youth group; others worked for food justice, STEM activities, and making ESL resources available digitally for community members from his home community center.

The time is right for an Eastern/Western blend in a mindful, global blend of tending the world and the self" for both women and men. As Santiago-Ortiz writes, "with the ever-present neo liberalization of higher education, there is a need to envision pedagogies that disrupt complicity with the neoliberal and settler colonia project in education." (Santiago-Ortiz…Kesckes, 2022; Loy, 2018; Steinfeld, 2019; Barbezat and Bush, 2014). And as a Director of Faculty Development I believe that many faculty members, students, and community partners could benefit from the mindful approach as a personal form of reflection or self-care, or as a pedagogical practice. We have assets and we need to further develop them through, as ABCD Steward of the ABCD Institute says, "working in the same spaces" or "the world." (Thompson, DePaul Faculty Community Institute, June 2023). John McKnight, one of the founders of the ABCD approach, called it "falling in love with the community;" we can also be enlightened by the current work of Buddhist activists like Kamilah Majied who proclaims that "fierce compassion when acted on becomes a skill, a response-ability, and an ability to respond instead of reacting." (Majied, 2024).

Challenges relate to the perceived time this approach may take away from "content delivery" and a hesitation on the part of faculty and administrators who might view such a mix as too innovative. But we must recognize that reflection and reflexivity are essential for responsible and ethical practice, on the part of the university as well as students and community partners. When we can bring mindful awareness to our work we can incorporate it as an asset for all.

Student Testimony from Study:
Mindful service-learning helps you know what you are good at (your "gifts"). That's the first thing folks from the community ask of volunteers—beyond their resume. And it's great if you can answer that mindfully. Then you can really work with them.

A Comprehensive Institutional Mindful Model

Given widespread interest in mindfulness and the potential for Mindful Service-learning, the ideal context for fostering mindful engagement on campus and in the community might be:

- The college or university takes a mindful approach to health and engagement in general, perhaps through a Mindfulness Center, examples of which exist (paralleling the earlier development of community engagement centers);
- Faculty partner mindfully with specific community partners with the assistance of the community-based service-learning center;
- Faculty teach students through orientation, reflection, mindfulness/critical analysis (community partners often help);
- Students build relationships with community and vice versa through beginner's mind deep listening and an asset orientation;
- Students, community partners, faculty, and university integrate theory and practice;
- Social change for students, community members, and faculty occurs in the same social spaces toward similar ends;
- Mindful skills and compassion are sustained; and, eventually,
- A global network for mindful engagement and contemplative practice is created.

Student Testimony From Study:

A garden won't grow on its own; it takes everyone; and in turn it will nurture everyone. I am a better person in the community/earth; climate change is very important to me for ex. The world gives us fruit, beauty, what we need to live. The community is better; we need to be authentic people in exchange.

Themes Emerging as Most Salient--Responses from Student Participants

- Theme 1. Mindfulness helps students with study skills and stress. Most salient, reflects the literature. Complements service-learning through general stress, especially in the time of the post-pandemic.
- Theme 2. Mindfulness helped students to prepare for service-learning.
- Theme 3. Mindfulness helped students to build relations with peers and community partners.
- Theme 4. Mindfulness and ABCD helped students to see possibilities in the face of challenges in the bigger picture.

Student Testimony From Study:

San Miguel assets a grounding pt.—we started there, especially with the 8th graders! Mindfulness a way to connect the dots to ABCD in the community and to come together ourselves. I took "Mindful Activism" because I was really interested in the blend. I was going through difficult times personally and mindfulness helped me accept things as they were and not be overwhelmed. I was also able to focus on the children at San Miguel.

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