Imagine a library research instruction session is about to begin at the W. E. B. Du Bois Library. Undergraduate students in the architecture program bustle in from other classes, exams, time with friends. The room is awash in technological and social interactions: conversations are at a fever pitch; backpacks thump to the floor; texts fly from phones; laptops flip open. Most of these students have never been in the Calipari classroom, one of the Library’s state-of-the-art classrooms with 32 computer workstations, and they’ve never met me, the librarian who supports their department. This scenario isn’t very conducive to launching my only session with them; I’ll have about an hour in which to impart a raft of information, including time for hands-on learning. And so, when there’s a lot of learning to fit into a short session, my pedagogical approach is to “grow the container.” In other words, I help the students increase their own capacity for learning.

Instead of diving right into database searches, citation management, and registering for interlibrary loan, I first invite the students to place their feet flat on the floor. In front of each student is a piece of paper on which a labyrinth is printed. Next, I invite them to trace the labyrinth with their finger or the end of a pen. Heads lower, eyes focus, and hands shift through the seven circuits of this archetypal pattern. The mood shifts in the room; a calmness arises.

When the students have completed their virtual journeys, I compare their experience of walking or tracing a labyrinth to the research process. Although it is not a straight line, you know you will eventually reach your destination—you will complete your project. At some stages, you feel close to completion, and then something switches, and you feel far away again. The winding path takes some patience to navigate, and staying the course is imperative. This contemplative practice brings a fresh perspective to the start of our session. Other contemplative practices I deploy in my instruction sessions (as well as in one-on-one consultations) are mind mapping, free writing, and pauses in which students can check in with themselves: Can you stay open to swerves in your research and still stay on track? Can you embrace the messiness of digging and sorting through information? What feelings are bubbling up—frustration, excitement, anxiety? From a somatic perspective, where are these feelings showing up in your body—tightening of the chest, stomach flutters, surges of energy on top of the head?

In their foundational text, Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning, Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush note that as students “find more of themselves in their courses,” they will make meaningful and lasting connections to their learning. The practices described in the book (such as journaling, nature walks, paired exercises) cultivate attention, foster compassion, stimulate creative problem-solving, and enhance students’ ability to hold contradiction, which is fundamental to integrating their learning into action in the world. Evidence-based practices, such as those offered through Berkeley’s Greater Good in Action demonstrate that by practicing mindfulness—making time in our lives to pay attention, on purpose and without judgment—we can actually change our brains in ways that reduce stress and shift our tendency toward worry, stress, anger, depression, and anxiety to flexibility, calmness, self-regulation, informed decision-making, and peacefulness. Equally important is the positive effect these practices can have on day-to-day interactions among members of a community. When UMass Amherst faculty and librarians harness these pedagogical approaches, they and their students contribute to the creation of a more compassionate world, dovetailing with the campus’s Diversity Matters efforts, Building a Community of Dignity and Respect.

College students in the U.S. today face considerable stressors due to academic demands, rising tuition costs, and navigating a fast-paced world of technological and social pressures. According to the Fall 2018 National College Health Assessment (from the American College Health Association), more than 60 percent of college students said they experienced “overwhelming anxiety.” More than 40 percent said they felt so depressed they had difficulty functioning. Considering the enormity of these challenges, UMass Amherst is stepping up its efforts to address student well-being. In June, Elizabeth “Betsy” Cracco arrived on campus as the first-ever Executive Director for Well-Being, Access, and Prevention in the office of Student Affairs and Campus.
Life. In this new position, Cracco will lead and provide strategic direction for programs and services supporting the psychological and physical well-being of students, as well as demonstrate the impacts of these programs on campus student success goals. Cracco explains, “We often orient toward managing crises in these arenas, as well as we should. However, to create lasting and substantive change, we will move upstream and look at the genesis of these concerns.” Cracco’s work with the Center for Counseling and Psychological Health, the Center for Health Promotion, Disability Services, and Campus Recreation mirrors the University’s strategic plan, recognizing that students’ goals and expectations are holistic in nature and include wellness and a sense of belonging. She refers to this holistic strategy as “hopeful and exciting work before us as a campus—to look beyond self-care models toward analysis of the ways in which structures and systems us as a campus—to look beyond self-care models toward analysis of the ways in which structures and systems...

Graduate students face similar pressures. A PhD candidate who wishes to remain anonymous sent me an email expressing gratitude for the pop-up open meditation space offered this summer in Bartlett Hall. “To have a space to practice during school hours is a great source of respite and has helped me immensely with my productivity,” wrote the student. “Prior to the knowledge about the space, I tried to practice mindfulness exercises in the bathroom or on staircases where there might be no interruption from people. It was awkward, uncomfortable, and definitely unhelpful. The room in Bartlett, to me, is an oasis of tranquility on campus.”

The transformation of the classroom into this “oasis of tranquility” was brought about with the cushions originally procured through a Campus Climate Improvement grant. The grant supported Mindfulness for All, an eight-week series offered at the Du Bois Library in Fall 2018. Each session featured activities such as body scan, silent sitting, breath work, gratitude practice, contemplative listening, walking meditation, compassion meditation, and visualization. The welcoming atmosphere and accessible setting—hosted by faculty, staff, and student practitioners of mindfulness from across disciplines and departments—invited unbiased and compassionate awareness. Participants were encouraged to apply these skills in their living-learning-working environments, again reinforcing the Dignity and Respect campaign on campus.

Many of those participants expressed a desire for a permanent meditation space on campus. Plans are now underway for such a space in the soon-to-be-completed Worcester Commons, while nascent plans are unfolding for meditation space in the Learning Commons of the Du Bois Library.

Mediation spaces, mindfulness programs, and resources are becoming increasingly common in campus libraries, which often function as a “third space” in a community. Neither workplace nor home, this in-between space in a library offers fertile ground for self-discovery, collaboration, and lifelong learning. In Merrimack College’s library, students use exercise bicycles fitted for laptop use, check out houseplants for their dorm rooms, and borrow kits for birdwatching, yoga, gardening, and sound healing. The library at Humboldt State University offers “Brain Booths,” which house biofeedback machines, therapy lights, virtual reality goggles, and sound machines—all intended to wash away mental fatigue and make room for deeper learning.

My personal mindfulness journey emerged in 2016 when my anxiety around climate change rose to a debilitating crescendo. After suffering for too long, I dusted off my little-used meditation cushion and began a regular practice of silent sitting. The result: my stomach has consistently, and many other benefits. Most importantly, meditating allows me to face the disturbing realities of climate change (and other issues) with a greater capacity to regulate my nervous system and behavior. Operating from a more stable place, I’m better equipped to engage in change-making activities, and that feels empowering—a feedback loop! Discovering many studies about the psychological and physical health challenges related to climate change has helped me feel less alone with my worries. This led me to participate in various groups that use deep listening and dialogue, another form of mindfulness, to process emotions around climate change and build social resilience, including Good Grief Network, Safe Circle, and Council on the Uncertain Human Future. In the words of Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, coauthors of Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy, “The most radical thing any of us can do at this time is to be fully present to what is happening in the world.” It’s not easy.

Integrating mindfulness into my teaching, I have found camaraderie and inspiration in various forms and settings. I regularly attend meetings of the Contemplative Pedagogy Working Group, which is administered by the Center for Teaching and Learning. As instructors and graduate students across a wide range of disciplines, we take turns leading contemplative practices, share and receive resources, discuss specific readings, and compile best practices in Contemplative Pedagogy course design and teaching. This past year we discussed The Slow Professor by Maggie Berg and Barbara Seiber and learned from visiting scholars including Michelle Chalmers (University of the District of Columbia), who gave a talk on “Blackness and Mindfulness: The Intersection of...
Glossary of mindfulness terms

**Contemplation**
Thoughtful observation; full or deep consideration; reflection; purpose or intention.

**Free writing**
Technique in which the student writes continuously for a set period of time without regard to spelling, grammar, or topic; produces raw, often unusable material, but helps jump-start ideas and overcome apathy or self-doubt.

**Mind map**
A nonlinear, intuitive diagram that represents tasks, words, concepts, or items arranged around a central concept or subject.

**Mindfulness**
Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.

**Pedagogy**
A method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept.

**Somatic**
Relating to the body, especially as distinct from the mind.

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Culture, Justice, and Healing,” and Sara Lazar and Gunes Sevinc (Harvard Medical School), who spoke about meditation and its effect on the brain. Along with other members of the Contemplative Pedagogy Working Group, I have attended the national conference of the Association of Contemplative Mind in Higher Education as well as their intensive summer teaching institute at Smith College. Based in Florence, Massachusetts, the Association is a multidisciplinary academic group committed to the transformation of higher education through the recovery and development of the contemplative dimensions of teaching, learning, and knowing.

Librarians have created specific forums such as the Contemplative Pedagogy Interest Group under the Association of College and Research Libraries and a Facebook Group, Mindfulness for Librarians, with more than 1,200 members and virtual sharing sessions throughout the year. The American Library Association offers online mindfulness courses, webinars, and conference programs. September 12, 2019, was the first annual Library Meditation Day (#LISMeditationDay), with planned and spontaneous meditation activities happening in libraries across the country. Locally, staff from the Five College libraries gather periodically to deepen our teaching and practice mindfulness activities. My professional involvement with mindfulness was sparked by UMass Amherst nursing professor Donna Zucker. In 2014, she projected a labyrinth in a space on the ninth floor of the Du Bois Library as part of a study on stress reduction and blood pressure. Intrigued, I volunteered as a subject. (The Sparq Labyrinth was created by librarian Matthew Cook, University of Oklahoma.) I began reading about labyrinths and seeking them out to walk in my area, learning that they date back to the Neolithic age and that more than 5,000 labyrinths exist in 80 countries, according to the website the World-Wide Labyrinth Locator. Dr. Zucker introduced me to Cathy Rigali, a nurse at the county jail, who lent me her foldout canvas labyrinth for a mindfulness retreat for Five College library staff. It was exciting to try something different and witness the various effects on participants. Some of their comments tell the story: “The pause in the middle was very powerful. I’ve done walking meditation before, but not in a labyrinth; I never realized how fast I usually walk. I’ve never walked so slowly, and without shoes; At one point I felt panic (shuckles), like I was lost. And then I realized I’m on the same path; It was like doing yoga.”

Longing for a labyrinth of my own, I applied for a grant from the Association of Mental Health Librarians and became the proud owner of a 16’ x 16’ canvas labyrinth purchased for $1,400 from The Labyrinth Company. Packed in a rolling suitcase, my labyrinth is easy to tote to various library settings so I can treat my colleagues to a sanctuary in time and space at conferences, at workshops I lead, and even in their own workplaces. It’s fun to scope out just the right spot in the conference center and post the location on Twitter. As librarians hustle among sessions, meals, and meetings, I direct them to the labyrinth. Many look at me quizzically; this is not your typical invitation at a conference. Afterward, many report how their labyrinth walk boosted their conference experience, easing some down from a presentation they just delivered, and calming others before they present. I discreetly observe the walkers, many of whom pause in the center, lifting arms up high, taking a few deep breaths—truly using the moment to re-center themselves—before retracing their steps out. We humans are complex beings navigating complex personal, professional, and societal landscapes. While mindfulness cannot completely resolve an issue, its tools offer precious and too-rare opportunities for self-care, meaning-making, and connection to oneself, others, and the wider world. In these rapidly changing and turbulent times, mindfulness offers support to stay the course—to lean on one another and reach out or look inward when the path forward feels murky, wearisome, or daunting. It is with great joy and purposefulness that I share mindfulness opportunities with my students and colleagues, within libraries and across disciplines. Wishing you all well on your own journeys.