

**Cornell College
Departmental / Program Assessment Project
Final Report**

Department / Program:	Office of Chaplain & Spiritual Life
Person Submitting this Form:	Catherine Quehl-Engel
Date:	June 2014

Please submit a brief report addressing the following items:

1. Description of assessment project, including the outcomes/questions addressed, the methods used to gather/analyze evidence, and the interpretations drawn from the results.
2. Changes implemented based on results of assessment project? Please be specific.
3. How have these changes affected your department and intended outcomes for students and/or services? How do you know?
4. What has the department learned from the assessment process?
5. Next year, you will begin anew in the assessment cycle, designing a new assessment project to address informational priorities. What outcomes and/or questions do you anticipate exploring?
6. Having completed the assessment cycle, the comments/concerns you would like to share about the process? What needs do you have moving forward?

Submitted to Becki Elkins & Elizabeth Jach



June 12, 2014

Your Signature

Date



June 12, 2014

Department Chair Signature

Date

1.A. DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT PROJECT:

This assessment project also served as the chaplain's doctoral dissertation research project. It involved a contemplative program created by the chaplain specifically for this department's inter-spiritual, liberal arts ministry context. Thirty Cornell students, faculty, staff, and townspeople from diverse religious, secular, and spiritual-but-not-religious backgrounds participated in this seven week program and research project in academic year 2012-2013.

Entitled Deep Abiding, this heart-focused interior prayer/compassion meditation program was intended not only for participants' personal solace and empowerment, nor solely for individual healing, and spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The program also sought to integrate the College's education priorities, core values, and learning objectives of inter-disciplinary knowledge, intercultural literacy, moral courage, civic engagement and social responsibility. In other words, the aim of the Deep Abiding program was the original purpose of many Western and Eastern contemplative traditions: namely, to live, love, lead, and serve as instruments of healing peace, and to awaken awareness of our inter-connective oneness.

Beyond learning a formal as well as an informal version of the practice that occurs while in the midst of daily life activities and encounters, six learning sessions addressed the following topics:

- Diverse religious and cultural understandings of indwelling life force energy or Spirit, and heart-focused contemplative practice throughout human history;
- Growing scientific research on both psycho-physical and psycho-social healing benefits of meditation/interior prayer;
- Wisdom from mystics, sages, and activists/social justice leaders on 1) healing peace and empowerment through self-surrender, compassionate embrace of one's weakness, and identification with indwelling life force energy or Spirit as one's deepest Self; 2) the relationship between contemplative practice and compassion, empowered action, leadership, and awareness of our inter-connective oneness as a human species and planet.

1.B. INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- Participants cultivate a contemplative practice which opens them to both personal and communal healing.
- Participants are able to engage in the inner gentle gesture of surrender to indwelling life force energy or Spirit even while in the midst of everyday life activity, responsibilities, and encounters. This enables them to be more skillful and compassionate with emotions like anxiety, sadness, and compassion fatigue amid life responsibilities and difficulties.
- Implicit, though not specified, among intended outcomes was the following operative assumption: Cultivating an awareness of indwelling life force/Spirit increases exterior awareness of inter-connective oneness and solidarity with others. This in turn deepens a *communio*¹ of love between self, other people, creation, and for many, the Divine.

Note: Participants were invited to interpret indwelling life force energy or Spirit imbedded in and between all living beings as best fit their scientific (i.e. Einstein), cultural, as well as secular, religious, or spiritual-but-not-religious perspectives.

1.C. METHODS USED TO GATHER/ANALYZE EVIDENCE.

Twenty-eight out of thirty participants completed the seven week program and the following assessment instruments:

- Quantitative: Survey comparison using the College's Qualtrics web based software: Survey A = Baseline (also served as a control group).
Survey B = Taken at the end of the program
Survey C = Taken one month after the program
- Qualitative: Hand written answers to questions during final session.

¹ *Communio* is a Latin for mutual participation, sharing, community, or communion.

Both Greg Cotton and Chaplain & Spiritual Life Office student worker, Kim Boche, verified this data.

Composite Participant Profile: Of the 30 participants, 31% were age 18-23, 48% were age 24-59, and 21% were age 60-69. Selection was based on a combination of intentionally trying to create a demographic balance of age, gender, and student/faculty/staff and other campus community members while still trying to honor to the best of my ability a first-come-first-to-enroll system. Participants were split into two cohort groups that mixed Cornell College students (9), faculty/ staff (8), faculty/staff spouses or partners (4), as well as alumni and other Mt. Vernon area residents (9).

The baseline survey showed participants as highly diverse in terms of religious, secular, and spiritual-but-not religious perspectives.

Research credibility within the academic field of spirituality is enriched when reported participant experiences match key themes of spiritual tradition/s which have some relationship to the research study. The following themes on Divine Indwelling, as found in TaNak or Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian New Testament, the lives and writings of Sts. Clare and Francis of Assisi, and the life and writings of St. Teresa of Avila, undergirded the project design, content, and intended outcomes²:

- Self-knowledge and acceptance of one's poverty (weakness) heals, liberates, and empowers.
- Self-knowledge of being indwelt by Eternal life force energy or Spirit as one's Deepest, Truest Self grants a dignity, peace, and strength that heals, liberates, and empowers. This indwelling energy or Spirit is in all people and creation.
- The inner gesture of surrender to indwelling Spirit, combined with mercy/compassion rather than aggression towards one's poverty (weakness, brokenness, failure) transforms, heals, liberates, and

² This underpinning of spiritual traditions was limited in scope in order to keep the dissertation size manageable. Still, these themes are of an inter-spiritual nature, and can be found in numerous mystical and other contemplative traditions of the world.

empowers.

- Recognition of the above leads to recognition of mutuality and solidarity with others, including amid others' struggles with their own weakness/poverty. This also increases awareness of oneness with creation and for many the Sacred or Source. This unitive consciousness is an awareness of oneness, inter-dependency, and interconnectivity with all beings in a *communio* of love.
- Interior prayer of the heart/compassion meditation puts one in touch with the four items named above. This form of prayer is not only a formal spiritual practice done in seated silence. It is also a way of being, perceiving, loving, and serving amid everyday life activities and encounters.

1D. INTERPRETIVE CONCLUSIONS:

It was not a surprise that assessment instruments revealed ample quantitative and qualitative evidence of personal healing and wellbeing occurring as a result of this program and its heart-focused interior prayer/compassion meditation practices (dissertation included chapter on related medical and other scientific research). It was also not surprising to find large numbers of participants turning to the informal version of this practice which occurs while in the midst of busy and often stressful life responsibilities and encounters with others.

What was surprising? The high levels of measurable evidence concerning communal healing, as well as the operative assumption undergirding the entire project: namely, how cultivating an awareness of indwelling life force/Spirit increases exterior awareness of inter-connective oneness and solidarity with others; how this in turn deepens a *communio*³ of love between self, others, creation, and for many the Divine.

Summarized below are sets of data for each intended outcome, ending with an interpretive conclusion drawn from those measurable outcomes in tandem with spiritual themes found in traditions named in methods/analysis

³ *Communio* is a Latin for mutual participation, sharing, community, or communion.

section above.

INTENDED OUTCOME: PERSONAL HEALING

There were 15 quantitative and 25 qualitative sets of evidence suggesting the Deep Abiding program contributed to personal healing. Examples of measurable evidence include:

- During the program, 96% of participants (27 of 28) reported using the program for personal healing on a weekly basis. One month after the program ended, 93% of participants (25 of 27) reported they were still using this program for this purpose.
- During the program 79% to 89% (22-25 of 28) of participants—and one month after the program 82% to 89% (23-25 of 28) of participants —turned this practice when experiencing the following:
 - 1) Fear, disappointment, or inability to control a situation (89% / 89%).
 - 2) Discomforting, none-life giving thoughts about oneself (86% / 89%).
 - 3) Need of strength and courage (79% / 82%).

Other reported occasions include:

- 4) When needing to be prayerful, but words aren't working, especially amid tiredness or sorrow (61% = 17 / 61% 17).
 - 5) When needing to be prayerful amid uncertainty of belief and spiritual questioning (46% or 13 / 44% or 12).
- An increase by 20-47% in "Often" and "Almost Always" responses for these categories:
 - 1) The ability to recognize when one is over-identifying with a non- life giving anxious thought or feeling;
 - 2) The ability to accept and respond to fears, imperfections, or anxious thoughts/feelings with tender mercy;

- 3) The ability to experience spiritual solace and strength during times of sorrow, difficulty, or loneliness;
- 4) The ability to experience one's being housing a peace, tender mercy, and strength greater than my own.
- 5) The ability to experience surrender/relinquishment in life giving ways.
- 6) Likewise, experiencing positive transformation, healing, and new life by loosening the tight grip of trying to remain in control.
- 7) The ability to ask for help when in need.

Interpretive Conclusion RE: Intended outcome of personal healing:

When data from survey comparisons are examined in tandem with qualitative written responses, repeating themes pertaining to personal, transformative healing emerge. These themes are also found in spiritual wisdom traditions undergirding this project:

- 1) A humble, gentle acceptance of one's spiritual poverty (weakness). In other words, a long, loving look at one's life circumstances, human limitations, imperfections, pain, vulnerabilities, and failures with non-aggression and compassion. This also includes observing and accepting with tender mercies one's fears and other unpleasant thoughts, feelings, self-criticisms, as well as ego-mind's desire to be accepted and/or esteemed by others.**
- 2) Increased ability to recognize, soften, and disarm over-identification with non-life giving thoughts and feelings.**
- 3) Increased ability to surrender the need to remain in control. This is not giving up or giving in but a relaxing of ego-mind aversions and grasping in life giving, transformative ways.**
- 4) Greater inner peace, solace, strength, and calm amid difficulties.**
- 5) Increased ability to forgive oneself.**
- 6) Increased patience with oneself.**
- 7) Increased ability to ask for help when in need.**

- 8) **Increased self-love and self-worth.**
- 9) **Increased ability to establish healthy boundaries in both pleasant and unpleasant relationships; includes the ability to stand up for oneself.**
- 10) **Increased physical vitality levels.**

INTENDED OUTCOME: COMMUNAL HEALING

The daily assignment for participants included the sending of healing, compassionate intention to Cornell College and the Mt. Vernon communities. Participants also engaged in the informal version of the practice while in the midst of daily life interactions. Examples of measurable evidence pointing to communal healing, include:

- Surveys results show 100% of participants used the interior prayer of the heart/compassion meditation practice for the purpose of communal healing. One month after the program ended, 100% of participants were still reporting that they were engaging in this practice for the purpose of communal healing.
- *According to Dean of Student's records, there was a decrease in student misconduct reports by 50% during this time period compared to two previous years.*
- Survey comparisons reveal *five out of five consistent sets of across the board increases in positive attitudes toward Cornell.* For example, participants indicating they had "Positive" or "Very Positive" overall feelings toward Cornell College jumped from a baseline pre-program level of 53% to 88%. Responses of "Often" and "Almost Always" having feelings of healing peace and compassion toward the College doubled.
- Occasions when participants engaged in the interior prayer of the heart/compassion meditation practice amid daily life encounters for this communal healing purpose:
 1. When wanting to send healing, gratitude, respect, or compassionate intention to someone (86% during program; 85% one month later).
 2. When wanting to be a healing presence (86%/81%).
 3. When hearing an ambulance, seeing someone struggle, or witnessing suffering in the news (71%/59%).

4. When wanting to send healing and compassionate intention to those who upset them (71%/70%).
 5. One month after the program ended over half the participants indicated that they still use this practice to send healing and compassionate intention to people while in a public setting (i.e. while in meetings, class, Thomas Commons, airports, while walking, etc.).
- 100% of participants filling out questionnaires indicated that the program and its spiritual practices improved relationships with family, co-workers, friends, and community members. When asked to explain how these themes occurred, they noted:
 1. Being a calming, peaceful, and positive influence on others.
 2. Helping people experience healing through forgiveness and the extending of gracious compassion to others, including those they may struggle to love.
 3. Helping cultivate healthier and happier relationships.
 4. Helping increase the ability to establish healthy personal and social boundaries amid caring community.
 5. Increased understanding of, sense of mutuality with, and tender mercy toward, others. This is an experience of oneness, solidarity, or a *communio* of love. For some, this sense of *communio* included an increased desire to serve others.

Interpretive Conclusion RE: Intended outcome of social healing

Social healing themes found in participant responses have the added credibility of resonating with social healing themes found in the supporting biblical, Franciscan, and Carmelite spiritual traditions undergirding the design of this project. These themes are as follows:

1. **Ability to identify with all who have ever struggled with their own poverty (weakness).**
2. **A humbling awareness, combined with tender mercy toward self and others deepens awareness of oneness, inter-dependency, and interconnectivity with all beings in a *communio* of love. This inter-**

connectivity is itself the Sacred—the One Spirit or life source energy dwelling in the many, weaving all as one.

- 3. Interior prayer of the heart/compassion meditation can be a way of being and perceiving amid everyday life encounters with others. This includes a deepened desire to engage in loving service and action.**

INTENDED OUTCOME: THE ABILITY TO ENGAGE IN PRACTICE AMID DAILY LIFE

There is ample evidence that participants engaged in the informal version of this contemplative healing practice while in the midst of daily life activities, responsibilities and encounters:

- During the program all but one person (96%) reported using the informal version of the practice.
- Though one month after the program ended there was a decrease in use of the formal practice from 100% participation to 82%, 100% of participants reported that they were still engaging in the informal version occurring while in the midst of work, other activity, and encounters.
- Also see bullet points 4 and 5 in the Communal Healing section.

Interpretive Conclusion: This practice is both doable and sustainable for people living busy lives. Moreover, this evidence is supported by spiritual traditions wherein prayer/meditation can be an awareness, life stance, and way of being—not simply something one does with their eyes closed and hands folded, but for empowered leadership, loving service, social responsibility and action.

INTENDED OUTCOME: INCREASED AWARENESS OF INTER-CONNECTIVE ONENESS AND LOVING COMMUNION WITH OTHERS, WORLD & SACRED

Regardless of whether participants interpreted this indwelling life force energy or Spirit on a quantum field and/or metaphysical level—or only as a metaphoric focusing device clothed in the language of mystics – did participants increase consciousness of indwelling Spirit? Did this sense of interconnectivity expand into a sense of loving communion between self, others, world, and the Sacred? The following evidence points to ‘yes.’ Here are examples of evidence drawn from survey comparisons:

A. RE: Increased consciousness of, and cooperation with, the grace and flow of Indwelling Spirit amid everyday life activities.

- **Increases in awareness of being indwelt amid activities.** “Often” and “Almost Always” responses in the baseline Survey A doubled in Survey B in answer to the question about how often one approached everyday activities (i.e. cooking, walking, working) with an awareness of Spirit/life force energy in and through ones being. This is an increase from 21% or 6 participant responses to 43% or 12 by the program’s end.
- **Increases in sense of oneness with the Sacred amid daily life.** In Survey A and B comparisons, “Often” and “Almost Always” responses more than doubled in answer to the question about experiencing a sense of oneness with the Sacred amid ordinary life activities. This is an increase from 18% or 5 participant responses to 39% or 11 by the time the program ended.

Moreover, in Survey A and B comparisons, there was a decrease from 8 (29%) to 2 (7%) participants saying they never experience oneness with the Sacred amid ordinary daily activities.

- **Increases in experience of “flow” states.** “Often” and “Almost Always” responses more than doubled in answer to the question about experiencing a state of “flow”—a focused yet relaxed state amid daily work and life. This is an increase of 18% or 5 participants to 47% or 13 by the time the program ended.

B. Evidence also suggests increased experiences of being led by, or entwined with, some larger mystery:

- **Increases in experience of meaningful coincidences** (unusual, unexpected, and uncontrolled synchronicity of occurrences.). Participants indicating that they “Often” and “Almost Always” had these experiences rose from 28% (8) in Survey A to 43% (12) in both Survey B and C.
- **Increased sense of being influenced or guided by a spiritual force greater than self.** The “Often” to “Almost Always” responses rose from 30% (8) in Survey A to 53% (15) in Survey B by the end of the program.

- **47% increase in participants reporting how they the “Often” or “Almost Always” sensed of their physical being housing a peace, tender mercy, and strength greater than their own.**
- C. There were reported increases in mystical awareness of inter-connective oneness with other people and creation:**
- **Increased reports of oneness with other people and creation in a way that words can't convey.** “Often” and “Almost Always” responses increased from 21% (6) of participant responses in Survey A to 40% (11) by the time the program ended (Survey B). The number of participants reporting that they “Never” approach encounters with other people and creation with awareness of the Sacred or universal life force dwelling in and through them decreased from 6 (22%) to 0.
 - **Increased reports of approaching relationships with others through an awareness of Spirit or universal life force energy working in and through their being.** “Often” and “Almost Always” responses to this category increased from 29% (8) to 61% (17).
 - **Increased reports of approaching encounters with other people and creation with awareness of the Sacred or universal force dwelling in and through them.** “Often” and “Almost Always” responses increased from 30% (8) to 50% (14), and remained higher one month after the program ended.
 - **Increased reports of approaching relationship with self via an awareness of Spirit or universal life force energy in and through one's being.** “Often” and “Almost Always” responses for this topic i from 35% (9) to 57% (16). One month after the program ended, 61% (17) of participants gave this response. The number of people reporting that they “Never” approach their relationship with self using an awareness of Spirit or universal life force energy working in and through their being decreased from 5 (19%) to 0.

2. CHANGES IMPLEMENTED BASED ON RESULTS OF ASSESSMENT PROJECT

- Outcomes from this assessment help quell my occasional worry about being a spiritual leader on this campus—whether that is still welcome

in our increasingly secularized and occasionally anti-religious culture. That includes within a contemplative higher education professional association I am part of which often excludes spirituality except, perhaps, for Buddhist modalities. Though meditation was born from diverse Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, secularized, scientific models are the current trend wherein technique is emphasized. That is a quite a different model from this department's Deep Abiding inter-spiritual program. So, I guess a change implemented as a result of this study is the easing of my apprehension over whether to offer the gifts and wisdom of these traditions which have been given to me to impart.

Maxed out interest levels in this inter-spiritual Deep Abiding program (interest exceeded capacity by over 100%) combined with 28 of 30 diverse participants completing this program assures me to stay the course. Originally I was tempted to hold back from Christian and other Western and Eastern mystical and contemplative wisdom traditions from fear of offending someone. This research project gave assurance to stay the course with programs that tap not only scientific/secular and Buddhist models but also wisdom from other spiritual traditions including my own knowing this can be done in a non-imposing, non-exclusivist, comparative manner where everyone is given choices.

- Maxed out interest rates in this program point to the need for spiritual tools and practices.
- Marketing for this program specifically named the use of interior prayer/meditation to assist one as an instrument of healing peace in the world. Given how interest in the program exceeded capacity and how 28 of the 30 participants stayed with the program to the very end (including assessment one month after the program ended) suggests my office should continue offering programs which enfold this vision of the larger good. This, in turn, connect more deeply to the mission, core values, and learning objectives of the College.

- After the program ended I continued use a heart rate/brain wave/autonomic nervous system monitoring device for 1:1 spiritual care sessions, as well as large group guest lectures. Doing so not only helped bridge the scientific research/spirituality polarization; hooking this gadget up to people's earlobes proved effective in showing students how they can create a healing/de-stressing psycho-physiological shift within a matter of seconds.

3. How these changes affected my department and intended outcomes for students and/or services? How do I know?

- Importance of emphasizing contemplative programs during the year not only for personal healing and empowerment but also for the healing wholeness of community. I know this is so from both the large interest in this program (which was intended for 12 people but 59 of them wanted to participate) but also from outcomes associated with communal healing and increased awareness of inter-connective oneness, mutual love.
- Topic of over-care/compassion fatigue during small group discussion inspires me to offer one session contemplative programs next year entitled *From Unmanaged Empathy and Over-Care to Balanced Care and Compassion*.
- Many people resonated with the embodied version of these practices. As a result I began integrating more embodied contemplative practices into the weekly contemplative gatherings which occur on Fridays throughout the 2013-14 school year.
- Return to offering a course through the religion department which allows for more in depth academic study of spiritual texts related to program themes and intended outcomes. Last course I taught with such a focus exceeded capacity, just like the Deep Abiding program.

4. **What has the department learned from the assessment process?**

- Use of Cornell's web based software is enjoyable and insightful.
- While religious, secular, and spiritual-but-not religious perspectives can polarize a campus or society, outcomes from the Deep Abiding study confirm my working hypothesis that heart-focused compassion meditation/interior prayer allows religious, secular, and spiritual-but-not religious people to sojourn in healing ways through personal communal adversities together.
- Likewise, assessment of this program demonstrates how diversity does not necessitate removing spirituality and religion from the public square. More spiritual and inter-spiritual competency—not less—is an answer to diversity, and to ending ignorance, prejudice, and hate. This program is testament to how college chaplains and others can contribute to this competency and thus to social healing. By offering people diverse understandings of life force energy or Spirit, then offering secular and sacred options for experiencing this shared praxis, this program is nimble enough to enable diversely religious, secular, and spiritual-but-non-religious people to come together for personal and communal healing.
- As Eastern spiritual healing practices involving *chi* or energy, insights from quantum physics, and age-old mystical and monastic writings concerning indwelling Presence and inter-connective oneness continue to increase in popularity, so may programs like Deep Abiding. Whereas Morton Kelsey concluded several decades ago that spiritual healing was a topic of great embarrassment among highly educated Western Christians throughout modernity⁴, perhaps this notion is changing; perhaps it is being replaced, especially as interest in integrative medicine and Eastern mind-body-spirit practices grows. Perhaps mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians can now publically speak of indwelling Spirit and the third member of the Trinity in ways Christians and non-Christians alike need not balk at when said in a non-imposing, non-exclusivist, comparative manner,

⁴ Morton Kelsey, *Psychology, Medicine & Christian Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 6-25.

alongside these other Eastern and scientific perspectives.

- Perhaps participant responses are yet another example pointing to our evolutionary human becoming, wherein people are ready for an inclusive, global pneumatology. This is not to suggest doing away with the distinct gifts of our differing traditions and perspectives. Rather, borrowing theologians Sandra Schneiders and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's perspective, this more expansive pneumatology is about tapping our differing spiritual traditions in ways that assist the healing wholeness of self, society, and earth.

5. Outcomes and/or questions I anticipate exploring in the next assessment cycle?

Design of the assessment project was recreated in the fourth year of the first cycle so it could also serve as my doctoral research project. With permission from Becki Elkins, I will continue using this model for the next assessment cycle, though in a more simplified manner (i.e. no follow up survey a month after the program ends).