

Cornell College
Departmental / Program Assessment Project
Year Three Progress Report

Department / Program:	Office of Chaplain & Spiritual Life
Person Submitting this Form:	Catherine Quehl-Engel
Date:	August 2012

Brief Overview of the Assessment Project:

LEARNING OBJECTIVES & ASSESSED OUTCOMES/QUESTIONS PROJECTS ATTEMPT TO ANSWER:

1. Whether students, faculty and staff have explored, deepened, expanded and/or clarified their spiritual lives. 'Spiritual lives' and 'spirituality'* are defined here as:
 - One's sense of meaning, values, purpose, and beliefs.
 - A contemplative disposition.
 - Self-transcendence. That is, expanded consciousness or awareness of reality beyond what Buddhism and contemplative Christianity call "small mind" or our egoic, separated sense of self. It often involves a sense of awe, wonder, humility, compassion, peace, beauty, mystery, joy, laughter, release and/or hope. It often involves a way of being, perceiving, and loving which wants to understand, learn from, care for, and find kinship with others as a fellow participant in the process of creation and the cosmos. For some, this self-transcendence and awareness of oneness is what is meant by "sacredness." For some, it means participation in the divine with the divine being as much as verb as noun. Spirituality may or may not entail religiousness and use of sacred language such as the divine, the Eternal, the One dwelling and beyond in the many, Spirit, Ruach, YHWH, Ultimate Reality, Brahmin/Atman, Christ, Allah, G-d, and Ground of Being.

2. Whether—through experiential learning, participating students, faculty, staff, and community members have acquired at least an introductory understanding of how Eastern and Western contemplative wisdom and related spiritual practices assist with:
 - Self-transcendence
 - Healing peace including courage for facing uncertainty and circumstances beyond one's control; this may involve wisdom of relinquishment/self-surrender.

METHODS USED TO GATHER AND ANALYZE EVIDENCE:

1. Eye-gazing exercise with written reflection.
2. Survey Monkey instrument sent to meditation/contemplative wisdom participants.
3. Monastic Silence Retreats and Fall Spirituality Retreat with written reflections.

Involvement:

Participants: Students, faculty and staff participated in all assessment projects. Several Mt. Vernon area community members also participated in projects 1 & 2. The majority of participants are regular or semi-regular attendees at Cornell Chaplain & Spiritual Life events including in offerings not being assessed (i.e. social justice programming, and chapel), and/or are in 1:1 spiritual care, thus have some familiarity with the department.

Peer Reviewer: Since I am a department staff of one I asked retired Cornell Institutional Researcher, Susan Minger, to serve as peer reviewer. She has read the gathered evidence. I asked her to ensure I am being accurate in my analysis of learning outcome evidence as I look for repeating themes/patterns. Institutional Research & Assessment expert, Becki Elkins, was also consulted for Survey Monkey design and for how to read data.

Results: Findings from data analysis / Interpretation / Conclusions

A vast majority of students, faculty, staff, and community members participating in these contemplative offerings seem to be looking for spiritual peace/wholeness, growth, and greater mindfulness through the counter-cultural practice of befriending stillness and silence. This includes a more skillful relationship with anxious thoughts and feelings which often color our perception of ourselves, others, and reality amid our hurried, overstretched lives. They seek related Eastern and Western contemplative wisdom including the setting as one's *intention* a willingness to pay greater *attention* so as to cultivate an expanded consciousness of life's beauty and mystery, and how to center and live from within (True Self), with unitive consciousness of G-d and/or life, and/or other aspects named in the working definition of spirituality in above section.

Analysis of learning outcomes reveals departmental opportunities provide expanded self-knowledge, clarification of beliefs and life meaning, reflection and discernment of right action, healing peace, renewal, learning to "let go" in utter trust so new life can rise, increased mindfulness, and sensing the sacred through interaction in both contemplative small group sharing contexts and nature. Here is a summation of the four assessment projects from which this information has been drawn and interpreted:

I. An **eye gazing exercise** was used during Friday meditation (2011-12) and the *Namaste: Meditation, Mysticism, and Servant Leadership* course that traveled to India (2010-11) with an open-ended "What did you notice?" reflection question posed at different stages of the exercise. Fourteen of the eighteen responses identified what I categorize as sense of self-transcending unitive consciousness/sense of oneness with—and compassion toward other people and beings at the end of the contemplative practice, or/and an increased interior sense of relaxed calm, inner peace, gentleness, and desire to

radiate peace, love, and healing energy to others.

II. Quantitative data from the Survey Monkey assessment instrument

Background information for the Spring 2011 Survey Monkey project: 34 students, faculty, staff, and community members answered the survey. Participants ranged from only being on a sporadic East-West contemplative wisdom listserv, to engaging in an hour-long workshop, ½-day retreat, 2½-day retreats, Friday meditation group, a contemplative academic course, or -t-1 spiritual direction. 32.3% said they attended contemplative departmental offerings more than once but it was a semester or more since participating. 12.9% attended once. 9.7% never attended (only participated through listserv reflections) leaving 25.8% attending weekly meditation irregularly (2-3x a block) and 6.5% attending weekly as often as possible (irregularity is often due to colliding with class schedules which shift monthly). As for keeping up with formal contemplative practice "homework" outside of meditation instruction/practice, 33.3% said they did so 2-3x a week. 15.2% said daily. 12.1% said multiple times throughout the day. 9.1% said they slipped from this spiritual practice yet want to return to it. 0% said they are no longer interested.

Assessment findings bear likeness to stress reduction clinic follow-up surveys which, six months out, show a significant percentage of participants retaining their learning from the program even if they have fallen from the discipline of engaging in a formal spiritual practice once program instruction/group support ended. Participants said they could still consciously catch themselves in the act of "small mind"; they could observe when their minds were running wild on auto-pilot, having "bitten the hook" of anxious thoughts/feelings, then practice release/letting go as they shift awareness back to the home base of the b/Breath (for some participants breath has the double meaning of breath and Breath as Spirit/Ruach/chi/prana of the Eternal breathing or praying inside them for this word play is the Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek, and other cultural origins and meaning of this term) with the focal point intention of a secular or sacred word/mantra, thus making room for greater "flow" or ease, physiological stress reduction, and/or spiritual awareness and expanded consciousness amid daily life.

A. Though only a small percentage engage in ongoing contemplative program offerings, with many slipping from their formal practice after the program ended or didn't keep up practice in between teaching/group practice sessions, survey results indicate an introductory or stronger level of knowledge being gained, retained, and applied to daily living. Evidence for this conclusion is drawn from Survey Monkey answers like the following:

- Even if you've slipped from regular formal practice, how often are you applying wisdom learned from it for daily living? 17% answered "daily with great frequency;" 50% answered "often/ several times a week;" 29.4% answered "I've learned to apply this awareness yet engage in it less often than weekly."

Other learning outcomes:

	Strong levels	Moderate levels	
• <u>Relaxation/decreased stress:</u>	52.9%	41.2%	= 94%
• <u>Mindfulness/Living in the present moment:</u>	50%	44.1%	= 94%
• <u>More skillful handling of fear/anxiety/ sadness/impulsive desires*:</u>			= 91%
	33.3%	57.6%	
	*3% said "not at all," and 6% said "doesn't apply to me."		
• <u>Being more patient, gracious, and compassionate toward others and self:</u>	46.9%	40.6%	=87%
• <u>Self-knowledge*:</u>	37.9%	41.4%	= 79%
	*13.8% said "doesn't apply to me."		
• <u>Inter-spiritual Insight. Being together amid difference*</u>	31%	48%	= 79%
	*10% said "not at all/doesn't apply to me."		
• <u>Living from within—from True Self or the divine within rather than surface self's fears and desires*:</u>	36.7%	40%	=77%
	*13.3% said "not at all" and 10% said "doesn't apply to me."		
• <u>Expanded consciousness*:</u>	34.5%	48.3%	= 83%
	*6.9% said "not at all," and 10.3% said "doesn't apply to me."		

C. Evidence of having achieved learning objectives is also revealed when noticing how participants come into a departmental offering with one lens, yet come out with another:

	Entered program with this learning expectation	Experienced moderate to strong levels of growth in this area
• <u>Union with all beings, or Self-transcendence</u>	24%	61%
• <u>Expanded Consciousness:</u>	47%	83%
• <u>Union with Spirit/the Eternal/Ultimate Reality:</u>	24%	61%
• <u>Self-Knowledge:</u>	50%	79%
• <u>Being comfortable with silence and stillness:</u>	53%	70%
• <u>Enhance mental state of "flow" for sports, etc.:</u>	21%	47%
• <u>Being prayed in by Spirit/the Eternal/Atman/Universe</u>	32%	54%
• <u>Living from within—True Self or the Divine Within, rather than surface level self's fears and desires,</u>	59%	79%
• <u>More skillful handling of fear, anxiety, sadness, and impulsive desires:</u>	74 %	91%

D. Contemplative programs are attended by people of diversely religious, spiritual but not religious, and secular perspectives. That 79% of participants surveyed said they learned inter-spiritual insights and how to be together amid difference (written reflections drawn from the monastic contemplative retreat also reveal this theme), and 61% said these practices helped them with self-transcendence and awareness of union with all beings, we can conclude that Cornell's contemplative offerings allow people with diverse secular and religious beliefs to spiritually experience, explore, and grow together in unitive. Instruction draws from secular medical, Eastern, and Western contemplative wisdom traditions and related practices. Options are given so participants can use a secular or sacred version of a given modality depending upon which approach best fits their personal wiring and curiosity. Meanwhile they are learning to appreciate and honor how different approaches resonate with people unlike themselves. Some participants come for secular reasons only such as learning stress reduction and self-regulation of emotions, mindfulness, and/or for exploring and deepening unitive consciousness while others seek these same learning yet with a spiritual awareness and intention added in from which these meditative practices had their historic origins, yet together we go through the ego-mind awareness/ relinquishment and loving kindness meditation together.

Given the polarizing tendencies over belief in our society combined with what the UCLA study on Spirituality in Higher Education reveals as extremely high student interest in spirituality, contemplative offerings provide an important and perhaps rare opportunity for people of diverse belief to regularly be in community together as they engage in spiritual practice amid difference.

E. Participants are cultivating skills for healing peace, wholeness, and courage to face life's uncertainties and adversities including external realities beyond their control by discovering ways they can creatively adjust their internal realities.

F. Though participants are at different levels of interest and commitment to spiritual practices taught in these contemplative offerings, they seem to be acquiring at least an introductory knowledge of the two key spiritual teachings shared by spiritual wisdom traditions East and West: 1) Awareness and 2) non-attachment or "letting go."

III. Monastic Silence Retreat and Fall Inter-Spirituality Retreat written reflections.

Background Participants in these programs and program assessments are diversely religious and non-religious people who are intentionally questing along the spiritual path. Simply by signing up for a two day spirituality retreat which has a description that one way or another reflects the definitions of spirituality described on page one above, they are a self-selected group who already possess—or have a curiosity about, the following: 1) A contemplative disposition toward life; 2) a desire to explore, deepen, expand or clarify their sense of meaning, purpose, and beliefs held by both themselves and others like and unlike themselves; 3) learning ways to cultivate healing peace and self-transcendence;

4) sensing oneness or interrelationship between self, others, world, and—where applicable, the divine; and 5) interfaith or inter-spiritual exploration and understanding.

Written reflections answering the question of if/how the retreat helped them grow, or what they take away from the experience, were given to participants at the end of the spring 2011 and 2012 monastic retreats at New Melleray Abbey, and the end of the 2011 autumn "Living in the Flow of Grace" inter-spirituality retreat led by the chaplain at Pictured Rocks. Reflections were written by 28 people during monastic retreats and 10 people during the autumn retreat.

Assessment findings: Repeating themes or patterns in the reflections point to learning outcomes matching learning objectives stated on page one. Comments are rich and important so I will share clips from the gathered evidence according to learning outcome theme:

- **Spiritual discovery amid stillness and silence** (As Christian monastic tradition puts it, "Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything."). Responses on this theme ranged from a person saying it was the first time s/he was able to pray in years to:
 - Learning to be as *patient as a tree*; also Lao Tzu's 'Can you let your mud settle?'
 - *I was able to grow in an appreciation of silence...and that life is not about being busy all of the time. It [is] about living...with purpose and living in the moment.*
 - *Being in the silence – Breathing and remembering that life is more than accomplishment. Life is also about reverence, loving-kindness, honoring the source of peace....The beauty of this quiet place, the smell of pine....the power and quiet beauty of the psalms, the purr of the monastery cat as it greets me.*
 - *I thought about ways I, and others, can maintain the monastic environment of peace when we enter our areas of life outside the abbey.*
 - *I learned that I don't do well in solitude.*
 - *The silence gave me a sense of peace and confidence that I have never felt before. I will leave this place with those feelings, knowing that it is a feeling possible amid the chaos of life.*

- **The inner journey; awareness of the interior life:**
 - *I have an inner strength that I need to remember in there.*
 - *Happiness is an interior state of being.*
 - *Being able to interact with people on this more internal level.*
 - *...able to breath, and think and look at the hidden peace deep inside my heart*

- **In terms of practicing release/non-attachment amid stressful circumstances, including with ever shifting thoughts/feelings so as to be more awake in the Now:**
 - *Every religion has some idea of letting go of the ego.*

- *I need to view more situations objectively as a passive observer so that my judgment is not clouded by irrational emotions*
- *Learning that scientific findings hold that 70% of our thoughts are about the past or worrying about the future. We are rarely awake and living in the Now.*
- **Unitive consciousness, self-transcendence, life meaning and purpose:**
 - *This trip has been a reminder that I am connected with everything.*
 - *I...thought about why I have the goals I have for my future life (teaching, growing food, academia) and if those goals had a selfless intention. I believe they do. This trip helped in that search for validity.*
 - *I found the value of taking multiple periods throughout the day to reflect on our mortal purpose in our world...communities...commitments ...relationships.*
- **Learning to relinquish/letting go and trust amid unknowns:**
 - *Regarding the blind walk in the woods: Having to let go, to trust that the string would guide me; the feeling at the end that it's alright, everything is going to be okay, from God (I think) to me, for my life, for our relationship.*
- **Self-knowledge:**
 - *Being assertive about my own needs while taking care of others.*
 - *This has been one of the defining moments of my Cornell experience – even though its only 2 ½ days away from campus it gives me the time to self-reflect and grow spiritually that I need to be a successful student....I contemplated my actions and pinpointed why I've been acting in such an oddly lethargic and frightened way....I hope I have come to terms with at least recognizing my problem. However the first step in fixing it relies not viewing every change in the course as a failure. Every rejection letter as the end of the world. I hope I've recovered some sense of release and will carry that into the coming months.*
- **Clarification of beliefs:**
 - *I went to the big sanctuary hall late last night and sate there for about an hour and came to a sort of understanding with God. If I had to pigeonhole myself, I'd say I'm an atheist—I don't believe there really is anything out there—but I've been entertaining a kind of postmodern idea for a long time that believing that something exists is, for a given person, equivalent to something really existing....So I talked to God about how when times are tough, and I need someone to talk to, maybe He can be it, even if it's just as an "imaginary friend." Perhaps that's a little silly, but I feel like it's something significant—reconciling a lack of belief with the need that some people have to believe.*

- *Here [at the monastery] I have the time and space to be alone and silent. When I'm quiet and by myself I start to think, really think, about all the things on my heart and mind. My family, my friends, my future, my faith. Things I don't take the time to explore because in everyday life there's always something more important to be doing. So I push aside the questions about what God looks like in my life right now. I push aside important issues because my environment doesn't care about those questions. My environment cares about GPA's, looking cool, getting drunk. That's the way things are in college. New Melleray gives me a place to be honest. Honest with myself and honest with God. Often God seems irrelevant on the college campus. I struggle to find the time and place and community for Him. Being on the retreat reminds me that God is the important thing to me. The most relevant thing in my life. I forget that I'm loved more than I can imagine, probably because it's hard to imagine a love that great. I've learned that I can seek God, silence, solitude, and calm. Whenever I want.*

- **The value of small reflection groups for sharing diverse spiritual journeys, perspectives, and beliefs.** These reflection circles simultaneously assisted participants with appreciation of spiritual and religious diversity, inter-religious understanding as a form of societal bridge building and peacemaking, and understanding one's own beliefs, struggles, transformational life experiences, and unfolding journey.
 - *Knowing others are broken and not hiding.*
 - *We have so much more in common at the deepest level....there are many paths to the same essential understanding;*
 - *Everybody believes in love. I will continue to believe in it and....humanity.*
 - *Another opportunity to step outside of me (my problems, etc.) and remember through listening to other people that I am not alone in these things (the searching, etc.) and that other people feel the way I do.*
 - *Loved hearing stories about people's faith journey.*
 - *I have never attended a church that was not Pentecostal or evangelical. This experience encouraged me to become curious about different faiths and traditions.*

- **Tapping into the divine within traditions (mysticism):**
 - *A student in the monastery library drawn to a phrase by St. Augustine that captures her retreat experience ...behold, thou wert within me, and I without, and there I sought for thee;*
 - *A professor's "take away" from the retreat being the phrase Come, Holy Spirit, come: Change me at the root of my being.*

Interpretation & conclusions:

- Qualitative and quantitative data confirm learning outcomes match contemplative learning objectives set by this department. There are other learning objectives for other programs this office provides which weren't part of the assessment such as interfaith understanding and exploration to assist students as leaders, healers, and bridge builders in a diverse, complex world. Yet as the second to last retreat reflection category reveals, even contemplative offerings assist with this diversity sensitivity and good citizenship.
- Contemplative program offerings enable people of diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds to share a common spiritual learning environment. This is a rare reality in our often polarizing culture. Given that I am a department staff of one, such offerings are a wise way to program to a diverse, complex campus community especially as we seek to increase our enrollment and plurality.
- Whether they are or aren't religious, there are Cornell students, faculty, and staff who seek and find spiritual growth as a necessary part of a holistic, well rounded liberal arts education. In our external-oriented, technology and speed driven, restless, over-stimulated, multi-tasking, Western culture (on top of the intensity of block plan campus culture), they seek pockets of peace, stillness, and silence for reflection, life integration, wisdom, healing, happiness, and wellness. They have inner lives they want to listen to, explore, and understand which in one way or another helps them navigate and find happiness in their exterior world—not only for self-actualization and improvement, but moving beyond self-absorption into self-transcending consciousness, compassion, and other forms of ethics as they increase awareness of their responsibility and place within the interconnecting weave with others on this fragile planet.
- By a vast majority, participants are experiencing moderate to very high levels of learning as it pertains to more skillful ways of living, loving, perceiving, and being (74-94% depending upon the specific topic asked in the survey).
- Through these offerings they are exploring and clarifying their values, beliefs, sense of meaning, and purpose.
- They are acquiring insights as lifelong learners as it pertains to sub-topics listed in the project categories above (i.e. mind-body-spirit connection; self-knowledge; being more patient and gracious with others and self; being more skillful with anxiety; living in the Now).

Decisions as a result of assessment project findings

- Experiment with enhancements to the Friday East-West meditation group by doing a focus group project in August.
- Spend summer 2012 discerning feasibility of adding an additional weekly contemplative offering, possibly for quarter credit by the year 2013-14. Also consider adapting the Christian-Hindu contemplative spiritualities course I taught in India for campus, full-credit learning in 2014-15. Numerous colleges and universities are increasingly providing for-credit courses in contemplative wisdom and practice. Student interest is also signaled by the wait list I typically have for the annual monastic retreat, my having to turn away over 50% of students interested in the India course due to class size, and consistently high involvement at weekly Friday meditation in the first half of the school year.
- Do more with the Welcoming Prayer methodology from Contemplative Outreach. Seems to be a significant enough interest to have a more overtly interior prayer focused group. Consider officially being listed on the Contemplative Outreach national and state registry of offerings.
- Students, faculty, and staff enjoy opportunities for sharing their diverse spiritual experiences and perspectives. Retreats are great for this but some monthly gathering may be good. Consider ways of creating something akin to Parker Palmer's "Circles of Trust."
- All of these added options will have to be considered in light of compression resulting from increased enrollment and how to deal with that as a staff of one (pastoral care load, etc).

Documentation/ Raw Data Storage:

Gathered evidence is stored on the Colleges H drive in the Chaplain's assessment Word doc folder. Hard copies are also located in paper files in the Chaplain's office.

Year Four – Implementation of Change & Sharing Results:

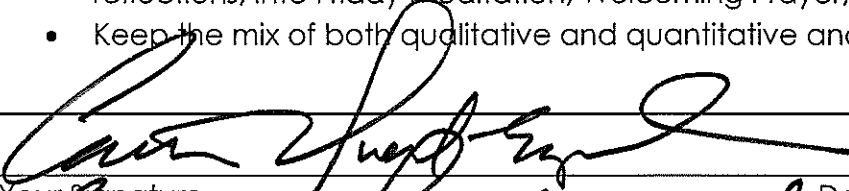
- See "Decisions" section above. Clarity of any changes will be made over the summer and into early fall.
- Share results with Division of Student Affairs, Student Life Committee, President's Cabinet, possibly with donors to my office, UMC/spirituality Trustee subcommittee, and student leaders of the Chaplain & Spiritual Life leadership team.
- It's time to find a grad student researcher to repeat the UCLA Spirituality in Higher Education assessment instrument on our campus—both on-line survey and discussion groups. Implement in 2013-14. Compare data with earlier assessment.

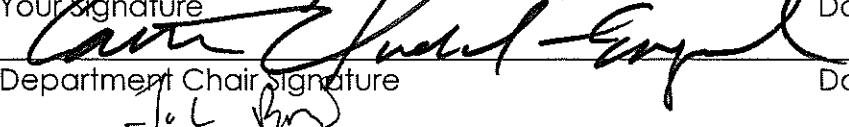
Doctoral dissertation project on contemplative spirituality to be designed in Spring 2013 and implemented with faculty/staff/towns people/student summer residence in summer as early as summer of 2013. Or, implement during the 2013-14 academic year. Assess results of the study and integrate as a future evaluation and assessment project.

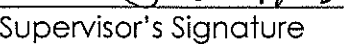
- Consider holding a HAIG lecture on findings.
- Consider presenting at my professional meeting of Contemplative Mind in Society/Higher Education at Amherst College.

Evaluation of the Assessment Project:

- See above (Decisions and Yr 4 implementation of change).
- Gleaned much from the Survey Monkey and written retreat reflections. Less from the eye-gazing; consider forgoing eye-gazing as future assessment project.
- Repeat Survey Monkey instrument every other year. Adjust language in scale so that the "somewhat" = "moderate."
- Integrate written reflections—and group sharing around those written reflections, into Friday meditation, Welcoming Prayer, Empty Bell or other group.
- Keep the mix of both qualitative and quantitative analysis.


Your Signature _____ Date Sept 11, 2012


Department Chair Signature _____ Date Sept 11, 2012


Supervisor's Signature _____ Date 9/11/2012