

A Contemplative Look at Social Change: Awareness and Community as Foundations for Leading

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We are part of an awareness-based movement that seeks to re-envision higher education for a more just, compassionate, inclusive society. Movements by their very nature are the result of community building efforts. However, the significance of this work is often unrecognized and devalued in our individualistic culture. This article argues that the power of awareness and the power of community are essential ingredients in the recipe for change. The paper explores how contemplative practices were utilized to build and sustain a contemplative community in Western New York that has grown from one university setting, to an inter-institutional collaborative, to a cross-sector (higher education, K-12, and health care) regional initiative over the past four years. The principles, practices, and prototypes that have supported our successes, as well as lessons learned in our ongoing process are discussed. The article shares the bridging and framing methods we used to garner institutional acceptance, as well as four foundational approaches we found essential to building community. Prototypes for collaborative structures to support and sustain movement building are also shared, in addition to how we transcended inherited structures that impede collaboration. As stewards of our future, the article offers a call to the field to take action with unprecedented daring in the movement to transform higher education.

Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly acknowledged the limits of a mechanistic worldview that focuses on independent parts, and the need to embrace a more quantum, holistic worldview that sees interdependent wholes, if we are to meet the demands of today's global, interconnected challenges (Scott, 2007; Wheatley, 2006). It is increasingly recognized that contemplative practices, a family of practices based in awareness¹ and connection (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2012), have an important role to play in this transformational movement from egocentric to more ecocentric worldviews (Scharmer, 2009). Yet our leaders are trained in institutions of higher education that create a divide between the intellect and the spiritual and emotional realms of knowing, and cultivate individualistic citizens who value competition

¹ In this paper, the term "awareness" is used generally to include many forms of awareness, as discussed by Davidson & Begley (2012).

(Bowers, 2002; Lin, 2013). In recent years, a movement to develop the academy as a liberating and capacity-building environment that recognizes and reclaims wholeness and well-being as dimensions of the greater purpose of higher education has gained momentum (Harward, 2016; Lin & Oxford, 2013; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010; Zajonc, 2013). Contemplative practices, such as mindfulness meditation and yoga, are being infused in academic institutions nationwide in response to this call—to call forth the source of inner wisdom in every student; help them find greater meaning and purpose (Barbezat & Bush, 2014); foster much needed world-centric, universal values (Lin & Oxford, 2013; Reams, 2010); and establish a more just, compassionate, and inclusive society.

Despite this progress and the growing evidence of the efficacy of contemplative practices, this movement to transform higher education is still in its infancy. As a contemplative academic working in institutions of higher education in New York State, I have witnessed that holistic, student-centered, integrative forms of educating still remain in the margins. Contemplative pedagogues often work in isolation within their own institutions, and there is little support for graduates to develop these capacities in the workforce as professionals. So how can we translate what we know about the potential of contemplative practices (both in theory and through our own lived experience) into awareness-based action for educational and social change? How does this movement come into being in real communities?

Called by these questions, and grounded in the understanding that movements, by their very nature, are the result of community building and community-based action (Della Porta & Diani, 2009; Palmer, 1992), I embarked on a contemplative community building journey in Western New York (WNY). This process began in 2013 at the State University of New York at Buffalo (UB) and expanded into an interinstitutional collaborative, and then into a cross-sector (higher education, K-12, and health care) regional initiative. Contemplatives from 18 institutions of higher education, eight K-12 schools, and dozens of health care professionals are working to bridge across perceived institutional and professional boundaries, uniting in their efforts to foster well-being across the region. This unique community of practice spans academic disciplines and sectors, and embraces multiple wisdom traditions. So far, our efforts have fostered collaboration on numerous events, workshops, and trainings. This has brought media attention to the mindfulness movement in WNY (Scanlon, 2016) and continues to foster increasing public and institutional awareness of contemplative practices as innovative and valid pedagogical tools.

Through this article, I share the principles, practices, and prototypes that have supported our successes, as well as lessons learned in our ongoing process. Early on, we faced two general types of challenges:

1. reducing institutional barriers by garnering acceptance among leaders;
and
2. fostering community building among contemplatives answering the call of the movement in their own work.

The article shares how we have worked to overcome these challenges. The bridging and framing methods we used to foster institutional acceptance are presented, followed by four foundational approaches we found essential to building cohesion in our emergent contemplative community. Prototypes for collaborative structures to support and sustain movement building are also shared, in addition to how we transcended inherited structures that impede collaboration. These insights, derived from both lived experience and theory, are shared so that they might support and encourage others to take action as change leaders in the movement to transform higher education.

GARNERING INSTITUTIONAL ACCEPTANCE: BRIDGING AND FRAMING

In 2013, the burning question in my mind was: how do we raise awareness of the educational efficacy of contemplative practices with education leaders to garner institutional acceptance? I realized that increasing perceived legitimacy would be essential to fostering the infusion of contemplative practices into “deeper” aspects of the higher education system at UB. In essence, acceptance and legitimacy are about influencing perception. In terms of fostering change, Quinn (2016) suggests that what differentiates a change manager from a change leader is that the latter works to transform human perception. Believing that this change is possible, a handful of passionate, like-minded faculty and staff at UB set out to transform the perceptions of senior leadership and advocate for contemplative pedagogy as a legitimate innovative approach to teaching and learning.

One of UB’s strategic goals was to provide an experiential learning opportunity to every student. The institution also aspired to become a leader in innovative education. Using accepted language within our cultural context, we framed contemplative practices as a form of cognitive training that cultivates self-regulatory abilities, and framed their use as foundational to improving learning outcomes and developing a 21st-century skill-set. We linked contemplative practices to the reflective component of the experiential learning process, highlighting their use in cutting-edge programs to strengthen the reflective learning cycle, deepen student engagement, and provide more meaningful education experiences. We declared that embracing this innovative pedagogy would set new standards for academic excellence, support the realization of certain institutional goals, and further distinguish the institution as a model of a 21st-century university. These concepts were refined into a concise one-page executive summary that could be used for advocacy purposes.

This process involved the strategic advocacy work of “bridging” and “framing.” Bridging involves working with language and concepts to bridge the language of contemplation with the language of learning, and demonstrate the relationship of contemplative pedagogy with accepted learning theories and practices that are already valued by faculty and education leaders (e.g., student engagement, experiential learning, transformative learning). Framing involves analyzing the institution’s vision, mission, values, and strategic plans; aligning contemplative pedagogy as an element that will foster the achievement of an important institutional goal; and reframing contemplative practices as a potential solution to a current problem (e.g., support academic success, improve well-being, foster 21st-century skill development, decrease violence).

Bridging and framing work has the potential to foster changes in perception in several ways (see Figure 1).

FRAMING	1. The use of contemplative practices as a solution to a current problem	Changes Perception of Contemplative Practices	To one of <i>value</i>	
	2. The use of contemplative practices in relation to achieving an institutional goal		To one of potential <i>utility</i>	
BRIDGING	3. The languages of contemplation and learning		Changes Perception of Contemplative Practices	To one of pedagogical <i>relevance</i>
	4. Contemplative practices with accepted education theories			

Figure 1. Bridging and framing change perception of contemplative practices.

By bridging and framing in these ways, a shared narrative was created through which faculty, students, and administrators could better understand the educational efficacy of contemplative practices. This narrative also served to unite various constituents throughout the system by transforming perception of their concerns from differing to united, thus connecting them through their shared concerns and goals. The changes in perception outlined above had a cumulative effect. Increasing awareness of the educational utility, value, and relevance of contemplative practices influenced perceived legitimacy, fostered further acceptance

and infusion into the system, and ultimately will lead to deeper-level change. The key to success lies in finding the most powerful, relevant bridge and frame specific to your institutional context and culture.

The success of bridging and framing is inherently connected to the political realm. Determining how best to bridge and frame in order to influence perception is vital, and even more so is how to get this information into influential hands in order to foster change. Networking and developing allies with political clout, who also have an “inside” understanding of the language most relevant to leadership and pressing institutional concerns, proved to be essential to our process. At UB, we were very fortunate that the director of the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) emerged as a champion for the cause, with the power to advocate with peers at senior levels and bring advocacy documents to light. TLCs can serve as powerful allies with campus-wide reach (Barbezat & Pingree, 2012).

Over the course of the next year and a half, the TLC director helped us refine our advocacy message and continually advocated to senior leaders that contemplative pedagogy was an important innovative tool. He used his position to pitch the idea to formally “debut” this pedagogy by bringing the then executive director of CMind to speak on “Contemplation for 21st-Century Education” at an endowed Excellence in Teaching Symposium, promoted campuswide. In the fall of 2014, senior leadership at UB approved contemplative pedagogy as an innovative approach to teaching and learning. The event drew contemplatives out of their closets, not just from our campus, but from institutions across the WNY area. Inspired by the experience of being surrounded by the number and diversity of others who shared their commitment to incorporating contemplative practices into their professional life, many expressed a strong desire to launch a more formal “contemplative working group.”

CULTIVATING A COMMUNITY OF CONTEMPLATIVES: FOUR FOUNDATIONAL APPROACHES

As we began this community-building endeavor, we challenged ourselves to consider how to embody and apply our capacity for awareness to our approach to leadership and community organizing. Our habitual approach to community building tends to establish a “leader” to be responsible for a diverse array of organizational activities, with much focus on “doing” what needs to be “done” in order to build community, and less emphasis on “being” how one needs to “be” in the process of building a contemplative community.² We noticed these patterns and

² The “doing” aspect could be thought of as the “outer” activities we engage in that support community building, and the “being” aspect as the “inner” contemplative processes in which we engage.

recognized early on that, as a community of contemplative leaders, we had an opportunity to embrace a more collective style of leadership that welcomed the contributions of diverse leaders and emphasized both the “being” and “doing” aspects of community building. Over time, four foundational community building approaches emerged, each with important aspects of “being” and “doing.” These four approaches will be discussed in the following sections:

1. awareness of “I-ness,”
2. building cohesion,
3. holding space, and
4. following the energy.

Awareness of “I-ness”

In the fall of 2014, we began more formal outreach efforts to grow the WNY contemplative community. Inclusivity was foundational to our invitation, from both participant and practice perspectives. We embraced a broad definition of contemplative practices that included all forms of contemplation, and invited contemplative faculty and staff from all disciplines, departments, schools, units, and other WNY institutions to join together. The accessible bridge that emerged and served to foster interconnection across perceived boundaries was the concept of “well-being”. In whatever domain we viewed our primary training or “work” (e.g., mindfulness, social justice, compassion), and in whatever institutional position we stood (e.g., faculty, administration, staff), the aspiration to foster well-being could be found at the core of everyone’s work. The foundational thread of well-being wove throughout our diverse efforts and served to unite us as a community with common goals.

I traveled to institutions and met with contemplative faculty and staff who I thought might be interested in coming together with like-minded others. Speaking from a place of connection, I focused on learning what they were doing and what they needed. Over and over I heard the need for connection, and the deep desire for community and support. I explained that people are coming together to support one another in their contemplative work and raise awareness of the educational efficacy of contemplative practices. I spoke of our related intentions and united desire to foster well-being, and how important each person’s work is as part of the collective work of fostering systems change.

During these conversations, a few key phrases began to emerge. People often made comments like “I have heard of *your* group,” to which I consistently responded, “It is not *my* group; the group serves the group,” and “I am not the leader. I am a facilitator.” The tendency to look to an individual leader, and to consider a group to be the territory of a leader, was inconsistent with what the emerging community was about. This gave me an opportunity to reflect on my underlying way of being as

I communicated, and how that related to leading. Models for leading change suggest that there is a relationship between the underlying level of awareness from which a leader operates and the results of the process of leading (Fry & Kriger, 2009; Reams & Gunnlaugson, 2014; Scharmer, 2009). These models suggest that increasing levels of awareness can be developed over time and result in increased leadership effectiveness. So how do we cultivate increasing levels of awareness? How do we move beyond our tendency toward “I-ness”?

It is arguably the case that a quest for greater awareness involves maintaining a regular inner practice. An important step on this journey includes cultivating the objective observer of self, or what Wilber (2000) refers to as witness consciousness. Through metacognitive processes, we cultivate the contemplative ability to take perspective on our beliefs and views. We engage in a process of “suspension,” loosening the grip our habitual mind has on us, and learning how to observe our thoughts, feelings and habits (Reams & Gunnlaugson, 2014; Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2015). We are able to more clearly see the movements of the ego or small self; we have more awareness of “I-ness.” Over time, this awareness fosters an increasing sense of freedom from egoic self-identification. As a result, a refining of individual and social identity transpires, which includes a growing awareness of the “other.” With increasing levels of relative freedom, we experience a diminishing of small-self concerns, as they too loosen the hold they have on us. The dominance of egocentric needs, such as recognition, status, power, and control, begin to weaken, alongside a growing desire to serve something larger than ourselves. This shift creates a sense of higher purpose. Quinn (2016) emphasizes the power of purpose, stating, “Higher purpose is outside the system in many ways...it’s outside the ego, and the moment we start serving a higher purpose we give more. Purpose really matters and when we pursue it...we start to see completely differently” (p. 62).

Our community-building processes were consistent with these theoretical perspectives on leadership, awareness, and contemplative practice. The invitations I extended to join with like-minded others were grounded in the intention to serve the larger whole, to serve well-being, with emphasis placed on the importance of every individual’s work and participation as vital to fostering change. The shift in focus away from a “leader” (“it’s not my group”) toward their connection with serving the greater good, and their connections with each other as a community, had a magnetic effect. Collective forms of leadership, which shift attention away from formal leaders and followers to relational processes that illuminate everyone’s leadership in a group, generate a new kind of capital based on human capacity (Bolden, 2011). Leadership from this perspective is a quality of a human *community*, not of an individual (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013; Senge, 2016). Using our capacity for awareness of “I-ness” to keep our focus on service to the larger whole and the contributions of everyone in the community was an ongoing process that proved fundamental to the development of the community.

Building Cohesion

Contemplative community-building efforts during the 2014/15 academic year focused on building group cohesion. The following section will describe both practical on-the-ground elements and awareness-based processes that we found vital to fostering and sustaining group cohesion, including meeting rhythmically, holding the vision, living the values, and building relationships.

Meeting rhythmically. Meetings were held rhythmically and always once a month. The rhythmic, unwavering holding of meetings conveyed a sense of stability to the group, and in turn people felt more secure in investing their time and energy to participate. Conflicting schedules made it challenging to hold large meetings regularly. We found it helpful to convey to meeting participants that the number of people present was irrelevant: that they each represented many dedicated people who would have liked to be there. Meetings were typically one-and-a-half hours in length and began with a meditation by a volunteer, followed by a fifteen-minute sharing from someone regarding their professional contemplative endeavors. The importance of each person's efforts was emphasized and support for one another offered. Over time this fostered connection, deepened and strengthened relationships, and supported group cohesion.

As we met as a core group, new opportunities for collaborative action emerged, often in the form of events that could expand our public presence and create opportunities for others to join the movement. The collaborative process of working together on event planning, promotion, and execution toward short-term goals generated energy and enthusiasm, and fostered group cohesion. These events also built our political capital, through connections to powerful advocates, organizations, and resources (Emory & Flora, 2006). One of our first major public events brought a SUNY trustee to campus to speak on "Making Mindful Citizens." Not only did he speak with a public audience, he also met with senior leadership at UB, which brought high-profile attention to the cause. Additionally, we found alliance with the WNY Consortium of Higher Education, an association of the 21 local colleges and universities committed to strengthening collaboration across the region. Connecting with powerful allies can increase visibility and legitimacy, and support continued growth and flourishing of the group and group work.

Holding the vision. As we worked within our community, an underlying vision emerged that served as a guide, an anchor, and an inspiration beckoning us onward. The vision that arose in our community through collective reflection and collaborative dialogue is based on three beliefs:

1. the possibility of change;
2. the power of community; and
3. the value of interdisciplinary interinstitutional collaboration.

We believe that by aligning more with the principles of the group, individual aspirations can be transformed into collective outcomes. United, we build our collective capacity, mobilize engagement, maintain optimism, and catalyze collective action. By building a regional presence to foster awareness-based social change, our united efforts increase perceived legitimacy, increase acceptance, and have the potential to eventually influence the culture of the higher education system itself.

A compelling vision holds great power. It can create a sense of purpose that has deep meaning for people, and evoke commitment because it matters so much to them (Senge, 2016). We found that continually restating and reaffirming aspects of the vision during meetings helped connect participants to a greater sense of purpose and inspired activism. For example, one faculty member emphasized that if the contemplative community did not exist, she would already have retired. Engaging in collaborative change efforts was the most meaningful part of her work. Our vision for interinstitutional collaboration aligns with Scharmer's (2009) assertion that we need new forms of collaborative structures across institutional boundaries to foster change. He suggests that leadership in our time requires leaders to expand beyond traditional ways of operating in separate teams, organizations, and systems, and work to dissolve boundaries to foster "cross-institutional awareness, learning and leadership" (p. 8). This appeal encourages us to consider how we might potentially reach beyond our institutional boundaries in our capacity-building and contemplative-community-building efforts in the future.

Living the values. Shared values are part of the glue that holds groups together. They are the "crystals around which networks grow" (Falk, 2000). In WNY, we discussed our shared values at length, which served to foster group cohesion and bring awareness to how we are living those values in action. We asked ourselves how we could bring the fruits of our practice—our growing awareness, inner stability, equipoise, and authenticity—to bear in the process of community building.

We can set the intention to support one another in living this alignment of intention, values, and action, both individually and through collective action. But support requires the ground of openness, trust, receptivity, and flow among group members. One way I approached establishing this ground was to start with myself. Holding myself open to the potential for growth, allowing myself to be vulnerable, and trusting in the group process helped others to feel safe to do so as well. One faculty member remarked how struck he was by the level of trust and patience that had developed among group members, which he referred to as our contemplative presence. Trust, openness, and the aspiration to live our awareness require vigilant attendance to what is happening both in the group space and within one's self. Supported by this vigilant awareness, I practiced modeling behavior, offering

gentle redirection during meetings, and invited private follow-up conversations. Over time, each individual's commitment to more consciously live his or her practice shifted the group space. Interactions became more compassionate and less reactive, and meetings became increasingly filled with joy. Each of us is learning how to become a living, embodied expression of contemplative principles in action and growing in our capacity to be of greater service to the whole. The embodied principles serve as anchor points that ground and magnetize the group field, fostering the growth and cohesion of the community.

Building relationships. Clearly, community building is at its core a relational process. Nurturing interpersonal relationships is critical to creating the shared understandings, commitments, and collaborative action that constitutes a movement (Ganz, 2010). One way we created opportunities to enhance relationships was to hold community gatherings on a regular basis that were not “work”-focused. These social gatherings provided opportunities for people to get to know one another on a more personal level. I also found it valuable to have private conversations after meetings when I noticed someone was struggling or there was tension. Meeting privately created space for listening to opinions and concerns that could not be shared during limited group meeting time. I anticipated that this would help people to feel seen and valued for their unique and important contributions to the whole. From the perspective of fostering change, we understand that the quality of the results of our efforts is dependent on the quality of our relationships (Scharmer, 2009). The nature and quality of our relational processes creates an invisible social latticework that sustains the capacity for generative collective action. Engaging in seemingly small, relationally focused actions grows and strengthens the invisible social latticework, which serves as a magical substructure that catalyzes co-creative action and ultimately fosters change.

We found the approaches to building cohesion outlined above (meeting rhythmically, holding the vision, living the values, and building relationships) to be essential to our community-building process. Having garnered institutional acceptance and built cohesion among contemplatives in the region, we were in a position to expand and hold space for something much larger to emerge.

Holding Space

In 2015, the WNY contemplative community focused on pursuing funding for a conference. Sights were set on obtaining funds from the State University of New York (SUNY) system's Conversations in the Disciplines grant, which is geared toward statewide engagement with all 64 SUNY campuses. Using the bridging and framing practices outlined earlier, we designed a proposal for a mindfulness and health conference. Since mindfulness, the practice of observing thoughts, emotions, and sensations moment-to-moment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1995),

is gaining increasing acceptance in higher education settings, we chose to use this term as an umbrella term under which many contemplatives might situate their awareness-based professional work. Aligned with the SUNY system's goal of a "healthier New York," we called on contemplative allies at SUNYs across the state to endorse the proposal, and successfully secured funding for the first ever SUNY-funded mindfulness conference.

We originally anticipated perhaps 150 people would attend, but registration kept growing. When we reached 200, breaching maximum capacity at our original venue, group members became anxious. I reminded the group to lean into the stability of their practice, to trust, allow flow, and hold space. When holding space we hold open to the possibility for potential to manifest without any attachment to a particular outcome, "only holding a diffuse intention for the good of the whole" (Baeck, 2012). This potential lives in the "invisible social latticework" mentioned earlier, which Baeck (2012) eloquently describes as "the subtle structuring mesh of our combined potentials—a web of invisible strands holding a collective potential that has not yet seen the light of day." When we moved to a larger venue, contemplative allies stepped in offering additional funds and encouraging us onward. Registration exceeded our expectations, and ultimately was capped at 400. Event day saw representation from 50 institutions of higher education, 10 K-12 schools, countless businesses, health care professionals, and the lay public.

We can use our meditative stability to hold space during our day-to-day community building work, to "let go," and to have an open will, so what wants to come can emerge. As we hold space aligned with the group's vision and underlying intention, the collective capacity of the group is catalyzed, creating a generative field of potentiality. Our capacity to hold space elicits the potential of the whole, in addition to the highest potential of each individual, thus increasing our collective capacity to be of greater service to well-being. It takes vulnerability to engage with deeper levels of awareness, to be that open. As contemplative practitioners, we can apply our inner capacity to soften, open, and allow...and let the emerging possibilities come to light.

Following the Energy

The 2016 Mindfulness & Health Conference generated quite a buzz and a plethora of possibilities. The palpable sense of excitement and joy in the air during the event remained long afterward. Feeling into the quality of this field of enthusiasm and delight, there seemed to be an underlying longing present. What was its root? What was it that "happened" at that conference? Contemplatives came together not just from the higher education sector; they came from K-12, health care, businesses, and many other sectors. The joyful buzz was rooted in unity. The illusory silos of discipline or societal sector did not separate us there. We reveled in our

shared efforts to foster the infusion of contemplative practices into the systems of which we are all a part. The longing that lingered beyond conference-day was a longing for continued unity.

It seemed that the interdisciplinary, interinstitutional contemplative community building we were fostering in the higher education sector was longed for in other sectors too. Inspired by this awareness, we reached out to conference attendees offering to support community-building efforts in their sectors. Over the next six months, we hosted meetings to facilitate contemplative community building in the K-12 and health care sectors. We shared lessons learned from our process and supported the emergent facilitators of each sector to help strengthen and grow their networks. During this time, an expanded vision emerged, which was shared with each sector:

Awareness is being infused into every Western system. As awareness becomes more of the foundation of systems, it will eventually foster a culture shift—from systems focused on individualism, separatism, and competition to systems focused on interconnection, interdependence, and co-creation that will reflect compassion, justice, and inclusivity—catalyzing systems transformation that fosters well-being. From this macro view, it is a shift in consciousness that we, our collective work, is a part of. Continuing to build and strengthen community *within* sectors will foster our capacity to collaborate *across* sectors in an organized way, forming a united regional presence to foster awareness-based social change.

During this emergent process, I was asked why I was trying to “make things happen” in other sectors. I heard myself reply that I was not “trying to do” anything, I am “following the energy.” This response prompted reflection on the nature of this unfolding process, this process of sensing what is in the air, attuning to what wants to emerge, and then listening to where it wants to go. This led to the insight that this process was supporting the manifestation of what *wants* to be, rather than a preconceived notion of what *ought* to be. Baeck (2012) describes this type of process as a “sensing into what wants to be born—that is not the same as imagining our own ideal future—it is more like sensing which seed is ready to sprout.” Scharmer and colleagues (2004) refer to this sensing capacity as tuning into the field of future possibility, which they call presencing.

Presencing is understood as the blending of sensing and presence. Sensing involves a perceptual focus on the whole, whereas presencing places perception on connecting with “the source of an emerging future—to a future possibility that is seeking to emerge” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 163). There is no controlling what arises through this process. Suspending the limitations of the personal will is required

(Reams, 2012), and deep trust is needed. Using our contemplative capacity, we hold space, let go, connect into the deepest parts of ourselves, sense into what wants to emerge, listen to where it wants to go, and follow the energy, not knowing exactly what it is or what it wants to be. We can lead from this deep space of inner stillness, living our contemplative practice in action, in service to the whole. Reams (2010) emphasizes the vast potential of this inner capacity to “bring a very different quality to our work and open up new possibilities for enabling radical change” (p. 1091).

SUSTAINING THE MOVEMENT

This past year, contemplative community building in the higher education sector in WNY focused on sustainability. The central question became how to support and sustain the largess of an interinstitutional community of more than 200 people across 18 institutions that continues to grow. This has challenged us to create new prototypes for collaborative structures as well as to transcend the current social and cultural structures that impede collaboration.

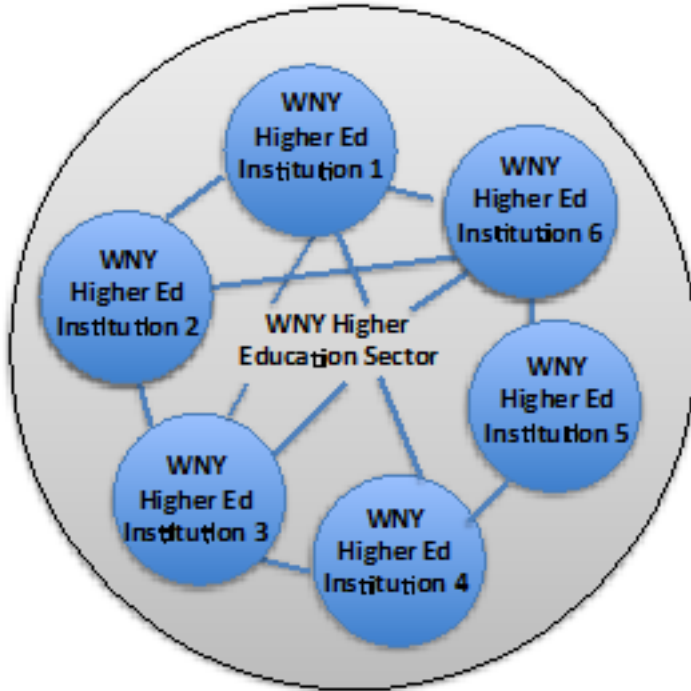
Prototypes for Collaborative Structures

We began holding interinstitutional strategic planning meetings to address this question. We worked through a formal, contemplatively facilitated planning process over the course of many months. Through this generative process, we created shared values and a detailed mission that serves as a guide for achieving our collective vision—a mindful higher education system for a more just, compassionate, inclusive society. Engaging in strategic planning generated a co-created ideology, fostered group cohesion, strengthened community, and clarified our goals moving forward.

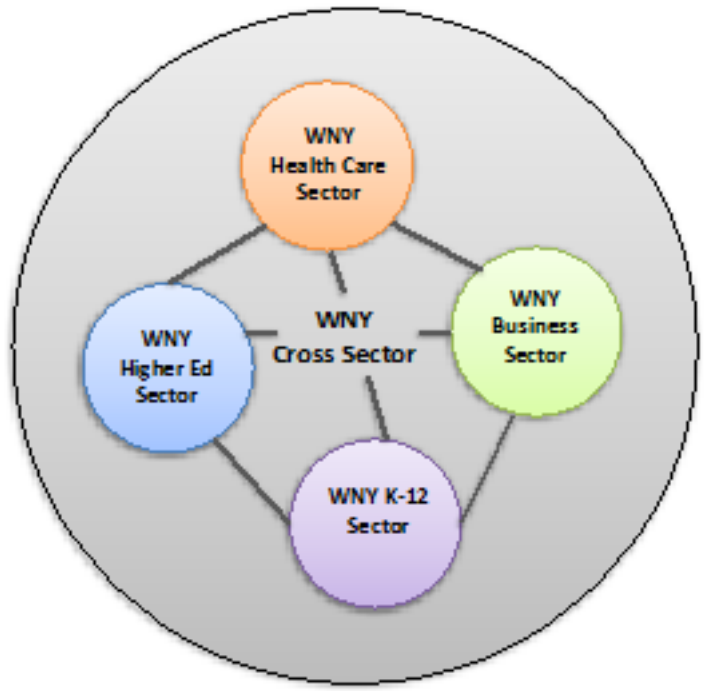
Cross-sector contemplative community building began in 2017. Representatives from higher education, K-12, and the health care sectors across WNY began meeting quarterly, aligned with the expanded vision mentioned earlier—to collaborate across sectors in an organized way, forming a united regional presence to foster awareness-based social change. Visual models emerged as a way of depicting the potential collaborative structuring within and across sectors, at both regional and statewide levels. The following prototypes depict interinstitutional inter-organizational collaborative structures at four levels: A.) within one sector within one region, B.) across multiple sectors within one region, C.) within one sector across one state, and D.) across multiple sectors across one state, using higher education as the sector, WNY as the region, and NY as the state (see Figure 2).

These models illustrate how contemplative community building initiatives could be united across regions and statewide to form powerful contemplative alliances in every sector. Networks of interconnected contemplative hubs, at both regional (Figure 2A & 2B) and statewide levels (Figure 2C & 2D), have the potential to leverage whole systems in service to awareness-based social change.

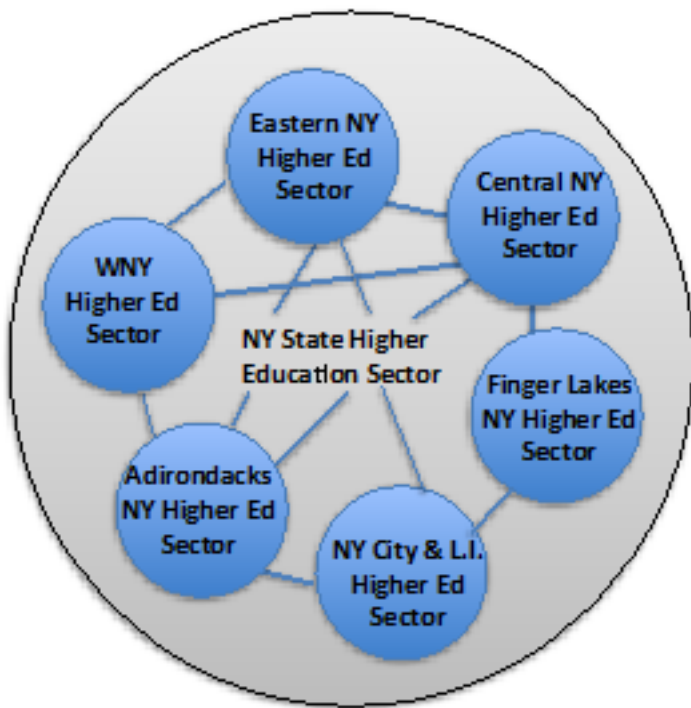
A. Within one sector and within one region.



B. Across multiple sectors and within one region.



C. Within one sector and across one state.



D. Across multiple sectors and across one state.

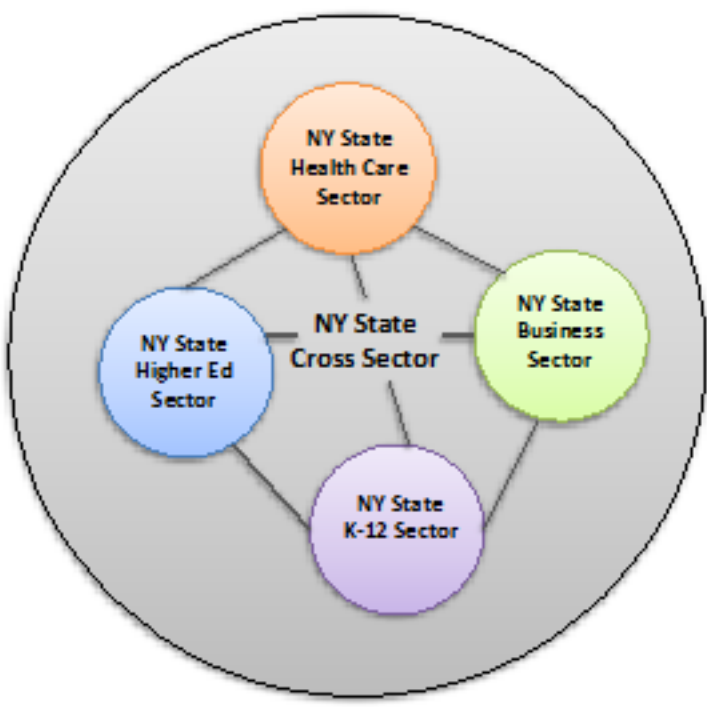


Figure 2. Four levels of interinstitutional, interorganizational contemplative community building.
 *Multiple sector models B and D depict four sectors for purposes of simplicity only.

Our experiment in building sustainable structures to support contemplative community building has focused at the regional level (Figure 2A and 2B) in WNY, with future aspirations to support statewide initiatives. Envisioning and prototyping *what* these collaborative structures might look like, the relational *form*, is just a beginning. Envisioning and prototyping *how* these collaborative structures might operate, the relational *function*, is another matter. What do contemplative governance structures look like and how do they function? How do we continue to move beyond outmoded hierarchical ways of operating toward more holistic, interconnected functioning that can sustain this work into the future? The next steps in WNY involve exploring this line of inquiry. Using our contemplative capacity to hold space and open to what wants to emerge will guide us to the new structures and new functions of the form. Who knows what will emerge next?

Transcending the Limits of Inherited Structures

Throughout this journey, we encountered many countervailing forces to building and sustaining community. During meetings early on, group members waffled between the tendencies to focus on self-serving interests and service to the whole, and competitive tensions related to academic posturing and self-promotion were evident. Guilt and frustration were, and still are, expressed in relation to the desire to participate and the inability to do so based on institutional constraints and expectations. These challenges are not surprising given our cultural values and norms. The most coercive limiting force that we have to deal with is our own cultural learning, taught to us by our cultural upbringing (Schien, 2016). The individualistic orientation of our culture produces an overriding emphasis on me and mine, which precludes the valuing of community. As leaders, our self-centered orientation runs contrary to the qualities needed to build collaborative networks and effectively lead change (Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015). In academia, the climate of academic capitalism invites posturing, intimidation and score keeping, promulgating an environment where competition, fear, and isolation are the accepted norm (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Stelmach, Parsons, & Frick, 2010). In a culture that rewards distinction and necessitates self-promotion, where everything you do needs to count somehow, it is challenging to find time to volunteer. We are constantly challenged to navigate these “outer” structures while at the same time being challenged by the “inner” structure of the ego, as it fights to maintain its sense of self, and challenged to realign and engage with awareness to thwart our “cultural trance” (Huston, 2009).

However, as contemplative practitioners, we are experiencing that we have the capacity to resist the forces of disconnection with which our culture and our psyches are plagued—from the ground of our practice. As we embody greater awareness and experience the unfolding of related ways of being (Fry & Kriger,

2009; Wilber, 2000), we forget our ego self's constant desire to separate, and remember our inherent connectivity. Each group member's commitment to be their best "contemplative self," coupled with being emboldened by the presence and support of others who share the same inner truth, has helped us to overcome our habitual patterns and transcend our cultural trance. Through individual and collective practice, we are experiencing a growing resilience in the face of academic capitalism, and an increasing commitment to lead in more collective, relationally oriented ways.

THE UNITED POWER OF AWARENESS & COMMUNITY: A RECIPE FOR CATALYZING CHANGE

Our experiment in contemplative community building in WNY continues. We are building a community of practice that bridges across conventional scholarly boundaries and sectors, creating a united regional presence to foster awareness-based social change. We have been successful in cultivating a community of contemplatives by cultivating awareness of "I-ness," building cohesion, holding space, and following the energy. This community is also growing exponentially in terms of allies. More and more people who might not initially understand the relevance of contemplative practices in their profession are coming to value them. Bridging and framing contemplative practices in ways that are relevant within the current climates of our institutions and systems have been instrumental in garnering acceptance. To sustain this work into the future, we have been developing new structures to support collaboration, while using our inner and collective practice to transcend inherited structural barriers. We are learning that living our practice is both the antidote to countervailing forces and the catalyst for change. We are learning more about the power of our contemplative practice, the *power of awareness*.

We are also learning about the *power of community*. Connected by our shared values and intentions, we are learning to find our collective voice, draw strength from our united resolve to foster change, and engage in collective action. Our community-building efforts have fostered collaboration on numerous events, workshops, and trainings. These types of processes provide opportunities for us to experience our solidarity and our underlying oneness. The "togetherness" inherent in this approach challenged us to begin to dissolve our habitual mental models that maintain our illusion of separateness. By bridging across perceived boundaries on the micro-level within one community, we can see the potential of contemplative community building to bridge and restore macro-level divisions within our collective social body. We are deepening our capacity for connection and strengthening the social latticework, the invisible infrastructure of our connections, which form the foundations of change. As social activist Grace Lee Boggs (2007) explains, "In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass.' It's always

about critical connections.” This learning journey in unbounded connectivity is an important experiment. Senge (2016) reminds us, “It isn’t individuals that shape how the world works its interacting networks of institutions of organizations” (p. 69). We are learning to value the microcosm of community, as a catalytic structure with the potential to transform the macro-structures of our society. We are learning to see each community as a micro-movement within the interconnected web of macro-movement change.

As contemplative change leaders in higher education, we are all part of the transformational movement, the revolution, toward wholeness and interconnection. Although this revolution is already underway, it requires us to be *daring*. It needs us to have courage, to lean into the power of our contemplative practice, and to be brave enough to open more, let go more, be vulnerable, trust the unfolding process, and allow what wants to emerge to emerge. As Rudolf Bahro reminds us, “When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by those who are not afraid to be insecure.” As stewards of our future, we must believe that the world we envision, this new culture, can become a reality. We must take action knowing that every connective step is important. Grace Lee Boggs (2007) emphasizes that change starts with small things at the local level, “That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously.” What actions are you taking? Do you believe in the united power of awareness and community to catalyze change? Do you dare?

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