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# LISTEN AND LEARN SESSIONS

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## Always Room for Mindfulness

Creating a Contemplative Space in Your Library

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**ABSTRACT** CU Boulder Libraries created a Mindfulness Room by embracing a whole learner perspective, in which patrons can meditate, pray, learn, and be inspired. Although initiated by Muslim students seeking a place to pray at a secular, public university, the Mindfulness Room has transformed into a space that encourages all to explore mindfulness practices in the midst of stress and burnout in an academic setting. The presentation emphasized how the space signals to students that libraries support the spiritual, mental, and educational aspects of being a college student, thus positively impacting the student experience as a whole. The presentation situated the project in broader trends of mental health initiatives in libraries, and discussed the contents of the mindfulness room, including a non-circulating collection, as well as future related projects. Speakers reflected on learning opportunities and challenges that arose from balancing multifaith and secular perspectives in a single, welcoming space.

### INTRODUCTION

This Listen and Learn presentation was designed to introduce to Atla professionals how mindfulness can be embedded into library

spaces that any community member can embrace, by showcasing the Mindfulness Room at the University of Colorado (CU) Boulder Libraries. The presentation aimed to make visible the work of the Religious Studies librarian and personnel responsible for developing and implementing outreach programming in a public, secular institutional setting. While spiritual formation is a more obvious component of religiously-affiliated institutions' missions, the fact of which is reflected by many library professionals and institutions represented in Atla, this presentation aimed to show how public, secular universities can support the whole learner in their personal spiritual or secular practices by dedicating space for meditation, mindfulness, and contemplation. Each patron in these spaces may personally affiliate with a distinct religious or spiritual background, or may embrace secular humanism or atheism, but, regardless, designated mindfulness spaces support patrons in stepping away from rigorous academic work in order to embrace rest and connect with their own thoughts. The presentation aimed to reveal unique lessons and approaches to supporting the whole learner within librarianship that can translate across various institution types, hopefully inspiring conversations across Atla to further embark on such work, regardless of individual or institutional affiliation. More explicitly, the session hoped that attendees would have the following take-aways:

1. Attendees will understand the value of the mindfulness space at CU Boulder and consider how a mindfulness space may add value in their own libraries, as well as consider ideal qualities of a space for contemplation.
2. Attendees will learn more about employing a whole learner perspective to library work so that they may consider how to apply this philosophy in their own settings, especially as a way to complement interfaith perspectives.
3. Attendees will gain an understanding of mindfulness book collection development, room policies, and meditation supplies to include in the space.

The session began with presenter introductions as well as a brief overview of institutional context, highlighting that CU Boulder is a large, public (secular), R1 institution, with over 30,000 students, and that the CU Religious Studies department offers classes to support undergraduate and Masters level degrees in religion while also supporting students who take these classes to meet general education requirements, as an elective, or for personal interest. The presenta-

tion moved through five sections, with two group activities embedded throughout:

- Section 1: Value of mindfulness & meditation
- Section 2: Developing a culture of mindfulness
- Section 3: Creating space for mindfulness
- Section 4: Developing a mindfulness collection
- Section 5: Maintaining a mindful future

## **SECTION 1: VALUE OF MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION**

The first section of the presentation began with the founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction Jon Kabat-Zinn’s definition of mindfulness: “The awareness that arises from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 0:25). The positive effects of meditation or other mindfulness practices on stress and overall well-being have been well-studied and documented (Astin 1997; Davidson et al. 2003; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, and Walach 2004). Meditation can reduce stress (Astin 1997), increase coping for those with mental health disorders (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, and Walach 2004), support resilience after traumatic events (Rogers 2013), and boost the immune system (Davidson et al. 2003). These benefits alone speak to the power of mindfulness meditation.

The presentation further established the context of mindfulness in library and information science, situating itself in recent scholarly communications and pedagogy within the field, in particular drawing from the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) 2023 Conference. Presentation anecdotes pulled from this conference highlight how the demanding environment of college life makes developing personal resilience crucial (Rogers 2013), as well as the ability to navigate stress and work positively with others (Oman 2008). Figures pulled from ACRL conference presentations showed that the percentage of students diagnosed with or treated for anxiety disorders had effectively doubled between 2008 and 2018 (Nazmi et al. 2019). Especially in a “post” COVID-19 reality, which has seen more student disengagement as well as increased mental health struggles among both students and those who support them (such as librarians), there has been an increased focus on campus mental health. According to a recent survey, almost 75% of university presidents

list student mental health as their “most pressing issue” (Clark and Taylor 2021). Meanwhile, the academic library is often the second most visited place on a university/college campus after the student center (Grimes and Salvesen 2023, 19). As conversations from the ACRL 2023 Conference reveal, there are many academic and social imperatives and implications of incorporating mindfulness into academic library spaces and programming. One such example of library initiatives entering into these conversations to meet student needs is “Mindfulinlis,” a resource that is specifically geared towards those learning about or practicing mindfulness in library and information science. (More information about this resource can be found at: <https://mindfulinlis.wordpress.com/>.)

The following mindfulness practices were shared with the audience, who were encouraged to use these in their daily work or within their broader institution:

**Meditation:**

- Loving Kindness Meditation
- Body scan meditation
- Various prayer practices

**Contemplative Writing:**

- Writing for self-reflection, contemplation, or introspection
- Writing to build compassion, consider different perspectives, and foster openness
- Answering simple yet effective prompts such as “How did it feel to....?”
- Freewriting

**Contemplative Reading:**

- Lectio divina, which includes the four separate steps of reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating on a text
- Reflecting on short texts such as poems or quotes. Reflection could entail reading aloud (alone or with a group) or savoring a specific word or phrase

**Movement-based Meditation:**

- Walking meditation and prayer
- Dance

- Yoga
- Labyrinth walking meditation

**Art, focusing on the creative process, rather than the outcome:**

- Intuitive drawing
- Collage (zines)
- Mandala/pattern drawing
- Prayer drawing/coloring

**Contemplative Reflection:**

- Classroom exercises that encourage students to reflect on their experience via prompts

**SECTION 2: DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF MINDFULNESS**

Presenters shared how at CU Boulder there is a growing interest in developing a culture of mindfulness. Resources such as the Renée Crown Wellness Institute (<https://www.colorado.edu/crowninstitute>) and the Contemplative Resource Center (<https://www.colorado.edu/center/contemplativeresource>) support wellness initiatives both in and outside of the classroom, while the student wellness center offers a meditation series and other activities focused on stress reduction. Other campus resources include the Mindfulness at the CU Art Museum initiative as well as a meditation series on campus: Mindfulness and Everyday Life (<https://www.colorado.edu/hr/2022/04/20/mindfulness-everyday-life>).

At CU's University Libraries, similar support programs for student and community wellness have been created including meditation, yoga, relaxing finals activities, and LibGuides aimed at addressing mental health and stress. The Learning & Engagement Team at the University Libraries has also collaboratively read and discussed *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education* by Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, first as a joint learning activity, and later presented as a workshop to the teaching librarian community of practice within the Libraries. Contemplative classroom practices, as well as the expansive family of mindfulness practices, vary, but all can be characterized by an emphasis on introspection and reflection.

The following recommendations were shared with the audience as ways to consider starting a mindfulness project at their institution:

- Explore your own curiosity and practices
- Find others who are invested, especially across departments
- Locate and investigate existing campus resources
- Connect with library users and ask about their needs or ideas for library support services
- Be creative!

At this point in the presentation, the presenters facilitated the first of two group activities. Participants were asked to answer the following question through an online response platform: “How do you — or might you — foster mindfulness in your library spaces?” This then generated a word cloud from participant responses (see figure 1).



FIGURE 1 Session word cloud

### SECTION 3: CREATING SPACE FOR MINDFULNESS

Audience members transitioned into the third part of the presentation by watching a news broadcast video which provided campus context about the importance of dedicated space for students to engage in contemplation and personal religious practices. Discussed in the video, Muslim students had petitioned for prayer space at CU’s Engineering Center in 2015. The Muslim Student Association and the CU Student government lobbied administrators to designate quiet spaces for student reflection. In 2016, a quiet space opened in the University Memorial Center (the student union at CU), and in 2017 another quiet space opened in CU’s Engineering Center (two years after the Muslim Student Association petition), which is where students wanted the space initially.

This campus context serves as an important backdrop to the eventual creation of the Libraries' Mindfulness Room. Prior to the opening of the Libraries' Mindfulness Room, Muslim students would pray wherever they could find a quiet space, often in stairwells or hallway corners, but still very much in public and with other patrons walking by. These spaces were not welcoming, and they did not facilitate an environment that embraces a whole-learner perspective. In December 2018, the Libraries' Senior Associate Dean convened the Libraries' Mindfulness Task Force and acknowledged the library as a central place on campus to support the whole learner, including their mental and emotional needs, and their desire for a space to rest and reflect.

In 2019, the Task Force began its work by identifying possible spaces for the room, curating a list of furnishings to be submitted for purchase, and, eventually, deciding on room use policies. The Task Force also accepted donated prayer rugs and cushions from the Muslim Student Association. A presenter explained how — acting as a Task Force member and in her role as Religious Studies Librarian — she solicited suggestions for purchasing titles from CU students and colleagues and from Atla colleagues to form a small, non-circulating collection which was placed in the room (see figure 2). In January 2020, the Mindfulness Room was opened for use. Two days before the campus shifted to fully online learning, the Mindfulness Room was scheduled to have a more robust grand opening with a panel discussion on the importance of mindfulness in education, but that event was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (The announcement highlighting the Mindfulness Room is available at: <https://www.colorado.edu/libraries/2020/02/05/mindfulness-room-norlin-now-open>.) In Fall 2021, CU Boulder, University Libraries, and the Mindfulness Room fully reopened. Currently, the Mindfulness Room is a peaceful, well-loved space on campus, with 2,253 admittances in the last year. The room is accessible to faculty, staff, and students affiliated with CU Boulder.

After learning about the context and timeline of the Libraries' Mindfulness Room, presentation attendees participated in a Think/Pair/Share activity, and discussed the following question with a neighbor or in the Zoom chat: "Who at your institution would most benefit from a mindfulness space in your library?" Participants were asked to share what they had discussed with the larger group. One participant commented on how the theological library that they

work at naturally lends itself to a mindful space through its architecture. Yet another participant talked about students from various backgrounds who would most benefit from mental health or mindfulness programs and resources on campus. One of the presenters shared statistics from the ACRL 2023 Conference presentations with similar observations: students who most need such resources may come from a background of low socio-economic and educational status, may have a disability, or may have been previously incarcerated.

#### **SECTION 4: DEVELOPING A MINDFULNESS COLLECTION**

In this section, presenters shared an overview of the collection development process for the Mindfulness Room. Presenters described how title suggestions were solicited from the Atla community through the Atlantis listserv, and they highlighted other outreach efforts within the field to develop a collection development policy. The presenters emphasized how outreach to various communities and networks helped develop an engaging collection and ways to think about maintaining that collection (see figure 2). The current physical collection contains 41 books in the room, including two copies of the Quran. More recently, the Mindfulness Room collection has expanded to include eBooks. Due to early ordering deadlines and time constraints in Spring 2023, the presenters discussed how they shifted from purchasing additional print materials and focused instead on purchasing eBooks. These eBooks were selected based on the presenters' desire to highlight various mindfulness practices and spiritual beliefs. All eBook titles (and additional information on the Mindfulness Room) are visible on the Mindfulness Room guide online: <https://libguides.colorado.edu/mindfulnessroom>.





**FIGURE 2** Non-circulating collection in the CU Boulder Libraries Mindfulness Room. Photo by Megan E. Welsh

The presenters also shared an overview of a more formalized collection development policy that is currently being created. In order to create this collection development policy, the presenters are consulting a policy provided over the Atlantis listserv, which will help compare and contrast existing collection development policies at CU Boulder, as well as current library school course material focused on collection development strategies.

## SECTION 5: MAINTAINING A MINDFUL FUTURE

The final section of the presentation went over lessons learned from this project and plans for the future. Lessons learned included the following:

- Collection development can take on a variety of forms and is ongoing work.
- It is important to understand how personal librarianship style and work is influenced by mindfulness practices, and how this translates into a public space.
- It is also important to be intentional about outreach on campus.

Future plans for the Mindfulness Room and activities relating to the space include:

- Hosting a zine workshop on the theme of mindfulness
- Aligning engagement, outreach and programming with the 2023–2024 CU Boulder One Read, *The Book of Joy*, by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to help share mindfulness practices of contemplation, as well as practicing and embodying joy across the campus community.
- Continued collection development work, including finalizing a collection development policy for print and ebook titles to be added to the Mindfulness Room collection, and soliciting more purchase suggestions from the campus community
- Creating a book club/contemplative practice group
- Highlighting some of our Mindfulness Room titles around campus using the Libraries' outreach tricycle, "InfoMotion"

Finally, presenters encouraged attendees to reflect on the information they gained from the presentation and how they might want to plan and implement mindfulness activities and spaces in their settings. The presenters asked attendees to:

- Consider patron interests and needs
- Consider how to better use space in the library (and be creative!!)
- Consider how to collaborate with colleagues, departments, and local communities and organizations
- Consider how to incorporate mindfulness practices into their librarianship practice.

## CONCLUSION

Mindfulness has become an important part of the library profession as more students need support navigating college campus communities as well as mitigating various stress factors throughout one's academic career. Indeed, many academic library leaders are taking greater notice of the various mental health struggles that students face, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Librarians can meet these unique needs of patrons by embracing a whole-learner approach when incorporating various mindfulness practices and resources into library spaces. Especially in spiritually diverse or even secular contexts, libraries can facilitate a welcoming environment for all patrons regardless of their spiritual or faith backgrounds. They can engage with mindfulness resources in order to support the whole student throughout their academic journey. This presentation gave an overview of embedding mindfulness activities and a physical space dedicated to mindfulness at a secular, public institution, providing the audience with key questions and considerations for implementing similar mindfulness initiatives in their own library setting.

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