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Peter Bremer

Reflecting on student mental health

Creating a meditation room in a small college library

There was a time when meditation, mindfulness, and massage were often seen as luxuries or the domain of granola-eating eccentrics. Now such activities have moved into the mainstream and are embraced by millions of Americans. Data analyzed from the 2012 National Health Interview Survey indicated that 8%, or 9.3 million, of Americans reported using meditation in the previous year. The most common reason cited, according to the report, was mental health problems. Anxiety, stress, and depression were the top mental health problems for which individuals used meditation.¹

In the United States, 4.4 million or 13.1% of adults ages 18 to 25 had a major depressive episode in 2017, and 8.8 million or 25.8% reported having an AMI (any mental illness) during the same time period.² At the University of Minnesota-Morris (UMM), the health of our students matter. Our small campus size (roughly 1,500 students) and rural setting means there are often more opportunities for research and engagement, but students can also can overcommit themselves, leading to stressful situations. When family separation, grades, choosing a major, and future career are factored in, it comes as no surprise that college can be a very stressful time for students.³ When mental health issues are present, the problem becomes even more complicated.

In a recent 2016 College Student Health Survey Report, 27.2% of UMM students reported having depression in their lifetime, and 40.2% reported being diagnosed with a mental health condition previously.⁴ Most

strikingly, more than 10% of UMM students reported being diagnosed with depression in the last 12 months. Clearly there is a need for mental health awareness and stress reduction. Academic libraries are increasingly creating reflection or meditation rooms, where students can contemplate, pray, practice yoga, study scripture, or simply escape for a while.⁵

Briggs Library has long offered monthly game nights and late night refreshments during finals week. Establishing a space for reflection seemed like the logical next step. Between 2012 and 2016 we maintained a temporary relaxation space in a large meeting room on the first floor. We equipped it with aromatic oils and a Buddha Board, courtesy of our campus Wellness Center, in the hope that it would help students cope with end-of-semester challenges. We even hired a local massage therapist to come in and offer free five-minute massages, a practice which continues to this day. Although workable, the arrangement was not ideal. Since the relaxation materials were housed in a meeting room, it was not always possible for students to access the materials or, if they could, they often had to share the space with others who were studying or talking.

In summer 2017, we realized that we needed to make a deeper commitment to the well-being of our students. This meant offer-

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Student using the Briggs Library meditation room.

ing a dedicated meditative space that would be available throughout the academic year. Expanded offerings would also be part of the plan. Besides aromatic oils and a Buddha Board we would also provide a Zen Garden, a shifting sandscape display, soothing music and lighting, a meditation mat, bean bag chairs, and coloring. Wherever possible, the library and Wellness Center split the cost of purchasing these items.

The challenge, as it turned out, was finding a suitable location in the library. It was important to us that students feel safe and secluded while trying to relax. This meant that we needed to find a room away from distractions and areas of heavy traffic. Plenty of spaces presented themselves, but all of them were already being used as an individual or group study room. We were understandably hesitant about removing valuable student study space, especially since we had no hard data to confirm that students would use the new expanded service in large numbers. As a compromise, we decided to house the newly named Meditation Room in one of the first floor group study rooms for a trial period during fall semester 2017. From September 1 to December 15, librarians would monitor the space four times daily at 1:00 p.m., 4:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m., and 9:00 p.m.

With fall semester fast approaching, we began to publicize our new Meditation Room by hanging posters, posting on social media, and through online news stories. To make it easier to find the space, directional aides were posted in strategic locations throughout the library. Finally, the first day of classes arrived.

Throughout the semester Meditation Room usage was recorded on a Google Docs spreadsheet. Although I manage our relaxation offerings and regularly freshen up the meditative space, each librarian was tasked with checking usage in the Meditation Room, if it fell within their scheduled reference shift. By mid-term some patterns were emerging, and by the end of finals we had a clear picture of when and how students were using this area.

The Meditation Room was observed in use 42 times from September 1 to December 15, 2017. There were 375 possible time slots to be checked. Of these, librarians were unable to check on the room 47 times. Taking this into consideration, the usage percentage was adjusted to 13%. If an assumption was made that one individual per day could have been missed based on the fact that the room was only checked at limited times (the library is frequently open until 1:00 a.m.),

then that percentage might reasonably be expected to double, climbing as high as 26% total usage. Overall we were pleased at the response, especially since it was an expanded service in a new location.

Based on our findings, usage was pretty evenly spread between different days of the week as well as between mornings, afternoons, and evenings. Single individuals were the norm in the morning and afternoon. Pairs or small groups of students were more frequently seen using the space later in the evening. Surprisingly, there was not an increase in observed use at the end of the semester, which is usually a stressful time for students. Part of this reason might be due to the fact that December is an abbreviated month, having only half as many observable days due to winter break.

As expected, most students took advantage of the relaxation resources. A few however, were observed simply napping or studying. A clipboard was placed in the space to help facilitate writing or coloring, since there wasn't space for a proper table.

Now that we had usage data for the Meditation Room, we needed to have a benchmark for comparison purposes. Luckily for us, we had conducted a comprehensive library space study during fall 2013, in which we mapped usage in all of the public areas in the building. Observation times and frequency were similar to the Meditation Room study, although the duration of the space study was much shorter. When looking at the floor plans of recorded usage and then compiling the pertinent data, we found that Study Room #152 (the current Meditation Room) was observed in use 23 times during a two-week period in November. In contrast, the Meditation Room was observed in use only eight times during the same time period. Similar to our Meditation Room study, the 2013 space study showed usage that was fairly evenly distributed by day and time.

Because of the limited duration of the 2013 space study, we could not make a direct comparison, but it was evident that

the space had been more popular as a traditional group study room rather than a Meditation Room. Data, however, wasn't the only way to gauge interest in the service. Feedback forms were left in the Meditation Room. They quickly filled up with passionate affirmations of what the space meant for individuals. "I recently discovered this place and fell in love!" "This room is the best!! I hope it stays open all year!!" "By far the greatest thing that I have experienced here at UMM." "Thank you for helping me slow down." "This is a beautiful resource! Please keep it available if possible! I was finally able to loosen the muscles in my neck. Thank you!" "Best idea ever!"

Although heartened by the warm reception that many students had given the new space, we felt that moving the wellness materials to a smaller individual study room nearby would be the best course of action. By so doing we would be responsive to a perceived need for study rooms while retaining a permanent space for reflection and relaxation. Any fears we might have had in regard to negatively impacting students were greatly diminished when we received no complaints in the months since the move to the smaller location.

As important as the Meditation Room and its resources are, it is only one facet of Briggs Library's commitment to student health and well-being. In addition, Briggs Library has made a concerted effort to arrange relaxation instruction opportunities during the stressful times at the end of each semester. The reason is simple. Studies have shown that interventions, such as mindfulness that target stress reduction, significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety as well as depression scores.⁶ Students who are more mindful have reduced stress, which contributes to more positive health and behaviors.⁷ Mindfulness is a skill, however, and skills have to be learned. Our mental health instructional offerings have taken the form of standalone sessions taught by a student group called the Peer Health Educators and by Wellness Center staff. Topics covered have included

mindfulness and visualization techniques, as well as simple relaxation activities such as coloring and Play-Doh. In the future, we hope to arrange a series of workshops that could build on mindfulness techniques.

A modest challenge for us, beyond finding a suitable space, has been the routine demands of keeping the Meditation Room orderly. On a weekly basis the space needs to be visited, making sure no clutter is left and cleaning up materials. Although minimal in terms of time it has to be done so that the space remains inviting. On rare occasions an item will go missing. To dissuade possible thefts we have taken to barcoding many of the items with magnetic book protector strips and labeling materials with Property of Briggs Library stickers.

Developing partnerships can also be a challenge. It takes time to make the necessary connections and have hard work bear fruit. We have been fortunate to have talented and open-minded partners on our campus to help shoulder the financial and programmatic burden. Another area that takes effort and planning is promotion. Simply creating a reflective space isn't enough. At Briggs Library we're always brainstorming ideas trying to come up with unique ways to publicize what we have to offer, especially during the end of each semester.

In summary, Briggs Library has a strong commitment to providing resources for relaxation and mindfulness that benefit the mental health of our students. Through strategic campus partnerships we maintain a small, but vital Meditation Room and are always exploring ways to enhance this space, either through new materials or programming. Although one can hope that such efforts will make a difference at the institutional level (think retention), our primary concern is for the well-being of our students. Providing a sanctuary for our students so they can not only escape, but also renew themselves is worth the extra time and expense involved. It shows that we care and that we listen. While we can't take away the stress that college and life

bring, we can try and make things just a little bit easier.

Notes

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7. Kimberly C. Roberts and Sharon Danoff-Burg, "Mindfulness and Health Behaviors," #171, 201. ❧