

**Building Compassion Through Stories: The CALS Compassion Project**

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## **Introduction**

When moving through a college career, the quality of connections that a student develops can be an important driver of success (Felten & Lambert, 2020). During their time in college, students' interactions and relationships with faculty and staff have an impact. Students often face barriers that faculty and staff have not personally experienced (Haney, 2015; Taylor & House, 2010). By facilitating a conversation where both sides of this relationship can speak vulnerably about their experiences, we can build a culture of compassion, fostering greater empathy and the meaningful connections that students need (Brown, 2017; Jazaieri, 2018). The CALS Compassion Project aimed to bring together students, faculty, and staff of diverse backgrounds, build community, share personal stories, and ultimately build a culture of compassion in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALC) at Iowa State University.

## **How it Works**

The CALS Compassion Project happened in two phases. During phase one of the project, a group of approximately twenty students of diverse backgrounds were recruited and brought together in preparation to co-facilitate workshops intended for faculty and staff. These students were invited to participate by members of the CALS Student Services Retention Team. Several sessions were held to help students understand and prepare for the faculty/staff workshops prior to phase two. The second phase of the project consisted of 3-hour workshop sessions held for various faculty/staff members across CALS. Prior to the workshop, participants answered survey questions related to life events, mental health, financial matters, college life and other challenges faced by students in CALS. Respondents were welcomed to share details of their experiences in an open-ended follow-up for each question. As we completed the workshops, we found it essential to include a slide presentation to provide context for supporting students from underprivileged backgrounds and to facilitate activities.

The primary workshop activity was a privilege walk based on anonymized surveys completed by attendees. To complete the walk, participants lined up shoulder to shoulder in the middle of a large open room and were given a random survey (identified as completed by student, faculty, or staff) with responses to act out. For each survey question, if the participant's answer represented a challenge, they took a step back; if it represented an advantage, they took a step forward. Throughout the walk, personal experiences were shared for each question, along with some of the written responses provided on the survey. By the end of the walk, most of the participants representing students were near the back of the room, while most representing faculty or staff were near the front. This physical separation helped to highlight the differences in lived experiences between students seeking assistance and the faculty and staff tasked with providing support. After the walk, participants were given an opportunity to share and ask questions related to these differences. This discussion activity promoted student and faculty/staff development of a deeper understanding of varied perspectives.

## **Impacts**

Participants of the CALS Compassion Project came away from the workshop with a deeper understanding of the complex challenges faced by students, faculty, and staff. Students were provided with a platform to share their stories anonymously and raise awareness around the challenges facing them. Additionally, faculty and staff were provided with an opportunity to ask questions and share their concerns with students. As a graduate student in Agricultural Education, participating in the planning and execution of this project provided me a unique

opportunity to collaborate with Student Services. I applied the content knowledge I've gained through my academic experiences in Agricultural Education to a broad, college-wide audience. I gained a deeper understanding of the challenges students can face as well as the complex circumstances faced by faculty and staff in responding to those challenges.

### **Implications**

Social connection between students, faculty, and staff in college has been linked to student success (Feltman & Lambert, 2020; Hiatt et al., 2023). The use of storytelling can facilitate compassion and ultimately connection, allowing the teller to share a piece of themselves through a personal narrative (Nairne & Thren, 2017). By facilitating a connection between faculty, staff, and students using personal stories during the workshops, this project is an important step towards a culture of greater compassion. Additionally, positive student relationships with faculty and staff during college have been linked to increased student satisfaction and retention (Hiatt et al., 2023). Students with higher satisfaction are more likely to stay involved with and give to the institution as alumni (Gaier, 2005). This points to the potential for institutional impact, in the form of higher retention rates and alumni contributions, if a culture shift towards compassion is achieved.

### **Future Plans**

During the CALS Compassion Project, a survey was used to open the door for discussion and storytelling. Moving forward, an adapted version of the survey will be conducted via Qualtrics. All students, faculty, and staff in CALS will be invited to participate. Surveying a large populace will allow us to gain a clearer picture of the specific challenges faced by students and the extent of those challenges. Additionally, a wider survey will shine a light on the differences in lived experience between students, and faculty/staff, leading to an opportunity to examine how this might impact retention and student success within CALS. The resulting data will also be used to strengthen future workshops, providing additional data to support all students. This work has the potential to positively impact student and faculty/staff relationships across all areas of CALS.

While many institutions offer campus-wide, University level programming with similar goals, fostering connections between students and faculty within their academic fields can have positive impacts on their success (Jorgenson et al., 2018). We encourage leadership at the college and departmental level to consider similar programming to foster greater connections between students, faculty, and staff. The most important and impactful resources needed for this project were the students willing to share their experiences and the faculty and staff willing to listen and engage. This project would not have been possible without them. It is important to note that students were offered credit or compensation for their participation. However, all participation was voluntary and many of the students involved, including the student authors on this abstract, would have or did participate without compensation. This will be an important factor to consider in the development and implementation of similar programming.

Our team believes Agricultural Education professionals can provide insights related to this work. We encourage Agricultural Educators to consider interdisciplinary partnerships, such as this one, to deliver workshops which have both direct and indirect positive impacts on faculty, staff, and students across their colleges. I am excited to continue this work for use in my master's capstone project, furthering the collaboration between Agricultural Education and CALS Student Services.

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