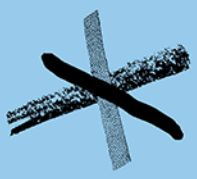

spark

The UCDA design education journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2024

spark
The UCDA design education journal

Spark—the UCDA Design Education Journal—invites submissions that heighten and expand the understanding and practice of design and design education in the past, present, or future.

Spark - UCDA design education journal
https://www.ucda.com/spark/

SPARK
Format: Online
ISSN: 3065-7911

Spark was conceived/designed by the UCDA Design Education Committee.

Contents

Using Monetary Value to Frame Critiques and Engage Students

Ben Hannam, Associate Professor, Elon University

This essay demonstrates how assigning a monetary value to undergraduate projects in a Visual Communication classroom fosters increased student engagement, transforms student perceptions regarding the communicative value of visual communication, and establishes a frame of reference for students in a critique environment. While professional practice often acknowledges time and budget as design constraints, it is crucial to actively address these considerations. Students must confront the notion that their design skills possess an intrinsic monetary worth. Guiding them through a series of exercises and lectures, both individually and collectively as a class, is necessary to establish an hourly rate. Students are encouraged to meticulously track the time devoted to a project and assert the "value" of their solutions as part of a group critique. This essay assesses student reflections on how the assignment of monetary value to their work enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of the value of visual communication and the market worth of their design skills. Additionally, it serves as a starting point for facilitating more engaged group critiques.

Students often under-appreciate the lessons they learn in the classroom because they need more contextual knowledge about the value of these skills and how they might apply them to professional practice. In her book, I Love Learning; I Hate School, author Susan Blum states, "The basic idea is that humans are born to learn, but not only cognitively. We are social, embodied, and emotional animals, with the capacity for learning any version of human culture. The more we take 'learning' out of context and put it, cleanly and abstractly, into an institutional framework and ask students to perform in isolation, the less possible it is to learn." With this in mind, survey courses should explore a topic broadly and provide students with a contextual framework for how the skills students acquire may be valued and incorporated into the student's respective disciplines.

In a survey class like Visual Communication, a second-year survey course, students prioritize the information they think the instructor will put on the exam. However, the design and creative process often require students to suspend judgment, fail, and embrace calculated risks. By emphasizing the educational, communicative, and monetary value, students begin to understand that answers other than "right" answers are valuable too. Discussions about gray areas of monetary value can enhance student motivation and learning.

When students were asked to assign a monetary value to a design solution for the first time, they initially struggled to view their academic work as having value beyond a personal learning experience. Students calculated the time they spent on a poster project and multiplied that by a $30/hour rate. A few students commented that they were uncomfortable declaring their solution was worth $360. When the class discussed the price, they determined they were not attaching the $360 price to the poster itself but to the value of the skills that the designer used to create the poster. The question, "Would it be worth paying a designer $360 to design the poster, get 1,000 posters printed, and sell them for $5.00 each" was asked. Suddenly the framework for the value of design shifted—the class agreed that this deal sounded fair for the designer, client, and consumer. Nothing about the poster had changed other than how the students had framed the value of the designer's work.

Attaching a monetary value to a student's work directly connects to various professional fields, particularly disciplines likely to engender freelancers, consultants, and advisors. Part of the goal of professional programs, including those at liberal arts institutions, is to prepare students for the challenges they will likely face in their respective disciplines. Many professional fields work within a particular set of monetary constraints or conditions, and experience in time management, workflows, and monetary value is critical.

In *Talent Is Not Enough: Business Secrets for Designers*, Shel Perkins states, "The U.S. economy is moving from being manufacturing-based to knowledge-based, and employment is shifting from permanent staffing to short-term projects that use independent contractors or temporary workers. This places a growing emphasis on expertise, peer networking, collaboration, and technology...success requires brainpower, entrepreneurship, and flexibility." While "value" is often subjective and biased at times, students are generally open to opportunities to internalize, grapple with, and explore the value of their work and skills in order to better position themselves for a professional career. Of course, not all students appreciate the exercise because of personal objections, including not wanting to monetize the learning process, fear of leaving the artificial reefs of academia too quickly, or because of other conflicting priorities.

The students' conceptual understanding of the value of visual communication (in all its various forms) may be attributed to the notion of a 'threshold concept.' A threshold concept is more than just a fundamental concept; it "opens up new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, interpreting, or viewing something" (Rowbottom, 2007, p. 263).

Sharing my freelance rate of $200/hour surprises students because they believe the rate is high. However, explaining how

these skills help clients achieve their goals reframes our discussions regarding value. If "a restaurant hires me at my $200/hour rate to increase their appetizer sales and I develop a campaign that increases appetizer sales 25%, sales go from $1,000 per day to $1,250 per day, and it takes me 8 hours ($1600) to complete the work—is this a good deal for my client?" Once the numbers are unpacked, students discover that the client essentially pays for my design services with the increase in sales within days and keeps the increase afterward. Suddenly $200/hour does not seem that extravagant.

By demonstrating visual communication's connection to shaping business, students understand how their skills can generate income and how these skills are valued beyond the classroom. When arguments for the value of visual communication include monetary value and measurable results, it generates a higher level of student engagement in class.

As such, "a threshold concept requires the merging of two views: those of the lecturer who possesses normative expectations about what a student should be able to 'understand' by the end of a course (a top-down approach) and the experience of the student whose path towards learning is generally opaque (a bottom-up approach)" (Lucas & Mladenovic, 2007, p. 240). In order for students to assign monetary value to their project, they need to reflect on their abilities to visually communicate a message to a particular audience, appraise their investments in time and other resources, and consider external feedback on their success at creating a solution that combines both form and content. Once students understand some of the factors that contribute to the success of their work, they are motivated to increase the perceived value of their solution and their mastery of visual communication. This shift in thinking can often be difficult for some students and can be met with internal conflict and resistance; however, once reframed through the lens of value and visual communication, students draw new conclusions about the relationship between content and form—or as one study suggests, the lesson now operates alternative view of these concepts (Lucas & Mladenovic, 2007, p. 242).

In order to better understand student perceptions of the helpfulness of assigning monetary value to student projects, twenty students completed two anonymous polls: a four-question poll distributed on the first day of class and a 14-question poll distributed after the class had concluded. As such, students "listed three words to describe their experience of keeping track of the number of hours they spent on their project and assigning a monetary value to their work." The terms that students repeated most often are displayed in a larger point size in a tag cloud (see Fig. 1). The single most repeated term was "helpful," followed by "surprising, eye-opening, challenging, reaffirming, and interesting" indicating that students perceived keeping track of their hours and assigning a monetary value to their work as a largely positive experience. An impressive 81.8% of the students who responded to the anonymous poll agreed that "Assigning monetary value to their work was a valuable part of this course," and 63.6% reported being more conscious of their workflow because of this project and the class discussions surrounding it.

Attaching monetary value to student work scales well for professional fields like Advertising, Marketing, Strategic Communications, and Public Relations because they are disciplines that have many creative and business-oriented commonalities.

Figure 1 - Word cloud

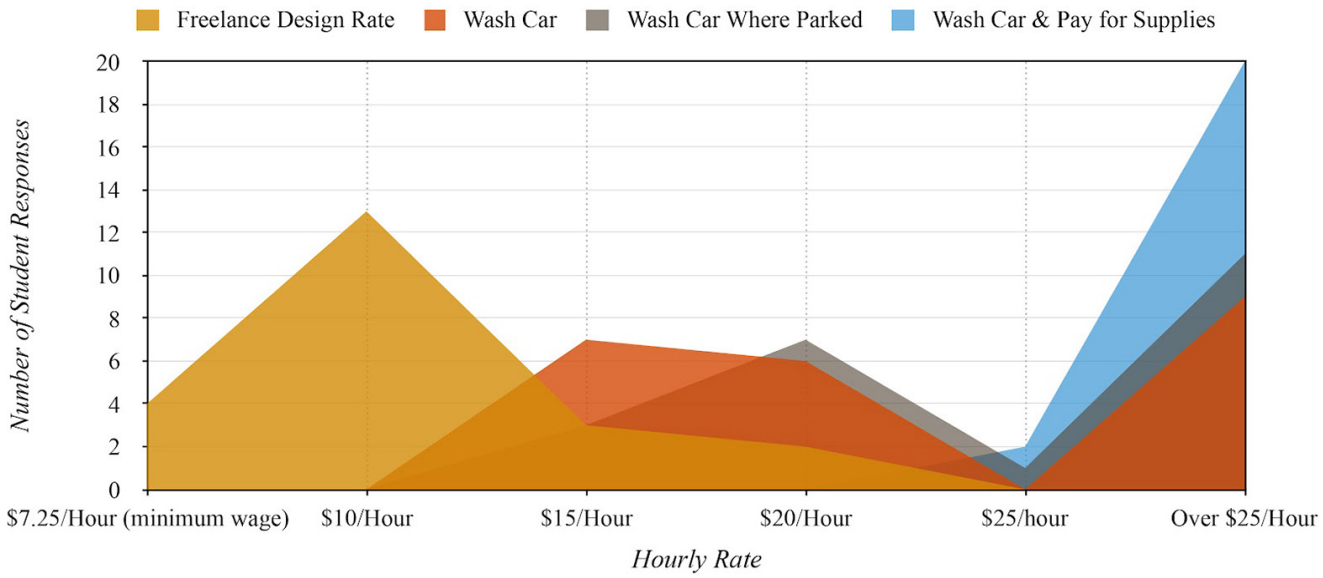

Figure 2 - Monetary values for skills

Having students frame a solution to a project in terms of its monetary value, investment of time and resources, and communicative potential helps students:

- Understand the value of visual communication,
- Identify how the value of a design service is determined, and
- Create a commonly understood point of departure for group critiques.

COURSE CONTEXT

This visual communication course focuses on visual theory, hierarchy, typography, color, movement, space, and composition. Students learn the historical development of visual communication and understand how design components influence perceptions of message content. By the end of the term, students must be able to define relevant terms and concepts; explain the historical development and the role of visual communication in traditional and emerging mediums; articulate visual communication theories and principles; describe how expression and ethical considerations influence the practice of visual communication; and consider how visual components influence the perception of messages.

After lectures on visual communication topics, students are evaluated on their ability to synthesize and recontextualize lessons through scaffolding exercises, experiments requiring sketching and implementing design methodologies, and a series of tests, small design projects, and quizzes. The class size is limited to 33 students, and the course is taught in a lecture format. Lecture courses are useful for presenting up-to-date information, summarizing and adapting information to the needs and interests of a group of students, and focusing on key concepts, principles, and ideas (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2014 p. 60).

Students in the class represent a diverse range of skills. The diversity in skills is due to some students having limited experience creating and using visual elements and typography to create focused messages for specific audiences.

INTRODUCING MONETARY VALUE

In order to establish a generalized baseline of how students value their visual communication skills compared to completing a more familiar task, a four-question poll is distributed on the first day of class before any discussions about the "value" of design have taken place

The poll measures students' thinking about the multi-faceted value of visual communication by asking them to self-assign an hourly rate to their design skills. However, the questions are designed to lead the students to a predetermined conclusion and challenge their notions about the value of visual communication. Students choose one of six answers for each question: $7.25/hour (minimum wage), $10/hour, $15/hour, $20/hour, $25/hour, or +$25/hour (see Fig 2).

1. **If you had to pick a freelance design rate this minute—what would it be?**
   Experience dictates that the majority of students will choose an amount between $7.25/hour and $15/hour. When asked

why they chose this rate, students often cite a lack of confidence in their design abilities.

2. **How much would you charge me to wash my car?**
   The second question contrasts the first question by asking students to place a value on a job that they may be more familiar with. Students have a good idea of the effort and time required to wash a car, so most students typically indicate that they would do this job for somewhere between $15/hour and +25/hour range.
3. **Since this is the first day of class and we are meeting for the first time, I do not feel comfortable giving you my car keys. If you were planning on driving my car to the car wash, you will need to reconsider this approach because you will need to wash it where it sits in the parking lot. Does this information have any effect on your hourly rate? If so, please adjust your rate accordingly.**
   This question often reframes the scope of work, an issue common in design. The typical student response is to increase their hourly rate.
4. **I don't know if I mentioned this, but you must provide the bucket, sponge, soap, and wax. Does this information have any effect on your hourly rate? If so, please adjust your rate accordingly.**
   This question gets students thinking beyond the job of washing the car and requires them to consider expenses that would affect their profit margin. Not only did the scope of the work change again, but most students do not consider waxing a car the same as washing a car. Once again, the typical student response is to increase their hourly rate.

The results of this poll demonstrate how students answered the first question (which averages $10/hour) and how they valued washing my car by the end of the poll (on average +$25/hour). The students quickly realize that they can no longer support a $10/hour freelance rate for themselves because there are many variables they had yet to account for initially. This self-realization helps set the tone for the class, and they realize that we will unpack some of the assumptions they made over the rest of the semester. Through conversations with students over the years, many need more confidence in using their design skills to solve a problem. As a result, they set their rates too low. Incorporating monetary value helps students transition from a "student, project-centered" mindset to a "professional in training" mentality.

A paradigm shift in an approach to learning can be beneficial because it helps reframe the course content from a "you need to remember this stuff" to, as one student responded in his post-class survey, "It makes the projects feel real." The shift in how the student identifies with the course content provides a more engaged learning opportunity. Grasping a threshold concept is transformative because it involves an ontological and conceptual shift in the learner (Cousin, 2010, p. 2). The student now views himself as a designer in training because his new understanding becomes part of who he is and how he views the world. This approach allows students to approach discussions from a professional persona and transcends a typical student, project-centered mindset.

Each student determines his or her hourly rate based on class discussions, research, and internal criteria and must share their hourly rate with the class. The hourly rate for the class is determined by averaging all of the hourly rates together. We spend time talking about the outliers, particularly the students with the highest and lowest hourly rates, trying to understand their rationale and justification. For example, the lowest hourly rate

DESCRIPTION OF WHAT YOU DID	08:00 - 08:15	08:15 - 08:30	08:30 - 08:45	08:45 - 09:00	09:00 - 09:15	09:15 - 09:30	09:30 - 09:45	09:45 - 10:00	10:00 - 10:15	10:15 - 10:30	10:30 - 10:45	10:45 - 11:00	11:00 - 11:15	11:15 - 11:30	11:30 - 11:45	11:45 - 12:00	12:00 - 12:15	12:15 - 12:30	12:30 - 12:45	12:45 - 01:00	01:00 - 01:15	01:15 - 01:30	01:30 - 01:45	01:45 - 02:00	02:00 - 02:15	02:15 - 02:30
Monday, Nov 3																										
Sketched ideas for poster		x	x	x													x	x	x	x	x					
Took photos of dogs													x	x	x	x										
Tuesday, Nov 4																										
Sketched some more									x	x	x															
Met with partner					x	x	x	x																		

Figure 3 - Student timesheets

might reflect the student's lack of confidence in using computer software or a strategy that the student uses to better position himself, reduce competition, and obtain a higher volume of work. Neither of these two positions are 'incorrect' answers; they reflect confidence and purpose and are relevant to our discussions of value.

KEEPING TRACK OF TIME

As a class, we discuss the role of visual communication, audience, design principles, Gestalt theory, creativity, and factors that traditionally influence hourly rates like competition, skills, and experience. Before announcing the second project, students learn to use a timesheet to track how much time they spend working on their solution. The timesheets are not graded, but we look at the data the students generate to provide them with data to compare their efforts with their peers (see Fig. 3). Timesheets are helpful for logging the following information:

1. Identify where the student's time is spent.
2. Assign a monetary value (hourly rate) to a design solution.

After a quick demonstration of using a timesheet and a brief question and answer period, students fill out their timesheets independently and turn them in after the project has concluded. We discuss ways in which students can data-mine their timesheets and look for clues to "hack" their design process, meaning they can compare the length of time it takes to complete tasks to their peers. Suppose a student spends too much time realizing a concept on the computer. In that case, they can brush up on their software skills through a popular online education company that offers software training courses. While there is no standard workflow in the graphic design profession, we can discuss what a healthy distribution of effort looks like with one-third of the time on analysis, iteration, and synthesis of ideas, one-third of the time on production and development, and one-third of the time reviewing, evaluating, and adjusting the design solution to better serve the needs of the client and the audience.

Almost every academic discipline deals with issues with time management, workflows, and deadlines. Prompting students to track time and consider the monetary value of their work might be valuable and motivating in other courses as well, even if only to discuss what a 'typical' workflow or monetary compensation might look like. One would assume that each discipline would have its trends and that there would be variations within these trends; however, breaking a more significant task down into smaller, more manageable pieces and looking for ways to work more efficiently might prove beneficial to a wide variety of disciplines.

MONETARY VALUE AS A CRITIQUE COMPONENT

Students reported in a post-course, anonymous survey that they had an overwhelmingly positive experience and that this exercise helped them "see where I stand among peers" and that they now "make an effort to break time down into categories and make an effort to ensure that the final product is worth the cost I am charging." In addition, a student commented, "Comparing the monetary value of each assignment to one another was a great way to measure my efforts throughout the semester." Another student added, "Applying an hourly rate makes me more aware of the quality of my work."

Both student comments indicate an increased self-awareness, internalization of the course content, and reflection on the student's individual efforts. Once a student realizes that their solution will be assigned a dollar amount they will go through great pains to justify the solution's value. One student commented, "This step in the design process helped me understand how important it was to justify the effort I put into each assignment. Before incorporating this step into my regimen, I often had trouble determining how to apply a monetary value to any mark of visual communication." Framing the conversation in monetary prompts students to think about maximizing their resources and valuing their efforts.

One might argue that when students are asked to attach a monetary value to their work, it reframes the critique in the minds of their peers. As one student stated, "The cost of each project was a key component of discussion related to the work that was produced. It is also easier to start evaluations from a cost point of view." Students in a survey class often learn new terminologies and may feel unsure about misusing these terms in a critique setting. Suppose we begin critiquing a design solution by discussing its monetary value. In that case, students may feel more comfortable beginning a critique by discussing monetary value because it is at a scale they are already familiar with. As the critique continues, students are often prompted to expand their critique to include the designer's concept, use of typography, color, design principles, and layout.

Students can inherently tell which projects would be a "good buy" based on their judgments, so I have the students deconstruct their peer's design solutions to answer the questions, "Why do you think it is a good buy? What makes this solution more or less successful than another solution?" Generally, the discussion comes down to "Did the student manage their resources well?", "Did the student communicate effectively?" and "Was their solution unique?"

While most students reported that adding monetary value to their work "did not make them feel more engaged" in the class critique, some students reported that they enjoyed adding

a monetary component to their project because they "wanted to gauge their success among their peers" and others "felt that tracking the number of hours spent on our work and assigning a monetary value to our work was primarily for the benefit of each designer."

Adding a monetary value component to a class critique would likely only be helpful in some academic disciplines. However, it may be helpful for the faculty member to:

1. **Begin group critiques with a familiar frame of reference for the students.**
2. **Frame the critique as an exploration of value— in all its various forms.**

This strategy may reinforce the notion to students that their input and insights are valuable, even if they are still learning the terminology, and that an assignment has value to the discipline, and community, beyond that of an academic environment.

CONCLUSION

One result of this process was that 54.5% of students reported that adding monetary to their work made them feel like they needed to justify their design decisions and root them in research, which was an unexpected byproduct. Getting students to anchor their design decisions in research and empathy on behalf of the audience is typically a goal that many professors need to account for in a survey class that focuses more on contextual and lower-order information.

Though keeping track of time and assigning monetary value to work is more tangential to specific disciplines over others, it may be of some benefit to students outside of visual communication. This technique makes students more aware of their workflow, helps students determine the market value of the course content, and has the potential to act as a threshold concept for some students while acting as a commonly understood starting point for group critiques. Faculty who require students to produce some form of artifact may benefit from having students keep track of their time and assign a monetary value to their work.

RESOURCES

Blum, S. D. (2017). "I love learning ; I hate school": An anthropology of college. Cornell University Press.

Cousin, G. (2010). Neither teacher-centered nor student-centered: Threshold Concepts and Research Partnerships. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, (2). https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i2.64

Lucas, U., & Mladenovic, R. (2007). The potential of threshold concepts: An emerging framework for educational research and Practice. London Review of Education, 5(3), 237-248. https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460701661294

Taylor, C. E. (2008). Threshold concepts, troublesome knowledge and ways of thinking and practising. Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines, 185–195. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911477_015

MacKeachie, W. J., Svinicki, M., & Hofer, B. (2014). Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and University Teachers. Houghton Mifflin.

Meyer, J. H. F., Land, R., & Davies, P. (2008). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (4). Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines, 59–74. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911477_006

Meyer, J. H., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. Higher Education, 49(3), 373–388. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-6779-5

Perkins, S. (2015). Talent is not enough: Business secrets for designers. New Riders.

Rowbottom, D. P. (2007). Demystifying threshold concepts. Journal of Philosophy of Education, 41(2), 263–270. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00554.x

Mindful Design: Empowering Design Students to Cultivate Wellness and Foster Mindfulness on Campus

Kimberly Mitchell, Assistant Professor, University of Tennessee-Knoxville

Mental health crisis among college-aged students is at an all-time high and there are limited resources on many campuses to meet the rising demand. A second-year graphic design class was charged with creating a mindfulness intervention to help facilitate conversation and share mindfulness resources with the college campus. The project began first with the undergraduate graphic design students completing a one-day immersive mindfulness training session, they learned how to utilize mindfulness exercises themselves to help them cope with everyday stresses – and in turn, they were tasked with sharing their knowledge with the broader college community in a mindfulness intervention on our local college campus. The goal of the project was to teach students how to incorporate mindfulness practices into their daily routines so that they can learn to better care for their own mental health, and ultimately become more resilient and productive contributors in their own community. This paper explains how this project unfolded – from the project development, learning outcomes, successes and challenges, as well as project visuals.

INTRODUCTION

Empowering students to engage with the communities in which they live and make a positive impact has become a cornerstone of design education in the 21st century. To achieve this, finding common ground with students is imperative. Most can relate to the stress of pursuing an undergraduate degree; though gratifying, graphic design is a rigorous discipline full of long hours, numerous revisions, and tight deadlines. Paired with other life stressors, this can adversely affect students' mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, burnout, and other mental health issues. How can educators prompt students to make positive contributions to society when they are already struggling? This paper shares an intervention where undergraduate graphic design students were introduced to mindfulness exercises to navigate daily stressors and subsequently implemented this newfound knowledge in a mindfulness initiative with the broader college community. The objective was to ingrain mindfulness practices into students' daily routines, equipping them with tools to enhance their mental health and ultimately become more resilient, productive contributors to society.

MENTAL HEALTH ACCESS

A significant concern on college campuses centers around the need for enhanced accessibility to mental health services to alleviate stress and anxiety among college-aged students. Present-day students have grown up amidst a generation inundated with recurring adverse global events, replayed relentlessly on news platforms and pervading social media channels. During her 2022 commencement speech, a University of Tennessee-Knoxville graphic design graduate Cadie Chapell gave an inspiring and moving address to her peers as she stated, "As young children we've seen school shootings, lived through the 'me too' movement, viewed images of children in cages, watched fish bobbing on the waves and birds black as tar from the BP oil spill in between episodes of Saturday morning cartoons, and lived through a pandemic where we were sent home from school and forced into isolation" (Chapell 2022). This constant stream of negative news and events has cast a shadow over college campuses, leading to heightened anxiety levels and altering students' overall mental well-being. Furthermore, today's college students find themselves grappling with the expectations of our "culture of hyperachievement" and the relentless pursuit of "effortless perfection" (Druckenmiller 2021). Alongside these pressures, the escalating expenses of higher education have added further strain on both students and their families.

College mental health systems were underfunded, understaffed, and underprioritized before the pandemic, and they are stretched even thinner given the increased demand for the services since (Carrasco 2022). A study conducted by researchers in the United Kingdom and Canada revealed that approximately one-third of first-year college students experience moderate to severe levels of anxiety or depression (Baily 2021). Data published by psychologist Dr. Gregg Henriques, drawing from the Healthy Minds Study, which spanned from 2014 to 2021, indicated a 14% increase in rates of anxiety and a 21% increase in rates of depression among college students (Henriques 2019).

A recent meta-analysis concentrated on the prevalence of anxiety and depression diagnoses in children, revealing that these symptoms had doubled compared to pre-pandemic statistics, especially among children and adolescents (Racine et al. 2021). These notably elevated estimations pertinent to the youngest generation, coupled with the converging stressors of financial strains, the pursuit of perfection, and the continuous inundation of negative news events elevating anxiety levels in college-aged students, are on track to exacerbate the strain on our already overburdened mental health system.

In 2017, STAT News found that wait times for initial mental health appointments on college campuses were between two and three weeks in many institutions (Thielking 2017). In

Figure 1: [2019] Kristine Matthews' student work, Exploration Nudges, by students Katie Hawkins, Andie Niebling, Piper Loyd

2019, the New York Times reported that this waiting period had been extended to one to two months (Wolverton 2019). While expanding services might seem like a straightforward remedy, it proves to be quite expensive. Even the most well-resourced schools have discovered they need help to keep pace with the surging demand (Hay 2019).

Addressing concern of mental health on college campuses is not a simple task. However, it is essential to acknowledge that individual actions can complement existing mental health services and prove beneficial. By fostering a supportive community, promoting open conversations about mental health, and encouraging peer support networks, students can contribute to a more inclusive and caring environment. Such efforts, when combined with the expansion and enhancement of mental health services, have the potential to alleviate stress and anxiety among college-aged students. It is crucial to recognize that a collaborative approach, where both institutional and individual efforts are intertwined, can pave the way for a brighter future in promoting students' overall mental well-being.

MINDFULNESS INTERVENTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

While coping tools such as meditation and mindfulness may not serve as solutions for acute crises, they can effectively address minor stressors before they escalate into more significant issues. This is where the intervention becomes invaluable – as it can offer individuals grappling with everyday life stressors a chance to pause, breathe, and introspect before the situation exacerbates.

Mindfulness entails immersing oneself fully in the present moment, engaging thoughtfully with current thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations without judgment or distraction. Mindfulness has demonstrated its potential to diminish stress, anxiety, and depression, enhance cognitive functioning, and promote overall well-being.

Research has indicated that even adopting a mindfulness routine once a week can yield stress and anxiety reduction benefits among college students (Lemay et al. 2018).

Our project began with lectures centered around mindfulness-based therapy's advantages. Dr. Elizabeth Strand, the founding director of Veterinary Social Work at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and an instructor in mindfulness-based stress reduction, conducted a comprehensive 3-hour workshop for our second-year graphic design students.

This workshop aimed to familiarize students with the merits of mindfulness while assisting them in cultivating their mindfulness practices. The workshop included experiential exercises like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and

Figure 2: [2020] New. York, United States. Color Centre street mural " Black Lives Matter" created by artists and volunteers in front of Federal Court House Credit: Pacific Press Agency/ Alamy Live News. Photo: Lev Radin

guided meditation, allowing students to explore these techniques individually.

Following their immersive training in mindfulness through the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) therapeutic approach, our graphic design students collaborated in groups to devise a campus-wide awareness initiative focused on mindfulness, stress reduction, and techniques promoting positive thinking.

THE INTERVENTION

After acquiring a foundational comprehension of mindfulness and its advantages, students were tasked with formulating a mindfulness intervention to implement on campus. This intervention could take on diverse formats, from physical installations to digital campaigns.

Students were encouraged to draw on their graphic design skills to create visually engaging and informative materials while incorporating research and best practices from psychology and public health.

The project's overarching goals were to create meaningful, impactful messages that empower the campus community to foster a culture of mindful presence and compassion.The messages aimed to forge connections with the students and prompted them to recognize their capacity to create change in their lives. Accomplishing this involved being mindful of their well-being and extending that mindfulness to those around them and the broader community in which they live.

THE PROJECT INSPIRATION

Many examples of unconventional, innovative designers and design interventions were shared with the class so that they could think outside of a typical "poster campaign," which was not a desirable outcome of the project. The class examined work from a variety of designers.

In Kristine Matthews' "Give Me A Sign" project (Figure 1), students were charged with looking at the context of a sign. They then determined a place, thing, or situation where they felt a sign could help, and designed a temporary sign to place in a public realm. They considered how the audience would interact and engage with the sign. Matthews' project emphasized the notion that signs possess minimal significance without the appropriate context. Conversely, relocating an everyday sign to a new setting can completely transform its meaning (Matthews 2019).

Stefan Sagmeister's "Banana Wall" stood out for its innovative use of non-traditional materials to convey a message, providing an intriguing angle to an interactive encounter. The artwork involved arranging ripe green bananas to compose

Figure 3: © [2020] Jenny Holzer, member of Artists Right Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Christopher Dilts

a message, forming a prominent mural featuring the motto: "Self-Confidence Produces Fine Results." This inventive application of materials meant that the installation would transform over time. Due to the nature of the materials, as the bananas continued to ripen and eventually decay; the motto gradually faded into the backdrop, leaving nothing to be desired.

The politically charged intervention of the "Black Lives Matter" mural in New York City was also shared (Figure 2), which emerged in June 2020 as a response to the incidents of police brutality. The takeaway was to understand that some interventions require community integration, and students should consider how they could involve the community.

Moving beyond traditional print materials, we explored Jenny Holzer's piece, "You Be My Ally" (Figure 3). Holzer's utilization of projected augmented reality using virtual projections on the University of Chicago campus demanded active audience engagement to sense and experience it truly.

Finally, a built interactive intervention idea was shared. Students delved into the work of New York-based artist Finnegan Shannon, exploring their project titled "Do You Want Us Here or Not" (Figure 4), which promoted disability awareness on exhibition chairs and benches. The exhibition featured messages such as "This exhibition has asked me to stand for too long. Sit if you agree," and "There aren't enough places to sit around here. Sit if you agree," which aimed at advocating for accessibility in physical spaces. This seemingly straightforward intervention, integrating seating within a physical space, disrupts the viewer's experience by posing a simple question. By unexpectedly grabbing the audience's attention, it encouraged active participation.

PROJECT PROCESS

The class was separated into five groups, each comprised of 4 to 6 students. The groups identified a space on campus where

Figure 4: [2019] Finnegan Shannon's Do You Want Us Here or Not, bench and chairs.
Photos: bench: Finnegan Shannon. chairs: Karel Koplimets

they could conduct their intervention. The space selection was rooted in finding a place they felt belonged to them and their larger college community. An essential aspect of their task was comprehending their target audience and devising the most effective approach to engage them.

Using observational research, the students studied the way the members of the community occupied and interacted within this space. The process included exploring the visual language and materials within the space, ensuring that their final interventions harmonized with the contextual environment. Finally, they conducted a typography study, strategically evaluating how the typographic elements could seamlessly integrate or contrast within the space.

Before embarking on the design of their project, students drafted a 2-page proposal encompassing their intervention site, materials used, associated costs, inspiration and mood board examples, and a delineation of their expected outcomes. To support their endeavors, each student group received $30 to help offset the cost of their materials and a $50 print credit.

Students worked collaboratively in teams to conceive three distinct physical pieces that would function cohesively as a comprehensive graphic design system. They adhered to the following criteria:

1. One component must have more than one page (e.g., a zine, app, website, book)
2. All three design deliverables should have different formats (they could not have 2 zines, 2 apps, 3 projections, etc.)
3. None of the three deliverables could have the same purpose or contain the same information.

Each deliverable was required to convey a unique nuance related to the overall message. For instance, a zine might convey a more personal message, while a rock could have a broader one, and a bench might create awareness and encourage reflection. The ultimate objective was to generate a tangible and experiential intervention.

Certain aspects of their proposals were not feasible to physically create due to funding or resource constraints. In such cases, students were permitted to mock up some aspects of the project digitally. The students were allocated four weeks for the design phase, followed by an additional week for the execution of the intervention and subsequent photography documentation. Students also had access to a 20,000-square-foot innovation space equipped with CNC routers, water-jet cutters, laser cutters, 3D printers, and a wood fabrication shop. However, training was required before the tools could be utilized. Unfortunately, the graphic design students were not formally trained before this project was assigned. To compensate for this, a one-week extension was added to the project length while the class got proper training on the tools, making the final time from start to completion five weeks.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

A diverse array of interventions emerged, with some more engaging than others. Each student group established a unique identity and system for their intervention. Notably, three group projects garnered attention for their innovative approaches, showing promise in effectively connecting and reaching the college community.

One group centered their intervention in a heavily frequented ped-way area on the college campus, naming it “Be Here Now” (Figures 5 and 6). The intervention was seamlessly integrated into students’ paths without requiring them to seek it out actively. Their decision to prompt active involvement and presence among students echoed the concept behind Shannon’s disability chairs and benches and Matthews’ student works, where people were prompted with questions in unexpected places. Situated in a high-traffic location and designed with contrasting colors to maximize visibility and engagement, a bench served as an inter-

Figure 5: Be Here Now student work. Student team Maggie Meystrik, Jessica Taylor, Parks Broyles, Kayla Flowers, and Jillian Lathrop with the class during the intervention.

Figure 6: Be Here Now student work.

active space that prompted people to ask themselves, "Where are you?" as an invitation for introspection. Accompanying the bench were printed zines for reading and contemplation, and stickers and buttons for students to take and share. The zines featured individual compositions adorned with pressed and scanned flowers, complemented by illustrations and select inspirational quotes.

A recurring mascot called "Lil Guy" played a central role in their overall delivery and deliverables, serving as an information conduit. "Lil Guy" was printed at large scale, cut using the laser cutter, and later hand painted. The mascot was strategically placed near the bench. During observations, the group noticed that the "Lil Guy" character near the bench caught people's attention first, prompting them to approach the bench and engage with its contents. Unfortunately, the "Lil Guy" mascot was stolen within 24 hours of placing him outside. The heavy bench remained in place for several months. The materials employed encompassed wood, nails, paper, pressed flowers, a magazine stand, sticker paper, paint, and foam signs.

Another group's intervention entailed substantial incorporation of the university's prevailing branding and its mascot, Smokey, a beloved Bluetick Coonhound (Figures 7-10). They framed their problem statement as, "How can we motivate busy students to notice our project?" Acknowledging the deep affection UTK students held for Smokey, the group utilized him as part of their design solution titled "Smokey Support." They illustrated Smokey and used a selection of UTK's official colors.

Enter the Mascot

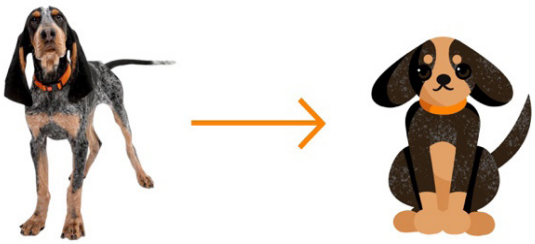

Figure 7: Students Lauren Favier, Emily Armstrong, Lydia McNabb, and Kathryne Hirt Smokey Support intervention

Their deliverables encompassed postcards, stickers, tabletop tents, a mindfulness app, and an engaging scavenger hunt. Recognizing that students enjoy free, fun swag, the group created a series of postcards featuring encouraging, uplifting quotes on one side and information about the mindfulness app on the reverse. The postcards doubled as keepsakes to adorn their rooms or workspaces, with the app's QR code linking to further resources on mindfulness. Tucked within the postcard envelopes were stickers, each adorned with an illustration of Smokey.

Keeping demanding student schedules in mind, the team crafted an interactive and adaptable app. This platform empowered students to tailor their mindfulness experiences according to their availability. It offered a variety of interactive exercises ranging from one to thirty minutes. This made it easier for students to practice mindfulness using a timeframe that would work best in the moment. Each day, the app would introduce students to a different strategy for being mindful.

The app featured an additional activity promoting healthy living awaited called the "Smokey Quest." The activity involved a 3D-printed Bluetick Coonhound dog featuring a QR code on its tail. The quest engaged students in a monthly scavenger hunt to find the 3D-printed dog, culminating in a prize for the winner.

Due to limited programming capabilities and time, the app prototype focused solely on front-end design. However, if the app were to be fully programmed, students could learn more about mindfulness prompts and app via tabletop tents, which would be placed in dining halls and throughout the Student Union.

The third and final project pursued bringing the intervention directly to the students, alleviating the need for students to seek it out (Figure 11) actively. Concurrently, the University of Tennessee Knoxville and Starship Technology initiated a robot food delivery service aligned with the project's timeline. This group focused on the autonomous fleet of 40 on-demand robots, a groundbreaking presence on our campus, and aimed to deliver the intervention to the students' doorstep seamlessly.

The team conceived a collaborative venture with the food services department. Whenever a student placed a food order, the individual responsible for placing the meal in the robot would include a "Present Moment Project" packet within the robot's compartment. This packet contained an interactive journal and coloring book, a postcard featuring a thought-provoking

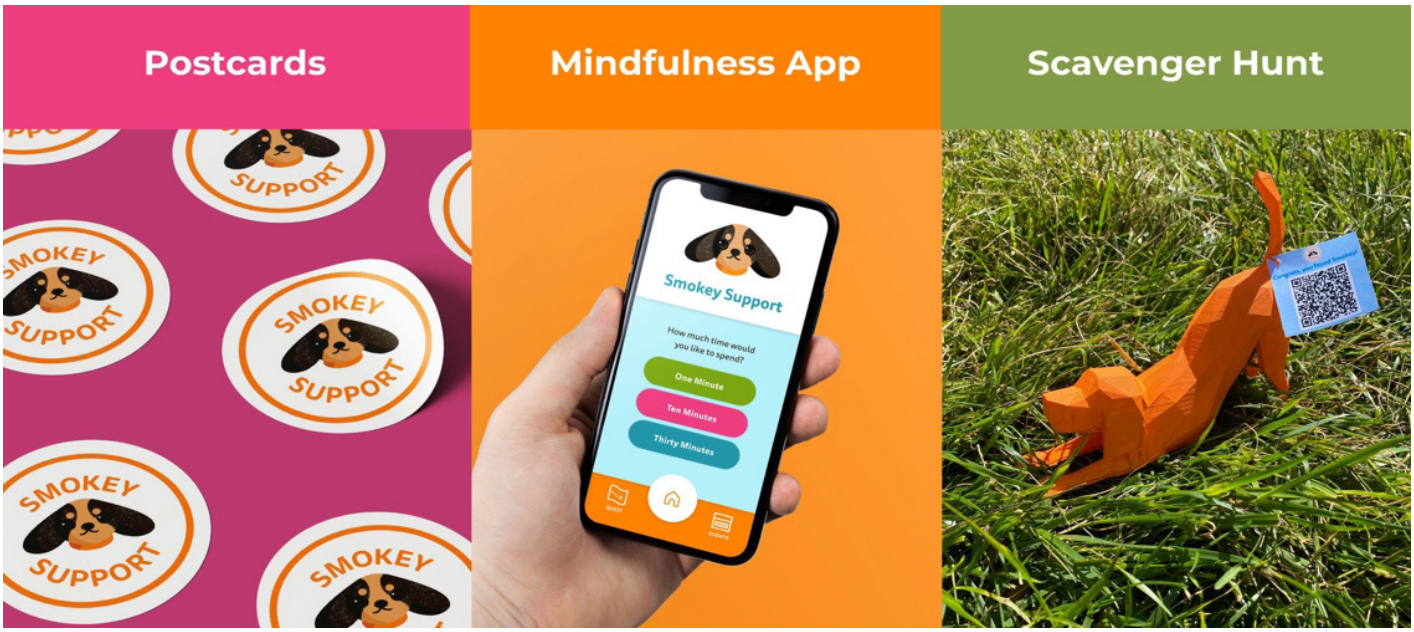

Figure 8: Smokey Support intervention

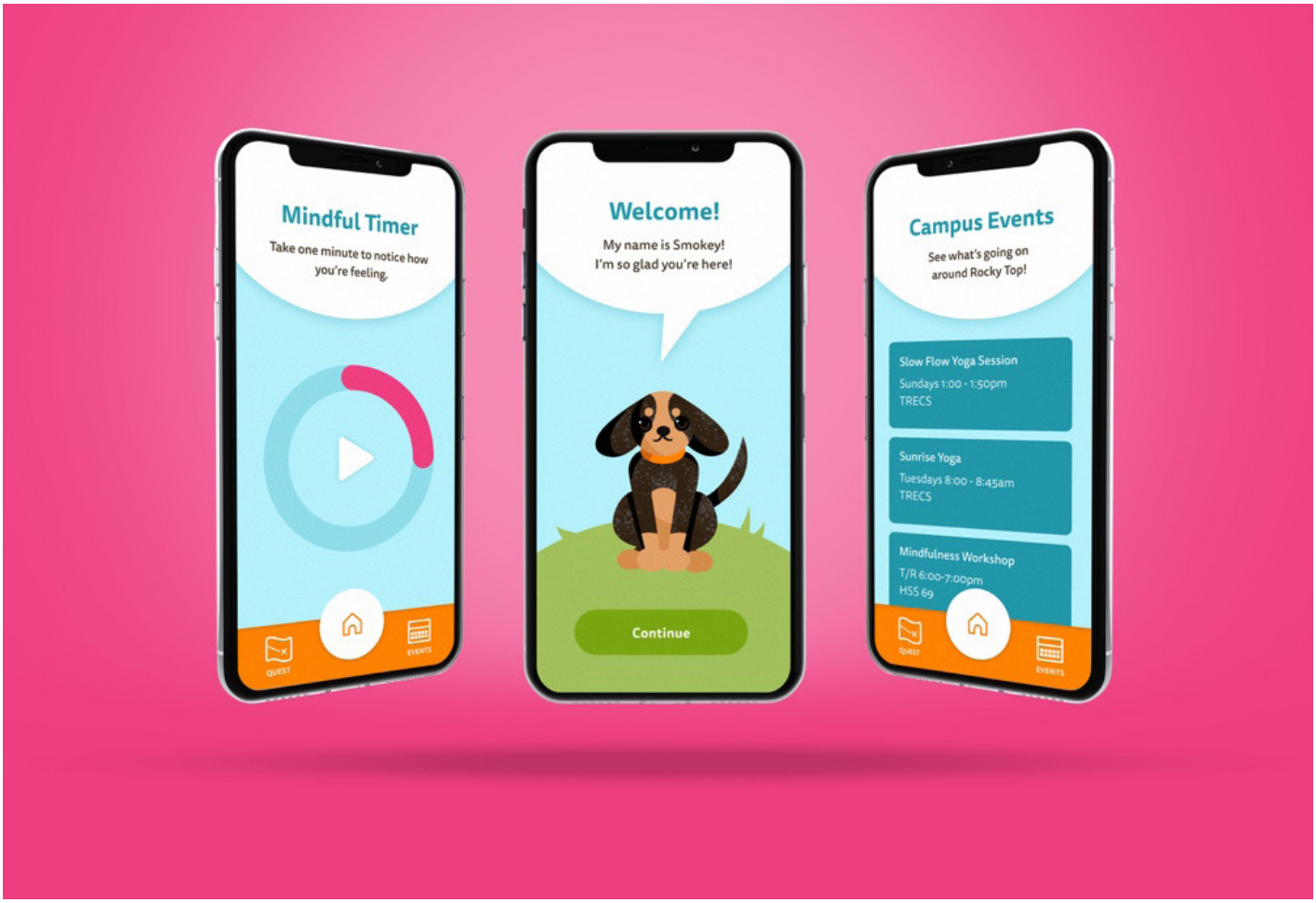

Figure 9: Smokey Support Mindfulness App

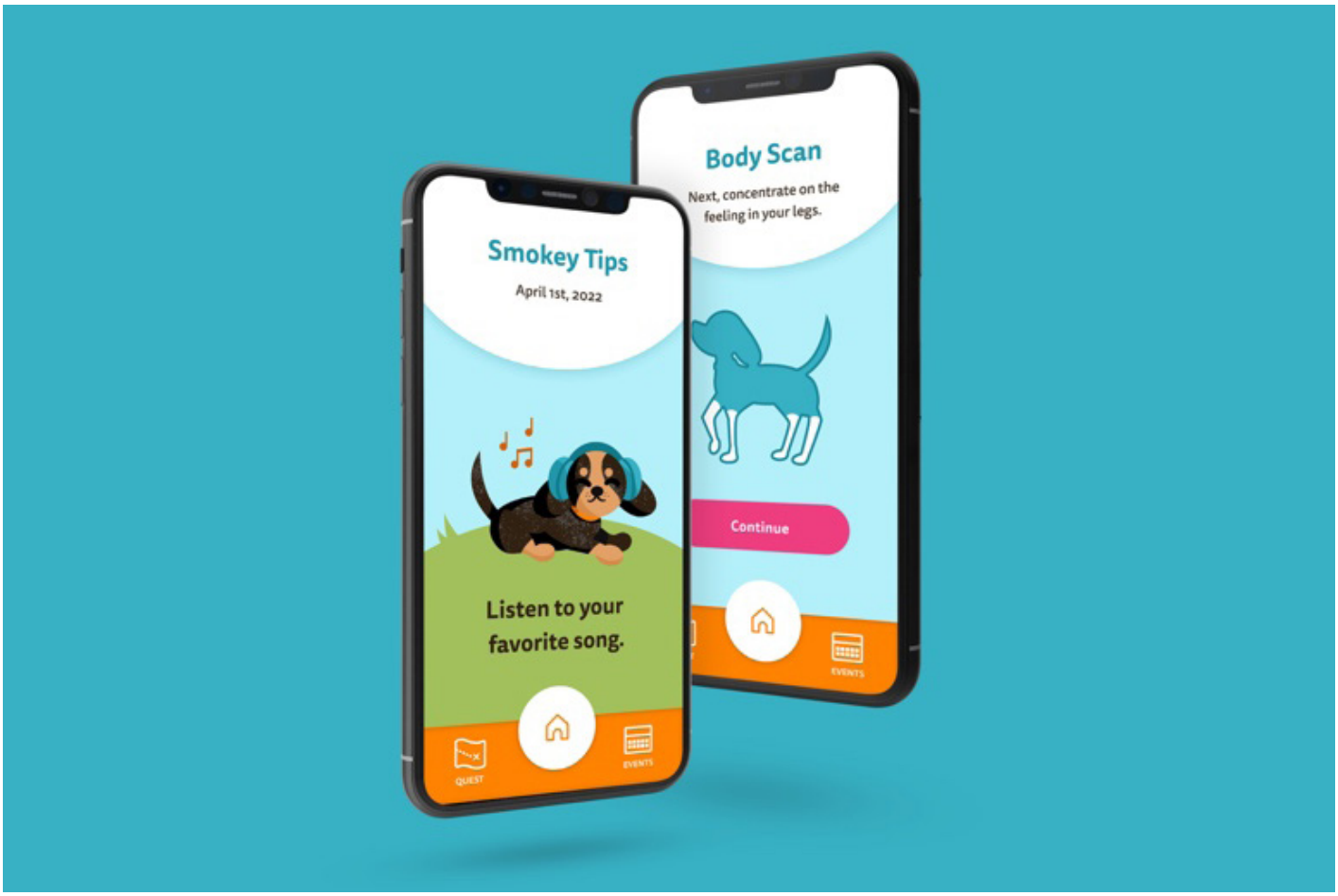

Figure 10: Smokey Support Smokey Quest

prompt on its reverse side, and an assortment of stickers. Each item featured a QR code directing students to an app housing a collection of current UTK resources, mindfulness insights, and a gallery showcasing anonymous messages penned by students addressing mental health concerns.

THE BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

The mindfulness intervention project yielded several advantages for the participating students. First, it enabled them to cultivate a more profound comprehension of mindfulness and its advantages, fostering the development of their mindfulness routines. Second, it promoted collaboration and interdisciplinary education, fostering teamwork as students pooled their skills and viewpoints to design projects. Last, it offered students a chance to produce work that held personal and community significance, resonating meaningfully on both individual and broader levels.

To measure success and to ensure everyone in the group contributed equally, surveys were distributed to students midway through the project and upon its completion. In the feedback, a student stated, "Literally everyone in our group loved this project, and we're super proud of the end result. Everyone contributed equally, and I think we all did a really good job," and, "I think our group worked really well together …. I'm really happy with what we made, and I loved working with this group."

Upon the conclusion of the course, a student reached out via email, sharing that they had been contemplating mindfulness and well-being since our project's culmination. They revealed that they had recently established an Instagram account dedicated to sharing daily positive messages, to brighten others' days or convey messages they may need to hear.

FUTURE WORK

The extension of one week for formal training in the fabrication lab inadvertently caused some students to lose momentum in the project. To prevent such disruptions, scheduling this training at the beginning of the semester would be more effective. While certain student groups embraced genuine physical interventions, which was encouraged, the costs of materials remained a challenge. Even with expenses shared among 4-6 students and a combined budget of $30 for supplies and $50

for printing, some groups needed help to create their physical builds.

The class found the three-hour intensive mindfulness workshop informative but exhausting. In the future, mindfulness teaching could be spread throughout various classes to avoid overwhelming them with content. Checking in with the current design students' mental health before and after learning mindfulness techniques could be an interesting study, as would testing the intervention to see if it made a difference in the college mental health community. It would also be beneficial to form a partnership with the Student Success Center, the Mental Health Clinic, and the UTK Counseling Center in making some of our interventions a permanent presence on our college campus.

CONCLUSION

The role of design educators extends beyond the simple imparting of technical skills; it encompasses the nurturing of empathetic, socially conscious designers who cannot only create impactful solutions but also maintain their own well-being amidst the challenges of the demanding design landscape. Teaching mindfulness techniques to design students proves to be a mutually transformative process, yielding remarkable outcomes for individuals and the broader college community. The integration of mindfulness into the design curriculum equipped students with invaluable tools to enrich their personal lives and others' well-being. As students delved deeper into their mindfulness practices and reaped benefits in their individual lives, they naturally became agents of positive change in the college community. By disseminating their newfound mindfulness techniques, these students instilled a culture of self-care, emotional equilibrium, and mental clarity among their peers.

The outcomes of the mindfulness intervention stand as a testament to the potential of design students to craft artifacts and curate experiences that foster comprehensive growth. These students showcased the powerful synergy between personal development and community enrichment through their initiative. Ultimately, instructing design students in mindfulness techniques has unlocked a cycle of growth where individual well-being contributes to community well-being and vice versa. This holistic educational approach equips students with the means to flourish creatively and emotionally, concurrently nurturing their ability to impact those around them positively. The project vividly demonstrated the effectiveness of weaving mindfulness into design pedagogy, resulting in a cohort of students who excel not only as designers but also as compassionate and empowered individuals dedicated to enhancing their communities.

Figure 11: Students Lily Caldwell, Ella Hosse, Jaiden Kasaval, Jake Robinette, Bella Woods Present Moment Project intervention

REFERENCES

Bailey, Monet. 2021. "One Third of First-Year University Students Have Depression or Anxiety." Health Europa. https://www.healtheuropa.com/one-third-of-university-students-have-depression-anxiety/112025/.

Carrasco, Maria. 2022. "Students Are More Stressed Now than Last January." Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/01/13/students-are-more-stressed-now-last-january.

Chapell, Cadie. "Spring 2022 College of Arts and Sciences Commencement Ceremony." University of Tennessee Knoxville College of Arts and Sciences. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgOVXTT_wN4.

Druckenmiller, Reese. 2021. "College Students and Depression." Mayo Clinic. https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/college-students-and-depression.

Hay, Mark. 2019. "Colleges Say They Don't Have Money for Mental Health. Here's What They Should Do." Vice. https://www.vice.com/en/article/a3xeqj/colleges-say-they-dont-have-money-for-mental-health-heres-what-they-should-do-triage.

Henriques, Gregg. 2019. "The College Mental Health Crisis: Learning How to Cope." 2019. BestColleges.com. https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/mental-health-crisis-learning-how-to-cope/.

Holzer, Jenny. "You be My Ally." https://www.jennyholzer.uchicago.edu/gallery

Jacobs, Julia. 2020. "The 'Black Lives Matter' Street Art that Contains Multitudes." The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/arts/design/black-lives-matter-murals-new-york.html

Lemay, Virginia, Hoolahan, John, Buchanan, Ashley. 2018. "SAMYAMA: Stress, Anxiety, and Mindfulness; a Yoga and Meditation Assessment." American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education 83 (5): ajpe7001. https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7001.

Matthews, Kristine. 2019. "Give Me a Sign – Design Teaching Resource." AIGA Design Teaching Resource. https://teachingresource.aiga.org/project/give-me-a-sign/.

Racine, Nicole. McArthur, Brae Anne. Cooke, Jessica E.. Eirich Rachel. Zhu, Jenney. Madigan,

Sherri. "Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During COVID-19: A Meta-analysis." JAMA Pediatr. 2021;175(11):1142–1150. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2482

Sagmeister, Stefan. "Deitch Projects, Banana Wall." https://sagmeister.com/work/deitch-projects-banana-wall/

Shannon, Finnegan. "Do You Want Us Here or Not." https://shannonfinnegan.com/do-you-want-us-here-or-not

Thielking, Megan. 2017. "A Dangerous Wait: Colleges Can't Meet Soaring Student Needs for Mental Health Care." STAT. https://www.statnews.com/2017/02/06/mental-health-college-students.

Wolverton, Brad. 2019. "As Students Struggle with Stress and Depression, Colleges Act as Counselors." The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/education/learning/mental-health-counseling-on-campus.html.

Spark — Volume 1, Issue 1, ©2024