Minutes: November 7, 2012

Attending: Renee Alexander, Casey Carr, Joanna Chen, Ken Clarke, David Delchamps, Kathy Edmondson, Greg Eells, Kappy Fahey, Natalie Finn, Michele Fish, Katherine Gleason, Carol Grumbach, Tanni Hall, Kevin Hallock, Christine Holmes, William Horning, Kent Hubble, Monica Jones, Douglas Kim, Janna S. Lamey, Tim Marchell, Beth McKinney, Gilad Meron, Todd Miner, Susan Murphy, Saadiya Mutawakil, Andy Noel, Patricia Nguyen, Barry Perlus, Rebecca Robbins, Keba Rogers, Lisa Ryan, Janis Talbot, Catherine Thrasher-Carroll, Shawkat Toorawa, Don Viands, Lane Wendel, Elise West, Ria Yalamanchili, Kathy Zoner, Khamila Anike Alebiosu, Sonja Skelly, Don Rakow, Jazlin Gomez, Mirinda Martin, Yevgeniy Izrayelit

Upcoming meetings: February 25, and April 15, 2013

Welcome and Introductions: Susan Murphy

1. In previous meetings, we have explored several dimensions of our Mental Health Framework. Today, discussion will be directed toward another way we can foster a healthy campus environment and resilience by more fully utilizing the beneficial effects of nature. Joining the Council today to provide an overview on how natural resources can influence personal resilience are Nancy Wells, Assoc. Professor, DEA; Gary Evans, Professor DEA/Human Development; Ryan Parrot, Graduate Student, DEA; and Gilad Meron, Graduate Student DEA. The importance of our natural resources was first discussed by the Council in the context of making decisions about bridge means restriction designs that would maintain vistas of Ithaca’s beautiful gorges.

2. There has long been recognition of the restorative value the natural environment has in reversing the effects of mental fatigue, reducing stress, improving mood and increasing social interaction. Gary Evans and Nancy Wells explained that arising from theories developed by William James in the 1890’s, researchers have continued to explore nature’s impact on our cognitive functioning, social relationships and even physical well-being. Human consciousness is selective. There are two forms of attention:
   - That which is involuntary, automatic and requires little effort on our part (fascination).
   - That which is voluntary, requires effort (directed attention) and when “overused” can lead to “directed attention fatigue.” Signs of this fatigue include distractibility and irritability. Our involuntary attention to nature can help us recover from this state.

When it comes to our psychological well-being, nature can act as a buffer. Studies show that when stressed/ fatigued people are exposed to nature they bounce back quickly to a refreshed state. Knowing how much and how long one needs to attend to nature to reap this benefit is still being researched. Studies have shown that even watching a squirrel for a few moments through a library window can help lessen fatigue. Our daily choices that bring nature into our lives, such as taking a walking route to campus that brings us closer to green areas and nature, is one way to bolster cognitive/emotional reserves and strengthen our resilience.

Although we often think of other people as sources of personal support, nature also seems to play a significant role in our psychological wellbeing. Whether it is nature itself or certain qualities inherent in nature, we need to value our natural resources as another way to help those in our community cope and heal.

4. Gilad Meron and Ryan Parrot, conducted a trial project last year to learn more about what creates a restorative environment. (See power point presentation.) The concept was developed by considering the following:
• Studies have found that nature has a unique potential to reverse the effects of mental fatigue caused by prolonged study.
• Wellness initiatives will have the highest impact in high-traffic public spaces.
• Studies show natural features reduce stress, improve mood and increase social interaction.

To create a high-impact, natural-setting in a high-traffic indoor location, they decided to lay live turf as a “rug” in the Lobby area of Mann Library during the week prior to midterm and final exams. Installation of the grass was relatively easy, required little maintenance and no investment in infrastructure changes; and made a huge impact on those entering the library or spending time in this study area. Using grass in this project allowed people to smell, touch and view the turf thus evoking ‘fascination’ with nature. The library also collaborated on the project by providing multiple stress-busters and study breaks for students to maximize use of the grassy space.

Student feedback was very positive and it attracted the attention of the Cornell Daily Sun and the Cornell Chronicle; interest also was received from multiple prominent design magazines and design blogs; and submissions were filed to competitions including The Environmental Design Research Association 2013 “Healthy and Healing Places Award.” The two graduate student originators of this project are currently planning to repeat the project during the Dec. 2012 study/exam period in 5 different locations: Milstein Hall, Physical Sciences, Olin Library, Duffield Atrium and Mann Library. They also hope to complete development of an exhibit website that will run tandem to the displays.

Gilad and Ryan are currently seeking institutional and financial support for the December displays, and see this initiative as a concrete way for units to show their caring for students. In addition, the project can increase the visibility of health and wellness initiatives, engage faculty and student organizations in learning about resilience, and aid in building a body of discourse and supporting research. Campus departments should contact Gilad and Ryan directly for more information about the project or offer support.

5. Open discussion:
• One member asked, “Is green a color that specifically was important in choosing grass?” This choice was made as an activity in which people could easily relate. While the color green is important, all colors that appear in nature can have this effect. Light is also important.
• Another member commented that it may be better to focus on two locations this fall rather than five to reserve funds and avoid the additional time and energy needed to care for the turf. The developers felt the five locations wouldn’t really require too much work.
• Others wondered if the project could become a class project.
• As current construction on the Law School expansion continues, it’s important to note that included in the plan is a small area behind Anabel Taylor that will serve as a courtyard. Inclusion of natural areas into building plans is another way to bring natural assets closer to our indoor environments. Landscape architects also create designs for landscaping around buildings that take into account how students will engage the area.
• One of the difficulties in helping people engage more with nature is to first get them to unplug from technology. People seem to develop a sort of “green blindness” where they become focused or occupied by life’s activities; they no longer can see/appreciate the value of their natural surroundings.
• Another great example that underscores the restorative value of nature in an urban setting is The High Line in New York City. This is a public park built on an historic freight rail line elevated above the streets on Manhattan's West Side. Throughout the day, views continually change as natural light highlights the walkway from different angles.

• We are fortunate to have so many beautiful natural areas surrounding our campus, but how can we help students utilize these remains a question?

• For many previous generations of Cornellians, Beebe Lake was a highly memorable and valued place where students felt as though they were off campus and experiencing a new environment. For some, Beebe Lake was a like a “bubble within a bubble,” where they could feel apart from their daily responsibilities and insulated from the view of other students. Now students see this as a ‘non-place.’ Are there ways we can help students reconnect or build stronger positive identifications with our natural environments?

• Also offered was the importance of making our connection with nature more intrinsic. We need to teach about the restorative value of these places, especially when taking breaks.

Summary: The research shared at today’s meeting shows the importance of utilizing nature to renew and recharge the mind, body and spirit. Over the final weeks of this semester, let us all remember that taking time to connect with nature is an act we need to reward. It is an effective strategy to optimize studying by replenishing our physical, mental and emotional reserves.

Minutes taken by Janis Talbot