As Penn State’s first-ever professor of caring and compassion, **Rob Roeser** is tasked with designing classes that meld the ancient practices of mindfulness and meditation with modern neuroscience. The goal is to help students become calmer and more focused—and ultimately, to be more engaged and caring citizens of the world.

**BY SAVITA IYER**
**ILLUSTRATIONS BY GRACIA LAM**
ROB ROESER IS SITTING CROSS-LEGGED ON
the floor of room 312 in University Park’s Biobehavioral Health
Building. It’s early on a crisp February afternoon, and the sun-
light streaming in through the windows illuminates the youth-
ful features of the students—seven female and two male—
attending HDFS 297: Art and Science of Compassion, a class
designed and taught by Roeser, Penn State’s Bennett Pierce
Professor of Caring and Compassion.

Identical round, gray felt cushions
sit on top of the chairs, which are
arranged in a circle.

“Feel free to sit, stand, or lie for
meditation, and to use the meditation
cushion,” Roeser says, “and if it
doesn’t work for you, we have
another kind you can try.”

Roeser himself remains cross-
legged for the first 90 minutes of class
without showing the least bit of dis-
comfort. First, he guides his students
down through a deep breathing exer-
cise—“You can close your eyes or
keep them open with a softened
gaze,” he says—then leads them in a
discussion on their homework assign-
ment: extending care and compassion
to strangers, an assignment that was
preceded by one on extending the same
to themselves and will be fol-
lowed by an exercise on extending
care and compassion to others. These skills, he says, can help
encourage kindness to the self and to
others, with the aim of alleviat-
ing or preventing it—adare attributes for professional success.

But Art and Science of Care and Com-
passion and Art and Science of Human
Flourishing, another class co-created by Roeser, are open to
undergraduate students from all dis-
ciplines. They’ve been designed, he
says, to teach students skills that
emphasize attention and awareness,
that help regulate emotions, that
encourage kindness to the self and to
others. These skills, he says, can help
students live a meaningful and ful-
filling existence while they’re in col-
lege, but will also serve them well,
both personally and professionally,
when they leave.

The classes are grounded in con-
templative science, a discipline that
explores the effect of mental training
—mindfulness, meditation, compas-
sion practices—on individual and
social flourishing and was pioneered
in the late 1970s by Jon Kabat-Zinn,
founder of the University of Massa-
chusetts’s Center for Mindfulness.

Thanks to the groundwork of profes-
sor emeritus Mark Greenberg,
founder of Penn State’s Edna Bennett
Pierce Prevention Research Center
and first holder of the Bennett Chair
in Prevention Research in Human
Development and Family Studies,
Penn State is one of a small but grow-
ing number of schools incorporating
mindfulness and compassion into the
curriculum, to create what Roeser
calls “post-modern education that
incorporates pre-modern wisdom.”
He, Greenberg, and like-minded col-
leagues from the University of Vir-
ginia and the University of Wisconsin
came together in 2016 to form the Stu-
dent Flourishing Initiative, and their
efforts gave rise to the two courses
currently taught at Penn State.

The three universities and others
have recently been looking to the
effective science backing the effec-
tiveness of mindfulness and, increas-
ingly, compassion as well, in large
part due to rising concerns about stu-
dent mental health. “Student anxiety,
attentional distraction, financial wor-
rries, and social comparison in this
age of new technologies are huge con-
cerns, and campus counseling centers
are overwhelmed,” Roeser says.

Teaching students how to dial back,
slow down, and gain some perspec-
tive can go a long way toward stem-
ing that tide “by instilling the
strength and skills to prevent prob-
lems from increasing and tip things
in the direction of health.”

Put simply, “we want students to
know that every day is actually an
extraordinary day if you’re there in
the moment,” says Molly Counter-
mine ’12 PhD H&HD, associate
professor of human development
and family studies. She has
taught Art and Science of Human
Flourishing to incoming first-year
students in the Learning Edge Aca-
demic Program (LEAP), which com-
bines classes with out-of-class pro-
gramming and peer-mentoring to
help students in their transition to
college. “We want to promote
self-awareness and individual
well-being, as well as show the
importance of connection to others.”

But addressing university students’
mental health is only part of the ratio-
nale for these unique courses.

“The original university developed
in the context of the world’s monastic
tradition and had a mission to create
human beings who are mindful, gener-
sous, and altruistic, who have kind hearts
and curious minds, and who are car-
ing and engaged with the world.”

In many ways, Art and Science of
Care and Compassion feels like
chicken soup for the students’ soul—
a class that gives them something
they don’t get elsewhere, but that is
key to their university experience and
needed to address the pressing chal-
lenges of our time—climate change,
social division, economic inequality.

Addressing these issues and promot-
ing individual flourishing at the same
time in contemporary university edu-
cation requires that we cultivate indi-
viduals who are mindful, generous,
and altruistic, who have kind hearts
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Care and Compassion feels like
chicken soup for the students’ soul—
a class that gives them something
they don’t get elsewhere, but that is
key to their university experience and
to bolstering their confidence. Back in room 312 BHH in February, the stu-
dents socialized, ate, and engaged in various activities, all under the guidance of Prof. McGraw and the help of graduate student Sarah Kollat, an associate professor of social work.

Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World by Pasang Lhamo
The Dalai Lama's guide to improving human life at the individual, community, and global levels outlines a set of ethics and principles for living in a shared world.

When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Hard Times by Pema Chodron
Chodron—considered a Tibetan Buddhist nun—draws from traditional Buddhist wisdom to give readers the tools they need to overcome suffering and negativity.

Kinds Hearts & Curious Minds
The practice of mindfulness is a lifelong endeavor, but in these tense and trying times, the following books recommended by Rob Roeser, Bennett Pierce Professor of Caring and Compassion, may be more useful than ever in finding inner peace and cultivating care and compassion for others.

Essential Reads for a Mindful Existence

Kabat-Zinn's work may have been considered avant-garde at the outset, but since it first came on the scene, innumerable scientific studies have confirmed the positive effects of mindfulness and meditation in areas ranging from preventing anxiety and depression to quitting smoking and treating chronic pain.

Today, the concept of mindfulness is ubiquitous—it's a mainstay of modern life, commoditized via an array of gadgets and gizmos and phone apps.

Mindfulness is a good thing, that all of us could benefit from greater awareness of ourselves relative to our surroundings and to those around us. “As both a classical spiritual practice and a secularized mental training practice, mindfulness may result in a variety of benefits in life—stress reduction, better relationships, better ability to concentrate,” he says. “The key is to remember that mindfulness is not just about our own well-being, but a deep and heartfelt understanding that all others wish to be happy and not suffer. We awake through mindfulness to this shared responsibility and to insure we reach these goals together and not at the expense of one another.”

Roeser first met the Dalai Lama in 2008, shortly after he took on the position of senior program coordina-
tor at the then-Boulder, Colo.-based Mind and Life Institute, an organization founded in 1991 by the Dalai Lama, Chilean scientist Francisco Varela, and social entrepreneur R. A. Colvin, and reimagining education as an "experience in flourishing." It set the wheels in motion for the Student Flourishing Initiative and the foundation for a set of new classes.

Today, a network of 10 universities, including Penn State, is working closely to devise new course offerings and broader university strategies along these lines. Ten commonwealth campuses are currently working with Roeser's team to offer Art and Science of Human Flourishing. Elements of mindfulness are finding a space in other parts of the H&HD as well. Sarah Kollat, an associate professor of human development and family studies, has her undergraduate students stand at the front of the classroom, close or lower their eyes, and focus on their breathing for the first two to three minutes of every class. And Counterme is now begins all her classes with what she calls "arrival practices" to get her students "present and settled." They might meditate, or she might read them a poem, and she says she's received overwhelmingly positive feedback—particularly from first-year students, many of whom have said in their evaluations that the class helped them find their footing in their first year of college.

Roeser has more classes in the works, including one based on the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. He would also like to introduce a course on the art and science of meditation, which would be an intensive practical course for students who are ready for it. For students like sophomore Brooke Archambos, there's little doubt that more of her peers could benefit. Archambos says the sense of perspec-
tive she gained from Roeser's class is valuable as she's adjusted to taking classes online, and wondering what the future will hold. "I hope that we can't control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond," she says. “These lessons are incredibly relevant to our current situation and are helping me stay composed in unprecedented circum-
stances that we simply have no control over.”

"Mindfulness is not just about our own well-being, but a deep and heartfelt understanding that all others wish to be happy and not suffer."