

Advocacy Questions for Brown Contemplative Studies

Larson Di Fiori

1. The primary funding for Contemplative Studies at Brown is through private donations, which support all our other lectures, classes taught by visiting faculty (who supply a substantial portion of the course load), and other expenses such as the contemplative practice grants that enable students to attend retreats at approved centers.

From an administrative standpoint, Brown University's Open Curriculum, which encourages students to pursue an interdisciplinary education, has provided an institutional foundation for the development of our program.

2. Over the years Contemplative Studies has responded to a variety of crises. Perhaps the first was a sort of pedagogical one. Students are typically introduced to texts from various traditions that describe contemplative practices and experiences, and then extrapolate from them to present a theory of the world. We needed to develop a new framework for instruction that both remained respectful of the original traditions that have developed and transmitted contemplative practices, while not enforcing dogmatic beliefs in our students.

Over time further crises have made us explore ways in which we contribute to the larger community at and around the university. The 2020 pandemic and more recently the shooting on the Brown campus in December 2025 has led us to further consider the vital role our classes, practice workshops, and other offerings serve in supporting students and our broader community in difficult times.

Similarly, we believe Contemplative Studies offers a powerful response to the crisis posed by the rise of AI and the accompanying social changes. What does it mean to be a human now? AI can summarize countless books and lectures, but it can never perceive a person's own breath for them, it cannot summarize their heartbeat, it cannot replace the experience of being, here and now.

3. All of our faculty find ways of incorporating their research into their teaching and other offerings. Since our faculty are interdisciplinary in the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities, we bring a wide range of expertise from our research into our classrooms.

4. Our strongest advocates are our students and alumni themselves. They promote our classes and events to other students while at Brown. After graduating they share what they have learned with the world. For many what we offer is a vision of what it means to live as a human for the sake of humanity and the whole natural world, a chance to get in touch with what truly motivates them, and to bring that out to others.

5. My observation is that programs are made of the people who are part of them, and what is shared among those people. We have been fortunate to have many excellent faculty, and many extraordinary students.