

THE MINDFULNESS INTO ACTION RESEARCH INITIATIVE

WITH DR. MARIANA VERGARA

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2025

Transforming High Aspirations into Human Agency

Abstract

Mindfulness into Action (MIA®) is a research-based framework designed to increase emotional intelligence and conscious awareness among participants. By identifying and transforming unconscious behaviors that influence decision-making, this research methodology fosters both individual growth and systemic improvement. The implementation of this approach at the community college level aims to increase graduation and retention rates while promoting a more emotionally intelligent campus culture. The proposed study will be implemented from two complementary fronts: (a) With students: this pedagogical analysis approach will be seamlessly incorporated into the college's current retention program, ensuring continuity of existing processes and requiring no additional financial resources. Through structured workshops and guided reflective practices, students will learn to recognize and shift behaviors that interfere with academic persistence. Their emotional intelligence will be assessed through qualitative and quantitative measures, allowing us to track progress and identify factors that help prevent dropout before the sophomore year; (b) With Leadership: At the institutional level, this methodology will be integrated into a one-hour weekly meeting with the president and the senior leadership team, providing a consistent space for reflection, alignment, and problem-solving. Each department will identify its key challenges, understood as symptoms of deeper organizational dynamics. Through this process, participants will uncover the subconscious behaviors and patterns at the root of these issues, enabling more effective and mindful decision-making. This reflective analysis helps leaders adopt more mindful, data-informed, and emotionally aware strategies to strengthen institutional effectiveness and communication.

*To address the dropout rate, Vergara is proposing the Mindfulness into Action Initiative designed to build **emotional intelligence** among participants. Emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our emotions and those of others—is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in academic achievement, workforce readiness, leadership development, and overall community well-being. Emotional and social intelligence as a kind of Intellectual competence that artificial intelligence has not yet been able to replicate. This is making a prime target for development of emotional intelligence for the curriculum of higher education.*

The Mindfulness into Action (hereafter referred to as MIA®) pedagogical analysis approach to education targets agentic habitus through the development of emotional intelligence in participants.

This white paper discusses the human development of participants before and after the implementation of MIA® pedagogical analysis and is structured as follows: (1) Background on the MIA® Pedagogical Analysis, (2) Transformational vs. Transactional Learning, (3) MIA® Pedagogical Analysis: Implementation, Results, and Conclusion.

(1) Background on the MIA® Pedagogical Analysis

Reflecting on her experience in 1996 as a new immigrant parent, Dr. Vergara realized that her biggest challenge was completely unknown to her at the time. She recalled sensing its influence on her behavior, but she could not fully understand what it was.

Now, after over 27 years of experience in the field and conducting her research (2016)¹, Dr. Vergara discovered that this unknown challenge was our taken-for-granted assumptions—our unconscious and, therefore, unperceived self-sabotaging behaviors.

Since 2005, in her interactions with Dr. Edmund W. Gordon, she has been introduced to the concept of habitus proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977)². As a new immigrant, Dr. Vergara sensed this concept but did not know it had a name. Habitus refers to the behavioral tendencies that humans seem to enact on a subconscious level and is shaped by a person's social class.

It develops in individuals everywhere as a function of how they live their lives and their status within society. For financially disadvantaged populations, the habitus they develop often has limited utility as they navigate cultures that have gained hegemony.

MIA® deliberately seeks to broaden the habitus of targeted populations by incrementing their emotional intelligence by providing acculturation experiences, educational services, and the cultivation of agency to compensate for the social isolation that has contributed to their limited habitus. Scholars such as Peter Senge describe this involuntary habitual life as mental models; yet we continue to operate within “the Veil” (Du Bois, 1989)³.

Senge questions whether we are prisoners of the system or prisoners of our own thinking. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990)⁴, he describes mental models as deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even images that influence how we understand the world and how we act. If we can identify our mental models, this information can help us appreciate the forces shaping our reality and recognize how we are part of those forces, allowing us to affect them. We propose incorporating the MIA® pedagogical analysis approach to increment emotional intelligence and measure the academic impact and reduction of dropout rate facilitated by an app/platform, ensuring the sustainability of these results. The MIA® approach, rooted in Dr. Vergara's doctoral dissertation (Teachers College, Columbia University, with Dr. Edmund W. Gordon as dissertation committee chair), focuses on transforming subconscious behavioral tendencies (habitus).

¹ Vergara, M. I. (2016). *Mindfulness into action: Transformational learning through collaborative inquiry* (Doctoral dissertation, TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY).

² Bourdieu, Pierre (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 78-79

³ Du Bois, W. E. B. (1989). *The souls of Black folk*. New York, NY: Penguin.

⁴ Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Developed since Autumn 2005 in close collaboration with Dr. Gordon, this pedagogical analysis uses reflection exercises and organizational learning techniques, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods. Data from its implementation with college students in New York, USA; Trondheim, Norway; and Ibarra, Ecuador, demonstrates that participants, irrespective of race, age, gender, culture, language, location, or socioeconomic status, tend to overcome subconscious limitations and reduce the constraining force of habitus through consistent application of these techniques and indigenous practices (Vergara et al., 2017)⁵.

(2) Transformational vs. Transactional Learning

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000)⁶ critiques the "banking" model of education—a transactional approach where the teacher lectures and students passively receive information. This model, prevalent in schools, colleges, and professional development, contrasts sharply with the MIA® pedagogical analysis. MIA® promotes transformational learning, using organizational learning techniques and indigenous practices to produce a change in participants' perceptions.

(3) MIA® Pedagogical Analysis: Implementation, Results, and Conclusion

The proposed MIA® pedagogical analysis approach surpasses previous efforts to address inequities by directly acknowledging and targeting negative habitus. This approach helps participants identify, observe, and modify self-sabotaging behaviors and implicit biases (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995)⁷—actions neuroscience suggests constitute 95-98% of our actions (Pradeep, 2010)⁸. Consistent with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus as internalized models of thinking and acting, MIA® distinguishes between positive habitus (e.g., self-confidence) and negative habitus (e.g., limiting beliefs). Through experiential learning, participants apply organizational learning techniques and indigenous practices to enhance their emotional intelligence and address negative habitus.

Table 1. Components of System and Systemic Thinking

	Current Strategy	Proposed Strategy
	System Thinking	Systemic Thinking
Quantitative	X	X
Qualitative		X
Objective	X	X
Subjective		X
Tangible	X	X
Intangible		X
Individual Perspective		X

Effective problem-solving demands not only efficiency (systems thinking), but also, and more importantly, a thorough evaluation of individual perspectives (systemic thinking).

⁵ Vergara, M. I., Tjernstad, C. D. B., Mac Quarrie, A., & Tamariz, M. I. (2017). Personal Growth and Leadership: Interpersonal communication with mindfulness into action. In V.C. X. Wang (Ed) Encyclopedia of strategic leadership and management (pp. 507-525), Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

⁶ Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

⁷ Greenwald, A. G., & Banaji, M. R. (1995). Implicit social cognition: attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes. *Psychological review*, 102(1), 4-27.

⁸ Pradeep, A. K. (2010). *The buying brain: Secrets for selling to the subconscious mind*. John Wiley & Sons.

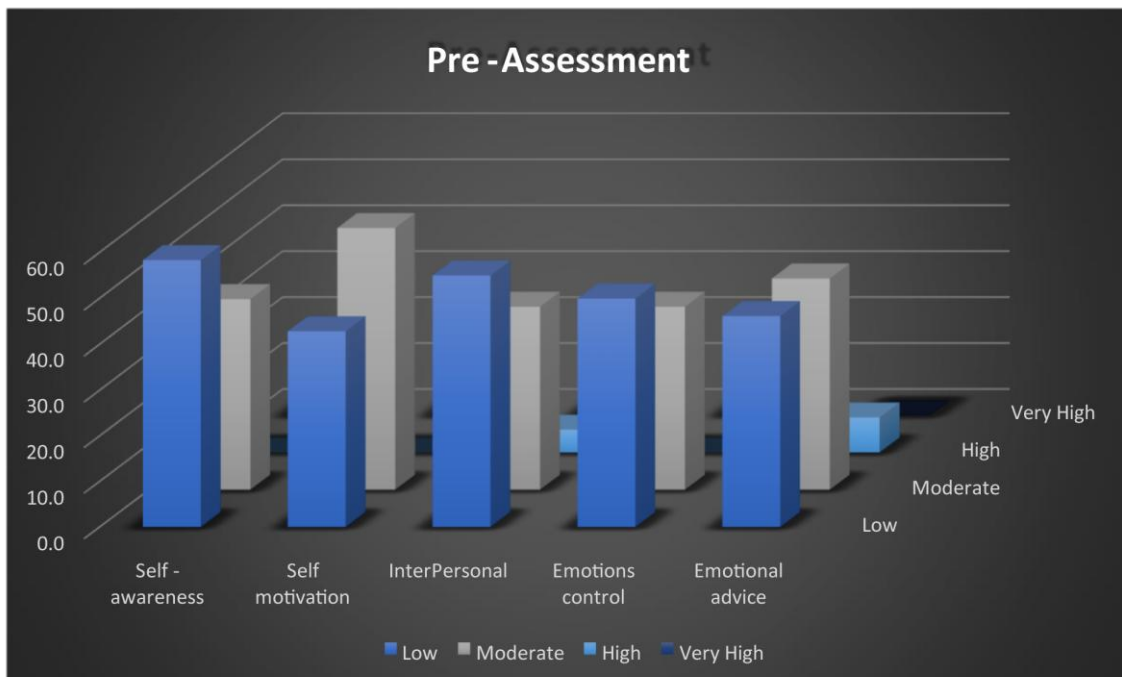
This pedagogical analysis model yields positive personal-level results within six weeks. The MIA® Pedagogical Analysis model uses experiential learning, applying organizational learning techniques and indigenous practices to enhance participants' emotional intelligence and address negative habitus. To empower students to surpass expectations by deepening their understanding of the learning process and enhancing their ability to navigate American cultural expectations.

Implementation - The MIA® Pedagogical Analysis as a new research paradigm

We initiate the process with an online pre-assessment to measure participants' emotional intelligence, stress vulnerability, and leadership styles. This assessment is crucial because it reveals their self-awareness, given that unconscious behaviors are not directly observable. The MIA® model integrates this into a mixed-methods approach, using a proactive, systemic strategy to ensure students maintain academic proficiency. A key aspect of the MIA® model is its ongoing monitoring and assessment, measuring progress against quantitative objectives (such as course enrollment and student grades) and established benchmarks.

The online pre-assessment data reveals that participants, at the individual level, generally exhibit low to moderate levels of self-awareness, self-motivation, interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, and the ability to seek emotional advice.

Figure 1. Pre-assessment



With students, this pedagogical analysis approach will be seamlessly incorporated into the college's current retention program, ensuring continuity of existing processes and requiring no additional financial resources. Through structured workshops and guided reflective practices, students will learn to recognize and shift behaviors that interfere with academic persistence. Their emotional intelligence will be assessed through qualitative and quantitative measures, allowing us to track progress and identify factors that help prevent dropout before the sophomore year.

At the organizational level, the senior leadership team compiles a list of current key challenges from each department. Most of these issues are symptoms of unconscious behaviors that will be addressed through the MIA® process. *This methodology will be integrated into a one-hour weekly meeting with the president and the senior leadership team, providing a consistent space for reflection, alignment, and problem-solving.*

The first week involves reflection exercises that participants complete throughout the week. Following this, we discuss their findings using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data (collected via free apps) and qualitative insights (from journaling).

During the week, participants use phone apps to track their emotions, aiming to identify unconscious behavioral patterns. Since these patterns operate unconsciously, identifying them is crucial. Once a participant recognizes an unconscious behavioral pattern, they can consciously work on modifying it during the subsequent week. At this stage, we introduce indigenous practices to help participants explore the origins of these unconscious behaviors in their lives. These practices support participants in consciously releasing these self-sabotaging behaviors.

Participants typically reach a point of transcendence, what Dr. Vergara terms the "third head," around six weeks into the program. This mirrors Du Bois' concept of transcending the "veil," marking a shift in perspective. The "third head" represents a state of neutrality, characterized by clarity, groundedness, and mindful action. Mindfulness is generally achieved by week six, paving the way for decisive action. In corporate settings, by week seven, executives—having reached this "third head" state—demonstrated the ability to resolve long-standing issues, some persisting for over three decades.

Qualitative Analysis

PHASE 1: Before the MIA® process

"I realized that I felt bad most of the time. I was upset almost all day with everyone who was around me. I allowed anything to affect my temper. Now, when I review the table of emotions from week 1 and 2, I realized that I was hurting myself with this attitude because I had constant headaches. I can see now that there was no day where I was not upset. I felt sad for many things, and I was worried for everything, with my attitude I was hurting myself physically and mentally."

Table 2. References regarding emotions during week 1 and 2

PHASE 1 Before the Intervention	Week 1	Week 2
Reactive State <i>Identification of emotions from week 1 and 2</i>	Conflict: 18 Stress: 3 Sadness: 11 Hungry: 12 Sleepy: 11 Happy: 6	Conflict: 19 Stress: 15 Sadness: 6 Hungry: 6 Sleepy: 10 Happy: 12

PHASE 2: During the MIA® process

“Something that I realized is about my bad mood because I was moody with the people around me, I was very impulsive, if things were not going my way, I would get upset. But, when I began to do MIA®, I was able to realized how I was hurting myself and others with my attitude. I stablished the goal to stop stressing myself, and to change my moodiness with myself and other people.”

Table 3. References regarding emotions during week 3 and 4

PHASE 2 During the Intervention	Week 3	Week 4
Identified Awareness <i>Identification of emotions from week 3 and 4</i>	Conflict: 12 Stress: 3 Sadness: 10 Hungry: 15 Sleepy: 15 Happy: 32	Conflict: 9 Stress: 0 Sadness: 5 Hungry: 8 Sleepy: 10 Happy: 44

PHASE 3: After the MIA® process

“Now I feel different in the way I think, the way I do things, even the way I feel because I am more relaxed and at peace. MIA® facilitated my daily life, first helped me to change my moody attitudes, I thought it was something I would never change, no matter how hard I tried. I do not know how, but with this work in a blink of an eye I have changed so much! My attitude is improving, my moodiness has changed, especially with my boyfriend. I used to fight with him a lot and get upset for insignificant things. I have learned to not stress and to have a more relaxed and tranquil life. I realized that the more positive I am, the better it goes for me! I overcame everything, not getting upset and achieve my goals. I feel much better, and my mood has risen 100%.”

Table 4. References regarding emotions during week 5 and 6

PHASE 3 After the Intervention	Week 5	Week 6
Identification of Third Head <i>Identification of emotions from week 5 and 6</i>	Conflict: 3 Stress: 0 Sadness: 21 Hungry: 15 Sleepy: 14 Happy: 44	Conflict: 0 Stress: 0 Sadness: 0 Hungry: 4 Sleepy: 16 Happy: 48

Quantitative Analysis

Profile of Emotional Intelligence

Table 5: Pre and Post Diagnostic of Emotional Intelligence as a group

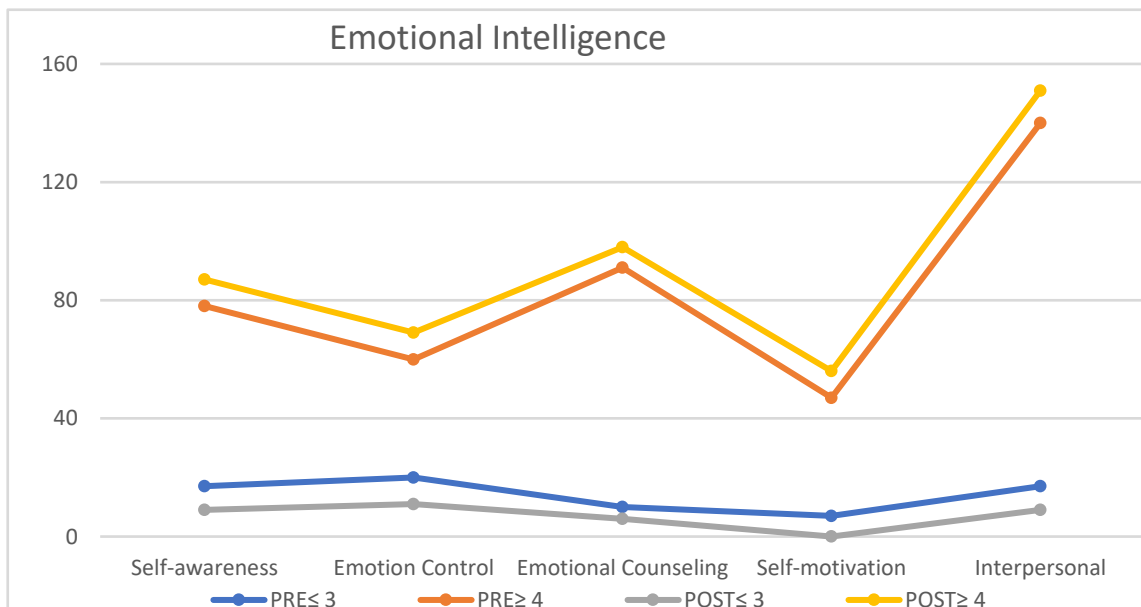
DIMENSIONS	PRE				POST			
	T/R	≤	≥	%	T/R	≤	≥	%
AUTOCONSCIENCE	95	18	78	82 %	96	9	87	91 %
EMOTIONAL CONTROL	80	20	60	75 %	80	11	69	86 %
EMOCIONAL ADVISORY	101	10	91	90 %	104	6	98	94 %
AUTOMOTIVACION	54	7	47	87 %	56	0	56	100 %
INTERPERSONAL	157	17	140	89 %	160	9	151	94 %

In this study, the pre-assessment revealed that, as a group, participants demonstrated high capacity in emotional advisory, with scores exceeding **90%**. However, other dimensions of emotional intelligence presented significant challenges. These difficulties were largely resolved, as indicated by the post-assessment results.

The pre-assessment indicated an 87% score for auto-motivation, which increased to 100% in the post-assessment. Auto-awareness rose to 91%. The interpersonal dimension improved from 89% to 94%. Emotional control increased from 75% to 86%. Finally, the emotional advisory dimension increased from an initial 90% to 94% by the end of the study.

Figure 2 compares the pre- and post-assessment results, illustrating the evolution of each dimension across both assessments.

Figure 2. Emotional Intelligence Analysis

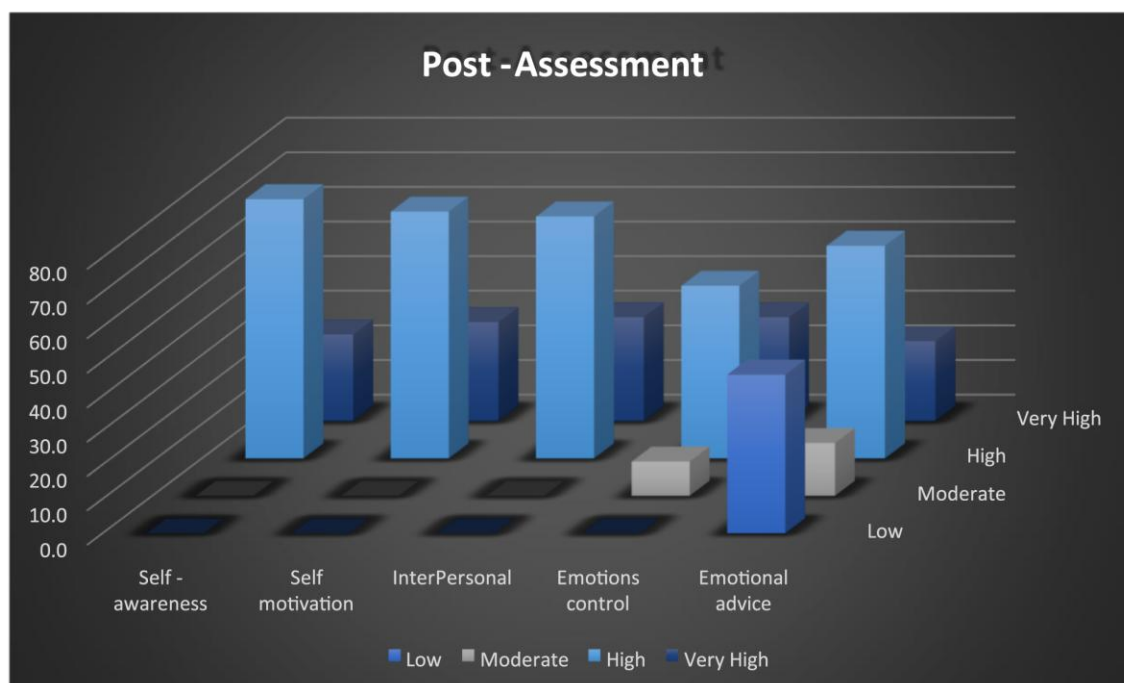


The patterns less or equal to 3, show the areas which have serious difficulties. These difficulties were overcome as shown by the data from the post assessment. The patterns more or equal to 4, show a higher level of emotional intelligence in comparison between the pre and post assessment.

Results

The MIA® methodology affects mental models. Mental models, a true reflection of our subconscious behaviors which affect strategic leadership (Vergara, 2018)⁹. Since, these mental models work as lenses that distort our vision and determine what we see (Senge, 1990), it is important to use the MIA® process to observe these self-sabotaging behaviors by developing emotional intelligence in participants. For that reason, the MIA® pedagogical analysis was applied as a didactical tool in ten university level courses. It was observed that students who were very timid and introverted at the beginning of the semester, by week six they changed to become more confident and extroverted. Moreover, they improved their grades and graduated.

Figure 3. Post-assessment



Our unknown assumptions of our mental models are embedded in our subconscious, so they are difficult to identify (Vergara & Navarrete, 2018)¹⁰. Participants were able to identify and change their subconscious self-sabotaging behaviors by using the MIA® methodology. Participants were able to identify and clarify assumptions, and thus found internal contradictions about these assumptions (mental models), and used strategic leadership to develop new strategies based on new effective concepts for their personal lives.

⁹ Vergara, M. I. (2018). Mindfulness into Action: Applying systemic thinking and exploring the potential for developing strategic leaders. In Victor C. X. Wang (Ed). Strategic Leadership (pp. 77-96). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

¹⁰ Vergara, M. I., Navarrete, R. (2018). Qualitative analysis of a transformational learning process developed at Columbia University. In Libro Memorias de las II Jornadas de Investigación Científica, I Foro de Investigación Desafíos Actuales de la Sociedad del Conocimiento (pp. 799-809), Ibarra, Ecuador: Editorial Universidad Técnica del Norte, ISBN: 978-992-78-14-8. Presentation of using MIA in a corporation.

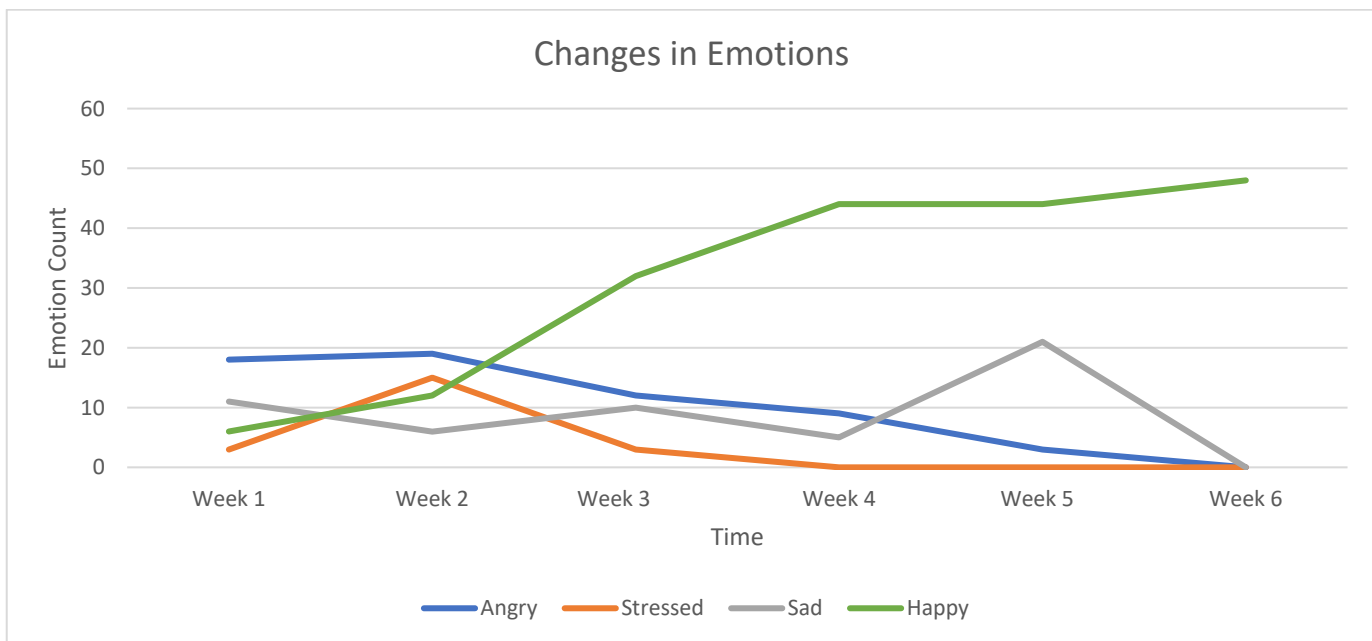
Conclusion

By using MIA®, we can look at long-term problems from a different perspective (the “third head”) and solve them (as we measure the results with the MIA® app and platform). Please see below a video with the description of the “third head” by doctoral, master and bachelor students from North University and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology at the MIA® Conference at Columbia University:

<https://mindfulnessintoaction.net/academic>

As a sustainable process, the MIA® process continues with organizational learning techniques and indigenous practices that help participants become more effective. By the fourth week, participants take the online post-assessment test that shows changes in their level of self-awareness, self-motivation, interpersonal, control of emotions, and emotional advice from moderate to high and very high. The MIA® pedagogical analysis approach includes research for which answers are not given. Rather, these answers surge from the process itself as participants identify, observe, and change their own taken-for-granted assumptions. Dr. Vergara spent a few years teaching in Ecuador and continues to gather data to identify the impact of her practice. The resulting data supports Dr. Vergara’s findings. Dropout rates decreased for students who were exposed to the modification of habitus as reflected in self-regulation and addressing dysfunctional behaviors in a systematic way. Regardless of the subject matter, all students transformed. In class, students learned to identify and change self-sabotaging behaviors as they gathered data regarding their social and emotional growth while learning the subject of study (Vergara, 2018). Refer to Table 6, below, to see the correlation between social/emotional growth and reduced stress levels among the participant group.

Table 6. Data Used to Describe Emotional Intelligence Growth



It is important to notice that the daily life activities of participants did not change, what changed was their perception when facing their daily challenges.

From Individual to Systemic Changes

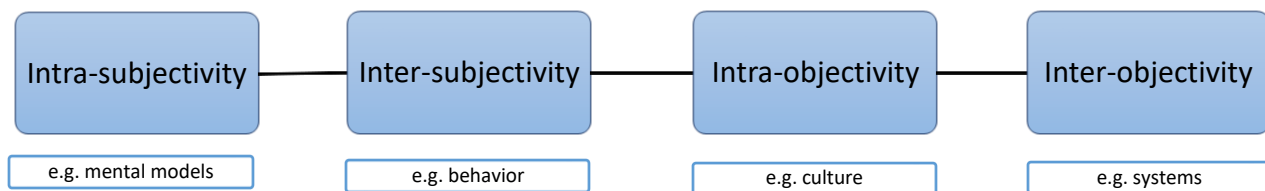
When working with individuals (intra-subjectivity), we talk about how to facilitate them to develop a more "empowering view of their current reality." By doing this we meant to help them view their current reality that reinforced, rather than undermined, their sense of confidence in shaping the future.

Most people perceive their reality through the lens of daily pressures they live with, crises that must be addressed, and limitations that must be accepted (inter-subjectivity). Due to such ways of defining "reality," individual's aspirations are like illusions or, perhaps, delusions that are not an achievable end (intra-objectivity).

This begets the question of how then can we create an intervention that can help people see reality as a medium for creating their visions rather than a source of limitation?

The MIA® pedagogical analysis is addressing this issue by helping people to see their problems in terms of underlying systemic structures (inter-objectivity) rather than just short-term events (Vergara, 2016).

Figure 4. Theoretical Model Showing the Movement from Intra-subjectivity to Inter-objectivity.



At the personal level, as described in page 5, during week one the person is in the reactive state that is phase one. Then, we begin to do reflection exercises while applying the organizational techniques and indigenous practices during week two where the person moves to phase two. During phase two the person is aware of self-sabotaging behaviors but cannot change them, yet. A person goes through life in this spiral of personal growth with ups and downs. Please look at figure 5 below. From the indigenous knowledge perspective, this figure represents the "Infinite Serpent," also known as "the breath of life." Scholars in organization theory, such as, Argyris (1982)¹¹, Kegan & Lahey (2002)¹², and Torbert (2004)¹³, have all found this spiral in human development, as well.

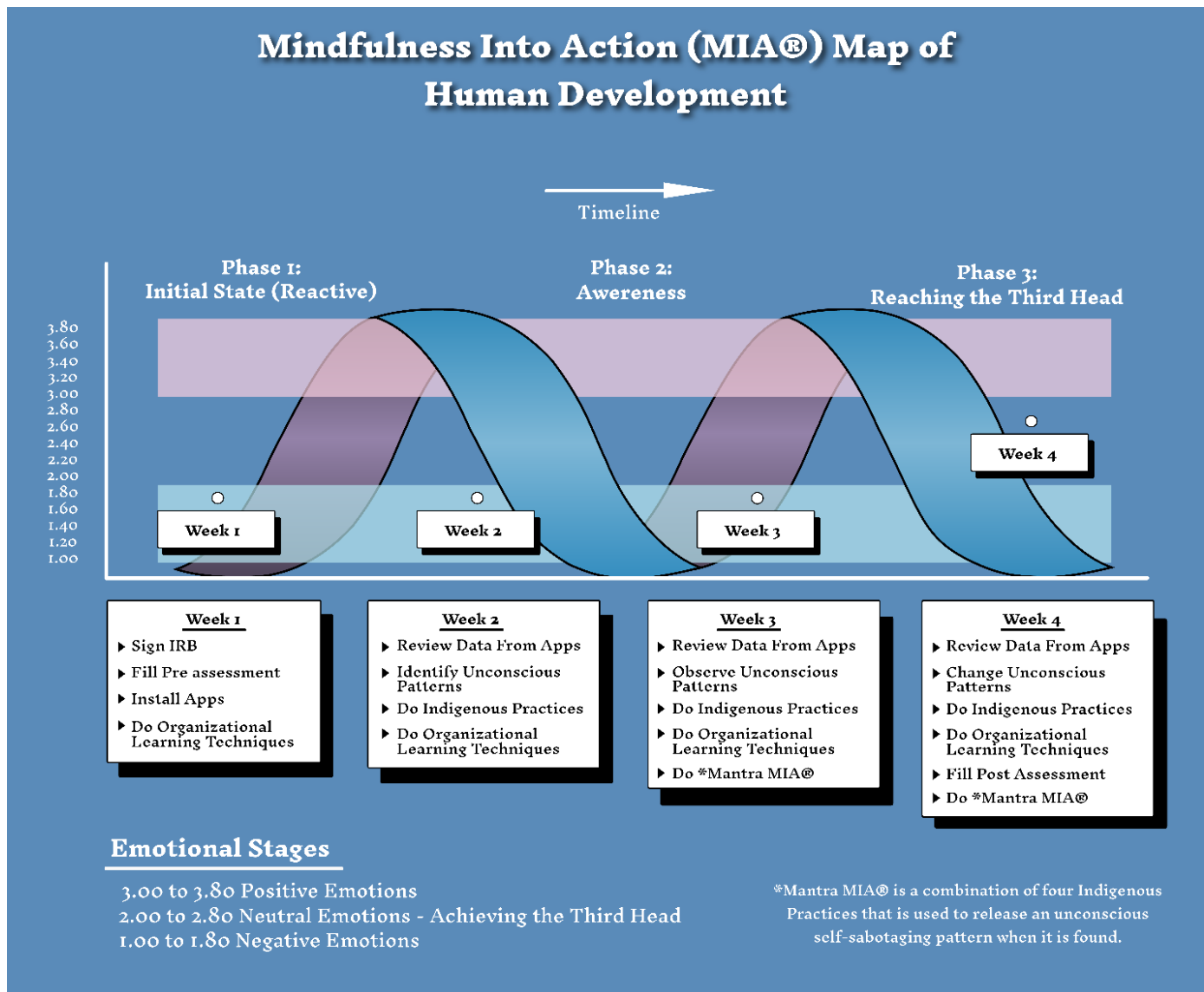
As participants continue engaging in the MIA® process with reflection exercises, indigenous practices, and organizational learning techniques, they reach the "third head" stage and become capable of changing their previously unconscious self-sabotaging behaviors.

¹¹ Argyris, C. (1982). The executive mind and double-loop learning. *Organizational Dynamics*, 11(2), 5-22.

¹² Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2002). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*. John Wiley & Sons.

¹³ Torbert, B. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Figure 5. Mindfulness Into Action Map of Human Development



By integrating MIA® simultaneously with students and leadership, a Community College can align personal development with organizational goals, creating an environment that nurtures self-awareness, collaboration, and sustainable success.

We are deeply grateful for the opportunity to meet with you and discuss the potential of this initiative. We believe that by cultivating emotional intelligence and behavioral awareness at all levels, a Community College can further enhance retention, graduation rates, and the overall quality of student and institutional experience

Thank you once again for your time, vision, and willingness to explore this collaborative opportunity.

Table 7. Mindfulness Into Action Pedagogical Analysis Logic Model

Mindfulness Into Action Research Logic Model

OBJECTIVES	VERIFIED INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
I. Individual & Organizational Pre-assessment	Pre-assessment MIA® Emotional Intelligence test, Stress test & Global Leadership Profile	List of current key challenges from each department
II. Implement and follow MIA® process to identify unconscious biases and self-sabotaging behaviors	Weekly meetings with participants	Recordings from weekly meetings with participants
III. Individual & Organizational Post-assessment	Post-assessment MIA® Emotional Intelligence test, Stress test & Global Leadership Profile.	Results of individual and organizational Post-assessment
IV. Evaluation of changes after the implementation of the MIA® methodology	Reduction of dropout rate, increment of graduation rate	Evaluating organizational strategies
GOALS	VERIFIED INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
I. Identify and changing unconscious and self-sabotaging behaviors in participants	Through the Mindfulness Into Action Pedagogical Analysis participants will be able to develop a sophisticated and mature thought process	Significant reduction of dropout rate and increment of graduation rate. Participants increment their emotional intelligence by responding, instead of reacting to challenges, and stress reduction.
II. Implement the MIA® process	Participants will achieve higher-order-thinking to develop a strong organizational effectiveness	Developing organizational strategies
MIA COMPONENTS	VERIFIED INDICATORS	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
I. Pre-assessment	Pre-assessment MIA® Emotional Intelligence test, Stress test & Global Leadership Profile.	Report
II. Implementation of MIA® methodology	Data from weekly meetings	Interview Protocol
III. Post-assessment	Post-assessment MIA® Emotional Intelligence test, Stress test & Global Leadership Profile.	Report
IV. Analyzing and Evaluating changes	Data from Reports	Report
ACTIVITIES		MEANS OF VERIFICATION
1) Individual & Organizational Pre-assessment	First week	
1.1. Adaptation of instruments		Instruments adapted
1.2. Pre-application of instruments		Instruments applied
1.3. Personal Analysis		Table with data
1.4. Organization Analysis		Table with key challenges
2) Implement and follow MIA® process to identify unconscious biases and self-sabotaging behaviors	Second, third and fourth week	
2.1. Reflection Exercises		Notes from participants
2.2. Organizational/Indigenous practices		Report
2.3. Post-application of instruments		Table with graphics
3) Individual & Organizational Post-assessment	Fifth week	
3.1. Identifying unconscious behaviors		Report
3.2. Organizational learning strategies		Report
3.3. Follow up of organizational strategies		Report
4) Evaluation of changes after the implementation of the MIA® methodology	Sixth and seventh week MIA® methodology continues as a sustainable process	Report describing increment of graduation rate
4.1. Evaluating changes at the operational level		Report describing reduction of challenges
4.2. Development of Final Report		Report describing reduction of dropout rate
4.3. Presentation of Final Report		Increment of innovative entrepreneurship