Dan Seed:

Hello, and welcome to Big Ideas. A podcast from Texas State University. I'm your host, Dan Seed, from the University of School of Journalism and Mass Communication. We're excited to be back for another year here on Big Ideas, and we kicked things off discussing the Common Experience for 2021/22. And this year's theme is, compassion. We're joined by Dr. Erika Nielsen, the director of the Common Experience, and a senior lecturer in the university college. Dr. Nielsen, thanks so much for joining us.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Thank you for having me.

Dan Seed:

So, for us here on campus, the Common Experience is a big deal. But for the uninitiated, our listeners out there, just give us some insight basically into what it is.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

So, this is the university's academic theme. It's targeted towards first year students, but everyone can be involved. So undergraduates, graduates, faculty, staff, community members. And each year, there is a different theme that is chosen by a committee. And this year's theme of course, is compassion. There's a book related to it called, The Common Reading. And then, all of the events that flow under that theme of compassion.

Dan Seed:

And as you said, each year, the Common Experience has a new theme. Compassion is this year, which I think we all need a little bit more compassion, over the last 18 months, following that. What went into that choice, as a theme?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

So, probably two or three years ago, started having conversations with Mr. Craig Aamot over in School of Music, who directs the men's choir and also vocal libris. And he was very interested in exploring, could we have a theme on compassion. Started distressing that. He'd actually done something similar at Montana State University, had a compassion project. And he was so amazed at the campus involvement, the community involvement, and he wanted to see something similar at Texas State. Besides just having his own personal interest in mindfulness, compassion, that kind of thing. So it sprung out of that, and then he proposed that theme last year in March. And the committee was very interested, especially considering everything that we've gone through, I guess, now what? In the past two years. So, it fit really well.

Dan Seed:

In that theme of compassion, the end goal of it, what do you hope people take from this year long experience? In terms of becoming more compassionate, becoming more mindful. What's the end goal for people, as they experience the events, and readings, and all that goes into it, to make our campus community at large, more compassionate?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Our hope is that people reflect on the subject, the topic of compassion. But what also is cool about this year's theme is, we're also talking a lot about, can you view anything you're doing, through a lens of compassion? So, just taking the time to understand what it is, and then can we use it in our day to day life? We also talk a lot about, in the Common Experience, the path of opportunity that students or anyone who's attending an event, not only do they learn something, but then they can go away, and do something with that information.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

I know Twister, the previous director, always gave a great illustration. We had a speaker that talked about the pile of plastic crap in the ocean. And students don't want to go and be angry or sad about it, and that's it. They want to learn, what can I do in my kitchen? What can I do in five years, to make a difference? So we really stress that. Another thing that is a new initiative that I want to start doing research on more and highlighting is, student involvement. Student led, student created events. So that they become even more a part of the process. So, just being immersed in that topic, and then being able to reflect and actually do something with the topic.

Dan Seed:

And so, for yourself, and we'll get much more into Common Experience events that are planned, what people can attend, what to get out of it this year. But for yourself, having the community picking this in the spring, and now here we are putting it forward in the fall. Have you found yourself stepping back, and taking this idea of compassion, and looking at personal life, academic life, dealing with students, through that prism a little bit more, since you started to explore this topic?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Yes. I will also give you a backstory. So, once upon a time, when I was an undergraduate at Texas A&M, I used to be on the cycling team, and I was in a really horrible cycling accident. I got hit by a truck. And in order to make my way to recover, I used yoga, meditation and self-compassion practices to help me. Later on, I actually became a yoga teacher. And then as I pursued higher education, my dissertation for my PhD involved mindfulness and self-compassion practices. So, I've already been heavily invested in this. And so, it's a really great reminder. Because sometimes, especially if we're teachers of it, sometimes we forget we should be practicing principles of yoga, or meditation. So it's always a really nice reminder, especially when it's fresh and reaching out to first year students, I'm like, oh yeah, remember, you need to practice mindfulness too.

Dan Seed:

Yeah. First year students definitely need that. It's a big transition, especially now, to be able to have that moment of calm and Zen, and be able to look at life a little differently. What do you like best about being the director of Common Experience, as it relates to working with those first-year students, and having an impact on maybe, changing their outlook or the way that they perceive the world?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Oh gosh, there's so many things. I just love the freshness of listening to students who are first year students, because it definitely changes who I am. As we get older, we start, this is the way we do things. But to have students also be my teachers, I always tell students, this is actually a yoga greeting. The student in me, honors the student in you. And the teacher in me, honors the teacher in you. So, I love getting that fresh perspective that students can offer, when I feel a little stuck. So, I think that's what's really fun.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

And I do like that the theme changes every year. My life is definitely not boring. I'm usually working on two things at once now, sometimes three, as we prepare. As we're living one theme, and then thinking about the next year. But I just love the fresh perspective of new students.

Dan Seed:

And for these new students, not just this year, but in general, why is this such an important thing for them to take part in, and to be exposed to? Year after year, with all these different themes? Why do we do this with our first year students?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

So, I think the Common Experience, along with other student organizations, is helping to establish that community. And we know, not only from a research based perspective, but just personally, when we find community, we're more likely to stay, we're more likely to thrive. So, if the Common Experience can be one of those communities, through an event or the creation of an event, through networking with faculty and staff, and if we can provide that opportunity for students to have community, that's super huge. They're just going to be better, holistically.

Dan Seed:

And with these events where you're creating this sense of community when they step on campus, walk us through again, for those that aren't familiar with Common Experience, this is not just a weekend or a week long thing, this is something that extends throughout the entire school year. What do you have planned? What are some of the highlights for this year?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

For the planning, so usually March, April, the theme is chosen. And so, then we have a Common Experience committee, of faculty, staff, and students who are thinking about different events that can go on, and prepping those for the fall and spring semester. And then when students get here, we're then trying to invite them into the conversation, in what kind of events do you want to see?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

In the planning, we've been talking to speakers' reps, to try to get the author here virtually, the author, Henry James Garrett, of This Book Will Make You Kinder, is located in the UK. So, we're going to attempt to get him here on campus. We have Temple Grandin. Currently, she is scheduled to be here October 21st. So she is an autism advocate, and she also has done a lot for the cattle industry in the United States. More humane treatment of cattle.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Let's see, there's always amazing discussions with philosophy dialogues. In fact, they probably contribute to most of the events for the Common Experience, discussing empathy, compassion. I just spoke with another individual about an event about compassionate consent, about navigating boundaries with people. And so, I'm super interested in that. That came from an individual in philosophy.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

What else do we have? Oh, this one's super fun. Super, fun. And we're actually asking for submissions right now. So, Alkeck One, I don't know if you all have gotten to experience the amazing space of Alkeck One, but if you haven't, go have a tour. They're encouraging students to submit creations, not just art, but creations that can then be implemented using all of the tools that Alkeck One has. And then, there's going to be a committee that decides which of these creations are the most amazing. And those will be on display in the spring. So that call went out, and currently the creations that won for the dynamics year, are still up in Alkeck One. So if you walk into Alkeck One, on the bottom floor and you look to the left, they're up there.

Dan Seed:

That's very Interesting. And Alkek One for people that don't know, is in the Alkek library, here at Texas State. It's a series of technology focused spaces, first floor of the library. It's this idea of having this culture of creation. Immersive reality, media information, digital design. Which is very cool that you guys are reaching out in that realm, to really involve the students in this kind of way, in this process of coming together. And this Common Experience, many universities have this kind of thing for freshmen, or incoming students. Where you're given a book, and we want you all to read this. What differentiates the Common Experience here at Texas state, from elsewhere?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

As Twister, the past director and I, we have done our research. We found out that most other universities pick a common reading first, and then they pursue a theme or multiple themes associated with that event. Sometimes they are with that book. Maybe they only have one event, maybe 10 events. And most of them are at the beginning of the year, or even during the summer, as students are preparing. We have noticed in our research, that not a lot of universities pick a theme, and then a book, and then have events all year long.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

So, we found out that as far as a number of events, I believe in the past couple of years, over 200 events. And so, yes, we love numbers in Texas. We're big, we've got big numbers. But what that does is, since students are asked to go to a certain number of events for their university seminar class, which is a requirement for first year students, then they can choose something they actually want to go to, not something that they are told to go to. So they could see an event, oh, it's compassion and health sports sciences. Or compassion and engineering, or philosophy, whatever it might be. They'll find something that really draws me to it.

Dan Seed:

We have all of these events, as you mentioned, bigger events, scattered throughout the school year. But let's start, I guess, with this book that incoming students have. The name of the book is really interesting, This Book Will Make You Kinder, which makes me want to pick the book up. It's telling me that it's going to work, by Henry James Garrett. So, tell us a little bit about this book. Why was this book chosen? And again, what do you hope that people get from this particular book?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

So, just to give you a little background. The common reading committee, 20 to 25 people, the faculty, staff, and students, we get the theme, and then we look at different books. And it seems that in the past three years, the book that we choose comes right at the very end. We're just not satisfied with the different selections that we have. And so, Twister and I were just looking at websites, and he found that one. It had the little cartoons and drawings. And anything with visual literacy, is always an extra plus. Not only for student engagement, but then we're also thinking about social media interaction, as well. As we're reading through it, it has a lot of practical advice. It talks about something that I was really drawn to is, a lot of times, we have empathy limiting mistakes, that prevent us from being kind.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

And so, teaching us to be aware of those empathy, limiting mistakes, being present to other people. And I think that's definitely something we all need. Just to stop and be present to someone or something, some experience. So, it popped up there at the end. Twister was the one that found it online. So, I'm a literatist by trade. Two of my degrees are literacy education. And to have those images and to be able to unpack them and to know that for most human beings, we're very attracted to images. And so, I like that extra little perk there.

Dan Seed:

This year, starting in the summer and leading up to the school year, well, really last year, it was about flexibility. Be flexible. And we've come back to some semblance of normal, early this year. But we still have to have that mindfulness, I suppose, as faculty. In what ways do you hope that this experience here, the literature events, can maybe help faculty navigate a difficult time for us as well? Where it's like, you've got to do what you need to do, but you also have to recognize the needs of students, maybe more than ever.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

I think part of that is going to be, listening to individual's stories, their lived experiences. And also taking the time, not only to listen to students' stories, but to take time and listen to your own story. And to practice the self-compassion involved with that. I know most faculty and stuff, they're juggling a lot of different responsibilities not only it at work, but outside work. And so, just to be able to stop and be present to yourself, and your own lived experience. So I hope that, again, not just an academic tool, but a personal tool, to stop and offer yourself some self-compassion.

Dan Seed:

And it kicks college off for our students, in a great way. Playing off what you just said, that college isn't just about the academics. It's about learning how to live life, learning how to better yourself and find yourself in some form or fashion.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Yes. Academics are very important. But again, if there's no community supporting you in those academics, to listen to your life, to your challenges, your trials or tribulations, your joys, then what does that really mean? That might feel very empty to some people.

Dan Seed:

Coming back as I mentioned, this year, where things are a bit more "normal", as opposed to last year, when people were all over the place. It had to be incredibly difficult to put this together last year. But how glad are you to have everybody for the most part, back here to be able to partake in that sense of community? Where we're not just boxes on a screen, we're able to come together in these environments?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Oh yeah. I mean, I love that. So I'm also, besides being a literacy person, I'm also a performer, I'm a vocalist. And when I teach, I perform. Students are like, oh my gosh, sometimes you're a little much. So, needing that audience to see reactions. Because sometimes if people are hidden behind a little black box, you don't know what's going on. So, it's really meant a lot to me, just to see students in class and to, it'll be great to see events happening again. See people gathered, though, safely.

Dan Seed:

And I was going to ask about that. So, you have these events and people coming together. What challenges did our current situation present you guys as you're planning these events, and meetups and whatnot, throughout this academic year?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

So, we definitely learned a lot from last year. But now we know the importance and even, for some of our big events, if you are going to have in-person, we'll also have the opportunity to put that online, so that if somebody's parent is in Waxahachie, they can watch the event too. They're like, oh, I want to see Temple Grandin, we got that.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

But a lot of times, for events here, especially if they're larger, having contingency plans... I was even talking to speaker's bureaus earlier this week. And for most of that, it's like, yes. We are planning in-person. But then, even in the contract there's caveats for, okay, then if it might be virtual or it is postponed.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

So yes, in the world of event planning things are... they got more complex, but now we also know we have multiple plans. And then just having different resources available and making sure that there's hand sanitizer available, and masks, and all that kind of stuff. But yes, we've definitely learned a lot in this past few years, in that planning world.

Dan Seed:

And I was going to say, again, a perfect theme. This idea of mindfulness and having to go through this, where you almost do have to roll with the punches, has to help. I mean, being able to center oneself and realize, okay, I can handle this and step back. It's a really good theme, in that regard.

Dan Seed:

In terms of these events that you're talking about, you mentioned parents checking in on some of the virtual events, are these events exclusively for students? Or is this something that's opened up to the community, the public at large?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

We gear most things towards first year students, but everything for the, well, for the most part, everything is open to as I said, undergraduates, graduates, faculty, staff, community members. In fact, one of our initiatives has been to talk more with the San Marcus and other local communities to say, how can we get you here?

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Or, can we have events that are off campus? Because we know our parking is crazy up here, on the hill. But for the most part, everything's open. And even, most events are free. The only events that cost anything, are usually associated with some of the events in fine arts, which is their operating costs and stuff, different performances, musicals, that kind of thing. But for the most part, our events are truly open to everyone. It is a truly Common Experience.

Dan Seed:

That's a good tagline right there, I think, for the Common Experience.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Right.

Dan Seed:

So, Dr. Nielsen, how can people find out more information about the Common Experience? As we start to kick things off here.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

So, they can go to our website on the Texas State website. So if you just type in Text State Common Experience, you'll find us. If you are on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, we're even on Tik Tok, LinkedIn, T-X-S-T-C-E, is our handle on all of our platforms. And so, we announce events there too. So websites, and then also, social media.

Dan Seed:

And as you mentioned, things are still in the works, waiting on things to move forward here, so you can make some announcements. So, people can check all those channels. Certainly media channels, meaning website, social media, for any sort of updates, I would imagine, as things come down the pike.

Dan Seed:

And we are very excited to have this theme for Common Experience. We're very excited to have it back. And I hope that everything goes well and smoothly for you all as you put this event on.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Thank you so much.

Dan Seed:

Well, Dr. Erika Nielsen, thanks so much for joining us.

Dr. Erika Nielsen:

Thank you.

Dan Seed:

And thank you for being with us for this episode of Big Ideas. Until next month, stay well and stay informed.

Automated Voice:

Big Ideas TXST, is a presentation of Texas State University, and the division of university advancement. Subscribe to experience more innovative, thought provoking content. If you like what you hear, consider leaving us a starred review. Five, if possible. The views expressed during this program are those of the individual participants, and do not necessarily represent those of the university. Big Ideas is hosted by Daniel Seed, produced by Jamie Blaskie. With technical assistance, provided by Manuel Garcia. Strategic consultant is Kelly Raz.