



Mindfulness Practices among Rural College Students in the US: Perceptions and Barriers

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Abstract

For college students, mindfulness may capture and promote innate strengths and abilities, and potentially improve student academic success, enhance university performance, and increase graduation rates. However, these practices may not be equally accessible based on geographic location and culture. The purpose of this exploratory, cross-sectional survey was to assess students' perceptions of, use and barriers to mindfulness practices. A total of 533 students enrolled in a public college located in rural North Carolina participated in an online study that examined the interest in contemplative practices and perceptions about potential benefits. Results of this survey indicated that the majority of respondents thought that practices associated with contemplative pedagogy were beneficial, and these students would like to have increased opportunity to engage in mindful practices while pursuing their studies.

Keywords

Pedagogy; Mindfulness; Contemplative; Rural; College students

Introduction

Reflective exercises constitute the foundation of contemplative pedagogy. According to Kabat-Zinn [1], contemplative practices involve “the systematic cultivation of wakefulness, of present-moment awareness” (p. xv). These practices include a wide range of activities such as meditation, visualization, deep listening, free writing, and beholding [2-4]. Currently, the practices most prevalent in academic settings are mindfulness practices, specifically concentrative and insight meditations, which are learned and enhanced through patience, discipline, and commitment [5,6]. The collective outcomes of all these practices include sustained attention, improved awareness, and enhanced acceptance, which subsequently, effect information processing, cognitive control/flexibility, self-regulation and the ability to manage stress [5]. Improved attention also impacts creativity, critical thinking, and insightfulness [6]. Overall, contemplative practices cultivate awareness through self-reflection and openness, along with developing attentiveness to the complexities of relationships with others and the self [7]. Critically examining one's own feelings of joy and disappointment through attention, awareness, and acceptance assists in a genuine development of empathy for others [2,3].

Although not synonymous, mindfulness may be considered a form of self- reflection. Both require awareness, but mindfulness stresses the present moment, whereas reflection focuses processing on past or future moments [8]. Mindfulness, or “reflection-in-the-moment” [9] can have benefits for academic performance and student self-growth.

A well-rounded education cultivates independent thinkers that rely on their creativity to understand abstract concepts and create innovative ideas. Developing the ability to think, compared to learning what to think, naturally enhances cognitive control, flexibility, and problem solving, giving students the capacity to apply knowledge for the purpose of solving personal challenges [2]. Contemplative pedagogy assists students in developing valuable coping skills, self-regulation, and teaches techniques for stress reduction, which improve academic performance. The capability to control anxiety, and to willfully induce a sense of calmness, can help students with test taking, presentations, and studying, all of which require the ability to sustain attention [4,5].

Academic performance and success can be measured by degree completion, as well as class participation, the ability to apply learned information, and the productive management of demanding academic workloads [10,11]. Due to the demanding nature of higher education, most students are at an increased risk for the harmful consequences of poorly regulated stress [12]. According to Shapiro, et al. [5] these effects can negatively influence one's learning potential, contributing to distractibility, loss in memory capacity, thought clarity, and emotional stability; whereas, contemplative practices can support healthy practices capable of increasing productivity and focus [13].

However, the actual use and acceptance of these contemplative practices may widely vary depending on students' past experience, perceptions and perceived benefits and barriers. The extent to which this can be examined can assist higher education in integrating practices throughout the college experience. This survey sought to determine the level of interest, as well as the degree of value, that rural college students place on the integration of mindfulness within their institution.

Methods

Procedures

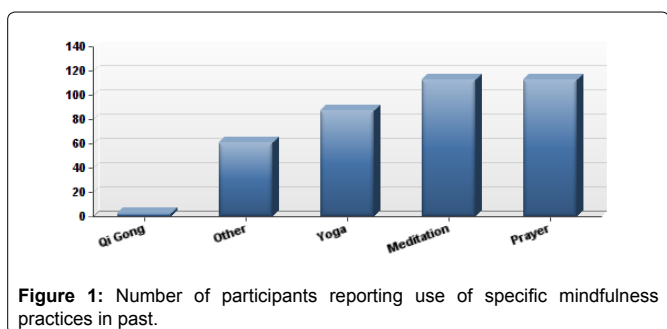
This was a cross-sectional design that utilized an online survey. Western Carolina University's Institutional Review Board approved this study [14]. A convenience sample was used specifically from students enrolled at Western Carolina University, a public college with roughly 10,000 students. All undergraduate, graduate, and distance-learning students had equal access and opportunity to take part in the survey. The sampling frame was obtained from the Office of Student Affairs, and consisted of an existing list of all registered students and their university email addresses. The survey was distributed to students through their university email three separate times over the course of one week. Upon giving consent to participate, respondents were redirected to the survey. All responses were collected anonymously online through the application of Qualtrics.

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Table 1: Demographics of Sample.

Gender	%	Age	%	Ethnic Group	%	Religious Affiliation	%
Female	74%	18-22	44%	White Caucasian	85%	Christian	27%
Male	24%	23-25	11%	Mixed Heritage	4%	Other	23%
Other	1%	26-35	24%	African American	3%	Baptist	19%
		36 or Above	21%	American Indian	2%	Agnostic	14%
				Hispanic/Latino	2%	Protestant	6%
				Other	2%	Jewish	2%
				Asian or Pacific Islander	1%	Muslim	1%
				Unknown	1%	Buddhist	1%



Measures

The purpose of this survey was to describe student perception and interest in participating in mindfulness practices. In order to not overburden the participants, six contingency questions were asked assessing: 1) if they have heard of mindfulness, 2) what they associate with mindfulness (e.g relaxation, associated with a religion), 3) if they have attended mindfulness event on campus, 4) if they had meditated in classes, 5) if they had engaged in mindfulness practices previously (e.g. meditation, prayer, yoga), and 6) if they would be willing to participate in a mindfulness practice in class. Based on their responses to these questions, follow up contingency questions were asked (e.g If no, why not?). Demographic information was also collected at the end.

Results

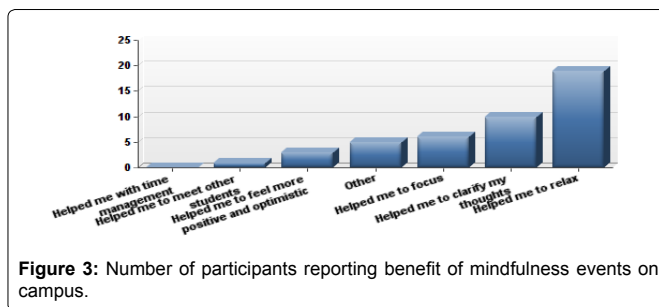
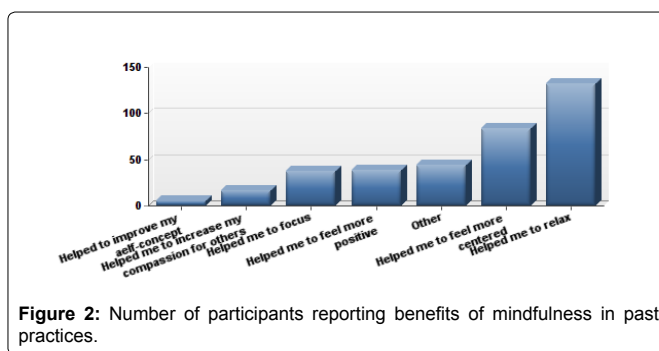
The information collected was the result of the completion of 533 surveys. The demographics of the respondents are representative of Western Carolina University’s student body. Demographics are illustrated in Table 1.

The survey found that 87% of participants were aware and familiar with the concept of mindfulness. When given a choice of various answers to the question, “What do you think of it (mindfulness)?”, the most common answer selected was most was that mindfulness was related to meditation (38%), while 27% associated it with relaxation, and 21% chose “other.” Of the 21% that chose “other,” 10% thought mindfulness was related to awareness and attention, and 3% believed that it was linked to being healthy.

Seventy percent of respondents indicated that they had engaged in a mindfulness practice at some time in their life. Figure 1 illustrates the types of practices participants had engaged in previously.

Of the participants that had engaged in mindfulness practice in their lives, 96% found them to be beneficial. Figure 2 illustrates how many times each benefit was indicated by respondents.

Although 70% of the respondents reported that they have



participated in mindfulness practices during their lives, when asked if they have participated on any mindfulness events on campus, the percentage drastically decreased to 9%. However, while only 9% of respondents had ever attended any mindfulness related event on campus, of these participants, 88% cited that they were beneficial. Figure 3 depicts the benefits indicated by participants.

When asked if they would be willing to participate in a mindfulness practice on campus, 63% indicated yes. Of the 37% who reported they would be not willing to participate in mindfulness practices on campus, 35% of these respondents cited being a distance learner as their reason for not wanting to participate. Additional reasons given were: too many things to do (26%), 21% felt it would not be helpful or that they would be uncomfortable, and 7% indicated that these practices would not be compatible with their religious beliefs. Lastly, close to half (47%) selected “other” as their reason.

The sample was then asked if they would be willing to participate in a mindfulness practice in a class, 75% of the sample stated that they would. For the 33% of the participants that chose no, the primary reasons being: distance learner (16%), not for me (6%), agree with multiple options (2%), do not have time (2%), and 6% left the text box blank. Following the most common choice of “other,” 32% believed class time should be spent on course material, 17% felt that they would be uncomfortable, while 11% believed it would not be beneficial for them. The final three choices collectively accounted for the remaining

8%, of which 7% cited that they were not sure what it was, and 1% expressed that they did not know how.

Discussion

The data collected from this survey indicated that the majority of participants would like to incorporate or increase their engagement in mindfulness practices throughout their personal and academic lives. Results showed that participants value the outcomes achieved through mindfulness, and that there is a strong interest among these participants to see these opportunities integrated into their university experience.

Unfortunately, only 9% of the respondents have participated in a mindfulness event on campus, especially since 70% of the sample reported that they have engaged in such practices prior in their lives. This reveals that there may be some kind of serious difficulty bridging past experiences into the college experience. Although the majority felt it was beneficial, more detailed inquiry could be helpful as to why more students don't participate. Additionally, because 47% of the respondents that indicated that they would not participate on a mindfulness event on campus choose "other" (i.e. other than discomfort, belief it would not help, incompatibility with religious beliefs, too many other things to do or disapproval of friends and family) as a reason, it would be extremely helpful to examine what other perceived barriers were. Qualitative inquiry may best suit the pursuit of these answers to help higher ed assist students in facilitating activities and curriculum that may benefit their well-being and academic performance.

In terms of the stated reasons for not participating on a mindfulness event on campus, no one chose disapproval from friends or family. Rather, the most selected reason was "too many other things to do (25.5%)". Although certainly understandable for college students who are usually consumed with other activities, strategies, such as time management and stress management may be useful here. On the other hand, the other reasons that were endorsed (discomfort -10.2%, belief it would not help-10.7% and incompatibility with religion-6.6%) indicate exposure and education around the practices may be useful in understanding mindfulness practices and their benefits.

Interestingly, a larger percentage of students were more willing to participate in mindfulness exercises in class (75%) than on campus (63%). This could be an indication of time constraints placed on students, or the potential impact of making these types of exercises readily available. Given this, perhaps ways of integrating practice directly into the classroom could be examined. However, this also warrants two cautions: First, one would want to be certain the willingness and comfort level of individual instructors. Perhaps inquiry into instructors' willingness and comfort level would be a logical next step in integrating practices into the classroom. The second caution is the balance of using these exercises in a way that those students who do not wish to participate or are not comfortable are not forced into participating or feel excluded.

Overall, the survey's findings indicated that participants valued the stress-reducing effects achieved through mindfulness practices. The perceived benefit that participants indicated as valuable is supported by researchers [12,15] who have concluded that contemplative practices induce a physiological relaxation response, thereby mitigating the harmful effects of stress while improving physical and mental well-being. Hayes, et al. [3], found through quantitative and qualitative research that students who participated in mindfulness

practices have lower levels of stress throughout the entire semester, compared to their non-participating peers, remaining true during the most stressful periods (midterms and finals). Their findings also revealed that contemplative practices positivity affected how participants viewed themselves, and their circumstances, impacting their ability to constructively manage stress and anxiety [3].

Singh, et al. [12] demonstrated that long-term contemplative practices significantly improved focus and markedly improved memory capacity. Additionally, a connection between contemplative practices and enhanced executive control has been shown to increase focus, augment cognitive functioning and improve performance monitoring [12,15,16]. The results of the current survey show that participants would agree with these benefits, as respondents believed mindfulness increased their feelings of preparedness and enhanced focus.

Survey respondents that chose to take part in mindfulness events on campus indicated that it was rewarding in that it helped them feel more centered and aided in the clarification of thoughts. Brown, et al. [17] would concur that there is a connection between mindfulness and mental clarity. It has also been found that mentally centered students display higher degrees of autonomy and competence, thus influencing information processing, attention, and one's approach to learning [5,17].

The implications of this study indicate that overall, students are interested in participating in such activities, but face some barriers in doing so. The extent higher ed can expand and modify services and programs by incorporating mindfulness activities into classroom and other campus activities, the more likely students can seamlessly capitalize on them. For this particular university after reviewing the results of the survey, the campus began to increase the campus-wide mindfulness opportunities. In the summer of 2014, a segment of their Summer Institute was focused on contemplative practices in the classroom. This is an example of taking existing campus opportunities and infusing mindfulness practices in a way that does not "burden" the students or give "another thing to do". It would be interesting to gauge if these activities impact student learning, focus and academic outcomes. Future studies that examine these outcomes would be welcome in establishing if and how mindfulness practices ultimately benefit college students.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this survey was its lack of diversity in regards to race, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, and age, as the university's student body is relatively homogenous. Similar to all online questionnaires, the results of the study would have been more substantial had more surveys been completed, however the study ended with a 91% completion rate. Although the questions were written to be simple, quick and straightforward, there is the potential for confusion, and this type of survey offers no options for clarification. Additionally, the consent form could have influenced whether or not an individual participated in the survey, as there is the possibility that students with strong views towards or against contemplative practices would be more inclined to complete the survey. Lastly, there is no way to ensure that a participant didn't accidentally or intentionally complete the survey more than once.

Another obstacle to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the sample's outlook on reflective practices was the use of the text box. While helpful, in that the text box provided an alternative

option for expressing one's views, in some instances it prevented certain responses from being counted. For example, responses that were significantly dissimilar to the others were discarded and not represented in the results section, as they could not be categorized.

Conclusion

Students engage in higher education for a wide range of reasons, with various expectations and goals, such as developing a sense of wholeness, or discovering one's own unique interests and talents [3], rather than simply gaining knowledge or a degree. Contemplative pedagogy may help students fulfill their goals, as personal growth is strongly valued. This alternative pedagogical approach to teaching integrates contemplative practices to cultivate a focused, clear and calm mind through attention training, enhancing learning, and problem-solving skills [2].

Contemplative and conventional pedagogies share a strong commonality, as they both aim to produce well-rounded and knowledgeable members of society, with the ability to solve problems and think critically [4]. The data collected from this survey showed that participants view mindfulness as beneficial with a variety of outcomes that are tied to academic success and personal development. As public universities increasingly compete for funding, institutions of higher education may be forced to explore avenues for augmenting student satisfaction and performance [18]. This survey would support the implementation of contemplative pedagogy, through mindfulness practices and support continued research investigating how the integration of contemplative practices impact course learning outcomes and programs offered by the university.

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