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"Come and See for Yourself": Exploration of Mindfulness Practice by First-Year College Students

Maristela C. Zell
Governors State University, mzell@govst.edu

Timothy Pedigo
Governors State University, tpedigo@govst.edu

Matthew Cooney
Governors State University, MCooney@govst.edu

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Abstract

This grounded theory study aims at explaining how college freshmen develop and stay engaged with a regular mindfulness practice, and the benefits they experience. The authors investigated an intentional effort to integrate mindfulness practices in the curriculum of a First-Year Seminar and English Composition course. The results presented here support existing findings concerning the integration of mindfulness practice in higher education settings. This study also advances unique findings relative to utilizing classroom settings to introduce first-year students to the practice, as a long as the course follows a regular structure (i.e., attendance, homework assignments). The substantive theory presented describes how students developed a practice routine and made the practice relevant for their academic and personal lives. Recommendations for practice and future research are included.

Keywords

mindfulness, first-year college students, self-awareness, self-criticism, compassion

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Maristela C. Zell, Timothy W. Pedigo, and Matthew A. Cooney
Governors State University, University Park, Illinois, USA

This grounded theory study aims at explaining how college freshmen develop and stay engaged with a regular mindfulness practice, and the benefits they experience. The authors investigated an intentional effort to integrate mindfulness practices in the curriculum of a First-Year Seminar and English Composition course. The results presented here support existing findings concerning the integration of mindfulness practice in higher education settings. This study also advances unique findings relative to utilizing classroom settings to introduce first-year students to the practice, as a long as the course follows a regular structure (i.e., attendance, homework assignments). The substantive theory presented describes how students developed a practice routine and made the practice relevant for their academic and personal lives. Recommendations for practice and future research are included.

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Introduction and Problem Formulation

Studies show that mindfulness practice enhances the well-being of students, increases concentration on academic tasks while minimizing mental distraction, rumination, stress, and anxiety (Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Gallego et al., 2014; Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Henriques, 2017; Horwarth et al., 2019; Kang et al., 2009; Kuyken et al., 2012; Ratanasiripong et al., 2015; Semple et al., 2010; Schwind et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2008). Through mindfulness practice, a process of "observing body and mind intentionally, of letting your experiences unfold from moment to moment and accepting them as they are" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 10), individuals learn how to disengage from disturbing thoughts and emotions and see more clearly whatever unfolds in the mind. This ability is indispensable to reduce human suffering — which arises primarily from the dissonance between how things are and how we want them to be (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Although the benefits of mindfulness for college students are established (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Flook et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2012; Hassed & Chambers, 2014; Hölzel et al., 2011; Irwin & Miller, 2015; Ramsburg & Youmans, 2013; Rogers & Maytan, 2012; Siegel, 2007; Smalley & Winston, 2010), there is no clear understanding of how students develop and maintain a consistent mindfulness practice (Deckro et al., 2002; Shapiro et al., 2007). Like most aspiring mindfulness practitioners, students struggle with issues of time, hyperactive minds, the desire for immediate results, and how to discipline one's attention and intention (Williams & Penman, 2011). It is also difficult to enjoy or see the merits of the practice without giving it the vigor, stamina, and dedication that it requires. For these reasons, it is unlikely that students will develop a mindfulness practice, if not compelled to do so, at least initially.

The current study aimed at constructing a grounded theory of engagement with and maintenance of mindfulness practice for first-year college students during their first term,

through a required curricular experience. The authors investigated an intentional effort to integrate mindfulness-based practices in a First-Year Seminar and an English Composition course.

Literature Review

College students are at increased risk of developing personal and psychological problems (Helber et al., 2012). Academic pressures, extracurricular demands, adaptation to campus life, and the need to develop an academic identity can result in depressive symptoms, anxiety, lack of focus, and maladaptive coping strategies, including substance abuse (Buchanan, 2012; Eagan et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2011; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Describing the experiences of first-year students, Eagan and colleagues (2016), found that 39% frequently felt anxious, 23% reported below-average emotional health, and 19% indicated they did not have adequate sleep. In addition to academic stress, studies found that these emerging adults face psychological distress associated with social and financial pressures, including having to work to afford college (Britz & Pappas, 2010; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Schneiderman et al., 2005).

There is currently a secular movement in higher education settings to study how mindfulness practice relieves student stress and other challenges, while also helping them meet academic demands and goals (Aherne et al., 2016; Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Brostoff, 2017; Burrows, 2015; Flook et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2012; Hassed & Chambers, 2014; Hindman et al., 2015; Irwin & Miller, 2015; Kelly, 2017; Schwind et al., 2017; Spadaro & Hunker, 2016) The most common mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, guided meditations and yoga classes, mindfulness-based technology, compassion training, and mindful eating interventions (Cieslak et al., 2016). These practices, and other generic mindfulness-based interventions (i.e., mindfulness meditations), are useful tools to help students work with personal and academic stressors and decrease anxiety. However, some point out that the frequency, duration, and instructional method make a difference in terms of effectiveness (Bamber & Schneider, 2015).

Regarding first-year students, specifically, studies have focused on incorporating MBIs to assist them in adjusting to college, prevent attrition, reduce stress, and increase well-being. These interventions vary considerably, from single, brief MBIs (i.e., workshops) to curriculum-grounded interventions (i.e., mindfulness practices incorporated into a specific course) to guided practices via the Internet. Despite positive results, some argue that mindfulness presents challenges for the academic setting, particularly in student recruitment and engagement. For instance, Danitz and Orsillo (2014) examined the impact of a one-session acceptance-based behavioral workshop on freshmen and first-year law students to mitigate the psychological difficulties that interfere with persistence. Similarly, Block and Cardaciotto (2016) attempted to recruit first-year students for a three-session, outside-of-the class, workshop. Both studies found that recruiting students into the workshop was a challenge, and Block and Cardaciotto (2016) found that only 10% of participants attended one or more sessions. The authors raised questions about dosage (number of sessions), concluding that integration of programs directly into curricula and an online delivery might be more impactful (Block & Cardaciotto., 2012; Danitz & Orsillo, 2014).

Along the same lines of providing brief interventions, Sandoz and Mullen (2016) assessed the impact of a two-hour training on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on first-year students who scored below the university's criteria in their college entrance exam. ACT is a psychotherapeutic approach that uses acceptance, mindfulness, and exploration of values to achieve behavioral change. The study's goal was to promote psychological flexibility (ability to be resilient in the face of unpleasant thoughts and feelings while acting according to

one's values) and reduce procrastination. Although procrastination decreased following the workshop, there were no significant differences relative to psychological flexibility.

Although there is no definitive answer, the question of *how* to engage students in mental health interventions, and in mindfulness-based interventions specifically, is an important one. Some protocols might require extensive time, energy, and commitment beyond the regular curriculum, causing students to forget to practice or give up altogether (Chang et al. 2004; Carmody & Baer, 2008; Hindman et al., 2015; Shapiro et al., 2005). Some suggest that integrating mindfulness practice into the regular curriculum and attention to brief practices outside the classroom, may prove more beneficial. For instance, in their quasi-experimental study, Conley and colleagues (2013) randomly assigned freshmen students to an intervention that fit within an existing course structure, a first-year seminar designed to promote wellness and stress management through psychosocial skills, including mindfulness practice. They posited that active engagement (regular attendance, skills mastery, or out of class practice) influences the benefits students might gain. Although the outcomes were mixed, they found that, compared with controls, the intervention group showed higher psychological wellness and stress management levels. Similarly, Ramler and colleagues (2015), focused on adjustment to college by adapting the MBSR protocol for first-year students enrolled in a two-hour-long, first-year seminar. The authors found that the program enhanced adjustment and reduced stress levels. Pistorello and colleagues (2016) also described a course-based approach to support first-year students' psychological health, utilizing Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Their study showed a reduction in participants' risk-taking and suicide-prone actions.

Despite small effect sizes, these encouraging results suggest that it is effective to include mindfulness interventions during the first year of college. Upcraft and colleagues (2015) suggest that freshmen succeed in college when they develop academic and intellectual skills, and emotional and social competence. Simultaneously, much has been written about the crisis in higher education and the questionable value of a college degree. Exorbitant student loans (Johnstone, 2016), a mismatch between college skills and the current job market (Bastedo, 2016), and lack of college preparation affect decisions about enrolling or staying in college (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). It is clear that if students are to make wise decisions during their first year toward these goals, they must learn to emotionally regulate to explore their experiences. Making decisions from an overwhelmed and reactive mind is unlikely to lead to beneficial outcomes. Based on current research, it is clear that mindfulness practices can help freshmen settle their minds, explore their experience more fully, and make wiser decisions about their future.

Utilizing a First-Year Seminar and an English Composition course, the current study aimed at constructing a grounded theory of engagement with and maintenance of mindfulness practice for first-year college students during their first term. The following research questions were the starting point for our grounded theory study: How do freshmen respond when they are required to develop a mindfulness practice as part of their first-semester curriculum? Can a course structure facilitate student engagement and consistency with the practice? What strategies do students employ to develop and sustain the practice?

Researcher Positionality

It is essential that researchers acknowledge their own experiences they bring into the research process. Decisions about frameworks, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and theory building processes are grounded in a researcher's assumptions, values, and cultural biography (Arzubiaga et al., 2008). As a long-term meditator who has taught various meditation techniques, I (Maristela) bring several assumptions to the fold. Practice always requires discipline, self-control, and daily effort. Meditation is a form of self-inquiry that

attempts to answer the questions: "Who am I?" and "Who am I vis-à-vis the world around?" Practice teaches us about ourselves more clearly, as we are, as well as our possibilities for growth and change. It provides potential to transcend the regular state of consciousness that gives rise to our problems, conflicts, and strife. At the same time, this "knowing" makes me more attuned to the obstacles that others encounter while trying to develop habitual practice. I also believe that mindfulness practice is about inner growth that has implications beyond college. Timothy Pedigo is a mindfulness instructor and researcher who entered the academy after 22 years of clinical experience as a practicing psychologist specializing in trauma and mindfulness, and recently he is teaching Cognitive-Based Compassion Training at the university. He has integrated mindfulness into his practice working through deep seated emotional fixations which inhibit growth and development. Matthew Cooney is a higher education scholar who focuses on student success initiatives in U.S colleges and universities. His mindfulness practice started in 2015 and is still developing. He experienced challenges as he navigated the university environment during his first year of college and now uses his position in the university to work with others who may experience similar challenges through mindfulness. The combination of the advanced and novice practitioners on the research team provides the research team with a unique perspective to understand the experiences of students in this study.

Method

A grounded theory methodology was utilized for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A grounded theory methodology focuses on developing a theory from data (Charmaz, 2014) and is consistent with the researchers aim to construct a theory to explain how first-year students engage and maintain a consistent mindfulness practice, and whether this practice helps them navigate their first semester. Researchers followed Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach, which focuses attention on social processes and the meaning of human actions, as well as participants' accounts of their own experiences. It also considers the reciprocal influence that the researchers exert on participants and vice-versa.

Procedures

Prior to commencing the study, the researchers obtained approval of the research protocol by the university's Institutional Review Board. For the purposes of this study, the researchers designed a new program that integrated mindfulness and meditation into the two courses – First-Year Seminar and English Composition. The authors were interested in these courses because, as foundational courses, they prepare first-year students for academic and psychological adjustment to college. Prior to the beginning of the project, the research team solicited faculty who taught these courses and two instructors volunteered. The research team who lead the project were experienced meditators, while the two instructors had fundamental knowledge of mindfulness practice.

A total of four monthly training sessions were conducted by the research team with the participants throughout the semester. Both course instructors were present during the training, which lasted approximately 90 minutes. Mindfulness' roots in Buddhism were explained, but the practice was presented as secular and nonreligious. Some students were familiar with mindfulness techniques, and one reported practicing often. The research team emphasized that whatever participants experienced during training and while practicing was valid, including inner resistance and confusion about mindfulness. Scientific evidence relative to the benefits of mindfulness to relief stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as improve focus, concentration

and memory were reviewed. Participants were introduced to a multitude of practices, including mindful breathing (following the natural pattern of the breath), mindful eating (paying attention to sensations of smell, taste, chewing and swallowing, bringing awareness to eating habits, such as eating too much or too fast, and ignoring body's cues), mindful walking (being aware of each step, moving the body consciously and intentionally, in an unhurried way), loving-kindness meditation (sending intentional good wishes and feelings of compassion toward oneself and others), and body scan (systematic awareness of body sensations).

In addition to training sessions, mindfulness was practiced weekly in the classroom, led by the two course instructors, at the beginning and at the end of the class. Consequently, students practiced, on average, four times a week during class, throughout the semester. Participants were also required to complete homework assignments, which included practicing throughout the week on their own, outside the classroom. They were given recorded instructions to follow, which included directions for breathing and relaxation exercises. Students were encouraged to practice each day and before starting any homework assignment. Although they were allowed to adapt the practices to fit their schedule, lifestyle, and personal preferences, students were required to practice mindful eating, mindful walking, or mindful breathing meditations, or all of these, if they so desired. Students were also required to complete weekly reflective journals documenting their practice. This included describing any relevant aspects of their experience, the obstacles encountered, and how the practices affected their body, feelings, and thoughts. Students also needed to reflect on and document the effects of mindfulness (if any) on their college experience. Prompts included: What emotions/thoughts, if any, might interfere with adjusting to college and engaging your learning in classes? How does practicing mindfulness exercises affect those particular emotions/thoughts? Which feelings/thoughts could interfere with or support your success? How has using the breathing exercises at the beginning of the day or before/after classes affected those feelings/thoughts, if at all? What do you think you need to do/hear that would help you to handle those feelings/thoughts?

Journal reflections were not graded, but their completion counted toward the student final grade. Although students were required to complete weekly journals, only four journals per student, completed a few weeks apart, were collected and used in the data analysis. We only collected these four journals because other weekly journals did not focus exclusively on mindfulness. Participants' last reflection was written after a focus group led by the research team at the end of the semester. Questions that guided the focus group discussion included: Why practice? Where do my intentions and attitudes toward the practice take me? What do I really want for my life and what prevents me from achieving it?

Fourteen participants were enrolled in the study. The average age of participants was 19 years old, and 11 students identified as female while three students identified as male. Additionally, two students were Asian, four were Black or African-American, two were Hispanic, three were white, and two were of two or more races. Half of the sample was first generation college students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study consisted of four reflective journals which students completed during weeks 6, 8, and 10, and 15, their comments during the focus group, and the researchers' observations of students' behavior. The first three reflections were completed via BlackBoard learning management systems as part of the course assignments. The fourth reflection was collected after a focus group carried out in the last day of class (Week 15). The researchers obtained the final reflections from the course instructor and all data was anonymized in accordance with IRB procedures.

The focus group was not part of the original design. However, the research team felt that it was needed for two reasons: (a) further elucidation of the categories and theoretical ideas (Charmaz, 2014) that had emerged in the analysis; and (b) the end of the semester made it difficult to set up individual interviews. All 14 students participated in the focus group, which was completed during the 75 minutes of class duration. A member of the research team took notes during the focus group, while another facilitated the discussion as a way to encourage participation and gain insight into the participants' experiences (Guest et al., 2013).

Following Charmaz's (2014) constructivist model, coding developed early in the process and in two stages: (a) an initial, early line-by-line coding, in which coders attached labels to segments of data, interrogating, raising analytical questions, and grasp its meaning, and (b) a focused stage, during which coders organized, integrated, and synthesized the most salient themes that represented participants' actions and meanings, and that indicated analytic significance (Charmaz, 2014). The three authors coded the data independently and then compared and discussed their codes. In keeping with Charmaz's (2014) method, researchers interacted with and returned to the data constantly to explore themes that might have been overlooked, continuously arriving at more complexity, and moving from description to interpretation. The authors also followed Charmaz's (2014) suggestion to code with gerunds, which moved our analysis forward and helped identify processes within the data, and to make connections between topics more explicit. Both initial and focused coding captured how students interacted with the practice. Finally, theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014) provided integration around central themes, showing relationships between them, and a theoretical structure. An example of this coding is provided below, in Table 1. Because "testing different ways to engage with the practice and seeing for oneself what works and what doesn't" was so ubiquitous in the raw data, the researchers decided that it was a focused code. By continuously returning to the data and comparing codes, the authors identified other focused codes (i.e., "noticing inner cues") and the relationship amongst them. We then generated the theoretical code that encompassed the process of "exploring the practice and discovering the best fit for oneself."

Memos are central to the analysis process, for they help to flesh out emerging themes, raising significant ones to provisional theoretical categories, and developing a strong theory (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the data collection and analysis, memos were written to improve reflexivity, record impressions, and discern how concept and themes fit together. Organizing and sorting our memos helped identify the properties of the categories emerging from the data, including strategies utilized by participants and the conditions that undergird those strategies. The themes that emerged from the data helped researchers gain a more nuanced understanding of students' experiences, the factors that characterized their persistence, and how they constructed their views and their actions (Charmaz, 2014).

Table 1
Coding Example

Raw Data	Initial Coding	Focused Coding	Theoretical Coding
Since the very beginning, I have found myself practicing mindfulness in my everyday life…every now and then I would focus on my breath and try to ground myself in the present. Over the past week however, I have found myself practicing it more without to set an alarm or reminder, I just do it because it feels natural.	Finding oneself practicing in everyday life Using the breath to ground oneself in the present Noticing a change in practice frequency Practicing more without prompts Noticing the mind moving away from the present	Noticing inner cues Using mindfulness practice in everyday life Practicing is becoming more natural Practicing mindful breathing to bring oneself back to the present Testing different ways to practice	Exploring the practice and discovering the best fit for oneself
I usually think about the past or the future, or the way my life could be if I just did something differently. Because of this, when I sit down to do a reading, whether I'm interested in the topic or not, my mind tends to go elsewhere and it takes me forever to get through the assignment.	Thinking about how life could be different Struggling to stay focused on assignments Noticing intrusive thoughts Taking longer to complete assignments because mind goes elsewhere	Seeing what works and what doesn't work for oneself Developing a habit	
Lately however, I have been able to notice when my mind is going off to another place and realize that I have a tool [mindful breathing] that can help me.	Noticing when mind goes off to another place Observing that mindful breathing helps when the mind goes off to another place Experimenting with mindful breathing		
Through trial and error, I have found the best way that works for me. I do not like the guided sessions. I find myself paying too much attention to the words that they are saying, which makes them echo in my brain and doesn't let me find my breath easily	Engaging in trial and error Finding what works through trial and error Expressing a dislike for guided meditations Finding guided practice distracting Noticing that guided practice interferes with finding the breath		

Trustworthiness

To promote trustworthiness the researchers utilized multiple methods to ensure the accuracy of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Multiple data sources were utilized to triangulate data to ensure consistency in the information and conclusions (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Also, the authors visited the classroom at least once a month to review information, practice, and continue to instruct the participants during the semester. This gave the researchers a chance to get very familiar with participants' viewpoints, difficulties, issues that mattered to them, and the meanings they attributed to their meditation experiences, including perhaps what they did not mention in their journals. This way, the researchers could have a better understanding of the story that was unfolding, as well better access the subjectivity of participants' experiences. No doubt, during those encounters, the authors' experiences with meditation and values became intertwined with and influenced the social context and the meanings that were created within the group. At the same time, this close proximity with the material allowed for more reliable conjectures about the themes and categories (Stiles, 1993). All three researchers engaged in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation, which allowed for continuous dialogue around the accuracy and interpretations of the findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

Memo writing (Charmaz, 2014) was utilized by the authors for improved reflexivity, record impressions during data collection and analysis, and develop a strong theory. These were discussed through the process to ensure consensus. To ensure credibility of the findings (Elliott et al., 1999), the codes and categories development and interpretation of data were reviewed by a researcher who was not involved in the project (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The reviewer has practiced mindfulness for over 10 years and is currently teaching mindfulness practice at a university with similar student population. This reviewer helped the researchers to reflect on our initial interpretations, prompting the team to revisit the raw data, and revise some of the categories.

Findings

A Theory of Developing a Mindfulness Practice in the First Semester of College:
"Is Mindfulness for Me?"

The grounded theory approach was used to explore how first-year students develop and stay engaged with mindfulness practice throughout their first semester. What strategies do they employ to sustain the practice? Under what conditions these strategies develop? What approaches (in-class and outside the class) best facilitate engagement with the practice? Do mindfulness skills help students navigate not only intellectual challenges, but also the social and emotional tasks typical of the first semester of college? How do they develop the persistence necessary to decide whether the practice is useful or not? Based the Buddha's invitation, "Ehipassiko," which can be translated to "Come and see for yourself," we invited the freshmen to explore mindfulness for an entire semester. They were asked to explore the usefulness of the practice to help settle the mind, make decisions with clarity, and better regulate emotions. The substantive theory presented here describes the trajectory of how students examined their misgivings about mindfulness, engaged in a practice routine, made the practice relevant to their academic and personal lives, and ultimately embraced or rejected the practice.

Students' written reflections, the authors' observations of them during mindfulness trainings, and focus group's remarks, resulted in the emergence of four theoretical categories: (a) Exploring the practice; (b) Getting unhooked from the mind; (c) Sustaining the practice,

and (d) Rejecting the practice. These four interrelated constructs, which represent how students came to determine the value of mindfulness for themselves, integrated in a core category, "Is mindfulness for me?" the central story of how students grappled with their expectations, interpretations, and perceptions of mindfulness practice and its usefulness throughout their first semester in college. Our grounded theory is shown graphically in Figure 1., depicting the four theoretical categories that emerged during the process, the strategies employed by students, and the conditions that were necessary for these strategies.

Figure 1
Grounded Theory of First-Year Students' Mindfulness Practice
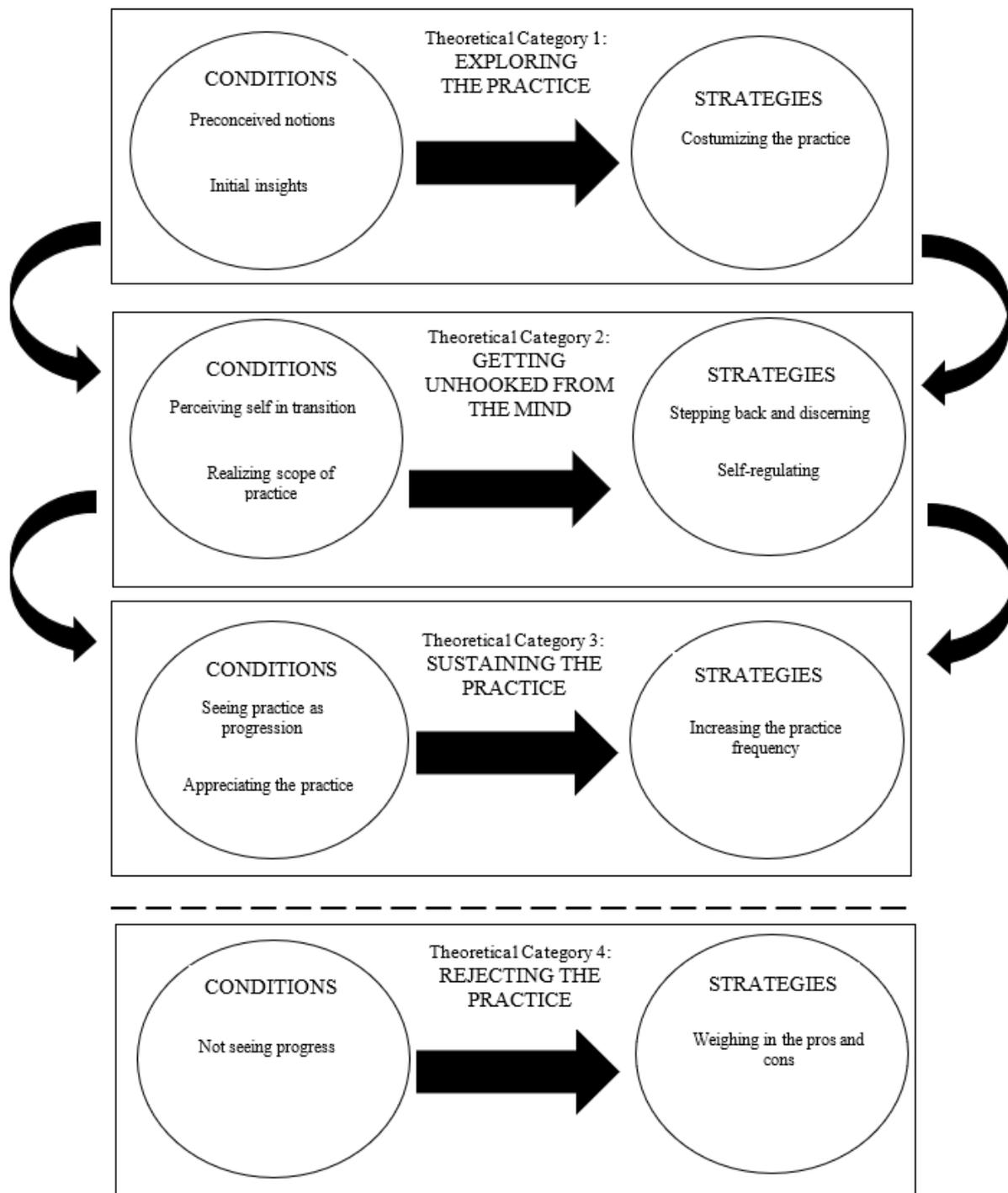
Theoretical Category 1: Exploring the Practice

Our analysis reviewed that establishing a mindfulness practice is a developmental, gradual undertaking. In our theory, ***Exploring the practice***, marked the initial stage of this process, encompassing roughly the first four weeks of class. Students began to examine their prior beliefs about mindfulness. That involved a process of incorporating new understandings of the practice, allowing themselves to be open to its possible benefits. ***Exploring the practice*** is made up of two conditions that emerged from the data, *preconceived notions* and *initial insights.*

Students bring predetermined ideas, misconceptions and secondhand information (i.e., mindfulness is about feeling good and free of stress, and clearing the mind of thoughts), all of which affect their interest in engaging with the practice. Since mindfulness meditation has become a widespread topic in American culture, it is not surprising that even those unfamiliar with mindfulness practice espouse fixed notions. Skepticism and disappointment about expectations not being met quickly or not at all, are also common. In this study, skepticism was generally expressed as self-doubt. "Am I doing this right?", inquired one student in his first reflection assignment. Such preconceived notions expressed early on in the process, cannot be underestimated; hence, feeling safe to express any misgivings, was essential for the participants.

This initial encounter with mindfulness practice can be a difficult moment for novice meditators and it is unlikely that they will persist. On the other hand, being compelled by external factors (i.e., training, in-classroom and outside of the classroom practice several times a week, completion of weekly assignments) grounded students on their own lived, present experience. Connecting more consistently with the present produced several *initial insights*, another condition that became apparent. For instance, students began to notice that mindfulness practice could be used to support their academic work. This was important insight, as their skepticism did not abate until this more instrumental use of the practice could be verified. This realization influenced their subsequent actions, and so did the imperative to carry on the practice. For instance, one student reported that practicing mindfulness before starting homework had a calming effect and helped concentrate more.

Such grounding experiences and insights, which cannot be discovered until several weeks of consistent practice, are akin to Gendlin's (1982) felt sense, a knowing that aligns physically and mentally. This alignment can, and often do, leads to becoming more alert to inner cues and internal states, which are important components of mindfulness awareness. Sixty percent of participants reported this experience; one student wrote:

> When I think about personal problems or things that I need to get done, I notice that my breathing slightly quickens and my skin feels like it's constricting. Instead of ignoring it and trying to get back to my breath, I focus on the negative energy that is flowing through me. By recognizing its power, I can see how stressed I actually am about my assignments or things that are happening around me and I can get a better sense for what is actually going on in my life and how I really feel.

At this early stage, students encounter both positive and negative experiences. Being instructed on a variety of practices right away had a positive effect on most participants in the study. Even those who were familiar with sitting meditation, enjoyed learning new methods. Six of them reported experiencing unexpected benefits from meditating, such as feelings of relaxation and calm, increased ability to tune into feelings, and reduced insomnia symptoms.

Negative experiences included difficulties focusing attention, the propensity for the mind to wonder, and being "made to practice mindfulness when one did not feel like."

Putting aside preconceived notions and gaining new insights were two conditions that resulted in students taking up strategies to solve an important challenge: How to commit to regular practice outside the classroom, since this was necessary to complete assignments, engage in discussion boards, and participate in in-class trainings. *Customizing the practice* emerged as a strategy, aimed at making meditation a natural habit, and discovering the best fit for oneself. For the majority of participants, establishing a practice routine entailed experimenting with and testing different techniques, figuring out the best time and place to practice (i.e., on campus, in private, at night, in the patio facing the lake, in silence or with music) and staying open to "try again." As the data revealed, the most favored practices were mindful walking and mindful eating. More than half of the sample provided detailed accounts of these meditations in their written reflections, that is, how mindful walking "inhibited intrusive thoughts," and the difference mindful eating made on how much they appreciated the food and the act of eating.

Proactive strategizing indicated a different relationship with the practice for the majority of participants. The data shows that students who had initial insights characterized by negative experiences had more difficulties customizing their practice. However, by the middle of the semester, the data shows that the majority had committed to persevering and developed a routine outside the classroom. Only one student reported not practicing beyond the sessions held in class.

Theoretical Category 2: Getting Unhooked from the Mind

Pushing through the mild discomfort of the first weeks and developing a practice routine is fundamental if students are to continue finding value in mindfulness practice. What, then, happens once students settle on a practice routine? Our model indicates that, once their practice yielded practical, short-term results, mindfulness led students to become more familiar with the mind's proclivity to identify with particular states, moods, or ideas. This theoretical category was named *Getting unhooked from the mind* because, by the end of the second month, students began to notice how their thoughts played a role in how they felt and vice-versa. This was not a joyful experience for the students, as their written reflections and comments during class indicated. Two strategies emerged from the data to resolve this challenge, *stepping back and discerning* and *self-regulating*.

Eighty three percent of participants indicated that mindfulness helped them to step back from obsessive and judgmental thoughts and discern their motivations, experiences and behavior more objectively. This strategy emerged under two conditions. *Perceiving self in transition* was one of them. The data indicated that participants were concerned about their well-being, and unsure of their prospects as students and what lied ahead. Like most first-year college students, the majority struggled with their first year of college. Some experienced feelings of inadequacy, some considered dropping out. Most were surprised at the amount of work that college required. Several indicated that their college experience had been disappointing and questioned the value of a degree. Some noticed that the skills they developed in high school were inadequate for college challenges. Most also noticed that keeping up with their mindfulness practice was a good strategy. Rather than being caught up in their thoughts or emotions, participants realized that it is possible to step out of the contents of the mind and challenge its assumptions. That, in turn, revealed familiar tendencies, mental habits, and patters of recursive thinking, all of which make it difficult to take effective, thoughtful action. Gaining distance from the mental fray helped participants to adjust attitudes, revise unrealistic expectations and, not be defeated by uncertainty. In some cases, it helped them turn to their

support network for assistance, as one student reported, "I had a long talk with my parents if I even wanted to continue [in college]…"

A second condition was *realizing the scope of the practice*. During this period, students continued to examine whether mindfulness was useful and for what, and what techniques made sense for them. Though the majority reported enjoying their meditations to relieve stress, participants also began to understand that its usefulness went beyond stress reduction. In that sense, stepping back and discern was a strategy for inquiring into oneself, bringing attention to broader contexts, sometimes beyond college, as illustrated in the following comment:

> I feel like as a college adult student we spend a large amount of time worrying about what school work is due, or if I did good on the exam last week. Life in general is so fast paced, we need to take time and be present in the now.

Perceiving self in transition and realizing the scope of the practice led to a second, related strategy that emerged from the data once students developed a consistent practice, *self-regulating*. Self-regulation is the capacity to pause, assess one's state of mind, modulate one's moods. In their reflection assignments, students discussed how their practice helped them become aware that emotions come and go, alleviate fear and self-doubt, and reduce some day-to-day pressures. Here is an illustrative example:

> While I have been beginning this new journey using the new method of meditation which is emotional awareness, I have started to notice new things about my emotions and they change based on the things that I eat, see, and how I just feel overall.

Two theoretical categories emerged when we looked at the data by the end of the term: ***Sustaining the practice*** or ***Rejecting the practice***. Those who establish a method and consistently meditated, sustained their practice. Those who did not, rejected it.

Theoretical Category 3: Sustaining the Practice

Although no specific method was emphasized by the research team, students who sustained their practice gravitated toward mindful eating, mindful walking, and mindful breathing meditations. Sustaining a practice naturally creates greater openness to experience (Barner & Barner, 2011) leading to better understanding of one's needs (Charbonneau, 2019). For instance, one student explained that "every session taught me something new about my body and how breathing can help me through the day." *Increasing practice frequency* emerged as a strategy that supported these realizations. Two conditions undergird ***Sustaining the practice***: *Seeing practice as a progression* and *appreciating the practice*.

Recognizing that mindfulness progresses in stages involved an appreciation for the process participants had gone through during their semester-long training. For instance, some noticed how the mind goes into automatic pilot (Williams & Penman, 2011), realized how refocus attention, and learned to interrupt the stream of unproductive thoughts and emotions. Eight out of fourteen students referred to the evolving of the practice in their reflection assignments. One participant reported gaining "more clarity," while another describing "how tense" they used to be before starting the meditation program. Participants could now see, in hindsight, the constrains of an untrained mind; one student said:

> At first, the mindfulness helped me regain focus and get me back to the present moment to be more productive. As time went on, it helped me release my tension because when I was doing it. I could find when the tension hid…

These comments also demonstrated that students understood that establishing a routine is a necessary step. Being required to practice mindfulness to fulfill assignment requirements also provided a record of how the mind operates: It creates distractions, wanders off, becomes bored, and cannot sustain attention. Hence, another element in this progression is committing oneself to embrace these discomforts. The consistency of pushing ahead despite obstacles supported students to renew their intentions and take purposeful action.

A second condition to sustaining the practice was *appreciating the practice*, and its benefits. Having sustained a stronger ability to concentrate and settle their attention, most of those who established a practice discipline communicated the positive impact that mindfulness training had on them by the end of the semester. Eighty six percent of them reported, including: Calming anxiety; staying in the present and not worrying about the future; relieving stress about college and personal life; relaxing and having a clear head; managing anxiety; helping to sort out feelings and relationship problems; becoming aware of emotions; relieving tension; appreciating life more; getting in touch with one's true self; appreciating life more; falling asleep with easy; getting through life stressors; becoming more aware of the body and recognizing tension; and succeeding academically. The following comment is illustrative:

> I feel like as a college adult student we spend a large amount of time worrying about what school work is due, or if I did good on the exam last week. Life in general is so fast paced, we need to take time and be present in the now.

This comment indicates another adjustment in participants' thinking, which in turn contributed to a greater appreciation of the practice: the realization that one can respond to internal experiences with kindness. *Appreciating the practice* seemed to have gone beyond academic benefits, as students began to notice that they had a choice on how to respond to broader circumstances, as in the following examples:

> […] since we started I have learned about the different types of meditation as well as the different uses. For example, I found that meditation helped me focus as well as de-stress when faced with the challenges of school and my own personal life

> Mindfulness has helped me got more in touch with my own soul […], to get back to the present and appreciate life. It helps me be okay with who I am and how I'm living ...

Theoretical Category 4: Rejecting the Practice

Students expect certain results (i.e., mindfulness will bring joy, decrease worries) in order to invest in and feel resonance with the practice. The data shows that all participants struggled at some point during the training, mostly at the beginning of the program. However, two students, who rejected the practice not only did not see benefits initially, remained unconvinced throughout the semester. Their most salient strategy was spending more time than the others *weighing in the pros and cons* of the program during the term. The condition supporting this strategy was *not seeing progress.* Although these participants suggested that others might benefit from mindfulness, from early on they did not feel that the practice met

their expectations. They consistently expressed dissatisfaction about being compelled to meditate or having to follow guided practices during the trainings. Additional sources of discontent included feeling self-conscious about meditating in class, while not being able to find another comfortable place to carry on the practice, the amount of time that it took to meditate, and the fact that it interfered with other activities (i.e., TV watching).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to generate a model on how first-year college students develop a mindfulness practice over the course of a semester through a required curricular experience. We outlined a substantive theory of *is mindfulness for me*, the strategies utilized to engage and nourish the practice, and the conditions that moderated these strategies. Our findings support the literature regarding the benefits of mindfulness practice for college students (Aherne et al., 2016; Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Brostoff, 2017; Burrows, 2015; Flook et al., 2013; Hassed & Chambers, 2014; Kelly, 2017; Schwind et al., 2017; Spadaro & Hunker, 2016). However, the processes that students undergo while establishing a practice have not received the same attention in previous research.

The first year is an important time in the students' college career to utilize mindfulness practice given the academic difficulty and adjustment issues which commonly arise. The data overwhelmingly showed that, even with a required practice, mindfulness practice has benefits for first-year students. However, in the authors' experience teaching mindfulness practice in non-required, non-credit courses, students begin with a lot of enthusiasm and curiosity. However, their interest is ephemeral, their attendance soon becomes sporadic, and they usually discontinue within a few weeks. On the other hand, required meditation practice is usually met with resistance due to high-demands and overwhelming stress. Our approach was to find a middle ground. We invited students to explore the practices for themselves, introducing multiple types of mindfulness (meditations, mindful eating, mindful walking), thus creating an atmosphere that lessen resistance. In the end, even though the practice was a requirement for two courses, most students (86%) discovered the usefulness of mindfulness practice for themselves. As the authors' hypothesized, our course structure (which incorporated attendance and homework requirements), offered a familiar pedagogical context and support to work with the difficulties inherent to developing a consistent practice. On the other hand, practice demands experimenting. Hence, having the flexibility to "test" various applications of mindfulness and adapt the practice to their life circumstance, might have incentivize participants to take up the practice without delay.

Our approach was designed to follow students over one semester (15 weeks), while they received mindfulness training, practiced the skills, and journaled about their experience. Many approaches to teaching college students utilize a relatively brief workshop model which can be a one-time event (Henriques, 2017) or last over a few weeks (Rogers & Maytan, 2012). Even approaches that include more extensive practices embedded in curricular frameworks do not explore students' experiences in depth, and in their own voices and words. Our substantive theory supports the notion that learning mindfulness is best done through a sustained effort over many weeks as our participants needed extended time to discover the benefit of the practice. In this approach mindfulness training begins with the invitation to "come and learn for yourself."

This study is consistent with existing knowledge about mindfulness skills, including self-awareness skills, which improve emotional regulation (Himesltein et al., 2012). For instance, when students learned that it is possible to unhook from stressful thoughts and emotions, they were better able to calm themselves and focus on the task at hand – adjusting to college. Twelve of the fourteen students (86%) persisted in their practice, a higher rate than

the researchers expected to find, Based on participants' accounts, this embracing of mindfulness relates to using mindfulness to deal with challenges in their lives beyond college. Even the two students who rejected mindfulness, where presented with information about leaning to cope with academic stress as a way of improving performance. In one case a student preferred to spend time watching her fish to calm herself over mindfulness practice, which could be viewed as a type of meditation in its own right.

Some aspects of our model are explained by current theories of how individuals embrace mindfulness as a practice, while others are not. Consistent with previous findings was the discovery that mindfulness tools play an important role in reducing stress and anxieties related to academics and even beyond academics (i.e., helps with insomnia). Our theory also finds resonance in Shapiro and Schwartz's (2000) intentional systemic mindfulness (ISM) model. The authors describe a feedback effect, whereas the motivation to practice is strengthened by seeing the benefits of the practice which in turn, leads to more practice. Our approach to include in-class mindfulness practice several days a week, combined with the requirement to practice outside the classroom, and students experimenting with various locations and techniques fostered this feedback effect.

Less discussed in the literature is the nature of suffering. An untrained mind interprets thoughts, feelings, and sensations as hard facts, rather than occurrences that come and go, such as the feelings of inadequacy discussed by several participants. Relative to existing literature, this finding evokes the concepts of self-acceptance and the nature of suffering. Exploring self-acceptance in the context of mindfulness theory, Carson and Langer (2006) describe the tyranny of evaluation, or judging oneself against unreasonable, unrealistic, or rigid standards. Consciously choosing to reframe experiences and past mistakes (a mindful choice), and the ability to shift perspectives lead to flexibility in processing and responding to experiences, behaviors, and or situations. The Buddha once told his students that the practice of mindfulness is like the story of two arrows (Brach, 2011). Arrows of life hit us all the time. However, we shoot ourselves with a second arrow by blaming others and ourselves unnecessarily or punishing ourselves for not doing things rights. As a result, our stress and anxiety, and our suffering increase. When we learn not to add the second arrow of self-criticism but instead respond to disappointment or frustration with self-acceptance and compassion, there is a greater chance our stress may decrease. Discovering that they could gain some distance from their mind (a mindful choice) and not "buy into" its discourse was truly an insight to most of them. It engendered other understandings as well, such as the recognition of silence as a healing respite from constant mind chatter, self-judgment, and rumination. It stimulated the students to not over identify with their experiences, if only for short periods of time. It contributed to increased inner sensitivity - not reactivity - to emotions and feelings. That, in turn, might have generated even more self-reflection, as the practice became gradually more "natural," as one student said.

Another source of suffering for many of the students in this study was the preoccupation with adapting and succeeding in college. Most of them were overwhelmed with the stress of all that they had to do. It is not uncommon for a person experiencing stress to view the cause of their stress as caused only by the external environment and not related to how he/she interprets the external environment. Some even wondered if attending the university was the right decision. Seen from this perspective, mindfulness may actually cause greater stress, rather than relieving it (Walsh et al., 2009). It is no wonder that some students reported that mindfulness was not helpful at the beginning. It was only as students remained open and continued to explore mindfulness, that they were able to see benefits. At least 12 of the 14 students got to a point where they settled into a practice, which they found beneficial to coping with stress, anxiety, insomnia, emotional dysregulation, and distractions. Given the degree of

self-doubt, anxiety, and rumination first-year student's experience, it is impressive that more than half of the students in this study continued with the practice and found it to be useful.

Limitations

Respondents belong to a small group of students, and the sample characteristics and findings might not reflect broader perspectives. This limitation makes it difficult to transfer or generalize the findings to other college student groups. Also, participants may have favored some aspects of their experiences in their responses. Perhaps a more refined theory could have been developed if the researchers had interviewed several or all participants individually, exploring further elements that did not emerge in their written reflections. Possible bias may also have occurred in the data analysis, based on the authors' own assumptions, attitudes, and interpretations.

Another limitation is that we did not explore was whether students would continue their practice beyond the course. In the authors' experience mindful practitioners often need a community which they participate in order to sustain their individual practice, such as what was provided by their first-year, cohort experience. Without the community to encourage the practice the possibility of sustaining a practice is low. Perhaps, if the practice were continued in other classes in their first year and beyond, there would be a greater likelihood to continue.

A final limitation concerns the possible contagion of some of the researchers seeing students outside of class. In a small university setting such contacts are inevitable and yet may have affected students' attitudes about the project.

The findings reported in this paper are not representative of other groups of first-year students. While results cannot be generalized, this was not the purpose of this study. Rather than generalizability, credibility, originality, and usefulness criteria (Charmaz, 2014), are better suited to evaluate this study's findings. Credibility was verified by a systematic process of comparisons, resulting in categories and processes that clearly emerged and linked back to the data. The study offered new insights that are significant for educators who wish to integrate mindfulness practice in their courses. Relative to usefulness, this study suggests interpretations that can serve individuals in their everyday life and contributes to current knowledge.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

The theory presented in this paper describes how students engaged in mindfulness practice, developed a practice routine, and made mindfulness relevant to their academic and personal lives, ultimately deciding whether mindfulness practice was useful or not. Concerning the integration of mindfulness practice in higher education settings, faculty should consider the structures that might support the practice more effectively. Single day experiences (i.e., workshops) may not provide enough exposure and support for students in their decision to accept or reject mindfulness practices. Similarly, participants from this study also detailed how the variety of mindfulness practices (meditations, mindful walking, mindful eating) allowed them to experience the multiple facets of mindfulness. Assignments were an important reference point that prevented students from abandoning the practice too soon or for long periods of time. The written reflections allowed participants to explore the impact and usefulness of mindfulness techniques, their transition into the university, their successes, failures, doubts, stresses, goals, and sense of belonging. Finally, existing and future mindfulness experiences may be more beneficial for students in adopting the practice if they are exposed to multiple types of mindfulness practices.

This study also advances unique findings relative to utilizing First-Year Seminars and learning communities (students taking multiple classes together with faculty collaboration

across classes) to introduce first-year student to the practice, as a long as the courses follows a regular structure (i.e., attendance requirements, homework assignments). In this study, participants' exposure to mindfulness in two courses with the same peers might have created a sense of community that supported their practice. Hence, the introduction of mindfulness practices may be beneficial for other community-based activities on college campuses such as co-curricular clubs, sports, and residence halls may be beneficial.

In light of the many issues facing first generation, low-income, minority students, it might have been important to help them examine the structural, institutional, and individual sources of stress. Providing more opportunities in the beginning of the semester to discuss these and other anticipated stressors may be helpful to lessen and normalize participants' initial difficulties. Educating students on how their thoughts and emotions contribute to stress may go a long way in helping them understand the usefulness of mindfulness practice. For example, it might be important, initially, to discuss how self-doubt would naturally arise during the semester and how to work it in meditation. Similarly, opportunities can be created for students to discuss, prior to engaging in meditation, how common it is to experience overwhelming anxiety in the first year as they are adapting to an entirely new context. Normalizing difficult experiences can help students accept their difficulties. Teaching self-acceptance and self-compassion as a part of the orientation to meditation may significantly improve the meditators experience of working with thoughts and emotions (Lindsay et al., 2019).

In addition to acceptance, compassion, and understanding, it may also be helpful to teach students to practice relational mindfulness (Kramer, 2007). Since many first-year students also suffer from a lack of belonging, practices that help develop connection may also be helpful. Although the current study did not focus on this issue, such relational mindfulness may help develop the collaborative feeling so often missing with first generation students (Stephens et al., 2012). For instance, Tull (2018) emphasizes the need to learn to listen deeply to others as well learning to be transparent in the process of dissolving the "myth of separateness." As the myth of separateness dissolves, a person moves into a "we consciousness" in which a sense of interconnectedness is experienced. A sense of collaboration has been shown to help first generation students remain engaged and feel belonging, which serves to decrease stress.

This study provides a solid foundation for understanding first-year college students' exploration of mindfulness practices. Expand on these findings, future research might follow students longitudinally through graduation to verify if they continue their practice throughout their college career. Similarly, Future research should explore how students at various levels of their educational career (sophomores, upper-division students, graduate students) experience exploration of mindfulness practices as students experience different types of stress, triggers, and difficult situations that may benefit from mindful interventions which assist in providing self-awareness, reflexivity, and resilience.

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Author Note

Maristela C. Zell, PhD., LCSW, is a Professor in the Department of Social Work and Director of General Education at Governors State University. Please direct correspondence to mzell@govst.edu.

Timothy W. Pedigo, PhD., is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Psychology and Coordinator of the Master's in Clinical Psychology at Governors State University. Please direct correspondence to tpedigo@govst.edu.

Matthew A. Cooney, PhD., is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Education at Governors State University. Please direct correspondence to mcooney@govst.edu.

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