

# **ENSURING COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH MINDFULNESS-BASED CLASSES: JUST BREATHE**

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In this study, we investigate the experiences of first-year college students with Just BREATHE (JB), an eight-session voluntary mindfulness-based wellness program. We collected qualitative interview data from 26 participants selected as a convenience sample from the larger quantitative study at three points in time: pre-implementation, post-implementation, and one semester to 1 year post-implementation. During the interviews, participants described stressors, coping skills, their perceptions of JB, and changes resulting from the program. The interview data reveal that JB provides college students with coping strategies to combat common stressors and may help address underlying causes of stress. Students described changes in several areas: (a) improved organization and time management, (b) commitment to a healthy lifestyle, (c) improved emotional awareness and relationships, and (d) self-compassion. Our findings suggest that mindfulness programs could be utilized and incorporated into required first-year courses to promote the adaptive, social and emotional skills necessary for effective stress management.

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The transition from high school to college can be unsettling for young adults who face a daunting adjustment to their new lives away from home (Parker, J. D., Summerfeldt, L.J., Hogan, M.J. & Majeski, S.A., 2004; Tinto, 1982, 1993). Students must establish a sense of identity while renegotiating relationships (Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001). These life changes force young people to exercise independence, initiative, and self-regulation (Bryde & Milburn, 1990). Thus, it is not surprising that this transition correlates with higher levels of stress, which can affect social, emotional and academic functioning (Towbes & Cohen, 1996).

Ample research affirms that college students experience substantial stress (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012; Conley, Durlak, & Dickson, 2013; Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Peer, Hillman, & Van Hoet, 2015; Reifnam, 2011). Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, and Miller (2009) found that 10 to 12% of college students experience extreme stress. Other studies have shown that a majority of college students (53.5%) report stress levels as above average or extreme (Hughes, 2005; Kang, Choi, & Ryu, 2009), which affects their ability to meet deadlines, attend classes, and remain in school (Bamber, & Schneider, 2015; Ratanasiripong, Sverduk, Hayashino, & Prince, 2010). This is concerning, as it affects not only student well-being but also academic performance and retention. In a national survey, more than 50% of college students reported feeling so stressed that it impeded functioning (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004).

Over the last 10 years, many colleges and universities have implemented mindfulness-based stress management initiatives (Byrne, Bond, & London, 2013; Greeson, Jeberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014). Such programs promote positive adaptive skills, stress resilience, and social and emotional skills. In fact, several institutions have incorporated mindfulness practices within the student affairs services such as student health services, regular course of-

ferings, counseling services, and/or training programs.

Mindfulness interventions have shown promise for supporting college students who experience stress and anxiety. Several quantitative studies have shown positive and potentially lasting effects of mindfulness programs on various aspects of student wellbeing, including increased resilience and flexibility, and lower stress (Caldwell, Harrison, Adams, Quin, & Greeson, 2010; Ramler, Tennison, Lynch, & Murphy, 2016; Mathew, Whitford, Kenny, & Denson, 2010). However, quantitative indicators only help uncover the impact of mindfulness interventions on specific variables. Little is known about the process by which mindfulness interventions influence the day-to-day lives of students. The literature also lacks rigorous investigations into how students experience and perceive aspects of mindfulness programs, which affect whether and how they adopt mindfulness approaches and engage in mindfulness activities. Given the precariousness of this developmental stage, it is critical to examine how college students perceive mindfulness interventions and their engagement with related ideas and practices. Without this knowledge, programs may lack student engagement and buy-in, tempering the lasting impacts of mindfulness interventions.

To address this important knowledge gap, we present the qualitative results of a larger mixed-methods examination of college students' experiences with and perceptions of a mindfulness-based co-curricular intervention called Just BREATHE (JB). Adapted from the Learning to BREATHE (L2B) curriculum for high school students (Broderick, 2013), JB was designed to help college students manage and mitigate stress and improve their well-being. The results from the quantitative research study show a statistically significant increase in participants' life satisfaction, and decreases in sleep issues and alcohol consequences that were not statistically significant, but in the appropriate direction (Dvorakova, Kishida,

Li, Elavski, Broderick, Argusti, & Greenberg, 2017).

Using focus group and interview data, we investigated the experiences of 26 first-year students at a large research university who voluntarily enrolled in the 8-week JB program. Our aim was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of college students with the JB mindfulness program?
2. How do students describe JB's influence on their overall wellbeing?

First, we situate the study by summarizing research on college students' stress and existing coping mechanisms before providing a brief overview of research on mindfulness-based programs geared toward this population and the L2B program specifically. Then we describe the methods, including those used in the larger study, and the JB intervention. Afterwards, we present the results, including many student descriptions, which we believe are essential for understanding the efficacy and limitations of mindfulness-based interventions. We also discuss considerations for those who are implementing similar mindfulness-based programs and suggest opportunities for future research.

## Literature

### College Students and Stress

Due to the complex nature of stress in students' lives, Arnett (2012) conceptualized the period of emerging adulthood as the "age of instability." First-year college students appear to be particularly prone to encountering difficulties associated with a new academic environment, different social expectations, and a newly gained sense of freedom (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991). Specific stressors are well-documented and include: financial obligations, parental expectations, changes in living conditions, time management, academic rigor, busy lifestyles, exams and assignments, and sleep deprivation (Arnett, 2012; Guo, Wang, Johnson, & Diaz, 2011; Misra and McKean, 2000; Peer

et al., 2015; Ramya & Parthasarathy, 2009).

The lack of immediately available physical and psychological resources coupled with the absence of familiar support network of family and social connections can cause additional stress and anxiety for college aged students (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991; Hughes, 2005; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in Peer et al., 2015). Repeated exposure to stress and subsequent maladaptive coping behaviors may negatively impact students' wellbeing and detract from their overall college experiences (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; McEwen & Stellar, 1993; Wichianson, Bughi, Unger, Spruijt-Metz, & Nguyen-Rodriguez, 2009). If stress is not addressed, feelings of loneliness and nervousness, as well as sleeplessness and excessive worrying may result (Wright, 1967). Students with high anxiety are more likely to report low grades (Godbey & Courage, 1994). Additionally, stress and anxiety have been shown to negatively affect memory, concentration, problem-solving and academic performance, and to lead to illness, avoidance, depression, and many other psychological and physical problems (Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Kang et al., 2009).

For higher education leaders, supporting students' socioemotional health and wellbeing has become increasingly important to ensure student success and college completion. Thus, it is necessary to identify programs that provide effective support in these areas. Over the last decade, growing evidence has shown that mindfulness training may be particularly helpful (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013).

### Mindfulness-based Interventions

Mindfulness-based interventions generally focus participants' attention on aspects of the present moment to develop a greater sense of awareness. Mindfulness practices enable participants to intentionally attend to their experience in an open non-judgmental way which leads to "reperceiving"—the capacity to shift one's perspective on one's experience and thus see it with objectivity

and clarity (Shapiro, 2009). Through practices such as mindful breathing and mindful eating, participants gain a better sense of focus, thereby increasing wellbeing and reducing stress (Greeson et al., 2014). In several studies, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 1990) led to significant reductions in stress (Demarzo et al., 2014; Newsome, Waldo, & Gruszka, 2012; Oman et al., 2008; Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007; Shapiro, Jazaieri, & Goldin, 2012; Song & Lindquist, 2015).

**Research on L2B.** One type of mindfulness-based program aimed at high school students is L2B, which has been shown to be effective in several studies. Compared to their non-participating counterparts, L2B participants in high schools reported: decreased negative affect and increased feelings of calmness, relaxation, and self-acceptance, as well as significant improvements in emotion regulation and physical symptoms (Broderick & Metz, 2009); statistically lower levels of perceived stress and psychosomatic complaints and higher levels of efficacy in emotion regulation (Metz, Frank, Reibel, Cantrell, Sanders, & Broderick, 2013); and reductions in depression and stress (Bluth, Campo, Pruteanu-Malinici, Reams, Mullarkey, & Broderick, 2016). Likewise, Fung, Guo, Jim, Bear, & Lau (2016) found that L2B was effective in reducing behavior problems and expressive suppression among ethnic minority middle school students with elevated mood symptoms. Overall, results suggest that mindfulness is a potentially promising method for improving adolescents' emotion regulation and wellbeing. While these research studies have begun to demonstrate the program's efficacy for a diverse adolescent population, in this study we address a gap in understanding how the program supports students. In addition, we look specifically at the adaptation of the curriculum for college students.

## Methods

### Intervention

The L2B program developer and two

trained facilitators worked together to create JB, an adapted version of the program targeting the developmental challenges specific to first-year college students. Lesson sequence and themes remained constant, but examples were modified to reflect college students' concerns. The aim of JB is to build effective stress management skills, strengthen attention and performance, promote pro-social behavior, improve emotion regulation, and enhance overall wellbeing and health (Broderick, 2013). The JB program is structured to gradually cultivate inner strength and empowerment throughout the eight sessions. Each letter of the word BREATHE represents a programmatic theme related to: mindfulness of the Body (i.e., physical sensations), Reflections (i.e., thoughts) and Emotions; implementation of effective stress management skills through Attention; practice of Tenderness (i.e., compassion) and Healthy habits to sustain mindfulness skills; and Empowerment. Each session includes an opening mindful movement, a short thematic presentation, activities and group discussions, and a group mindfulness meditation practice (e.g. mindful walking, mindful eating, body scan, three breaths, mindfulness of emotions, and mindfulness of thoughts).

**Sessions.** In both the fall and spring semesters, eight 80-minute sessions were conducted over a 6-week period (two sessions per week for the first 2 weeks and one per week for the remaining 4 weeks) in residence hall common areas. Participants were encouraged to attend all eight sessions. Students were given cards associated with the core theme and practices of the specific session to support mindfulness practices at home. They also received stickers as reminders to use mindfulness techniques, worksheets with suggestions for additional practices, and a link to audio recordings of guided meditations led by the facilitators.

**Facilitators.** The two lead facilitators had more than 10 years of experience with personal meditation, mindfulness, and self-inquiry practices. One facilitator had

been a mindfulness facilitator with college students since 2013 and had 2.5 years of clinical experience with children and youth, a certificate in mindfulness and psychotherapy from the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy, and a 200-hour yoga teacher training certification. The second facilitator was an established yoga teacher with more than 600 hours of yoga teacher training who had been teaching college-age students yoga and meditation techniques since 2012.

### Participants

The sample for the larger study included 109 first-year undergraduate students from one of the residence halls at a large university in the northeastern United States who were recruited in September 2014 and randomly assigned to the JB program (Fall 2014) or a waitlist control group (Spring 2015). Each group included 20 to 25 students. The sample was 50% Caucasian, 26% Asian, 5% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 10% mixed race, and the majority of participants were female (65.6%). Results from the quantitative research study show that participants reported significantly lower levels of depression and anxiety, significantly higher levels of life satisfaction, and marginally significant lower levels of sleep issues after the intervention; however, there was no change in the indicators of intrapersonal awareness—mindfulness, self-compassion—and interpersonal awareness—social connectedness, compassion (Dvorakova et al., 2017).

### Data Collection

We collected qualitative interview data from 26 participants selected as a convenience sample from the larger quantitative study based on students' availability and willingness to volunteer. The interview questions asked participants to describe stressors, coping skills, their perceptions of JB, and changes resulting from the program in order to provide more depth about how students experience the intervention. In-

terviews were conducted at three points in time: pre-implementation, post-implementation, and one semester to 1-year post-implementation.

Data collection efforts are summarized in Table 1. During the Fall 2014 semester, the researchers engaged in participant observation of two sessions at different times and recorded their observations in field notes. Upon completion of the program that semester, the researchers conducted post-intervention interviews with two focus groups of seven participants each. In the Spring 2015 semester, pre-intervention interviews were conducted with incoming participants: one individual interview, and two focus group interviews with five and four participants, respectively. At the end of the semester, the researchers performed post-intervention interviews: two individual interviews and one focus-group interview with three students who had been part of the waitlisted control group from the original quantitative study. In December 2015, the researchers performed a ½ to 1-year follow-up individual interview with one participant and a focus group interview with four participants who had already been interviewed during the Spring 2015 semester. Each participant received a \$20 credit to her or his student account.

### Data Analysis

All of the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and uploaded into a qualitative analysis software program (NVivo). Data were analyzed using the general inductive approach and coding technique suggested by Creswell (2010). This method involves five specific steps: (a) initially reading through the data, (b) identifying segments of information, (c) creating emergent categories based on the identified segments, (d) reducing overlaps and redundancies among categories, and (e) creating a model of the most relevant categories. Specifically, one researcher closely read the interviews to become familiar with their contents and themes before identify-

Table 1. Data Collection		
Cohort 1		
Fall 2014 After the program	Focus group 1 Focus group 2	2 5
Cohort 2		
Spring 2015 Prior to the program	Focus group 3 Focus group 4 Individual interview 1	5 4 1
Spring 2015 During the program	Facilitator interview 1 Facilitator interview 2	1 1
Spring 2015 After the program	Focus group 5 Individual interview 2	3 1
Cohort 1&2		
Fall 2015 Semester or 1-year follow-up	Focus group 6 Individual interview 3	4 1

ing and defining category codes. To achieve reliability, two researchers analyzed one sample interview using the initial codes (campus life, JB, changes resulting from JB, and obstacles). They then revised the analysis procedures and refined the codes and sub-codes. For example, for "changes resulting from JB," they identified six sub-codes: family, college, relationships, stress and emotions, perspectives, and routines/organization. Three core themes emerged during data analysis: stressors, experiences with JB, and changes resulting from JB.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations. While diversity was desired, the qualitative sample was small and not diverse. Only two of the 26 participants were male. The sample depended on self-selection and is thus not representative of the broader first-year college student population. Consistent with the

nature of qualitative research, the sample is limited in size and scope and does not enable generalizability. Self-reported responses collected in group settings such as the focus group interviews have several limitations, including that individual responses potentially influence and are influenced by others' responses. Nevertheless, the richness of the responses and the student voices help illuminate the effects of mindfulness-based programs and the experiences of first-year college students.

Another limitation is that study participants had attended most of the sessions—average 6 out of 8 sessions, so they had presumably "bought in" to the mindfulness program. Other students did not participate as regularly. We were unable to determine, therefore, the effect of self-selection on the findings. Does the JB program only help frequent attenders, or do people with less buy-in also learn the same skills? More research

needs to be performed to understand how the less enthusiastic students may perceive the intervention, and why.

## Findings

### Stressors

In the pre-intervention interviews at the beginning of the semester, students described difficulties in adapting to college life. Some were homesick and described themselves as being “a mess.” One student said: “It was really hard for me to split my time between academics, work, and social.” Later in the semester, stress related more to choosing or getting into a major. Describing a required entrance-to-major course, one student said, “I put my blood, sweat, and tears into that class...I would literally cry.” Another student explained: “I’m trying to put all of my 110% into the class so I can...get into the business school.” Another student also worried about achieving grades that “a grad program is going to want to see.” Yet another student explained how for some classes, “no matter how much you study...you still could like fail.” Grade-related pressure from parents was also common: “I told them that I just had three As and two B minuses. And my mom was like, ‘Well are you happy with that?’”

Although all students felt academic stress, most students also felt relationship-related stress. One student described how her roommate’s breakup and her friend’s recent narcotics overdose had “been really tough on her.” Even after adjusting to the new environment, one student admitted: “I’m still consistently worrying about how to make new friends...it’s just really stressful because I don’t know what they think.” Two students also described financial stress related to finding time to work amid a hectic school schedule, and making enough money to cover living expenses.

### Experiences with JB

All participants indicated positive experiences with JB, despite some initial reservations. One student explained: “I didn’t real-

ly know what to expect, but I’m glad of how it turned out...I didn’t know if it was going to be like weird or uncomfortable.” Overall, students enjoyed the mindfulness exercises, felt comfortable during the sessions, and looked forward to attending. “When you get in there you feel better. I don’t know. Everyone’s happy and that changes your mood.” Several participants specifically mentioned auditory aspects of JB such as the chime sound. “The first thing that comes to my mind when I think of [JB] is the ‘ding.’ It directly makes me remember to step back and just breathe.” Another student said, the facilitator’s “voice was really relaxing.”

The two facilitators played an important role in helping the students receive the program positively. The students’ perceptions of the program were based on their experiences with their facilitators. One student expressed deep admiration for her facilitator, saying that she would “love to be her.” Another said: “She is just kind-hearted. I feel she was a really relaxed person so that helped me relax.” Several students described their facilitator as “a natural” who was “really into” the program and had “mastered it;” they, in turn, aspired to emulate those attitudes and behaviors. The kindness and caring shown by the facilitators resonated strongly with participants. Several students noted how the facilitators developed personal relationships with participants by conversing with participants before the sessions and “remember[ing] things from meetings to meetings.” The strong relationships and rapport built with the facilitators aided in having a positive experience with the program.

In addition to the facilitators’ welcoming attitudes, the objects used such as the chime or cymbals and the actual physical space where the sessions took place played a role in easing program facilitation. Although the sessions were held in the residence halls where the students lived, some students mentioned how the moment they entered the room, they automatically relaxed, “forget[ing] that I have a lot of as-

signments for the next day. I am in that moment, there, literally and mindfully present." Some students mentioned certain objects that helped them such as the bell, the facilitators' warm voices, the cozy blankets, the freedom to use the chairs or simply sit on the floor. One student mentioned how at times the coldness of the room made it hard for her to focus: "The lighting should be dimmer because you try to close your eyes, there is still light on you. I know a few times when I laid on the floor and it was impossible because it was freezing cold and it was bright. So that was hard to relax when you are shivering."

Some students mentioned how the stickers and bracelets they were given as reminders to take breaths made them more aware of their current feelings, curious about what they were sensing around them. "I read the sticker [that says] 'breathe,' and I realize that my stress is at its peak, so I take a deep breath and focus on what I need to do." Other students explained how the bracelet was a constant reminder over the summer: "If I kind of freak out, I can kind of move out of myself and remember everything we did in the sessions."

### Changes Resulting from JB

The program provided useful tools for helping students manage their stress and improve their overall well-being. Students described changes in four general areas: (a) improved organization and time management, (b) commitment to a healthy lifestyle, (c) improved emotional awareness and relationships, and (d) self-compassion.

**Improved organization and time management.** A majority of participants expressed how JB had improved their organizational and time management skills. Most students reported a decreased sense of time urgency which enabled higher productivity. By mindfully practicing certain daily activities like taking a shower, folding clothes and brushing their teeth, they eliminated the perceived need to rush and spent the same amount of time (sometimes less)

on these activities: "I mindfully fold my clothes. I mindfully hang up my clothes...I have time." One student described how paying attention saves time that is otherwise wasted "because you are zoning out somewhere."

Students also began taking their time with daily activities, which helped them become more focused and attentive. One student said that JB "really helped me realize that I rush through everything...It just definitely teaches you [how to] slow down." Another student explained: "I used to always rush to get to where I was going...[but] I'll take my time now...just paying attention to everything around me with all of my senses." Most participants mentioned terms such as "mindful of the present" or "in the moment." By organizing their time and living in the present, they were able to achieve more.

Some mentioned how focusing and dividing their time methodically enabled them to finish their assignments earlier and enjoy more free time. Others said they even felt more encouraged to channel their energy into positive outlets such as waking up early, exercising, and mindful eating: "I used to come back and just sleep and now I have been coming back and doing my homework like this morning...I can sit down and know that I have done it and feel more accomplished." One participant mentioned how she reduced exam-related stress through time management by studying "smaller stuff a few days ahead of time. At the end do a big review and then if I actually feel comfortable knowing it, then I'll just put it away." Likewise, another student learned to "spread [assignments] out and also when I'm studying when I get overwhelmed to...take a breath and just kind of like calm down."

Most participants shared that the time management skills learned through JB enabled them to be more focused and prioritize their work, revealing one possible mechanism by which mindfulness reduces stress. It may not be that mindfulness inherently reduces stress, but that by focus-

ing on breathing and relaxing their bodies, students are better able to organize, which in turn reduces stress. One participant described: "I would get so stressed and just fall asleep. And now I focus and get [my homework] done."

These findings support quantitative results showing that students reported a decrease in anxiety and an overall increase in life satisfaction. They were happy that they are able to achieve more, and get to do the things they like without feeling overwhelmed by lack of time. They also highlight some of the mechanisms underlying the decrease in stress, such as the ability to focus and relax.

### **Commitment to a healthy lifestyle.**

Most participants expressed that JB made them more aware of health-related choices and helped them commit to a healthy lifestyle. One student explained: "I literally Googled foods that make you perform better on tests...I am more mindful of the types of food I eat. And I actually realized I used to overeat a lot." Similarly, another student expressed how the JB intervention helped her "go to lunch alone...just like be with myself and kind of like relax and like not eat in front of Netflix." Another participant described how she reduced anxiety by regulating her sleeping habits so she no longer sleeps "until the last minute" and has enough time to prepare for the day.

Only one of the participants did not describe increased commitment to a healthier lifestyle as a result of JB. One student, who considers herself as a positive person who was not prone to worry or stress, noted that she still liked to party during the week and procrastinate. Nevertheless, she did mention that she had become more aware of the consequences of her choices and habits.

**Improved emotional awareness and relationships.** After participating in JB, many students felt that they had become less emotionally reactive. A majority of participants explained how JB had enabled them to become more accepting of stressful situations beyond their control and to view unpleasant happenings (especially grades)

differently, resulting in more positive feelings: "I used to be one of those people that always was so focused on getting the best grades;" but now, "if I get a C, it's not the end of the world for me." A participant without significant stress problems said: "I'm more confident now. I'm like, 'What's the worst that's going to happen?'" Another student explained that JB had helped her let go of persistent negative thought patterns.

Participants also described how emotional awareness, especially during relationship conflicts, enabled them to control automatic reactions that typically escalate such situations and to become more reflective before responding to negativity. One student described a tense relationship with her stepmother. Instead of reacting to her stepmom's scolding, she utilized mindful breathing to calm down and reply respectfully. Another participant relayed a similar story: "So just recently, my dad had made me upset and then I was in the car and I was like, 'These are just thoughts; these are just emotions'...I can think differently. I can feel differently."

Some participants expressed how JB practices helped them channel their emotional responses into more productive actions by recognizing mental scripts and assumptions and avoiding judgment. They recognized their tendency to "overthink things...and if you just stop doing that and just let it go, it helps you." They also felt they had become more compassionate and understanding of other people's emotions and situations, because "our perception is not always reality."

Another outcome of the program was an increased sense of appreciation and gratitude: "You realize how much you have to be thankful for. Everything you touch. Like, wow, I'm really thankful for water." This realization led several participants to incorporate this practice of gratefulness into their daily lives: "I just look around and appreciate things." Another participant explained that she had begun mindfully thanking the people who served her food in the dining

commons.

Through these processes of recognition and self-awareness, mindfulness actually creates more awareness of the sources of the stress one experiences. Thus, through these practices, students were able to make substantive changes in their lives that reduced stress overall. The practice of mindful awareness, for example, has led some students to curiosity about their present moment experiences without avoiding the unpleasant feelings. Gradually, there is greater tolerance for stress without reactivity.

**Self-compassion.** Several students described how JB enabled them to develop a sense of self-acceptance. One student explained: "It makes you treat yourself better. You stop blaming yourself and it has health effects not to drag yourself down." Many participants described increased awareness of themselves, their surroundings and their situations: "It teaches when you start bringing yourself down to bring yourself back up." Another participant explained: "Just BREATHE helped me become nicer to myself because I am more self-understanding. I'm only human." One participant reflected, "It's ok not to know the answers to some things." Many participants also focused a lot on future possibilities (e.g., courses, majors, dream jobs). "I feel like the program really helped me get back to [being] me."

### Summary

The interview data reveal that JB appears to have had a positive influence on the experience and management of stress in first-year college students. Students mentioned several stressors related to the college transition, including balancing competing demands, academic pressure, financial hardship and making new friends. While most of these stressors have been discussed in the literature, the students' detailed descriptions show how students experience them. After participating in JB, students described changes in several areas: (a) improved organization and time management, (b) commitment to a healthy lifestyle, (c)

improved emotional awareness and relationships, and (d) self-compassion. Even those who acknowledged that they had not regularly integrated mindfulness practices into their daily lives mentioned practices they used, like taking deep breaths just before exams, as a reminder to relax, slow down, and focus.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of first-year college students with a mindfulness program and their descriptions of its influences on their college lives. While a quantitative study supported the program's efficacy and feasibility (Dvorakova et al., 2017), a qualitative examination was necessary to obtain an in-depth understanding of how students respond to stressors and their experiences with JB. In doing so, we sought to identify how mindfulness programs can help address the needs of first-year college students.

Confirming findings in the literature, we found that first-year college students face significant stress and anxiety. Students described common stressors such as academic, social and financial pressures. In this study, we found that the JB mindfulness program enables students to make small changes in their lives to improve their wellbeing. JB provides students with coping strategies to manage common stressors and helps address underlying causes of stress. Previous literature has shown how JB facilitates emotional regulation through decreased unpleasant feelings and increased relaxation (Dvorakova et al., 2017; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Metz et al., 2013; Bluth et al., 2015; Fung et al., 2016).

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting how JB enhances students' emotional regulation and wellbeing. Our findings affirm those of previous research, showing that mindfulness programs could support students to become less emotionally reactive, to better tolerate distress and withstand challenges without feeling the need to ruminate or escape. By reduc-

ing the rumination that disrupts concentration, students are able to focus on the present moment, which leads to reduced stress. Participants described how integrating mindfulness practices into their daily routines helped them become more organized, manage their time more efficiently and make conscious lifestyle choices. This led to minute changes in their daily routines such as focusing on their studies and eating and walking mindfully, and they were able to recognize how small changes had transformed their lives. While generalizations cannot be made, the students' descriptions of their subjective experiences help illuminate the mechanisms by which mindfulness interventions help reduce stress for adolescents who are transitioning to college. Given the positive outcomes from various research studies, student affairs at universities could offer a promising venue through similar mindfulness programs for addressing the needs of college students and helping them set on a path to well-being and success.

Although mindfulness had not yet become an integrated part of some students' daily lives, participants had become aware of how they were (a) using their time, (b) thinking about their choices and related consequences, and (c) responding emotionally. This is a crucial step towards incorporating mindfulness into their daily lives, and thus their identities. Mindfulness skills are cultivated in everyday life through regular practice, "which in turn should lead to improved psychological functioning such as symptom reduction, reduced stress and enhanced well-being" (Carmody & Baer, 2008, p. 31). Participants had begun to utilize some mindfulness practices such as "three breaths" in everyday activities. While it is difficult to determine the extent to which this ease of adaptation was directly related to participation in the JB program or a natural outcome of the transition process, sustained long-term practice of mindfulness techniques appears to be associated with program efficacy. Still, there is a need for sustained implementa-

tion efforts in order to ensure that students integrate mindfulness into their daily lives to become a natural habit and a useful resource that can be consistently utilized.

Shapiro et al. (2006) offers a theory for how mindfulness affects change and transformation. They proposed that intention, attention and an open, non-judgmental attitude lead to a shift in perspective that they term *reperceiving* (p. 377). Through the mindfulness process, relationships to thoughts and emotions shift, bringing forth "greater clarity, perspective, objectivity, and ultimately equanimity" (p. 379). This study provides evidence of *reperceiving*: some participants expressed that their intention was to reduce stress, that directing their attention to the present moment enabled them to perform better, and that their attitudes had shifted as a result of JB mindfulness practices. They had become aware that while they cannot change their unpleasant emotions, they can change their relationships to their emotions in order to support healthier relationships and interactions with others. However, some participants did not experience the whole process; instead, they focused on parts of the construct of mindfulness itself. While some students focused on attention, being in the present moment did not lead to changes in attitudes, and thus their behaviors and/or perspectives remained the same. Others unconsciously integrated mindfulness into their lifestyles, but failed to develop intention, a key component of the process.

Since participation was voluntary, students' perceptions of the learning environment were crucial. Evidence shows that teacher characteristics and contextual support significantly influence social-emotional learning program implementation quality and student outcomes (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000; Dmitrovich & Greenberg, 2000). In the context of this study, the use of certain tools such as the cymbals, chime, pillows and chairs fostered feelings of comfort and relaxation. While researchers tend to deemphasize the

role of instructors' personalities and qualifications in program efficacy (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015), our findings reveal that students' perceptions of the program hinged largely on their perceptions of the facilitators' expertise, attitudes, behaviors, and their embodiment of mindfulness. There is considerable literature that discusses the pedagogies of mindfulness-based approaches and emphasizes the importance of teacher embodying the spirit of mindfulness as it facilitates a positive reception of the mindfulness-based interventions and communicates a genuine experience with the participants (Crane, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2003, 2005; McCoun & Reibel, 2009; Kabat-Zinn & Santorelli, 2005; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002; Crane, Kuyken, Hastings, Rothwell, & Williams, 2010 ). Although the fundamental issues pertaining to training processes, standards, and competence to develop "a robust professional context for the next generation of mindfulness-based teachers," additional research on the influence of facilitators on program quality for mindfulness-based interventions is warranted (Crane, 2012, p.76).

### Future Research

Findings of this study highlight several opportunities for future research. First, some mindfulness teachers have noted that changes become truly noticeable after several years Goldstein (2003). Thus, longitudinal randomized controlled studies may be warranted to study changes over time. One participant attempted to continue these practices at home, but felt "uncomfortable" and "awkward" because her roommates would come and stare at her while she engaged in mindful breathing. Longitudinal studies might reveal factors that support or inhibit the use of mindfulness practices over the long term. Additional research also is needed to determine how certain factors, such as the number of sessions, the physical space, and/or the duration of each session affect program efficacy. Likewise, researchers might compare outcomes for

intervention participants with students who have not received any mindfulness training in order to determine whether these adaptations are directly related to involvement in the program, or simply occur naturally over time.

### Conclusion

This study reveals significant new areas for exploration and the potential efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions such as JB. We have uncovered some potential mechanisms for how mindfulness programs can be applied to help first-year college students navigate transition challenges. Extant L2B research indicates an overall decrease in perceived stress and increased efficacy in emotional regulation (Bluth et al., 2016; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Metz et al., 2013). Our study affirms previous findings showing the efficacy of mindfulness programs for stress reduction (Caldwell et al., 2010; Mathew et al., 2010). As a mindfulness intervention, JB provides college students with coping strategies to combat common stressors and may help address underlying causes of stress. Our findings suggest that mindfulness programs could be utilized and incorporated into required first-year courses to promote the adaptive, social and emotional skills necessary for effective stress management.

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