
Peer-Reviewed Article

Mindfulness as a Tool for Student Achievement in Higher Education: Insights, Benefits, and Exercises

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Abstract: Student achievement, retention, and graduation rates are issues at the forefront of higher education. Many students are ill prepared for the challenges of online learning and are plagued with personal issues that cause stress and anxiety, which can manifest in the classroom through poor interaction, poor engagement, and poor academic performance. Maladaptive behaviors and lifestyles exacerbate academic stress and lead students to drop out. It is critical that higher education institutions implement strategies to prepare knowledgeable students that can learn critical thinking, reasoning, and assessment and decision-making skills. Mindfulness is an important emerging concept in higher education and is a tool that students can use to take control and ownership of their personal issues and educational journey.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Education; Higher Education; Teaching; Learning; Student Achievement

What is mindfulness?

Although mindfulness is not new concept in education, its use and applicability in higher education is relatively new. Mindfulness in higher education is gaining momentum as a tool to help student's manage stress and anxiety and foster student accountability and achievement. Simply stated, mindfulness means being present and aware in the moment and blocking out distractions that may interfere with fully being present in the moment. Instructors and students alike can benefit from being mindful.

The term mindfulness is exceedingly broad. It is important to understand what mindfulness means by examining different views and to be fully informed, as mindfulness is defined in many ways. For the purpose of this article, five definitions of mindfulness will be provided for reference.

According to Merriam-Webster (2018), mindfulness is defined as “the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis; also: such a state of awareness” (para. 2).

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2018), mindfulness is defined as the “practice of being aware of your body, mind, and feelings in the present moment, thought to create a feeling of calm: Mindfulness can be used to alleviate feelings of anxiety and depression” (para. 1).

According to The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley (2018), “Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment” (para. 1).

According to Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World (2018), “Mindfulness is about observation without criticism; being compassionate with yourself. When unhappiness or stress hover overhead, rather than taking it all personally, you learn to treat them as if they were black clouds in the sky, and to observe them with friendly curiosity as they drift past. In essence, mindfulness allows you to catch negative thought patterns before they tip you into a downward spiral. It begins the process of putting you back in control of your life” (para. 2).

Lastly, according to Goleman and Lippincott (2017) “Mindfulness is a method of shifting your attention inward to observe your thoughts, feelings, and actions without interpretation or judgment” (para. 2).

In examining the definitions above, three key themes emerged regarding mindfulness. The first theme that materialized is that mindfulness is acting with awareness in the moment. The second theme that arose is that mindfulness involves self-compassion and nonjudgment, without criticism of one’s thoughts and actions. The third theme that appeared is present-moment attention. These themes are important to keep in mind when interacting with students. Instructors and students both need to be aware and present in the moment, without condemnation, in order to create space for insight, self-inquiry, and enlightenment.

Insights on Mindfulness

College students struggle with juggling challenging primacies, such as academics, employment, financial issues, family obligations, personal issues, health issues, relationship issues, leisure time, poor sleep habits and fatigue, poor study habits, inattention, procrastination, obsessive thoughts, and stress and anxiety. All of which have a negative impact on academics.

The purpose of higher education is to not only educate students but also to enlighten them, while fostering character development, as well as cognitive and emotional development during their academic experience. This happens through knowledge acquisition, development of intellectual abilities, and applied professional and technical skills through theoretical connections and practical learning. Mindfulness is a useful training tool for assisting students to be successful, self-aware scholars, and connected members of an educational community (Leland, 2015). Mindfulness can transform the classroom experience and the quality of student learning.

According to Burke and Hawkins (2012), mindfulness practice is one of the most important tools that educators have to encourage students to increase their academic achievement and social and emotional learning. Mindfulness improves focus, academic performance, critical thinking skills, behavior and self-control, life skills, and influences job specific skills, which prepares students to take control of their learning and be part of a cooperative, caring society (Leland, 2015; Odahowski, 2004). Higher education institutions can support teacher-student learning by fostering mindfulness in their academic programs and curriculum (Leland, 2015; Schwind, McCay, Beanlands, Schindel Martin, Martin, & Binder, 2017).

Bruin, Meppelink, and Bögels (2015), examined mindfulness in higher education through student participation in a mindfulness curriculum course and noted that participation in a mindfulness based intervention curriculum led to an increase in non-judgmental and non-reactive thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Slavik (2014), explored of the impact of course specific mindfulness-based practices in the university classroom and found that students reported a positive impact on their ability to transition to class, engage in the moment with the learning process, to attune/attend, concentrate and process information, decrease stress and anxiety, build capacity for insight and creativity, and be more reflective.

According to Davis (2014), academic work occurs through teaching, research, and service. Teaching reflects the principles of active learning and active student engagement in the learning process to increase content understanding and application. Implementing mindfulness-based interventions in the classroom promotes engaged learning, cultivates intuition, cooperation, self-growth, and helps work life balance.

Mindful contemplation can help students let go of limiting views of one's self and others, as faculty provide relational, collaborative, active learning that integrates the whole student. Implementing mindfulness-based interventions encourages students to find their higher life purpose and help the student move from a state of "me" to a state of "us," in relating to others. Thus, benefiting the student, their education, and society (Davis, 2014).

According to Schwind et al. (2017), "mindfulness practice enhances the wellbeing of the practicing students, increasing their capacity for reflexivity, learning, equanimity, kindness, and compassion" (p. 93). Mindfulness preparation and practice increased student focus on academic work and provided a sense of relaxation and wellbeing (Schwind, et al., 2017). The study by Schwind, et al. (2017), found that students were more receptive to mindfulness techniques if used at the start of class. This helped students to relax, become grounded, and to fully engage in the content.

Pierdomenico, Kadziolka, and Miller (2017), conducted a study to determine if mindfulness can influence problematic behaviors in students. The study concluded that using mindfulness-based interventions can reduce poor outcomes in distressed students and that students that are more mindful were able to self-calm and self-regulate better. In the study, Pierdomenico et al. (2017), discovered that "mindfulness is related to coping on a physiological level as well as a cognitive-emotional level" (p. 129). Students that reported substance abuse demonstrated elevated reactivity, had maladaptive coping strategies, took longer to return to their baseline, and are at risk for other problematic behaviors.

The study by Pierdomenico et al. (2017), concluded that schools need to make resources available for students in distress and that implementing mindfulness methods is a reasonable way to help students cope with the stress and anxiety they experience. According to Pierdomenico et al. (2017), higher education institutions need to develop the quality of their curriculum by offering mindfulness interventions to promote students self-efficacy and that faculty members offer mindfulness interventions in their courses. However, in order to do so, faculty members must be aware of the benefits and use of mindfulness.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Throughout the literature, common themes revealed the benefits of mindfulness and why college students should practice mindfulness in their educational journey. Mindfulness heightens the five senses, reduces stress, anxiety, and depression, and improves the ability to focus and concentrate, while blocking out distractors. Mindfulness cultivates resilience, self-compassion, connections to others, increases motivation, and enhances emotional wellbeing, as well as the ability to self-regulate and self-reflect, to pay attention, and to stop multitasking through self-discipline, which maximizes academic success.

Mindfulness practice helps students to remain mindful and self-aware through difficult situations they experience in the world of academia and in life. In particular, students become aware of their:

Thoughts - "I must be stupid, because I failed the test," "I must not be good enough or smart enough," "I can't do it," "It's too hard," "I'll never understand this," etc.

Feelings - anxiety, sadness, worry, hate, anger, jealousy, mood swings, distress, apathy, overwhelmed, guilt, self-doubt, etc.

Behavior - aggression, acting out, bad manners, guilt tripping, withdrawing, manipulation, bullying, gossiping, poor listening, excuses, etc.

Physiological changes - arousal, fast breathing, changes in heart rate, weight in stomach, sweating, pins and needles, shaking, nausea, etc. (Thompson, 2010).

Mindfulness fosters student wellbeing and engagement in the learning process, and allows students to see their thoughts and emotions for what they are, in that moment of time. As students become aware of their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physiological changes, they will reap the benefits academically and personally, through improved self-efficacy, inner awareness, and performance, and this may even prevent dropout (Dundas, Thorsheim, Hjeltnes, & Binder, 2016).

Benefits for Well-being

The literature illuminates the benefits of mindfulness on the overall human experience and personal well-being. These benefits include but are not limited to: the ability to look inward, increased energy levels, feeling better about self, improved attitude, a richer, more meaningful and fulfilling life, life satisfaction, more self-control, acceptance, compassion, and empathy, healthier life choices, and expanded self-awareness (Thompson, 2010; Burke & Hawkins, 2012; Schwind, et al., 2017).

Benefits for the Mind

The literature reveals the benefits of mindfulness on the mind through alertness and attunement to self-awareness, improved balance, focus, concentration, objectivity, introspection, and mental clarity with flexible thoughts and responses. Self-awareness allows students to be aware of the contents of the mind and to understand the typical thought patterns of the mind, which improves coping, understanding of mental processes, leads to less reactivity, less distraction, and reduces unhelpful thoughts; thereby, increasing the capacity for emotional

intelligence. Mindfulness increases the stability of mind by sustaining the mind in an alert, clear space, rather than at the two extremes of a dull or agitated mind. Mindfulness also increases the flexibility of mind, which is the ability to shift your mind to whatever object you choose, rather than having it bounce haphazardly between a number of issues (Thompson, 2010; Burke & Hawkins, 2012; Pierdomenico et al., 2017; Schwind, et al., 2017).

Therapeutic Benefits

The literature exposes the therapeutic benefits of mindfulness as decreased anxiety, worry, depression, pain, anger, and stress, along with reduced physiological symptoms. Notably, students experience less emotional reactivity and lability, less rumination, less tension, less self-destructive behaviors and self-depreciatory thoughts, which in turn promotes feelings of relaxation, inner peace and calm, and an increased sense of wellbeing (Thompson, 2010; Burke & Hawkins, 2012; Dundas et al. 2016; Pierdomenico et al., 2017; Schwind, et al., 2017; Lynch, n.d.).

Life Benefits

The literature divulges the life benefits of mindfulness as social and emotional development consisting of self-management, and improved social skills, self-regulation, self-insight, relationship satisfaction, development of empathy and compassion, inner life awareness, providing meaning and purpose in life, and exploration of existential issues; the big questions of life (Thompson, 2010; Burke & Hawkins, 2012).

Learning Skills and Academic Performance Benefits

Literature on mindfulness in relation to learning skills and academic performance include but are not limited to better focus on the task or lesson at hand and ability to engage more fully with the subject matter, course content, and with other students. Students expressed improved information processing speed, comprehension, cognitive flexibility, metacognition, study habits, performance, curiosity, planning, and organizational skills, reduced test anxiety and improved test scores, and enhanced memory and concentration, while reducing mind-wandering, daydreaming, and filtering out distractions (Leland, 2015; Dundas et al. 2016; Schwind, et al., 2017; Lynch, n.d.).

Benefits for Critical Thinking

Literature on mindfulness and critical thinking skills shows improved ability to look inwardly, question views and beliefs, and to recognize the wisdom one has within themselves, by trusting one's own judgement and inner voice, which cultivates the capacity to experience inner knowing (Burke & Hawkins, 2012; Leland, 2015).

Benefits for Behavior and Self-control

Literature on mindfulness as it relates to behavior and self-control confirms improved self-awareness, good will, and acceptance, while decreasing poor behaviors and reactions to

emotional distress. Mindfulness enhanced students ability to identify and process feelings and control reactions through healthier problem solving skills and self-reflection, which enriched character development (Burke & Hawkins, 2012; Leland, 2015; Schwind, et al., 2017).

Benefits for Job-Specific Skill Development

Literature on mindfulness and job-specific skill development reveals less burnout, improved clinical skills, and the aptitude to develop time management skills, self-reflection, openness, integrity, empathy, compassion, and connection to others, while withholding judgment. Listening skills and active listening improved; thus, minimizing poor listening habits like mind wandering, thinking ahead, and multitasking while listening (Leland, 2015; Schwind, et al., 2017; Lynch, n.d.).

Benefits on the Impact of Bullying

The literature on the benefits of mindfulness and bullying is invaluable. Bullying is seen in various forms, including physical, verbal (name-calling, insults, intimidation), social (spreading rumors, mimicking), and cyberbullying (using technology to bully). Bullying can occur in person and online, can be direct or indirect, and overt or covert. Bullying causes physical and psychological harm. The use of mindfulness improved student behavior and self-regulation, reduced peer-to-peer conflict and violence, and nurtured positive social skills including compassion, patience, empathy, and generosity (Burke & Hawkins, 2012; Leland, 2015).

Benefits for Students with Learning Disabilities

Mindfulness also shows positive benefits for students with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities face considerable issues in higher education. Disabilities pose challenges to academic learning and may make it more difficult for students to behave in accordance with set institutional standards. Students with learning disabilities may experience frequent anxiety and worry, anger and frustration, mind wandering and difficulty concentrating, repeated failure, and ineffective coping (Leland, 2015).

The use of mindfulness training in students with learning disabilities reveals academic improvement, increased attention span and commitment, better ability to understand, control, and express emotion in adaptive ways, while decreasing behavioral issues arising from impulsiveness and difficulty reading social cues. Incidents of challenging, rebellious, disruptive, and overly physical behavior reduced, as students learned to better control their reactions to stressful situations (Leland, 2015).

Mindfulness Exercises

To operationalize mindfulness in practice takes time. One must believe in development of the whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional, and physical well-being. Keys to mindfulness success include bringing one's whole being to the process, patience, persistence, self-trust, letting go, acceptance, journaling, and scheduling it and practicing it often.

During mindfulness sessions, make a concerted effort to stop multitasking and unplug from any digital and technological engagement (Thompson, 2010).

Mindfulness is learning how to become aware of and breathe into our body sensations in order to deal with troubling emotions (Thompson, 2010). Try using the following mindfulness exercises to empty the mind and find calm in present awareness, amidst the madness of scattering thoughts and emotions of a frenzied day. It only takes a few minutes each day to improve wellbeing and cultivate mental awareness and positive mind-body balance (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.). Enjoy the sensation of just being.

Breathing Exercises

Mindful breathing can be done in any position, at any time. It requires you to be still and focus on breathing for just a minute or two (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.). Thompson (2010), suggests sitting upright with a small bow when practicing mindfulness of breath and dropping any expectations before the session.

For this exercise, start by breathing in and out slowly, for cycles of six seconds, for each breath in and each breath out. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting the breath flow effortlessly out back into the atmosphere, while you let go of your thoughts (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.).

Naturally, your mind will try to drift away to other thoughts, but simply notice these thoughts, let them be for what they are, and return to watchful, mindful breathing. Observe the physical sensation connected with mindful breathing, such as the rise and fall of the abdomen. This breathing exercise is useful in calming the mind when thoughts are racing out of control (Thompson, 2010).

Mindful Observation

This is a simple exercise but incredibly powerful, as it connects us with the natural beauty of the world in a more profound way (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.). Pick a natural entity within the immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a blade of grass swaying with the movement of wind, a leaf or flower, an animal, bird, or insect (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.).

Avoid labeling or categorizing what you see, just notice the thing you are looking at; really notice it, be observant but not critical, be aware but not fixated (Positive Psychology Program, 2017). Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. Visually explore every aspect, be consumed by its presence and possibilities, and connect with its energy and purpose with in the natural world (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.). If distracted, notice the distraction and pull your thoughts back to the entity and mindful observation (Positive Psychology Program, 2017).

Mindful Listening

Mindful listening is an important skill for all students to master. Students thrive when they feel fully heard but often have poor listening skills and become distracted easily. Mindful listening involves self-regulation, in which the focus on self is set aside. Mindful listening creates inner stillness by putting aside preconceptions and prejudices, and the listener is free of inner chatter, while learning **valuable positive communication skills** (Positive Psychology Program, 2017).

Mindful listening opens students up to sound in a non-judgmental way. Past experiences and preconceptions have less influence in mindful listening. For example, listening to a song may elicit negative feelings. Mindful listening involves a neutral perspective with present moment awareness, unhindered by preconception (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.).

Start by choosing something to listen to, then close your eyes, and get lost in the exploration of sound for the duration of the song. Be aware of the sound waves, the beat of each instrument, and separate and analyze each sound. Focus on the vocals, the sound of the voice, its range and tones. The awareness of listening attentively allows one to be fully entwined with the sound composition, without regard to the artist, lyrics, or instruments (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.).

A second option for mindful listening involves listening and difficult conversations. In this exercise, students ask a series of questions to another student. Questions consist of “What is your fondest and oldest memory? Why is this such a fond memory? What your most painful memory? What makes this memory so painful? There should be no interruptions during the session (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, n.d.).

During this exercise, the student listens intently while making eye contact, refraining from judgment. Each student will spend time as the listener and the speaker, asking the same series of questions. Through this experience, students realize how little they actually listen and come to recognize the importance of mindful listening. This exercise allows students to let go of distractions and possible reactions, by silencing the internal noise the listener may experience (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, n.d.).

Mindful Awareness

Mindful awareness cultivates a heightened awareness and thankfulness of unassuming daily responsibilities (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.). Identify something that happens each day, for students that might be starting the computer. At that moment be mindful of your own self-presence, feelings in the moment, and appreciate the hands and brain that enable this process. Cues do not have to be physical, mindful awareness can also be practiced by focusing on a negative, repetitive thought. At that moment, stop, label the thought as unhelpful, and release the negative energy. When you smell food, for example, take a moment to appreciate how fortunate you are to have food to eat (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.).

Mindful Immersion

This mindfulness exercise cultivates contentment in the moment with ordinary routine tasks and allows one to experience it fully. For example, when cleaning your home, take note of

every detail involved, observing each feature of movement, feel and become one with the movements. The idea is to get creative and notice experiences within routine tasks and the movements associated with them. Instead of thinking about completing the task, become mindful of every step and fully experience it (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d.).

Mindful Appreciation

The point of this exercise is to give thanks and appreciate seemingly insignificant things in life, things that support our existence, but seldom get a second thought. In this exercise, notice five things in your day that usually go unappreciated, for instance people or objects. For example: the computer allows you to connect and research, your hands allow you to type, electricity powers your alarm clock, the television provides you with entertainment, your ears allow you to hear a dog barking, “but... Do you know how these things/processes came to exist, or how they really work? Have you ever properly acknowledged how these things benefit your life and the lives of others? Have you ever thought about what life might be like without these things? Have you ever stopped to notice their finer, more intricate details? Have you ever sat down and thought about the relationships between these things and how together they play an interconnected role in the functioning of the earth? Once you have identified your five things, make it your duty to find out everything you can about their creation and purpose to truly appreciate the way in which they support your life” (Pocket Mindfulness, n.d., sec. 6).

In-Class Contemplation

If a student’s attention is not focused in the moment they will not be able to effectively complete the task at hand. At the beginning of class, instruct students to take a few deep clearing breaths. Allow the body to release unhelpful thoughts and relax, feeling the gentle pull of gravity. Let go and be silent, do not do anything for a few moments, just focus on breathing, allowing the breath to flow in and out effortlessly (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, n.d.)

Guided Meditation on a Raisin

This exercise heightens self-awareness and attention, and students come to understand and realize the benefits of paying greater attention in the moment. For this exercise, give each student a raisin. Instruct students to contemplate the raisin for 10 minutes, look at it, touch it, smell it, taste it, chew it, and swallow it. Then, discuss the students experience with this activity. Students realize the complexity of slowing down and focusing on the raisin in that moment in time. Students discover their relationship with the raisin and the raisin may generate memories, as they rediscover its taste. Students learn to cultivate wonder and pay attention to what is happening in the moment (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, n.d.).

Journaling

Journaling is not a new concept in higher education; however, it is a mindfulness technique that is highly underutilized. Journaling has several benefits for the college student, as it allows for self-reflection and promotes self-awareness. Journaling allows students to be aware of

actions and behaviors that impede scholastic development and decipher between emotion and logic, which in turn improves reasoning skills. Journaling allows for contemplation in the moment where students can center themselves, practice writing skills, and thought organization. Journaling builds confidence, aids in productivity, relieves stress, and calms the mind.

In this exercise, students answer three questions. The first is “What matters here?” This question allows students to take ownership for where they are in the world and take ownership for their role in the classroom, which ties into caring. Caring about one’s self, about academic achievement, and caring about each other. The second question is “Where are you now?” This question has psychological, emotional, and spiritual implications, as it is about the map of one’s life and where the student is on that map, in that moment. Lastly, the third question is “What do you know now?” Students think about knowing on different levels, not just an intellectual level, as they write from their own experience and value that experience (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, n.d.).

Summary

Mindfulness is a useful technique that aids in student achievement. Using mindfulness techniques in higher education allows students to improve their academic performance through an integrated educational experience. Students that use mindfulness techniques are more organized, focused, and better prepared, they are able to critically think, problem solve, and perform better on exams. Mindfulness also has a positive impact on impulse control, relationship building, and stress reduction. **Mindfulness** allows students to concentrate and focus on what is important in the present moment, and not be distracted by thoughts and emotions, or the noise around us, which cultivates a truer awareness of being.

Mindfulness has a relevant and important role in higher education, as completion rates remain low. In an era of dwindling funding, the use of mindfulness is a free technique that institutions of higher education can easily incorporate into existing courses, which can lead to an increase in student achievement, graduation, and employment rates. Mindfulness shapes students into better learners and transforms institutions of higher education into better learning communities.

When you know better, you do better. —Maya Angelou

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