"This isn't happening right now": Racial Diversity Conversations in a Well-being-Focused Course

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Abstract

The present study explored how Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and White students enrolled in a well-being-focused course at a Midwestern, predominantly White institution, experienced conversations about race and diversity. We used reflexive thematic analysis to examine transcripts from semi-structured interviews with 15 first-year undergraduate students (seven White, eight BIPOC). Four themes were identified: (1) *White student discomfort with racial diversity conversations*, characterized by avoidance, guilt, and self-censoring; (2) *BIPOC students' frustration with White students' disengagement* and defensiveness; (3) *BIPOC students' dissatisfaction with instructional experiences* stemming from shallow engagement with racial topics and some insensitive remarks by instructors; and (4) *feeling challenged and experiencing growth*, particularly among students who reframed discomfort as an opportunity for personal development. Overall, the present study underscores the importance of thoughtful integration of racial identity considerations into universal well-being interventions to ensure equitable benefits for diverse student populations.

Keywords: College student mental health; Flourishing; Diversity; White fragility; Mindfulness

Public Significance of Research

This study highlights the challenges of engaging in racial diversity-focused conversations within a well-being-focused class. We found that White students experienced significant discomfort, whereas BIPOC students felt frustrated and isolated, particularly with the superficial handling of these topics by some instructors. Some students also reported experiences of growth as a result of these conversations. There is a need to better understand and support the facilitation of deep, sensitive conversations about racial diversity in these contexts.

"This isn't happening right now": Racial Diversity Conversations in a Well-being-Focused Course

Mental health challenges amongst college students represent a major public health challenge globally (McGorry et al., 2024). In the United States (U.S.), the number of students experiencing elevated mental health symptoms has nearly doubled over the previous decade (Duffy et al., 2019), and the situation has significantly deteriorated following the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2022). Furthermore, university and college counseling centers are experiencing significant hardship due to both increased symptomatology amongst students and an increased demand for mental health services relative to enrollment (Xiao et al., 2017). The challenge is especially acute for students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), as BIPOC students report significantly lower rates of mental health utilization relative to White students (Lipson et al., 2022). For instance, in 2021, the past-year treatment rates were notably lower for Black students (37.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander students (APIDA, 33.8%), and Latine students (35.9%) compared to White students (55.8%; Lipson et al., 2022). As such, colleges and universities must explore novel strategies for addressing the mental health crisis and supporting student well-being. For the present study, we define well-being following a training-based operationalization which purports that well-being is the cultivation of four core skills—awareness (i.e., attention regulation), connection (i.e., cultivation of meaningful relationships), insight (i.e., self-understanding), and purpose (i.e., sense of meaning in daily life; Dahl et al., 2020).

Meditation and mindfulness (MM) based interventions may be one possible solution. Prior meta-analyses have found that MM interventions (e.g., mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and app-based meditation programs) can be effective in

reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress as well as supporting increased well-being in university settings (Dawson et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2023; Worsley et al., 2022). Many of these interventions occur outside the classroom, either through synchronous guided sessions or unguided mobile apps. Synchronous sessions may be difficult for college students to access due to their demanding schedules, while app-based interventions often face low adherence, potentially limiting their overall effectiveness (Jiwani et al., 2023). As such, integrating MM practices directly into the academic curriculum may be a promising alternative.

The *well-being course* (WBC), initially developed in 2016 by a group of multidisciplinary scholars across three research universities in the U.S. (Hirshberg et al., 2022), offers a novel approach to addressing accessibility concerns by offering a credit-bearing college course that meets student academic requirements. It integrates contemplative practices through both didactic and experiential learning (i.e., meditation training) to enhance well-being (Hirshberg et al., 2022; Inkelas et al., 2023). The course content is grounded in five core dimensions—foundations, awareness, connection, insight, and integration, which build on the previously mentioned training-based well-being framework (Dahl et al., 2020; see Hirshberg et al., 2022, or Appendix A for a description of each of the dimensions). Prior research suggests that the WBC may improve student mental health and well-being (Hirshberg et al., 2022, 2024), even when course pedagogy and student engagement vary across different university contexts (Inkelas et al., 2023). However, the impact of the course on students of different racial identities has not been previously examined (Hirshberg et al., 2022).

One important criticism of the literature on MM and well-being is that the theories, research, and interventions have largely excluded BIPOC people (Kiknadze & Fowers, 2023; Proulx et al., 2018). For instance, multiple meta-analyses have found that BIPOC people have

been underrepresented in research on mindfulness relative to their population proportions (Eichel et al., 2021; Waldron et al., 2018). Furthermore, some BIPOC groups, particularly Black and Latine groups, have also been found to be less likely to utilize mindfulness relative to White individuals, potentially due to a lack of consideration for values and perspectives associated with BIPOC people in the development of MM interventions (Cramer et al., 2016; Jiwani et al., 2023; Macinko & Upchurch, 2019) as well as a lack of cultural representation of BIPOC in popular mindfulness (Gajaweera, 2022). As of Fall 2021, BIPOC students comprise 48% of the college student population in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), and thus, it is particularly important for interventions such as WBC to address the needs of BIPOC and White students.

One potential need of BIPOC students in the context of well-being interventions may be to explore how their racial identity, along with the systemic forces that exclude and marginalize them, affects their overall well-being (Comas-Díaz, 2019; Williams et al., 2022). Particularly in the contexts of predominantly White institutions (PWIs), BIPOC students report experiences of racism and discrimination, which have been found to be associated with increased mental health symptoms and lower academic engagement (Eliason & Turalba, 2019; Griffith et al., 2019; Ingram & Wallace, 2019; Jochman et al., 2019). Conversely, engagement in constructive dialogues has been found to increase feelings of belonging (Muñoz & Rostron, 2024) as well as support greater identity development for BIPOC students (Ford & Malaney, 2014). White students may also benefit from racial diversity-focused conversations, as it can support the development of cultural competence, an increasingly important skill in a globalized economy (Saxena et al., 2023). Additionally, prior research suggests that conversations about racial diversity may enhance student self-awareness, empathy, and social connectedness (Ball &

Skrzypek, 2022), which are important components of flourishing (Ryff & Singer, 2008). In the present study, flourishing is conceptualized as more than the absence of mental illness, but rather the presence of positive emotions (e.g., regularly experiencing happiness), positive psychological functioning (e.g., self-acceptance), and positive social functioning (e.g., feelings of belonging; Keyes, 2007). On the other hand, difficulties with engaging in such conversations have been found to be detrimental to White student mental health (Trawalter et al., 2009).

Conversations about racial diversity in a majority White classroom can be challenging for several reasons. Prior research suggests that for White students, discussions of race in the classroom may trigger White fragility, a concept which draws from Helms' (1998) stages of White racial identity developmental model and serves as an umbrella term for emotional responses (e.g., anger, guilt, discomfort, etc.) when White people consider their racial identity, racial bias, and/or privileges associated with being White (DiAngelo, 2018; Ford et al., 2022; Pieterse et al., 2016; Spanierman et al., 2008). In addition, for many White first-year undergraduate students in a PWI context, where Whiteness is often normalized and unexamined, classroom discussions about race may represent an early encounter with these identity development processes, potentially amplifying such responses (Helms, 1998). For BIPOC students, conversations about racial diversity may make them feel uncomfortable, as they may be deemed as the representatives of their cultural identity and experience implicit pressure from peers or instructors to talk about these issues (Eliason & Turalba, 2019; Harper, 2007; Pieterse et al., 2016). Additionally, BIPOC students may feel invalidated by White students' defensiveness or disengagement as well as by poorly handled facilitation of racial diversity-focused conversations (Sue et al., 2009). Despite these documented challenges in traditional classroom settings, there remains a critical gap in understanding how racial dynamics might manifest within

universal well-being-focused interventions that integrate mindfulness and contemplative practices (e.g., Crowley et al., 2022; Hobbs et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2021). A recent meta-analysis examining mindfulness-based interventions across 30 randomized controlled trials found a medium-sized effect on intergroup bias, internalized bias, and anti-bias outcomes ($g = -0.53$; Chang et al., 2024), suggesting that MM practices may contribute to reduced bias. As such, it is conceivable that the use of MM practices, at least theoretically, may support conditions for more meaningful conversations about race in these contexts. Given that classroom-based well-being interventions are increasingly being implemented to address the college mental health crisis, it is essential to examine whether the established patterns of racial dynamics persist, are mitigated, or take on new forms within these specialized educational contexts. A better understanding of these dynamics will help elucidate whether these interventions offer opportunities for engaging effectively in conversations about race in a multiracial classroom.

The present study aimed to explore how students experience conversations about racial diversity in the well-being-focused course (i.e., WBC) at a PWI, guided by the following research question: How do students experience conversations about race in a well-being course at a Midwestern PWI? Data for the current study were drawn from a broader project (Jiwani et al., 2026) to explore first-semester, first-year undergraduate students' experiences of the WBC, emphasizing data-derived participant perspectives and experiences. Notably, while the broader project did not initially focus on racial diversity focused conversations, this secondary analysis was driven by the richness (i.e., complex, detailed, and pertaining to an underresearched topic such that participants' perspectives were unknown and warranted full description; Braun & Clarke, 2006) of racial diversity themes that students repeatedly raised during interviews. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), we examined data from semi-

structured interviews with 15 students (seven White and eight BIPOC) to engage in a deeper analysis of race and racial diversity-focused conversations by White and BIPOC students.

Method

As noted in the Introduction, a more general investigation of how first-year, first-semester undergraduate students experience the WBC preceded and inspired the current, more focused analysis of students' experiences with racial diversity discussions. A qualitative research design and specifically, *reflexive thematic analysis,* our chosen methodology, was well-suited for the aim of our study and as a framework to guide critical reflection for a multiracial research team interpreting students' experiences discussing race in the WBC at a PWI (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). A qualitative design allowed us to investigate course dynamics, particularly with regards to exploring conversations about racial diversity, which may not be apparent in the context of quantitative research, while also emphasizing similarities and differences across the experiences of BIPOC and White students (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, reflexive thematic analysis emphasizes researchers' continuous and critical reflection on their positionality relative to the data and the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). This process was necessary for a research team that included members who had previously worked on the WBC teaching team or who were otherwise involved with related research and teaching, as these experiences informed data coding and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Through the initial reflexive approach for coding and theme generation as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021), the first author identified that the 15 interviews yielded data on the underresearched topic of conversations about race within a well-being course at a Midwestern PWI that were complex and detailed—in other words, sufficiently rich to allow for

selective analysis focused specifically on themes related to racial diversity conversations in the class (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In collaboration with other authors involved in the analysis, we collectively agreed to present this specific theme development and refinement as a separate manuscript. Woven with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and detailed in the sections below, we also endeavored to adhere to recommendations set by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as well as Nowell and colleagues (2017) regarding trustworthiness of our data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Intervention

In the iteration of the course examined in the present study, the class met in person twice-weekly for 50-minute full-class lectures and once-weekly for 50-minute discussion sections with a smaller group of students led by an instructor or TA, ranging from 19 to 25 students in size over a 15-week semester. Over the course of the semester, students examined five interconnected dimensions of flourishing, which were closely drawn from a training-based framework for well-being described by Dahl et al. (2020) and elucidated through weekly topics related to one of the dimensions. The five dimensions include foundations, awareness, connection, insight, and integration, with example topics such as *introduction to flourishing* (foundations), *focus* (awareness), *interdependence* (connection), *values* (insight), and *community* (integration).

While the course was not primarily focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), diversity was an important consideration throughout the course. For instance, there were efforts to ensure that the teaching team reflected diversity of identity and perspectives. Additionally, diverse voices and perspectives were emphasized in the assignments and lectures. As an example, for the resilience topic as part of the foundations unit, student assignments included a reading on the neurobiological perspective of resilience (see Sapolsky, 2017), as well as a

podcast with mental health providers who provided support in Puerto Rico following the earthquake in 2020 (see Aybar et al., 2020). Additionally, one week in the connection unit focused exclusively on diversity, as an understanding and appreciation of diversity was seen as critical to flourishing in an interdependent world. While the intention was to focus on all aspects of diversity, as well as intersectionality, the teaching team determined that given the ongoing mental health impact of the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Eichstaedt et al., 2021) and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed, racial diversity discussions were particularly important. During diversity week, students engaged with content exploring implicit bias, intersectionality, systemic racism, in-group/out-group dynamics, and racial discrimination through lectures, readings, and videos. For example, students were assigned to take and reflect on the implicit bias test and read a chapter from Clint Smith's book *How the Word is Passed* (2021), which explored how the legacy and history of slavery continues to shape modern U.S. culture and politics (see Appendix A for description of the key objectives for the diversity week).

Beyond these assignments, there was no specific preparation for students in engaging with diversity week. The student perspectives described in the present study section include conversations during the diversity week as well as conversations about race throughout the class. Students also engaged in guided mindfulness practices throughout the course during the full-class lectures, in the discussion sections, and at home using the Healthy Minds Program app (HMP app; see Goldberg et al., 2020), which is based on the same framework as the course (i.e., Dahl et al., 2020). The aim of the meditation practices was to support the development of an experiential understanding of the concepts discussed in class (Hirshberg et al., 2022). During diversity week, the in-app meditation practices focused on extending kindness and compassion across group boundaries. A total of 258 students were enrolled in the class, of whom 29.1% (*n* =

75) identified as BIPOC, including 8.5% (*n* = 22) African American, 8.5% (*n* = 22) Latine, 7.4% (*n* = 19) Asian, and 4.7% (*n* = 12) multiracial. The course had a racially and ethnically diverse teaching team from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., neuroscience, counseling psychology, and humanities). During the year when the study was conducted, the teaching team had four instructors and five teaching assistants. The instructors were responsible for leading the twice-weekly full-class lectures, and three out of four led one weekly discussion section each. The TAs would occasionally lead the lecture, but their role primarily encompassed attending class, facilitating two to three weekly discussion sections each, and grading. No specific training was provided to the instructors to facilitate conversations during diversity week in advance of the course. See Appendix A for additional information about the course as well as Hirshberg et al. (2022) for a detailed perspective on the course design and efficacy.

Participants and Procedure

All participants in the broader project were students at a large, public, midwestern university who, during Fall 2022, completed the WBC. In December 2022, the first and last authors visited the WBC to invite enrolled students, 18 years of age and older, to participate in an interview (no more than 60 minutes to minimize participant burden) about their experiences in the course. Students were informed of the voluntary nature of participation in the study and that, upon completion of the interview, they would be paid $40 for their participation. Students were provided with a screening survey (via QR code) to express their interest in participating, as well as to report demographic information. We measured satisfaction with the course using a single-item question (i.e., “Overall, how satisfied were you with the [WBC]?”). Student responses ranged along a five-point Likert scale from extremely satisfied to extremely dissatisfied.

Through this initial survey, 60 students expressed interest in participating in the study, and 15 students ultimately participated in the interviews (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics of both sets of students). Pursuing a diverse sample (Braun & Clarke, 2021), we used purposeful, maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2014) combined with a first-come, first-served approach to construct a sample that aimed to reveal student experiences in the WBC that cut across satisfaction with the course and race. These characteristics were selected to explore varied student experiences in the course, and because mindfulness research has historically not been inclusive of BIPOC people's perspectives (Waldron et al., 2018). We iteratively invited students based on two criteria: 1) the order they completed the screening survey, and 2) whether each participant would help us achieve maximum variation across race and satisfaction with the course. Through this approach, we continued inviting students until we achieved adequate representation across different satisfaction levels and racial backgrounds, resulting in our final sample of 15 participants.

Given the small population of students, particularly BIPOC students, from which participants could be selected, individual participant characteristics will not be included here to protect participant confidentiality; in association with quotes in the Results section, only participants' racial status (White or BIPOC) and satisfaction level with the course will be noted. Summary statistics provided in Table 1 include additional detail regarding the full sample. Relatedly, all identifiable statements made in references to the WBC teaching team by participants were anonymized to protect these unintentional participants (Chang et al., 2016).

Interviews

The first author led the development of the interview protocol with feedback from all co-authors, with the exception of the fifth author (RJD), who joined the study team at a later date.

The co-authors either had expertise in the subject domain (ZJ, SUL, RJD, SBG) or in qualitative methods (RLD, TBW). Feedback was also solicited and provided by members of the teaching team who had knowledge of the course structure. See Appendix B for the complete interview guide. The questions inquired about students' overall experience with the class (e.g., "How would you describe your overall experience of the class?"), moments that were meaningful as well as moments where students felt disconnected or uncomfortable (e.g., "If you had a moment when you felt uncomfortable or disconnected from the class, can you share that with me? What about this moment made you feel uncomfortable or disconnected?"), and the influence of prior lived experience on the class (e.g., "How do you feel your background or prior lived experiences prepared you for engaging in this class?"). While the interview protocol was not intended to generate more than one study, the themes presented here were deemed sufficiently rich (i.e., complex, detailed, and pertaining to an underresearched topic such that participants' perspectives were unknown; Braun & Clarke, 2006), warranting full, independent description. All interview content relevant to the present research question was included in the analysis, though data related to the themes presented here were frequently drawn from participants' responses to the aforementioned question about moments of discomfort or disconnection.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom in December 2022 and January 2023 upon completion of course requirements by student participants. Participants were permitted to turn their cameras on or off based on their comfort and ability. Prior to completing their interviews, participants received information about the study, were given the opportunity to ask questions, and provided informed consent to participate. The interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 60 minutes in duration. To support data credibility, at the end of each interview, the participant was asked if there was anything more they wished to add or discuss to better ensure that their full

experience with the WBC was captured (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). The first author completed 14 interviews, and the second author completed one. The initial intention was for both authors to complete an equal number of interviews, but due to scheduling and logistical challenges, the first author conducted most of the interviews. Both interviewers took notes immediately following participant interviews to note their initial observations and reactions to facilitate researcher reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

Data Analysis

Research Team

The authors primarily involved in the data analysis process for the study had a range of positionalities relative to the class. The first author is a doctoral student in counseling psychology, identifies as BIPOC, and previously served as a teaching assistant for the WBC. The second author (SUL) identifies as a multilingual woman of color and a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology, has received qualitative research training in a graduate-level course, and has attended a workshop which was intended for course TAs and other stakeholders interested in learning more about the course. The third author (RLD) identifies as White, is an assistant professor of psychology at a small liberal arts college, has expertise in qualitative methods and served as an auditor for the analysis. She has no experience with the WBC but has led numerous trainings on unlearning racism for White psychologists and students. The fourth author (TBW) is a faculty member in the Social Work department, with expertise in qualitative research methods, identifies as White, and has no prior experience with the WBC.

The authors individually and collectively reflected on how their particular positionality might influence their engagement with the data. Collectively, engaging with this multiracial team

with varying levels of engagement with the class facilitated the convergence of diverse perspectives to generate richer and more nuanced perspectives. Notably, while the first author's previous experience as a TA with the course offered valuable context, the coding meetings served as a potential safeguard in ensuring that interpretations for the present study were grounded in participant experiences, rather than previously held assumptions. For instance, despite the first author's prior experience on the teaching team, the salience of racial diversity focused conversations in the interview data was largely unexpected. This discrepancy underscored the importance of centering participant perspectives. Additional consultations with the fourth author, who served as a qualitative consultant on the project and had no prior connection to the course, also allowed the team to deepen reflexivity and uphold ethical representation. Finally, the identities of the first and second authors as BIPOC scholars and students also augmented our awareness to concerns of BIPOC students in the course, which guided our efforts to capture and incorporate these experiences in the analysis and design of the study. None of the authors involved in recruitment, participant interviews, or data analysis participated in the initial course development, nor did they have any prior relationship with the participants outside the scope of the study.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Following the interviews being professionally transcribed then reviewed by the first author, we followed the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis procedure: 1) data familiarization, 2) initial code generation, 3) initial theme generation, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) writing up a report of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). While this procedure was originally outlined for a broader *thematic analytic* approach (2006), Braun and Clarke more recently (2021) affirmed that these recursive phases also reflect their reflexive

approach. Given that the broader study focused on the experiences of first-year, first-semester students in this course, an inductive approach focused only on semantic content was selected to decenter the authorship team's theoretical interests, assumptions, and preconceptions, which may overshadow student experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For the first phase, the first and second authors engaged independently in data familiarization (i.e., reading all transcripts and noting reactions; reviewing memos taken after each interview; Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). In the second phase, these authors then produced initial, data-driven codes using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to facilitate this process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dhakal, 2022). While technically distinct from a reflexive thematic analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021), these authors then constructed a codebook to pragmatically document and recurrently use their codes, as well as to provide a basis for engaging in both independent reflexivity and reflexivity between the two authors. Following the instructions by Braun & Clarke (2006; 2021), the coding process involved systematic labeling of data that were relevant to our research question. Example codes associated with the present study included "worry about saying the wrong thing" (see Theme 1) and "lack of depth in conversations about race" (see Theme 3). These authors met regularly while coding to discuss similarities and differences in their codes, working to agree on coding phrasing and meaning for recurrent use. These authors then independently applied codes using the existing codebook, meeting frequently to discuss and refine under supervision and guidance from the fourth author, who was not involved in the direct reflexive thematic analytic tasks. All coding disagreements were addressed through collaborative discussion and resolved by consensus.

For the third and fourth phases, the first author, with support from the fourth author, used the visual mapping software Miro–a collaborative tool for manually organizing and visually

sorting information (Chan et al., 2023)—taking the initial codes documented in the codebook and visually sorting and collating them into potential themes, then assessing whether the collated codes and resulting themes formed a clear pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To support research credibility, we employed prolonged engagement with the data, such that these initial phases involved an active and iterative process lasting several months.

During the fourth phase, the first author determined that the theme "Discomfort with Racial Diversity" encompassed a richness of data specifically related to race-focused conversations, warranting a more detailed, separate analysis to fully capture the complexity and nuance of this topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first, fourth and last authors consulted on this, determining that—congruent with the reflexive thematic analytic phases—a separate manuscript for these data was warranted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These authors identified a second research question: How do students experience conversations about race in the WBC at a PWI? The first author then re-engaged with the fourth phase for the "Discomfort with Racial Diversity" collated data until they formed a clear pattern and answered the new research question, finding that this select thematic map worked with the dataset selection (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While this approach has limitations insofar as we were unable to ask participants specific questions about race, given that every participant still mentioned something about race and particularly about racial-diversity-focused conversations, we did not feel those themes could be adequately captured in the full study manuscript. In keeping with reflexive thematic analysis, as we had preemptively opted to analyze only semantic content, the third phase (i.e., initial theme generation) was not repeated, as all information semantically related to race had already fallen under this theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the fifth phase, these redefined themes were shared with the full author team for support with code names and definitions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To support confirmability, the third author served as an auditor, reviewing the redefined themes, a draft write-up, and the Miro visual map for the current study. The auditor provided feedback that deepened interpretation and provided a more nuanced understanding of the data, particularly with regard to racial identity development. No substantive changes were made as a result of the auditor's feedback. To support research credibility and transferability, preliminary results were shared with three students who participated in the annual WBC across three different years but did not participate in the broader study. All students were presented with the themes in a format similar to the Results below, and they confirmed that the reported themes in the present study largely matched their experience of the course (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). The sixth phase is shared in Results. The present study was not preregistered, and the interview data are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality.

Results

Four themes were identified in our analysis of students' experiences discussing topics related to racial diversity in the WBC at a PWI. These themes include: (1) White student discomfort with racial diversity conversations, (2) BIPOC Students' Frustration with White Students' Disengagement, (3) BIPOC Students' Dissatisfaction with Instructional Experiences, and (4) Feeling challenged and experiencing growth (see Table 2 for a list of themes, their descriptions, and examples). Here, we describe these themes and present illustrative participant quotes to enhance these descriptions. Quotes are anonymously attributed to participants using only their racial identity status (BIPOC or White) as well as their satisfaction level with the course. Some quotes were modified for the purposes of clarity, brevity, and maintaining anonymity, but the substance of the quotes was not modified.

Theme 1: White Student Discomfort with Racial Diversity Conversations

Several White participants reported varied levels of discomfort with discussing racial diversity in the class. Even White students who were extremely satisfied with the course noted that they felt “awkward,” “disconnected,” and felt that the experience of talking about racial diversity was “just kind of weird.” In terms of sources of discomfort, some White students mentioned experiencing guilt associated with White privilege. One White student who reported being extremely satisfied with the course stated, "I think that it kind of made me feel like guilty almost, because having a place of privilege versus people who don't kind of, and that's kind of what the conversation was about." Multiple White students also mentioned their lack of exposure to conversations about racial diversity as a source of their discomfort. These students stated that their more rural backgrounds or lack of prior contact with BIPOC people made them feel that they could not relate to the concerns of their BIPOC peers and thereby “couldn't participate” in the racial diversity focused conversations, as one somewhat satisfied White student noted.

One common response to White students’ feelings of discomfort appeared to be avoidance or self-censoring during conversations about racial diversity. For instance, one White student who reported being somewhat satisfied indicated, "I guess I just didn't wanna like, say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing or make anyone else feel that or like I wasn't listening or wasn't caring about their issues either." For this White student, the concern about saying or doing something “wrong” appeared connected to a worry that BIPOC students might perceive them, a White peer, as disregarding their concerns about racism. Similarly, another White student who was somewhat satisfied with the class reported, “I would want to give word to these topics (related to racial diversity), but I don't want to offend someone else for not describing it right.” Other White students were more explicit about naming their White racial identity as being the foundation for their discomfort in the face of in-class conversations about racial diversity. One

student (White/Somewhat satisfied) reported that their discomfort was due to a perceived feeling of being targeted because of their identity as a White person:

> I always get uncomfortable with this, but probably the diversity [unit], because, being a White [person]…it's kind of hard, because it's always like you're being targeted a little bit, but obviously I know that's not the point, the point is to be, kind of inclusive to everyone. But you always get kind of singled out because you're the majority of this country. So, it's always kind of a little uncomfortable.

The hesitations in the participant's response above may also reinforce the earlier point regarding worry about saying the "wrong" thing, given the apparent discomfort in the student's response (i.e., phrasing, cadence, pausing) as well as the attempts to express and minimize the feelings of discomfort as a White person in the context of racial diversity-focused conversations. It may also be attributable to speaking with an interviewer who presented as a BIPOC person. Overall, several of the White students interviewed reported discomfort associated with discussing racial diversity in class, including salient racial guilt, lack of exposure, and defensiveness. The primary response reported by White students was avoidance and self-censoring.

Theme 2: BIPOC Students' Frustration with White Students' Disengagement

The second theme focused on BIPOC student experiences of frustration and isolation during conversations about racial diversity. This theme appears largely in response to self-censoring and avoidance by White students as described in Theme 1. Several BIPOC students often observed a lack of engagement from White students when racial diversity was the topic at hand. For instance, one student (BIPOC/Somewhat dissatisfied) reported, "The questions were directed towards White students, not one White student answered the question, it was all Students of Color…I was like, oh, my God...I was really just like this isn't happening right

now."[1] Instead, many BIPOC students felt responsible for driving the conversations around racial diversity and, as one somewhat dissatisfied BIPOC student noted, felt they were "kind of teaching the other White kids in the class" without much contribution from their White peers. Furthermore, even when BIPOC students were leading the conversations on racial diversity, they interpreted signs of disinterest from their White peers. One student (BIPOC/Somewhat satisfied) reported that they observed White students in the class would "murmur stuff or they'd still be on their laptop, like they don't take it seriously" during racial diversity-focused conversations. Additionally, BIPOC students also reported observing defensiveness from White students about having to discuss issues of racial diversity. For instance, one student (BIPOC/Somewhat dissatisfied) reported overhearing a White student during an in-class discussion:

> I overheard someone behind me, was talking about like oppression. And this was a White girl, and she was just like; well, I mean it happened in the past, I'm not sure what we can do now. And I'm just like, there's a lot we can do, and having conversations like the ones that were brought up in that class is a foundation.

In addition to defensiveness, the aforementioned quote suggests that White students were interested in moving on from the conversation around racial diversity, potentially to alleviate feelings of discomfort and guilt noted in Theme 1.

Taken together, it appears that most BIPOC students not only observed a lack of positive engagement from White students, but they also interpreted signs of disengagement such as talking amongst themselves, not paying attention and at least in some instances becoming defensive, leading to feelings of disconnection, isolation, and frustration for BIPOC students.

[1] The student did not recall the specific question which was asked of the White students. A review of the lesson plan indicates that questions such as "What is valuable about working toward diversity and equity, and why is it so difficult to achieve?" were asked as discussion questions during the diversity week lecture.

One BIPOC student (Somewhat satisfied), who was not from the Midwestern US, offered a nuanced perspective on the reactions of BIPOC students from the local area. The student noted that some of the feelings of frustration for BIPOC students from the Midwestern U.S. may emerge from past experiences of racism in education settings:

> …but then for them (BIPOC students from the Midwestern US), they already had specific biases, and they just weren't willing to try, and I didn't understand that. And then I tried, and then I'm like, okay. But for them it's like stuff that is reinforced…they'll be like, oh yeah, my (former) teacher used to say the N-word where it's just they just didn't want to be in class at all.

This student's response suggests that responses from Midwest-based BIPOC students to White students were conditioned by past experiences, while also being reinforced in the present context.

Theme 3: BIPOC Students' Dissatisfaction with Instructional Experiences

Many BIPOC students reported frustration around the teaching of the diversity-focused curriculum and how the topic was approached by the teaching team. Students reported two types of concerns. First, BIPOC students reported that there was a lack of depth in exploration around topics related to racial diversity. For instance, one student (BIPOC/Somewhat dissatisfied) noted feeling particularly challenged during the week focused on diversity:

> I think I felt really disconnected that week, just because some of the things that were, actually almost all of the things that we talked about weren't really addressing the exact point. I felt as if (the teaching team) was beating around the bush a lot and didn't want to actually say, a genuine point because (they) didn't want to step on toes.

As this student further noted, the lack of depth around racial diversity may have been due to a focus of the teaching team on 'making our White counterparts comfortable,' rather than focusing on the needs of BIPOC students, a perspective shared by other BIPOC students. BIPOC students also hypothesized that some members of the teaching team may have been feeling uncomfortable leading the conversation on racial diversity which may have also contributed to the lack of depth.

A second type of concern noted by BIPOC students was around inappropriate comments or comparisons made by members of the teaching team which made them feel surprised, shocked and/or uncomfortable. In order to protect the identities of the teaching team, specific comments shared by students are intentionally not disclosed, but can be described as microaggressions involving cultural and historical trauma insensitivity. This student (BIPOC/Neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied) provides a perspective on one particular comment made by a member of the teaching team around topics associated with racial diversity:

> I think one of the professors made a comment, and it's just it's a very sensitive topic already, because of everything that's happened. So…it hits home to some people. I think there was a random comment, because (they don't) have the same experiences as other people. So yeah. I mean, I think just overall that made some people uncomfortable.

This student's perspective suggests that such "random" comments reinforced the perspective that, at least some members of the teaching team did not appreciate or understand the concerns of BIPOC students. In terms of better ways to teach and approach racial diversity related-content, one student (BIPOC/Somewhat dissatisfied) suggested that there needs to be a greater focus on inviting students to "be mindful of how you are speaking on [the topic of racial diversity]". The same student noted that otherwise, White students are perceived as likely to easily "dismiss basically everything" or speak without consideration or care for their peers with drastically

different experiences than their own. Notably, this student's suggestion to be 'mindful' of how one speaks about racial diversity was interpreted by the authors as directly invoking awareness, one of the four core dimensions of wellbeing taught in the course. Faculty might better support White students in navigating these conversations by more explicitly connecting the awareness dimension of the course to race-related dialogue, helping students intentionally apply this skill in moments of racial discomfort.

Theme 4: Feeling Challenged and Experiencing Growth

Even as both White and BIPOC students found the experiences of discussing racial diversity uncomfortable for different reasons, some students, including one somewhat satisfied White student, did frame their discomfort as a "good thing" and felt that they experienced growth and were able to gain insights as a direct result of their experiences having racial diversity-focused conversations in the class. For instance, one student (White/Extremely satisfied) described an exchange where they learned something new that challenged their preexisting perspective:

> I would say one time, someone in the class kind of called out the professors on mostly portraying studies and information about White people, and…I was just a little…like a situation that I had never thought of before. I never thought the information being presented to me was unjust. But I also am a White (person), so I never thought about it that way. But then it was really eye opening…

This student's view demonstrates an acknowledgement of how their racial identity influences their understanding of the world, leading to a new perspective.

For other students, the racial diversity conversations were associated with new understanding of how their race, amongst other factors, influences their ability to flourish or not.

For instance, one student (BIPOC/Somewhat satisfied) noted that their experience as a person from a racially non-diverse town and lower socioeconomic background meant that they never previously had a chance to explore: "…how like your race and your socioeconomic class and your status and everything like that comes into play when you're trying to flourish." For this student, the encouragement to consider and define flourishing for themselves, a central and repeated exercise in the course, was the first opportunity to think more deeply about how much their identities play a role in their ability to flourish in their lives. Finally, some BIPOC students noted that they appreciated having the discussion sections to help unpack the conversations that occurred in the lectures. In these discussion sections, students were able to dig into the same questions in a smaller setting with other students who might be better able to relate to and identify with those experiences. One student (BIPOC/Somewhat dissatisfied) shared how much they appreciated these conversations,

> …in my specific discussion (section), we had people from all different racial and ethnic groups. And so that was very important, we were really able to talk about like how much difference there was within…So in Diversity Week we're getting a lot of diverse different answers, which was almost amazing. I kind of feel sorry for a lot of the other discussions who didn't have that.

Similarly, another BIPOC student who was somewhat dissatisfied with the course noted that while the students in these smaller discussion sections "didn't always have the same exact opinions, we all could understand where each other were coming from." For these students, being with other students of various racial and ethnic groups and understanding their varied perspective on diversity, appeared to be a source of growth, despite the aforementioned challenges in the themes above.

Discussion

College student mental health is an ongoing public health challenge in the U.S. (Duffy et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2022) and prior research suggests that BIPOC students are less likely to utilize traditional mental health services (Lipson et al., 2022). Universal, evidence-based academic interventions, such as the WBC, which provide well-being skills while also meeting student academic needs, may be an important pathway to support the mental health needs of college students. However, for such interventions to be effective, it is critical to meaningfully engage in conversations about the role of race, racial discrimination and systemic oppression given its importance, particularly for BIPOC students (Ingram & Wallace, 2019; Jochman et al., 2019), as well as White students (Ford et al., 2022; Helms, 1998). Using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the present study examined how conversations about racial diversity were experienced by BIPOC and White students in the WBC in the context of a Midwestern PWI. Given that prior research (Chang et al., 2024) suggests that MM practices, which were part of this course, may be associated with reduced bias outcomes, it is conceivable that such a course may offer an opportunity to engage in more meaningful conversations about race.

White students' responses to conversations about race (Theme 1) appear to collectively map onto the White fragility regulatory framework proposed by Ford and colleagues (2022), which uses an emotion regulation framework to understand White fragility and builds on the stages of identity development proposed by Helms (1998), particularly the disintegration stage. In their framework, Ford and colleagues (2022) describe a four-step process (i.e., situation, attention, appraisal, and response) and different White fragility responses at each step (Ford et al., 2022). In the first two steps, when a situation where racial identity becomes salient and is

attended to—such as a discussion of race in a multiracial classroom setting—a White fragility response would be to avoid or exit the situation or to distract and tune out the conversation. We heard descriptions of these behaviors, including staying quiet and not taking racial diversity focused conversations seriously, from both White and BIPOC students. The third step (appraisal) involves appraising the situation whereby the White fragility response is induced when there is emotional overwhelm due to an incongruence between a desire to view oneself as a good and moral person and being confronted about holding prejudicial beliefs and having unearned privilege. The White fragility response to such an appraisal can be minimization and denying responsibility (Ford et al., 2022; Helms, 1998). We heard an example of this response when a White student, as observed by a BIPOC student, minimized past racial oppression and did not believe there was anything actionable to be done about it at present. Finally, in the fourth step (response), there is an emotional response stemming from underlying White fragility as well as a desire to modulate the response (Ford et al., 2022). White students reported experiencing a range of emotions such as guilt, discomfort, defensiveness, and worry. These emotional responses also align with prior research, which examined White students' response to learning about White privilege in a classroom environment (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012; Spanierman et al., 2008). Taken together, our findings suggest that White fragility may have been induced for White students during the conversations about race and may explain some of their responses, even as many studies suggest that mindfulness-based interventions may improve emotion regulation (Roemer et al., 2015) and reduce bias outcomes (Chang et al., 2024). White fragility responses can be taxing for the mental health of White students (Trawalter et al., 2009), and the consequences also extend to BIPOC students who may experience greater negative emotions

when faced with White fragility, potentially leading to detrimental mental health outcomes for BIPOC students (Ford et al., 2022; Griffith et al., 2019; Sue et al., 2009).

BIPOC students' frustration and isolation due to White students' disengagement (Theme 2) appeared to be a form of microinvalidation, a type of microaggression, which involves implicit or explicit messages to refute racialized realities of BIPOC people (Sue et al., 2007). Prior research suggests that racialized microaggressions and discrimination at PWIs have been associated with worse mental health and lower academic achievement for BIPOC students (Ingram & Wallace, 2019; Jochman et al., 2019; Solorzano et al., 2000). Notably, while our sample was not representative and purposefully constructed to vary across satisfaction and race, BIPOC students in our sample generally reported lower levels of course satisfaction relative to White students, a pattern that is consistent with these experiences. BIPOC students also reported feeling a greater burden to engage and lead the conversations about racial diversity in the classroom. This response aligns with prior research, which suggests that BIPOC students often face expectations to contribute during discussions about racial diversity by White peers and professors (Harper, 2013; Pieterse et al., 2016; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). For BIPOC students, such experiences can feel akin to tokenization, leading to greater isolation relative to what they may already be feeling in a PWI context (Griffith et al., 2019; Harper, 2013). We also observed that at least one BIPOC student, not from the Midwestern U.S., noted the response from students in the Midwest may have been influenced by their prior experiences of racialization. Relative to other regions in the U.S., prior research suggests that the Midwest has greater racial inequality and segregation (Gordon, 2019), thereby underscoring variable experiences of BIPOC students by region of origin. These regional differences may help explain the responses of Midwestern BIPOC students, as research indicates that persistent exposure to racial discrimination can

increase vigilance during ambiguous interactions (Bennett et al., 2004), foster greater racial social distancing, and reduce openness to cross-racial friendships (Brondolo et al., 2012).

BIPOC students' dissatisfaction with instructional experiences (Theme 3) suggests that course instructors play a crucial role in shaping student experiences regarding conversations about racial diversity and aligns with prior research, which suggests that PWIs are often performative and shallow in their engagement with racial diversity-related concerns (Rolón-Dow et al., 2022). If course content and instructor behaviors are experienced by students such that White perspectives appear normative and that BIPOC experiences appear peripheral or engaged only superficially, this can conflict with BIPOC students' efforts to develop and maintain a positive, coherent racial or ethnic identity (Gummadam et al., 2016). Such misalignment may contribute to the frustration, isolation, and heightened vigilance described by BIPOC students in this study. Furthermore, previous research has found that instructors often find it very difficult to engage in racial diversity conversations, which may further contribute to more shallow conversations (Satterthwaite-Freiman et al., 2024; Sue et al., 2009). Additionally, given faculty concerns about potential public criticism or backlash (often referred to as "cancel culture"; Norris, 2023) in the university context, instructors may be hesitant to engage in deeper discussions of racial diversity for fear of inadvertently making statements that could be perceived as insensitive. The instructors may have also had difficulty explicitly recognizing and naming White student discomfort, which appeared palpable to BIPOC students. Prior research has found that faculty members being overly concerned with not being perceived as prejudiced can lead to lower trust and feelings of belongingness for BIPOC students (Kunstman et al., 2022). Furthermore, given the strong emphasis on flourishing concepts and MM practices within WBC, instructors may have faced challenges engaging in racial diversity discussions due to the limited

inclusion of BIPOC people's perspectives in both the flourishing (Kiknadze & Fowers, 2023) and MM literature (Proulx et al., 2018). Additionally, such conversations may be even more difficult in the present-day context, given the persistent institutional and systemic attacks on consideration of and conversations about racial diversity in classroom settings (Ng et al., 2025). One possible tool that may be helpful has been described as mindful teaching (Stewart et al., 2023). Stewart and colleagues (2023) drew on the work of Langer (1989) to describe mindful teaching as an approach that is sensitive to variability in context, aware of multiple perspectives, oriented in the present and involving instructor authenticity. For instance, in racial diversity discussions, mindful teaching might involve instructors acknowledging their positionality, creating structured opportunities for all voices to be heard, and responding to emotional reactions in the moment rather than avoiding tension. Lack of mindful teaching has been found to be associated with BIPOC students feeling less valued by their instructors (Stewart et al., 2023).

Despite the many challenges, we also observed participant growth as well as positive experiences related to discussions of racial diversity (Theme 4). For some White students, this was associated with experiences of discomfort, which were not rejected or avoided, but rather accepted and utilized as learning experiences. Acceptance of discomfort around conversations of racial diversity is an important strategy for healthy emotion regulation in response to activation of White fragility (Ford et al., 2022) and a potential positive step in the direction towards greater allyship (Goldie et al., 2024). Given that MM practices have been found to increase distress tolerance (Carpenter et al., 2019), it is possible that the course's meditation components played an unsaid role in supporting some White students' capacity to sit with discomfort rather than avoid it. However, this was not explicitly examined in the study and thus remains a tentative interpretation, making it a potential subject for future research. BIPOC students appeared to have

meaningful discussions around racial diversity and race in smaller groups, particularly with other BIPOC students. This finding suggests that BIPOC students may experience a greater sense of safety to engage in such conversations with a more racially diverse discussion section, aligning with prior research (Pieterse et al., 2016). This also aligns with prior research, which has found that connecting and building solidarity with other BIPOC students with similar lived experiences can often lead to a greater sense of belonging and lower symptoms of psychological distress (Sheets & Young, 2024).

Implications for Training, Research, and Practice

Several important implications and next steps emerge from these findings. First, from a practice perspective, even as prior research suggests that mindfulness-based interventions may contribute to reducing bias outcomes (Chang et al., 2024), we observe that, at least in this context, the use of mindfulness was largely not sufficient to create a healthy environment for racial diversity-focused conversations. The themes identified in the present study could have been present in any classroom at any PWI (e.g., Pieterse et al., 2016). As such, additional efforts must be made to create an equitable and healthy learning environment for such conversations to occur, especially given the growth of college course-based interventions, such as the WBC, that aim to teach well-being and meditation skills (e.g., Crowley et al., 2022; Hobbs et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2021) or incorporate such skills into existing academic courses (Diaz et al., 2025; Samuel et al., 2023). For courses like the WBC to meaningfully move the needle on interracial relations in a PWI context, greater intentionality to move these concerns from the margin to the center is required. Specifically, an equitable and healthy learning environment in courses like the WBC involves both (a) creating conditions that validate and sustain BIPOC students' racial and ethnic identity processes and sense of belonging, and (b) scaffolding White students'

engagement with race-related content in ways that reduce defensiveness and support greater awareness of equity-related concerns while also accounting for identity development processes (Helms, 1998). Specifically, in a PWI context, where Whiteness is frequently normalized and unmarked, these classroom conversations about race may represent one of the first structured spaces in which White students are asked to critically reflect on their racial identity, potentially amplifying dissonance and White fragility responses. As such, while the course already incorporates some diversity-focused content, it may be necessary to deepen these efforts by integrating racial diversity topics across multiple weeks to support more meaningful engagement and reduce the kinds of unsatisfying instructional experiences some students reported. Additionally, drawing on preexisting best practices such as integrating diversity and social justice-related theories (Latimer et al., 2021) may also be helpful in the successful implementation of such content.

From a training perspective, one important step in creating a healthy environment may be to actively manage White student reactions to conversations about race through preparatory conversations in advance of engaging in discussions about race. This might occur through instructor-led meta-conversation about White fragility, as well as common emotional reactions it may evoke, which could be a helpful preparatory step in engaging in discussion of race and identity (Ford et al., 2022). Additionally, as noted by one BIPOC participant, it may be helpful to leverage meditation-based skills to encourage White students to observe and accept their discomfort rather than avoid or react to it. Additionally, prior research suggests that encouraging, but not requiring, White students to engage in diversity courses and activities may also be supportive (Neville et al., 2014). For BIPOC students, it may be helpful to provide concurrent spaces with other BIPOC students along with a skilled BIPOC instructor to allow deeper

engagement in conversations about race with greater emotional safety than what may be possible in mixed classrooms, though this recommendation may be challenging to implement in the current climate (Ambrose et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2025). As such, instructors will need to attend to how racial group membership and larger societal milieu may impact classroom dynamics, with particular attention to potential pressure felt by BIPOC students to represent their racial group and educate White students (Pieterse et al., 2016). One possible approach may be to explicitly identify and name this pressure felt by BIPOC students during these conversations. For instructors facilitating such conversations, it may be critical to do their own identity development work prior to engaging in such conversations (Utt & Tochluk, 2020) as well as receiving training in facilitating such conversations (Kaplowitz & Griffin, 2019).

Universities can play a key role in advancing systemic change by facilitating, incentivizing, or even requiring ongoing, reflective training in racial dialogue for faculty who lead diversity-related classroom conversations. Furthermore, using structured prompts along with giving students the opportunity to provide regular feedback to instructors (potentially anonymously) may also be supportive (Warde et al., 2022). Moreover, instructors may benefit from using anti-racist and culturally humble pedagogical approaches (Farrelly et al., 2022; Kishimoto, 2018)—for example, discussing critiques and limitations of existing mindfulness research and acknowledging how its contemporary, consumer-oriented form differs from its origins (Purser, 2019). Successful implementation of such classroom-based interventions that involve engaging in conversations about racial diversity may yield benefits for both White and BIPOC students in terms of their well-being and may create a greater sense of inclusiveness and belonging, particularly for BIPOC students (Ford et al., 2022; Griffith et al., 2019; Sue et al., 2009). Finally, from a research perspective, the present study adds to the growing evidence that

there needs to be greater effort within the fields of meditation and flourishing to incorporate perspectives of BIPOC and other minoritized and marginalized communities so as to ensure equity in intervention accessibility and adoption (Kiknadze & Fowers, 2023; Proulx et al., 2018). It may be helpful for both the class instructors, as well as researchers, engaging in contemplative interventions to draw upon less frequently discussed frameworks such as Soulfulness (Harrell, 2018) or Black radical tradition (Vesely-Flad, 2022), which engage in contemplative practice with roots in African and African American culture.

Limitations

There are several important limitations which must be considered when interpreting these results. First, we did not design the study to center racial-diversity-focused conversations, as this was a secondary analysis of data originally collected to explore student experiences in the WBC. This limitation is important as we may have taken several steps (e.g., include specific questions in the protocol, varying students across discussion sections, or other characteristics etc.) to orient the study to answer this question. However, this limitation may also represent a methodological strength. The fact that students spontaneously and extensively discussed racial diversity experiences without direct prompting suggests these conversations were highly salient to their overall course experience. Additionally, the naturalistic emergence of these themes may have reduced social desirability bias that could occur when participants are directly asked about sensitive racial topics, potentially providing more authentic insights into how students actually experienced these classroom dynamics (Krumpal, 2013). Second, we only collected data from one course taught at a specific university during one semester with a particular curriculum. It is possible that student experiences of racial diversity focused conversations vary across different contexts and different iterations of the class. To partly address this limitation, we consulted with

three students across different years of the course at the same university to assess if their course experience may be reflected by the aforementioned themes. Third, we inquired about student experiences only at one timepoint rather than multiple time points; multiple time points may have provided a fuller understanding of student experiences over time. Fourth, we only included student perspectives in the present study, and it is possible that our study may have benefited from the inclusion of multiple stakeholders, including the teaching team or the student advisors who work with students closely. Fifth, due to a researcher error, we missed recording the exact times of the interviews, which may have provided additional insight into potential differences in participant engagement or the depth of responses across different demographic groups or satisfaction levels. Finally, to preserve the privacy of the teaching team, we do not disclose details about instructors (e.g., instructor racial identities) or provide specific comments made by the instructors which may have further elucidated the dynamics of having such conversations.

Future Directions

These limitations notwithstanding, several future directions emerge from this work. First, while the present study speculates about potential pathways for improved racial diversity focused conversations, future studies could inquire directly from students. Understanding how BIPOC and White students would want to engage in these conversations could be widely beneficial for the WBC as well as similar such interventions. Second, future studies could also inquire about instructor experiences of engaging in these conversations and consider potential fears, limitations and concerns as well as how they may be alleviated. Third, due to a small sample of BIPOC students, prior studies are not clear on whether the intervention effects of the WBC vary by racial identity (Hirshberg et al., 2022). Future studies would benefit from intentional recruitment of larger samples of BIPOC students to better assess this important question. Additionally, one

potential mediator to test may be to assess if BIPOC student experiences with racial diversity focused conversations mediate the relationship between participating in the course and improved well-being outcomes. Additionally, future studies could explore student experiences of racial diversity focused conversations across other similar interventions (e.g., Hobbs et al., 2022) to assess if overlapping themes could inform future adaptations. Finally, implementing modifications to the racial diversity component of the course based on the aforementioned feedback and assessing whether these changes influence students' experiences would be a valuable avenue for future research.

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Table 1

Participant characteristics amongst those who expressed interest and the eventual study sample.

	Expressed Interest		Study Sample	
Satisfaction with the WBC				
Extremely satisfied	20	33.3%	5	33.3%
Somewhat satisfied	28	46.7%	6	40.0%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	4	6.7%	1	6.7%
Somewhat dissatisfied	8	13.3%	3	20.0%
Race				
African American/Black	6	10.0%	2	13.3%
Latino/a/e	5	8.3%	3	20.0%
White/Caucasian	39	65.0%	7	46.7%
Asian or Pacific Islander (includes the Indian sub-continent)	1	1.7%	0	0.0%
Multiracial[a]	9	15.0%	3	20.0%
Gender				
Woman	51	85.0%	11	73.3%
Man	8	13.3%	3	20.0%
Non-binary / third gender	1	1.7%	1	6.7%

Note. No potential study participant reported being extremely dissatisfied with the course. [a]Multiracial students disclosed specific, multiple racial identities including White, African American and Asian or Pacific Islander

Table 2

Themes, Descriptions and Examples.

Theme	Description	Example Quote
White Student Discomfort with Racial Diversity Conversations	Many white students reported discomfort and self-censorship during conversations about race, stemming from fears of offending others, a lack of experience, and feelings of guilt about their privilege.	"So it's kind of like, you don't want to trigger anyone or hurt anyone's feelings, like you want to make sure you're being sensitive of everyone....But so I'd say, I was probably the most quiet like around my peers during the Diversity unit"
BIPOC Students' Frustration with White Students' Disengagement	BIPOC students reported feeling frustrated and isolated due to the lack of open dialogue about racial diversity, exacerbated by the perceived disengagement and dismissive attitudes of some White students.	"I feel like people get so uncomfortable talking about inclusion, and it's like, even though I'm a person of color, obviously, I could grow. You know what I mean, like what is your perspective? And just because I'm a person of color don't mean I represent every person of color. So it's like why are you uncomfortable like telling me how you, what you think of this topic"
BIPOC Students' Dissatisfaction with Instructional Experiences	Students reported being unsatisfied with the teaching of diversity, noting a lack of depth, discomfort from instructors, and occasional inappropriate comments, which hindered meaningful engagement with the topic.	"I thought that I was actually going to get into a lot of those conversations in lecture, that wasn't the case, it actually almost felt like we're beating around the bush for the majority of it, that we weren't exactly talking about things specifically. So it was just very frustrating…"
Feeling Challenged and Experiencing Growth	Despite challenges, some students found the conversations about race and diversity to be eye-opening and found the experiences of discomfort as an opportunity for personal growth.	"There was something about like racism…I don't know what the question was, but I guess that kind of made me feel uncomfortable just because it's a hard topic, and coming from like the place of privilege it, it kind of feels like weird to talk about this…it does feel uncomfortable, but it, and kind of needs to feel uncomfortable"

Appendix A: The Well-being Course Information

Course Description & Philosophy: This course explores the concept of flourishing—a life characterized by well-being, resilience, and fulfillment—through an integrative approach that draws on scientific research and humanistic perspectives. Guided by a pedagogical philosophy that views flourishing as individualized and rooted in lived experience, the course emphasizes reflective engagement and personal meaning-making rather than prescribing a universal definition. A wide range of course activities such as check-ins, mindfulness and meditation practices and journal reflections supported this practice. Students examine five interconnected dimensions that provide a framework for cultivating well-being: **Foundation**, which introduces concepts of flourishing, transformation, and resilience; **Awareness**, focusing on attention regulation, emotional understanding, and mindfulness; **Connection**, which addresses interdependence, compassion, and diversity in relationships; **Insight**, centered on identity, values, and gratitude; and **Integration**, which highlights courage and community as essential for sustaining well-being. Each unit combines conceptual learning with experiential practices designed to foster self-awareness, strengthen social bonds, and support the pursuit of purpose. By engaging with diverse cultural and disciplinary perspectives, the course encourages students to construct a personally meaningful understanding of flourishing that honors individual differences while acknowledging shared human capacities. See Supplemental Figure 1 for the course theory of change as previously articulated in Hirshberg et al. (2022).

Learning Outcomes: The course learning outcomes include:

- Examine flourishing in its complex diversity
- Recognize the elements that are central to your notion of flourishing
- Create your own vision of flourishing based on those elements
- Assemble the skills to develop well-being in your life
- Experiment with embodying a vision for flourishing in your life

Course Structure: The class meets twice a week for a plenary session (50 mins each) in person. Students will be expected to complete prework prior to the class which includes readings as well as reviewing audio and video resources, including lectures. The class meeting will involve lecture, small and large group discussion, and interactive exercises, including guided meditation practice at the start and the end of the class. The class will also meet for a discussion section once per week (50 mins each) in person with an instructor or TA. The discussion section will focus on engaging in meditation practice, reviewing course material and engaging in group discussion. The TAs and instructors set group norms (e.g., at the beginning of the semester. Students will also be expected to regularly use the Healthy Minds Program app to complete course assignments.

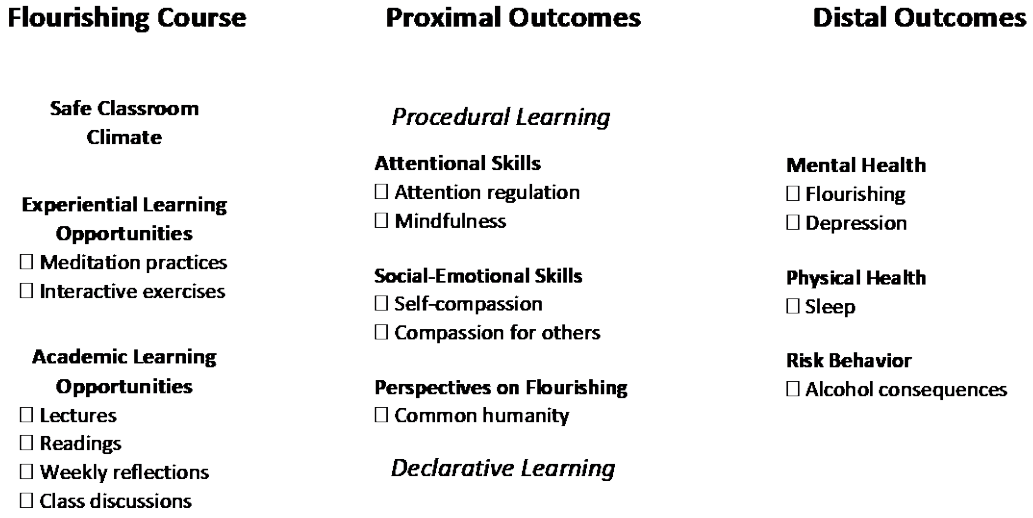
Diversity Week: Diversity a topic in the connections unit of the course. The specific learning objectives for that week were provided by the teaching team for the course and are described here:

- State why Diversity is an important element of flourishing

    - Evolution favors diverse responses to changing contexts and conditions. Homogeneity reduces organisms' capacity to adapt, and as a result, to survive and thrive. In the specific case of humans, diversity within a cooperative group enables individuals to contribute in different ways to the group's success. Not only does diversity allow different individuals to contribute to the group in ways that draw on their unique strengths, it also fosters innovation. Thus, beyond survival, diversity supports continued growth and evolution in individuals, groups and cultures.
- Explain the emergence of in-group/out-group distinctions and their impact
    - All primates tend to identify with their kin and affinity groups, and humans have evolved with an especially strong tendency to easily create social groupings or "in-groups" with which they identify. One reason for this is that, for a human, survival and thriving always depend on the group, so the success of the group—and also a threat to it—feels like a success or threat to oneself. Especially in the context of between-group competition, this strong tendency to identify with in-groups can occur with an equally strong tendency to identify out-groups as the *other*. This othering can provide the basis for violence, genocide and other atrocities against out-groups. Through simple awareness and associated practices, this *othering* can be lessened significantly, and perhaps even eliminated.
- Experientially explore implicit bias
    - We all carry biases, and some are "implicit biases," unconscious attitudes about identity involving features such as race, gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, and so on. If we can become aware of these biases, we can choose to take deliberate steps that lessen their impact or even eliminate them over time. When unaware of these biases, we cannot choose to address them, and if, for example, we value equity and inclusion, our unconscious, implicit biases will lead to behaviors that are mismatched with our values. Identifying implicit biases, such as with the Implicit Association Test, can enable us to become aware of biases and start to make choices that enable actions to align with values.
- Discuss intersectionality
    - As Walt Whitman famously wrote, each of us *contains multitudes*. We're each a composite of our various roles, identities, ethnicities and so forth, and the intersection of these various social and political identities creates different modes of discrimination and/or privilege. The ways in which we are embedded within multiple social identities is also uneven, such that some we feel more strongly aligned with some identities than others. Between-group competition and perceived (even if not actual) threat can compel us to retreat into our more core identities, such that our sense of belonging to a larger, more diverse group is lost.
- Explain how pressure from challenges or threats impacts group identity
    - In good times, humans are more likely to cooperate with non-kin and outgroups. In times of challenge or threat, the proverbial wagons tend to circle, with actions and behaviors favoring in-group and discriminating against out-group.

Supplemental Figure 1

The Wellbeing Course Theory of Change from Hirshberg et al., 2022



Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me why you chose to take this class
    a. How did you hear about the class?

2. How would you describe your overall experience of the class?
    a. What aspect of the class did you find most beneficial to you?
        i. Any specific examples?
        ii. In what way was this most beneficial?
    b. What aspect of the class did you find less beneficial?
        i. Any specific examples?
        ii. In what way was this less beneficial?

3. Sometimes but not always students who take this class have moments that are personally meaningful and at times students might feel uncomfortable or disconnected in this class. I'd like to understand more about that.
    a. If you've had a moment that was personally meaningful, can you describe that?
        i. What about this moment made it meaningful?
    b. If you had a moment when you felt uncomfortable or disconnected from the class, can you share that with me?
        i. What about this moment made you feel uncomfortable or disconnected?

4. How do you feel your background or prior lived experiences prepared you for engaging in this class? For example, your background or lived experience might include prior exposure to meditation and other class curriculum or even prior lived experience with a mental health challenge in your life.
    a. What role, if any, did your social or cultural background play in how prepared or unprepared you were for this class? Social and cultural background can include any relevant identities such as your race, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status
    b. Relative to your peers with a different background or lived experiences, how did your background or lived experiences change the way you engaged with the class?

5. There is a lot going on during the first semester of college. How would you say your day-to-day college environment influenced how you engaged with the class?

6. Can you tell me about how being in this class contributed to your first semester of college?
    a. What particular aspect of the class do you think influenced this?
    b. Were there any learnings or insights from the class that you found yourself applying in any aspect of your life (such as in academics, in your relationships etc.)? If yes, can you tell me more about that?

7. Do you believe this class contributed to your sense of belonging or not belonging on this campus during your first semester? Can you tell me more about that?

8. Imagine you were talking to an incoming student starting at this institution and they were considering this class. What advice might you give to them?

9. Earlier research has found that first year students who take this class experience better mental health and well-being. However, we don't fully understand why this might be happening. Based on your experience with the class, do you have any ideas?

10. Would you like to share anything else about your experience with the class that I might have missed?