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"I definitely think I can flourish": Exploring First Year College Student Experiences in a Flourishing-focused Class

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Abstract

Mental health of college students in the United States is a major public health crisis requiring innovative solutions. The Art and Science of Human Flourishing (ASHF) course is a credit-bearing academic course that has been found to improve well-being and mental health outcomes. Using a qualitative approach, the present study examined first-year, first-semester student experiences with the course as well as perceived mechanisms of change. Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit a racially diverse sample (N = 15), with over half the sample identifying as a racial or ethnic minority (n = 8). Thematic analysis was used to analyze semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. Five themes were identified in the results: 1) applying learnings from the class, 2) cultivating connections with other students, 3) dual focus challenges, 4) positive experiences with meditation, and 5) generating insights and reflections. While most students reported a positive and impactful experience in the class, there was variability across some themes based on students' racial identities and neurodiversity. The findings provide insights into student experiences and perceived mechanisms of the course, which may be beneficial for the implementation and assessment of ASHF and other similar interventions.

Keywords

College student mental health; Flourishing; Meditation; Mindfulness; Racial Diversity; Neurodiversity

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Mental health of college students in the United States (US) is in crisis (Abrams, 2022). According to the Healthy Minds Survey, in the 2022-2023 academic year, 36% of American college students had an anxiety disorder, 41% had depression, and 29% engaged in self-injurious behaviors (Healthy Minds Policy Initiative, 2023). Beyond the experience of distress, mental health concerns can impair academic performance, underscoring the need for accessible interventions (Bruffaerts et al., 2018).

Traditionally, university counseling centers have been the primary source of on-campus mental health support for college students. Psychotherapy provided in university counseling centers has been effective in promoting students' mental health (McAleavey et al., 2019). However, university counseling centers are overburdened and may not be adequate to meet the needs of all students (Xiao et al., 2017). For example, even as more than 60% of students report some mental health condition (Lipson et al., 2022), fewer than 12% of students at four-year institutions and under 5% at community colleges receive counseling center services annually (Bruns et al., 2024), suggesting that a large proportion of students in need may go unserved. Additionally, nearly half of college counseling centers report difficulty recruiting clinical staff, and only 44% are fully staffed year-round, forcing the use of session limits (Bruns et al., 2024). Moreover, sociocultural barriers to seeking mental health services can be particularly prominent in students with marginalized identities such as students of color (Lipson et al., 2022).

Preventive and Strengths-Based Interventions for College Student Mental Health

New approaches taking a more positive and preventative outlook on mental health are now being attempted to address students' mental health needs. These approaches often focus on strengths (i.e., the presence of consistent emotional well-being; Dahl et al., 2020; Keyes, 2007) and flourishing instead of deficits, rather than the mere absence of mental illness. The dual-continua model of mental health posits that flourishing is distinct from being free of mental disorders and represents a unique dimension of psychological well-being (Keyes, 2002, 2007). In this approach, flourishing is defined as the presence of positive emotions (e.g., positive affect), positive psychological functioning (e.g., self-acceptance), and positive social functioning (e.g., social integration; Keyes, 2007). Flourishing has been found to offer protective benefits against suicidal behavior and academic impairment, even among students with diagnosed mental disorders (Keyes et al., 2012). Moreover, among students who screened free of mental disorders, fewer than half were classified as flourishing, underscoring that the absence of clinical symptoms does not equate to optimal mental health (Keyes et al., 2012). These findings highlight flourishing as a meaningful and necessary focus for college mental health efforts, beyond simply treating psychopathology.

Examples of these flourishing approaches include meditation interventions (e.g., mindfulness training, kindness and compassion training). Meditation interventions have been effective in improving mental health and well-being among college students (Johnson et al., 2023). However, many meditation interventions take place outside the classroom context or are implemented as non-credit well-being courses through university counseling

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centers (e.g., Gallo et al., 2023). Given the demanding schedules of college students, such approaches may create an additional barrier for students to access mental health interventions (Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022). Offering credit-bearing courses could help address this gap.

The Art and Science of Human Flourishing (ASHF) Course: An Accessible, Flourishing-Focused Intervention

The ASHF course may be one promising approach to increase the accessibility of mental health support to college students, particularly by embedding well-being practices into their academic curriculum (Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022). ASHF is a credit-bearing, general education course that is rooted in the flourishing model proposed by Dahl et al. (2020). This model focuses on promoting and integrating four domains of well-being, including Awareness (i.e., heightened and flexible attentiveness), Connection (i.e., fostering a sense of care, compassion, and kindness to self and others), Insight (i.e., self-knowledge about how thoughts and emotions shape experience), and Purpose (i.e., clarity around aims and values). Additionally, ASHF is conceptually aligned with the dual-continua model of mental health (Keyes, 2002, 2007), which views flourishing as a distinct dimension of well-being beyond the absence of mental illness. Together, these frameworks reflect counseling psychology's emphasis on strengths-based and preventative approaches to mental health. ASHF follows a structured 15-week curriculum organized into five major domains: Foundations of Flourishing, Awareness, Connection, Insight, and Integration (see Intervention subsection for additional details on the course; Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022). ASHF combines theoretical and practical components to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of flourishing. Specifically, the proposed theory of change emphasizes both "declarative learning" – such as understanding various definitions of flourishing and well-being – with "experiential learning," including practices like meditative practices and interactive exercises (Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022). While the core curriculum and pedagogical principles are consistent across campuses, there is some flexibility in delivery (e.g., lecture vs. in-class activities, instructor background), allowing universities to tailor implementation to their local context without compromising fidelity or effectiveness (Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022; Inkelas et al., 2023; see additional details about the course in the Intervention subsection below).

Preliminary research supports the efficacy of ASHF for college students. A multi-university, multi-year (Fall 2018 & Fall 2019) quantitative quasi-experimental study with undergraduate students (n = 651) suggested that ASHF enhanced students' mental health outcomes and flourishing (Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022). A follow-up study of these students during the Spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdown indicated that prior enrollment in the ASHF was associated with lower anxiety and depressive symptoms and higher flourishing (Hirshberg et al., 2024). Moreover, ASHF implemented across universities with varying course pedagogy (i.e., instructional approaches) and student engagement showed similar effects, suggesting that it allows for some flexibility in adaptation without compromising its efficacy (Inkelas et al., 2023).

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Given the potential of ASHF to enhance access to and support college students' mental health, it is important to understand how students experience the course to aid future implementation in diverse contexts. Qualitative approaches offer several advantages in exploring such research questions. First, qualitative methods help illuminate the relationship between proposed theories of change and actual changes with a focus on an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). Furthermore, qualitative research can help identify variability in experiences across diverse sociocultural contexts, which may be missed by quantitative methods. Finally, qualitative research also allows for an appreciation of complexity in dynamic systems and variability in participant experience, which often cannot be captured by quantitative studies alone (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Given ASHF is a unique, credit-bearing course within a complex university structure aimed at supporting student mental health, gaining a deeper understanding of the course is likely to provide valuable insights for implementing future iterations of ASHF and similar courses (e.g., Crowley et al., 2022; Hobbs et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2021).

The Current Study

Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), a flexible qualitative methodology, the present study explored two broad questions:

1. How did students experience the ASHF course and its applicability in their daily lives?
2. How did the course improve student mental health from the students' perspective (i.e., perceived mechanisms)?

Examining student experiences may provide insight into how ASHF might be tailored to meet the diverse needs of students with different identities. Understanding perceived mechanisms of change can optimize the course as well as help clarify the core ingredients of ASHF, enabling its implementation across diverse academic institutions and contexts (Kazdin, 2007). This study aligns with the core values of counseling psychology, including a focus on prevention, strengths-based development, and an accessible intervention in educational settings.

Method

Intervention

All participants were enrolled in the Fall 2022 ASHF course at a large Midwestern public university. The class included 258 students, 29.1% (n = 75) of whom identified as racial or ethnic minorities (i.e., BIPOC). Students attended two weekly lectures and one discussion section led by a TA or instructor. The course was structured around five domains of the flourishing framework (Dahl et al., 2020), each comprising three weekly themes. The course was structured around five domains of the flourishing framework (Dahl et al., 2020), each comprising three weekly themes: Foundations (conceptualizations of flourishing, intentional effort, resilience), Awareness (emotion, attentional focus, mindfulness), Connection (compassion, belonging, interdependence), Insight (identity reflection, values clarification, visioning), and Integration (synthesizing strands to support intentionality, courage, and

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community strength; Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022). The teaching team was racially and ethnically diverse, with disciplinary backgrounds spanning humanities, neuroscience, and clinical psychology. Students also used an adapted version of the Healthy Minds Program (HMP) app, which provides training based on the flourishing framework (Dahl et al., 2020) and has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing mental health symptoms in randomized controlled trials (Goldberg et al., 2020; Hirshberg, Frye, et al., 2022). For a detailed course description, see Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al. (2022).

Participants & Procedure

Participants were recruited during an in-person visit to the ASHF class in December 2022 by the first (ZJ) and last (SBG) authors. They were invited to a 30–60-minute semi-structured interview about their class experience. A flyer with a QR code linking to a Qualtrics interest form was projected in class, and paper copies were distributed. Participants were eligible if they were at least 18 years of age and enrolled in the Fall 2022 ASHF class. Sixty students expressed interest, and we contacted 25 students based on the order of response and on our purposive sampling approach (see below) to achieve a sample of 15. Of the 25 contacted, eight did not respond, one declined, one did not attend, and the remaining 15 completed interviews. Following Braun & Clarke's (2022) guidance on balancing depth and breadth, we determined a priori that 15 participants would be sufficient given the substantive nature of our interview protocol, which was designed to elicit rich, detailed accounts of participants' experiences. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in course satisfaction and gender identity. Satisfaction was assessed via a single-item question (i.e., "Overall, how satisfied were you with the ASHF class?") on a five-point Likert scale. We intentionally oversampled BIPOC students (n = 8, 53.3%) to address underrepresentation in meditation research (Waldron et al., 2018) and examine variability by racial identity (see Table 1). To protect student privacy, we only racial status (White or BIPOC) and satisfaction level are noted alongside quotes. Specific references to the teaching team were anonymized as well. Interviews were conducted and audio recorded via Zoom in December 2022–January 2023, lasted 30–60 minutes, and participants received $40 compensation. The protocol was developed by the first author with input from co-authors and the teaching team (Appendix A). The intention was to evenly divide the interviews between the first author (ZJ) and one coauthor (SUL), but due to scheduling issues, the interviews were primarily done by the first author, with SUL completing one interview. Given that all participants were students in the ASHF course, the terms students and participants are used interchangeably in this paper. All participants provided informed consent, and procedures were approved by the University of Wisconsin–Madison IRB (protocol #2022-1464).

Data Analysis

Our analytic process was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) grounded in a contextualist epistemology (Madill et al., 2000). Given that RTA acknowledges experiences as shaped by individual realities and broader social contexts, it was well-suited to our exploratory aim of understanding students' experiences in a flourishing-focused course. An additional advantage of RTA is that it supports inductive theme development rather than imposing preexisting frameworks. Finally, RTA emphasizes

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reflexivity—encouraging researchers to critically consider positionality and issues of power, privilege, and representation throughout analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The authors primarily involved in the data analysis process had a range of positionalities relative to the ASHF class. During the time of data analysis, the first author (ZJ) was a graduate student in Counseling Psychology, identified as BIPOC, and served as a TA for the ASHF class for one semester in the year prior to data collection. Another co-author involved in the analysis (SUL), identified as a multilingual woman of color and a doctoral candidate in Counseling Psychology, has sought qualitative training in a graduate-level course and has attended the ASHF summer workshop. The final co-author involved in the analysis (TBW) was a faculty member in another department with expertise in qualitative research methods, identifies as White, and has no prior experience with the ASHF class. The authors involved in participant interviews and data analyses did not participate in intervention development and did not have any engagement with the participants beyond the scope of the present study.

The data analysis team engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue, individually and collectively, considering how our social identities, backgrounds, and familiarity with the ASHF class might shape our interpretation of the data. For instance, while the first author's prior teaching experience offered valuable context, regular coding meetings served as a safeguard to avoid potential over-identification and ensure interpretations were anchored in participants' voices rather than previously-held assumptions. To deepen reflexivity and uphold ethical representation, the first author also consulted frequently with TBW, who served as the qualitative consultant. Finally, ZJ and SUL's identities as BIPOC scholars and students heightened their attentiveness to racial nuance in participants' accounts. This awareness guided deliberate efforts to capture and honor diverse perspectives throughout recruitment, coding, and theme development, ensuring that differences were neither muted nor overlooked.

We closely followed the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Prior to the start of data analysis, the transcripts were professionally transcribed, and the entire coding process was completed using NVivo software (Dhakal, 2022). ZJ and SUL led the coding process and immersed themselves in the data by reviewing transcripts and memos. Memos were used on two occasions: immediately following each of the 15 interviews to capture our initial reactions and during the data analysis phase, where we used memoing to document our evolving and critical interpretations of the data. For instance, one memo noted, "Conversations/connections/inclusion are things that support student well-being and are critical to the success of the class," which was informative for Theme 2 (see results below).

Next, the two authors began the coding process, which involved a fine-grained review of the transcripts to systematically identify and label meaningful segments of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The authors coded the first five transcripts together via Zoom, discussing passages that were challenging to code (e.g., ambiguous or overlapping segments) to surface assumptions and ensure consideration of multiple perspectives. Through these dialogues, they developed a shared coding vocabulary before dividing the remaining

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transcripts for independent coding, continuing frequent meetings to refine codes and reflect on positionality. For pragmatic reasons, the next ten transcripts were then divided and coded independently. However, the authors met frequently to discuss the process, collaboratively consider new codes, and reflect on positionality concerns. TBW provided ongoing consultation but was not involved in the actual coding of the data. The first author led the next three steps - generating candidate themes, revising the initial themes, and writing up the results – with close consultation from SUL and TBW. In reflexive thematic analysis, themes are generated from clusters of codes that exhibit a "pattern of shared meaning" around a core concept, which may help answer the research question (Braun et al., 2019, p. 845). Given the interpretive nature of reflexive thematic analysis, themes are generated, not discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To aid visual conceptualization, we used the digital visual mapping software Miro to graphically represent our emerging themes (Supplemental Figure 1; Chan et al., 2023), concurrently with the use of NVivo software. The refined themes were then named and shared with the full author team for review and further refinement.

Research Quality and Trustworthiness

To promote research quality, we examined our analysis through the lens of three criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure the credibility of our data, we asked each participant at the end of the interview, "Would you like to share anything else about your experience with the class that I might have missed?" to ensure that we fully captured student experiences. We also had prolonged engagement with the data such that the coding was not done in one sitting, but rather over a prolonged period of time and involved an iterative process of coming back to the data repeatedly. Additionally, we engaged in member checking of the data by sharing our write-up with students who participated in the annually offered class across three different course years but did not participate in our qualitative interviews. The member checking process involved the first author meeting with three students and reviewing each theme presented below. These students largely confirmed that the reported themes aligned with their experience of the class. Our member checking process also provides potential evidence of the transferability of the research across different years of the course, despite our participants emanating from a single year. We also provide detailed accounts of the study methodology as well as thick descriptions of our findings to support transferability. To support confirmability, we engaged in an audit process with the TBW serving as the auditor. TBW was particularly well-suited to be the auditor, as they were not involved in any aspect of the class and had expertise in qualitative research. The auditor reviewed four transcripts, the draft themes, and the visual map in Miro. The auditor provided feedback on the draft themes and helped clarify important contextual components to provide a more nuanced view of the findings.

Results

Five themes were identified from the data analysis: applying learnings from the class, connecting with other students, dual focus challenges, positive experiences with meditation, and generating insights and reflections. See Table 2 for a brief description of each theme and

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an additional sample quote. Some quotes were modified for clarity, brevity, and maintaining anonymity, but the substance of the quotes was not modified.

Theme 1: Applying Learnings from the Class

Several participants spoke positively about how applicable the class content was to many aspects of their lives. They noted feeling excited about coming to class because they felt they were learning content that could help navigate their day-to-day lives. Specifically, they noted three broad areas where they found the class helpful: for their mental health, in supporting academics, and in navigating their relationships.

Several participants reported that they were navigating various mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. These students noted that the class content and particularly the meditation practices were very helpful –

> *I definitely think meditation was a big part…because, with anxiety, my brain is bouncing around things that have happened in the past, and things that are coming up in the future. And so, I think mindfulness and meditation were the biggest component into helping me understand how to get through everyday life and flourish.* - BIPOC, Somewhat Satisfied

Students mentioned two specific processes through which they were able to navigate their mental health challenges. The first was to use these practices to calm or ground themselves when they felt overwhelmed. A second process was to find a way to be less attached to their thoughts or emotional experiences. As one participant who identified as BIPOC and reported being extremely satisfied with the class described, “There is a song by Rebecca Sugar called ‘Here Comes a Thought’ and it’s about being able to take a thought that comes in your mind…just pass it through without judgment, and still say I belong here, everybody feels this way…that was very important for me.” As this quote suggests, the class appears to provide students with tools to flourish despite the presence of psychological challenges such as automatic negative thoughts.

That said, at least two students who reported having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder had divergent experiences and mentioned that initially, some of the content did not feel as relevant or connected to their experience. For instance, one BIPOC student who reportedly struggled with ADHD and was somewhat dissatisfied with the course shared that they felt “disconnected” from the class during the Focus module. They initially perceived the instructor’s message as a directive to simply “stay focused.” The student noted this was difficult because they often “focus on 50 million things besides the main one that [they] need to be focusing on.” As the class progressed, a more nuanced message became apparent, whereby students were invited to meet themselves where they were rather than creating an ideal sense of focus. However, during this initial period, this student felt disconnected and felt that the content was geared towards more privileged and neurotypical populations rather than appropriately reflecting their experiences.

Second, students mentioned that the class was supportive of their academics in a multitude of ways. Specifically, students mentioned that the class content and experiences were helpful in moments of academic stress, such as during presentations or while taking a test. Students

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also mentioned that the insights they gained from the class helped them better understand their experience of stress and were able to directly use the learnings from the class to better manage academic-related stress. For instance, one participant noted applying the learnings in a different class from ASHF,

> *I was taking the final, and three of the long-answer questions were questions that we had never done in class, like nothing even similar. And I was like, I have no clue what to do, and I was really kind of like nervous, and my heart rate was pretty high, and I was like, okay, like this is just me preparing to like do this, and I'm just gonna do my best, and that's all I can do. And I was able to kind of calm myself down, and then approach it in a more rational way* – White, Somewhat Satisfied

The student's description suggests that the experiential practices and didactics taught in the class helped the student become aware of their physiological response to a stressful situation and make sense of their experience, allowing them to better manage the situation. Some participants noted that the class also helped them challenge some of their beliefs about academics. Specifically, one participant discussed how the class encouraged them and their peers to take a broader view of the habits they were developing. This student (White, Somewhat Satisfied) noted that the class challenged them to take a deeper look at their intentions for doing certain activities (e.g., getting good grades, volunteering) primarily to support future job or graduate school applications, rather than emphasizing the process of learning, suggesting that the class content was encouraging students to reflect on their larger academic journey.

Finally, participants also shared that the class was applicable in the context of their relationships with others. Specifically, they found themselves mindful in navigating moments of conflict with their friends and family, which allowed them to respond differently than they might have otherwise (see Table 2 for an example). Participants also shared that they used content from the class to connect more deeply with others and engage in compassionate actions with their friends and community, particularly in moments of adversity. For instance, one student shared how they supported a roommate who lost a friend in a car crash –

> *So that was really, really hard for her, and I like, I just thought like, how can I use what we learned in class to help her?… So like those couple of days…I made sure to stay in here with her, and watch a show with her, and when she was crying, she was talking to me about it. So that helped me to be able to navigate that situation of how I could help her.* – White, Extremely Satisfied

This student's description of experiences supporting their roommate demonstrated the applicability of the class in fostering deeper connections, particularly in moments of adversity.

Theme 2: Cultivating Connections with Other Students

Participants noted that the ASHF class helped them build deep connections with other students, much more so than their other classes. Several participants pointed out that the class emphasized conversations and discussion amongst students in the lectures as well as

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discussion sections, which was helpful in nurturing connections. For instance, participants pointed out that professors would create space each week for a 'check-in.' This practice involved students sharing how they were doing with a neighbor, which helped them nurture connections with their peers. The experience of repeated, meaningful engagements with peers allowed students to process their experiences as first-year college students and facilitated deeper connections –

> *…my discussion section in particular left a huge impact on my way of thinking. All of my peers are very respectful. We all had ideas, we all shared. We were constantly engaging in meaningful conversations, and I feel that was the biggest impact for me, like I literally cried (on) the last day of discussion. I was so sad because I felt there was so much meaning in that classroom.* – BIPOC, Somewhat dissatisfied

Despite being somewhat dissatisfied with the class, this participant nonetheless appeared to deeply appreciate the connections they were able to build with other students in their discussion section.

Participants shared that these deep and important connections supported their well-being and feelings of belonging on campus. Specifically, many participants shared that what helped them most was feeling less isolated, particularly as they were not comfortable sharing difficult moments (e.g., "not doing well on an exam") with others, given the competitive academic environment. However, as the class encouraged sharing amongst peers, participants found that they were not alone in their experiences. As one student who identified as White and reported being extremely satisfied with the course noted, "I think it just felt relatable, like if they were going through something that I was also going through, I knew then like I wasn't the only person, and I wasn't alone, and like that it was okay to feel that way…" Additionally, students felt that the diversity of perspectives or views amongst students was a real strength. They noted how much they appreciated hearing a wide range of perspectives from students whose life experiences were very different, which also made them feel more connected and supported their sense of belonging. Nevertheless, some students, particularly BIPOC students, had divergent experiences such that while they felt connected in discussion sections with peers who shared diverse identities, they often felt isolated and disconnected in the lectures where they had less opportunity to connect with other students, and when explicit actions of other students made them feel that they did not belong. For instance, one BIPOC student described their experience in lectures, particularly around White students –

> *Then you're put into like a lecture hall with people you don't know, with these people who don't relate to you in any way…Nobody is like me, so it's just like I don't even have the courage to talk to you…or, are you even gonna talk to me? Because I have tried to talk to people, and then they just don't.* – BIPOC, Somewhat Satisfied

This participant's experience suggested that while students were able to foster connections, student identities appeared to play an important role in shaping their interactions and sense of belonging within the class.

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Theme 3: Dual Focus Challenges

Students also described challenges associated with the class trying to achieve two, sometimes contradictory, aims: to serve as a rigorous academic class that meets college requirements and also to support their mental health and well-being. This came up most frequently around quizzes, where students noted that they could not enjoy the readings or be mindful while listening to the HMP app because they were worried about remembering the content for the quiz. For instance, a BIPOC student who reported being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the class shared that "…our quizzes and our final exam had questions (related to)… what we were doing on this app. As such, the student reported feeling "…not very mindful, and…more so stressful, because I was like oh, I have to remember this." Students also found the quizzes oddly specific and in contrast with the more interpretive nature of the class. Some BIPOC students reported an added layer of burden around the quizzes because they often felt that the quizzes forced them to take a perspective that didn't align with their beliefs about flourishing –

> *…some kids I know, their grade struggled because of these quizzes. And oddly enough, a lot of them were my POC friends who maybe already had this sense of what flourishment was in their own eyes, especially as the weeks went on, but they're trying to answer it from somebody else's perspective, which would dock them points and lower their grade, and some of us need good grades to maintain our scholarship. So it's just it was really frustrating.* – BIPOC, Somewhat Dissatisfied

Taken together, it appears that the grading structure appeared to encourage students to focus on memorizing, rather than experiencing the content, and for BIPOC students, it appeared to force them to take a perspective that did not align with their values.

Theme 4: Positive Experiences with Meditation

Participants frequently shared that they had positive experiences with the meditation practices offered in and outside of the class. Specifically, they appreciated and found meaningful the in-class practices as well as their experiences with the HMP app, a required component of the class, which was typically done as part of the homework. Participants shared that starting the class with a meditation practice helped them settle into class and allowed them to be more present, and the practices also helped them better manage their stress levels, work through problems and conflicts, and feel more relaxed and regulated. Additionally, they found themselves to be better able to identify their needs and be more intentional with their day or specific tasks –

> *I did use the Healthy Minds App, and I found that really nice, like I would do that a lot of times. I (did) the active meditation…on my (way to) classes, which I thought was really, really helpful. So (I would) start my morning out with being mindful and intentional for what I was doing that day.* – White, Somewhat Satisfied

This student's experience suggested that engagement with meditation through the HMP app was applicable and helpful to their daily life, and they were using it beyond the requirements of the course. For students who had prior experience with meditation, they noted that it was particularly helpful, and in some cases, the primary reason why they chose to take this class. That said, a few students also noted specific frustrations with the meditation practices

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which did not facilitate a positive experience with the meditation practices. For instance, as previously noted, given that they were required to remember some of the content for the quizzes (see Theme 3), they felt less connected to the content.

Theme 5: Generating Insights and Reflections

Another important theme identified was using the class as a space to generate insights and for reflection. Specifically, students noted that the class content and structures, such as the check-ins, class assignments, and the weekly journal entries, supported them in reflecting and developing their insights. The content of the insights ranged widely and included new ideas such as generating a deeper understanding of emotions and gaining a new perspective on mindfulness. One frequently mentioned example of an insight that students shared was that their understanding of what it means to flourish evolved over the course of the class. Many of them came to the class with explicit or implicit ideas of what it means to flourish, and the class challenged that perspective by allowing them to come up with their own definition of what it means to flourish. Through the process of the class, they were also able to see that flourishing might be possible despite their experience of adversity –

> *I definitely think it was my idea of who flourishes (that) was challenged, and then I definitely think this changed, because I can see myself flourishing, and…I'm not necessarily fully White, I don't have a lot of money and stuff like that, but I definitely think I can flourish.* – BIPOC, Somewhat Satisfied

For this student, the important insight from the class appeared to challenge a preexisting belief that flourishing was only possible for those with privileged backgrounds and not for someone like them.

Other students pointed to specific class requirements that led them to new insights. For instance, one BIPOC student who reported being somewhat satisfied in class noted using journaling to explore their learning process. They noted, "…I just put a lot of my thoughts in (the journaling process), and then after I was like oh, I didn't know that's what I was thinking, or how that like, I was feeling that way." For this student, the process of journaling appeared to clarify their thinking and help them see new perspectives.

That said, at least one student with a divergent experience noted that given their intersecting marginalized identities, they would often feel left out of the way that the class presented and explored the concept of flourishing, and they had to do the additional labor of generating insights and reflections for themselves -

> *I just have layers upon layers. I'm African American, low income, I'm a first-generation college student, I'm pansexual…And I was going to say, oftentimes in the class, I felt like the content didn't really resonate with me at all, because it felt like it was being told from the perspective of people who were sort of neurotypical, and didn't have the same lived experiences as me, and probably were privileged in some way. And I was just like this can't relate to me, until I made it relate to me.* – BIPOC, Somewhat Dissatisfied

This student's experience suggested that, at least for some students with multiple intersecting marginalized identities, the class content was not designed to meet their needs,

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and thus, they had to make a greater effort to apply the content to their lives so as to generate the insight and reflections that the other students experienced naturally.

Discussion

The mental health of college students is a major public health challenge in the United States (Healthy Minds Policy Initiative, 2023). Prior research has found that the ASHF class was associated with improved mental health and flourishing outcomes for college students (Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022). However, an understanding of student perspectives was missing from the literature. The present study explored the experience of first-year, first-semester undergraduate students enrolled in the ASHF class and attempted to examine potential mechanisms of change from the student perspective. Qualitative research is critical in the context of implementing evidence-based interventions to understand how and why interventions work from the participants' perspective (Hamilton & Finley, 2019).

Many participants in the present study mentioned the applicability of the class content to their daily lives across a range of domains (Theme 1), aligning with prior research on college campuses, which has found that interventions that include mindfulness can be applicable to students' daily lives (Bamber & Schneider, 2022). Specifically, we highlighted participant reports of the applicability of the course content to students' mental health, academics, and interpersonal domains. This finding suggests that the ASHF course is quite versatile in its ability to positively influence disparate parts of students' lives, which is critically important during the transition to college (Mulaudzi, 2023). This theme also suggests that the content and well-being skills that are taught in the class are relevant to students' daily lives and can be practiced to support their well-being. This is consistent with Dahl and colleagues' (2020) theory of well-being cultivation, which has proposed that the practice and application of well-being skills may be an important mechanism for change. Furthermore, this theme also appears to provide support for the dual-continua model of mental health, which suggests that flourishing is distinct from being free of mental health concerns and individuals can have mental health issues and still be flourishing (Keyes, 2002, 2007). Notably, several students with various mental health conditions reported that the class content and processes helped them flourish even as they still struggled at times with mental health challenges.

One skill ASHF students had ample opportunity to practice, apply, and benefit from was meditation (Theme 4). Students reported benefits from both in-class meditations and the HMP app, consistent with prior work documenting positive experiences with in-class mindfulness practices (Vilvens et al., 2021) and HMP app use (Goldberg et al., 2020; Hirshberg, Frye, et al., 2022). Through the practice of meditation, students likely had the opportunity to cultivate awareness, which is described as an attentiveness to one's external environment as well as internal psychophysiological experience (Dahl et al., 2020). Increased awareness and capacity for mindfulness appear to have a range of benefits, including reduced stress (Goldberg et al., 2022), increased emotion regulation (Leyland et al., 2019), and improved executive functioning (Cásedas et al., 2020), and ASHF students' reports were broadly consistent with these benefits. Furthermore, students reported engaging

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in mindfulness practice outside of class, which may represent an important mechanism of change in the course, consistent with findings from other studies (Goldberg et al., 2025).

In addition to mindfulness, students reported generating new insights through class assignments that encouraged self-reflection and self-inquiry (Theme 5). While insights can occur spontaneously, intentional training and practice of self-inquiry, which involves exploring and questioning self-related processes such as preexisting beliefs, can support the occurrence and sustenance of insight (Dahl et al., 2015, 2020). The process of challenging preexisting and updating new beliefs is a central component of many mental health therapies, including cognitive behavioral therapy (Beck, 1974), and is also an important part of frameworks of well-being and human flourishing (Dahl et al., 2020; Lobel, 2018).

Connection, another important component of well-being and human flourishing frameworks (Dahl et al., 2020; Lobel, 2018), was also highlighted by participants as an important part of their ASHF experience (Theme 2). Connection is particularly relevant as loneliness during the transition to college is found to be associated with deleterious outcomes, including increased stress (Drake et al., 2016) and a higher likelihood of dropping out (Boddy, 2020). It appears that the class structure and processes helped students connect over common struggles experienced during the transition to college and thereby feel less alone in an otherwise competitive environment. This experience contrasted with other classes where such a connection was rarely facilitated. This finding aligns with prior mindfulness- and meditation-based interventions, which have similarly shown that meeting others with shared concerns can foster camaraderie and reduce social isolation (Bond et al., 2013; Hjeltnes et al., 2015).

Even so, across many of the aforementioned themes, students holding marginalized and often excluded identities, including BIPOC and neurodiverse students, reported that the class did not always reflect or include their perspectives, requiring them to make additional efforts towards integrating the content. Interventions, such as ASHF, that are intended to be delivered universally to all college students often focus on meeting the needs of the normative student, rather than those with marginalized identities (Dolmage, 2017). Part of the challenge is systemic, given that underlying theories and research on concepts of flourishing often have embedded Eurocentric assumptions that may not align with BIPOC populations (Kiknadze & Fowers, 2023) or may view a neurodiverse diagnosis as contradictory to flourishing and having a good life (Chapman & Carel, 2022). Additionally, research (Waldron et al., 2018) as well as cultural representation (Gajaweera, 2022) of meditation has largely excluded BIPOC populations, and research on meditation-based interventions with neurodiverse populations has been limited (Cairncross & Miller, 2020). Another part of the challenge may be that large lecture-based classes may struggle to meet the individualized needs of students. Prior research also suggests that college classrooms and institutions largely adopt values of the dominant culture (Nelson et al., 2023), leaving many BIPOC and neurodiverse students isolated. This finding implies greater effort is needed to integrate BIPOC and neurodiverse perspectives into the class and similar interventions. We provide a few recommendations related to this issue in the implications section below.

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Most students mentioned that the dual focus of the class – both as a credit-based academic class as well as a mental health intervention – was a challenge for them (Theme 3). What makes ASHF unique and potentially widely impactful is its ability to serve as a credit-bearing academic class while also supporting student mental health and well-being (Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022). However, instructors may struggle to balance these competing priorities. For instance, students reported challenges such as reduced engagement with the HMP app, as they were more concerned about remembering the content for quizzes rather than engaging with it to support their mental health. Academic stress has been found to be associated with greater psychological distress (Grøtan et al., 2019), particularly for BIPOC and neurodiverse students who often face additional barriers and challenges in college settings (Bayeh & Ryder, 2025; Lipson et al., 2022).

Limitations

The present study has several important limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. First, we only collected data from a single university context during one semester. It is possible that student experiences and potential mechanisms may vary across different iterations of the class, even as the different iterations achieve similar outcomes (Inkelas et al., 2023). Second, we inquired about student experiences at a single timepoint, immediately following the conclusion of the class, which may have led to a recall bias. A longitudinal examination with multiple points of data collection may have yielded a richer and more complete understanding. Third, while we attempted a purposive sampling to get a diverse group of participants, women (n = 11, 73.3%) were overrepresented relative to men (n = 3; 20%) and gender diverse participants (n = 1; 6.7%). This is likely a function of women being overrepresented in the class and mindfulness interventions broadly (Eichel et al., 2021). We also only considered gender, race, and satisfaction levels in our sampling. However, other factors (e.g., first-generation status, mental health symptoms, learning disability) may have also influenced participants' experiences in the class and could be considered in future studies. Fourth, our study only considered the class experience from the students' perspectives. However, a more complete picture may have been possible if multiple stakeholders were included in the analysis, including the teaching team as well as student advisors who often recommended the class and work with the students closely. Finally, we made some pragmatic decisions that may not have fully aligned with our chosen methodology of reflexive thematic analysis (e.g., having the two coders code several transcripts separately). Nevertheless, Braun and Clarke, the developers of reflexive thematic analysis, suggest that it is not necessary to be "precious" with their use of TA so long as it is done in a "knowing" and "thoughtful" way (Braun et al., 2019, p. 849).

Implications and Future Directions

Overall, there are several important implications and future directions that emerge from these findings. First, from a research perspective, the present study reinforces and provides additional context for prior quantitative findings demonstrating that ASHF improves student well-being and reduces psychological distress (Hirshberg, Colaianne, et al., 2022), given that despite having a racially diverse sample with varied levels of satisfaction, nearly all students report at least some positive and impactful experiences with the class. Second, the present findings offer a number of potential mediators that may explain student

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improvement in mental health and well-being. For instance, it is possible that developing strong connections (Theme 2) or the applicability of learnings from the class (Theme 1) may be important factors supporting intervention effectiveness. These hypotheses could be directly tested using randomized controlled trials in future studies. Third, the present study also provides some support for the dual-continua model of mental health (Keyes, 2002, 2007), given that students reported experiencing well-being even as they still struggled with mental health challenges. Finally, our exploration of student experiences with ASHF offers a critical example through which to reflect on how students from dominant and non-dominant groups may experience course content and delivery differently. Future research and implementation of the course may want to foreground inclusive, structurally attentive, and diverse conceptions of flourishing. For example, future studies may include pilot interventions that adapt the intervention in contexts with predominantly BIPOC and/or neurodiverse populations to assess the feasibility of delivering such an intervention.

From a practice perspective, it appears that several themes closely align with the Dahl et al. (2020) framework of well-being and flourishing. This is not surprising given that the course was heavily influenced by the aforementioned framework, and it appears that students adopted and applied many of the concepts in their day-to-day lives. Our findings suggest that the application of the framework may be appropriate in college settings, and such interventions may serve as an important component in support of mental health amongst college students. That said, given the challenges reported by BIPOC and neurodiverse students, future iterations of the course must give significant consideration to adapting the course content and pedagogy to meet the needs of students with marginalized identities, such as BIPOC and neurodiverse students (Murrell et al., 2015; Proulx et al., 2018). For instance, prior research suggests that for ADHD students, it may be helpful to acknowledge beforehand that some mindfulness practices may initially increase distress by bringing attention to their ADHD symptoms (Murrell et al., 2015). For BIPOC students, including flourishing frameworks that offer an alternative to Eurocentric assumptions of flourishing (e.g., considering communal flourishing; Kiknadze & Fowers, 2023) or practices that center spirituality may help facilitate greater inclusivity (Watson-Singleton & Pennefather, 2024). Otherwise, interventions such as ASHF may unintentionally create greater health inequity via reduced accessibility of such interventions for BIPOC groups (Jiwani et al., 2023; Veinot et al., 2018).

Finally, from a training perspective, it appears that such interventions can be delivered effectively by a multi-disciplinary, multiracial team of college educators. Nevertheless, as the intervention is scaled, prior research on implementing mindfulness-based interventions in classrooms suggests that extensive training along with regular, ongoing support may be necessary to successfully implement such interventions (Crane et al., 2020). Furthermore, instructor stress-levels may also influence implementation, and higher support for high-stressed instructors may be necessary (Braun et al., 2024). There may also be a need for more specialized training, curriculum, and pedagogy in supporting students with marginalized identities. For BIPOC and neurodiverse students, one possible improvement may be to create concurrent spaces and discussions with other students with similar intersecting identities, which may be supportive of efforts to create greater connection and help them relate course content to their lived experiences. Finally, it may also

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be helpful to examine and consider student and instructor experiences in other similar interventions (e.g., Beloborodova & Leontiev, 2024; Hobbs et al., 2022) to assess if there are overlapping themes that emerge that could inform instructor training as well as adaptation of such interventions in the future. Overall, in line with counseling psychology's emphasis on prevention, strengths-based practice, and the delivery of contextually responsive interventions in educational settings, these findings suggest that ASHF may serve as a flexible framework for promoting student mental health and flourishing.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Appendix A

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?

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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 the UW campus during your first semester? Can you tell me more about that?
8. Imagine you were talking to an incoming student starting at UW-Madison, 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?

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Table 1

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

	Expressed Interest		Study Sample	
Satisfaction with the ASHF class				
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	39	65.0%	7	46.7%
Asian or Pacific Islander (includes the Indian sub-continent)	1	1.7%	0	0.0%
Multiracial	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.

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Table 2

Themes, Descriptions, and Examples.

Theme	Description	Example
Applying Learnings from the Class	Students found the class content and experiences applicable to various aspects of their lives, including mental health, academics, and relationships	"Like, if I was like having a conflict with someone…I feel like I found myself like stepping away from my phone for a little bit, and like doing a practice or something to help myself like clear my mind and calm down before I like made like an irrational decision, or did something that I might regret doing."
Cultivating Connections with Other Students	The class fostered deep connections among students, enhancing their sense of belonging and well-being, though some students felt isolated in larger lecture settings.	"I think this is probably the class I made the most connections and friends out of. So I would say that, you know, it definitely helped me in feeling like I belong on campus."
Dual Focus Challenges	Students faced challenges balancing the class's dual aims of being a rigorous academic course and a mental health intervention.	"I think that (the Quizzes) were beneficial in some ways, but sometimes the questions were really specific, and it just seemed like they were focusing on such little details that like, it didnt' really matter for the overall module, rather than like focusing on bigger concepts…"
Positive Experiences with Meditation	Students largely reported positive experiences with mindfulness practices, both in class and through the Healthy Minds Program app.	"I liked doing it with the practices. I think that's the most beneficial for me, because it can kind of help you like calm down if you're in like a stressful situation, or just like if you need to relax for a couple of minutes and like think about what you're going to do before you do it type of thing. Like it just helps you slow down…I think for me, that was the most beneficial."
Generating Insights and Reflections	The class provided a space for students to reflect and generate insights, particularly around the concept of flourishing, though some students felt excluded by content that did not fully address their marginalized identities.	"I remember I was writing the Resilience Journal, and I got a little vulnerable! I was writing about my life…like overcoming like battles within myself like after my parents got divorced …And so I really like poured my heart out into that journal about resilience…and what I've gone through, and how I've overcome it, and how I've been able to better myself afterwards."

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