

Investigating the Impact of MindfulU on Student Well-Being: Executive Summary

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Post-secondary students are in the midst of a growing mental health crisis and a loneliness epidemic (Moghimini et al., 2023; Linden et al., 2021; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2021). Using data from the National College Health Assessment Survey II from 2013, 2016, and 2019, Linden and colleagues (2021) showed that there was a significant increase in students reporting mental health challenges across time. Even though these challenges are shared amongst students, research has shown that students are feeling isolated in their struggles. Ogrodniczuk and associates (2021) conducted a study in which over 81% of students reported that they regularly feel lonely. Declining mental health also poses issues for academic success (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). For example, first year students who dealt with mental health problems tended to have a 0.2-0.3 decrease in grade point average compared to their peers without mental health problems (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). As a result of this increasing challenge, traditional campus counselling services have become overburdened, and many students have been unable to promptly

access the care they require, an issue that makes the need for additional support services clear (Abrams, 2022; Baik et al., 2019; Moghimi et al., 2023).

Stress and Loneliness Among Post-Secondary Students

High levels of academic pressure, family pressure and financial pressure have been shown to significantly impact students' perceived stress (Pitt et al., 2017; Slimmen et al., 2022). Additionally, feelings of loneliness can exacerbate perceived stress (Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015). High levels of stress and loneliness have numerous negative outcomes for students. For example, high levels of stress have been associated with lower levels of hope, difficulty concentrating, and irritability (Liu et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2025; Satıcı, 2020). Additionally, chronic stress is considered to contribute to the onset of various mental illnesses such as major depressive disorder (MDD) and bipolar disorder (Davis et al., 2017). High stress and loneliness also result in negative academic outcomes such as procrastination and burnout (Fincham & May, 2021, Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015). Loneliness has also been related to several serious adverse effects such as increased risk for eating disorders, poorer depression and anxiety outcomes, and mental distress (Fagan et al., 2025; Ganson et al., 2025; Wang et al.,

2018). On the other hand, a sense of social connectedness has been associated with higher life satisfaction (Avci, 2023).

Peer Support Services

Due to the growing issue of student mental health, many post-secondary institutions have turned toward introducing peer support services as a means of enhancing student well-being and creating connections between peers. Generally, peer support involves a volunteer providing support to a fellow student, with the opportunity to connect over the shared lived experience of being a student (Pointon-Haas et al., 2023). These services have been shown to be vital for supporting student well-being, with students who utilize the service displaying reduced anxiety and depression symptoms, lowered stress, reduced loneliness, and a higher sense of belongingness (Costello et al., 2022; Gregoire et al., 2024). Volunteers for these programs also stand to gain substantive benefits as well (Lovell & Webber, 2024). These include tangible benefits, like the opportunity to receive free training and to build their resume, but also more personal benefits like a sense of increased confidence and fulfillment (Lovell & Webber, 2024). Existing research suggests that holistic campus well-being programs can play a vital role in defending against the ongoing student mental health crisis and loneliness epidemic.

MindfulU: A Student Mental Health Collective

In the 2023/2024 academic year, Red Deer Polytechnic launched a campus well-being program which was developed by students for students (Students Association of Red Deer Polytechnic, 2024). The program is called MindfulU and seeks to support students through four foundational categories: empowerment, relaxation, fun, and connection. MindfulU was designed around the stepped care model, which involves providing support to individuals proportional to their specific needs (Marques et al., 2024). Using this approach helps to reduce the pressure on support services, which in turn reduces wait times for those seeking help (Marques et al., 2024).

The Present Study

MindfulU was recently implemented at RDP and has therefore not yet been assessed. The purpose of the current study was to assess how the program is perceived by students, and to determine if differences exist between students who have, and who have not accessed its services. Specifically, we sought to assess if students differed in their perceived stress levels, social connectedness, loneliness, mindfulness, flourishing, and thriving. Due to the goal of MindfulU being to enhance student

well-being, and in light of prior research on peer support services, it was expected that students who have accessed and have more frequently attended MindfulU would experience higher well-being than students who have not and do not regularly access Mindful. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to understand students' perceptions of this program. Because of the way that MindfulU is currently operating, it was not feasible to obtain pre- and post-measures of student well-being before and after they access MindfulU. Instead, all RDP students were eligible to participate in the study, regardless of whether they had accessed MindfulU or not, in order to make comparisons between these two groups.

Method

Participants

All current RDP students were eligible to participate. A total of 148 students participated. The majority of the sample were White, female, and between 18-24 years old. As an incentive, participants were eligible for entry into a draw to receive one of four wellness gift baskets.

Materials

Participants completed six measures of well-being which have all been shown to be validated for use with post-secondary

students. The measures included were *The Brief Inventory of Thriving* (BIT; Su et al., 2014), the *Perceived Stress Scale* (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983), the *Social Connectedness Scale-Revised* (SCS-R; Lee et al., 2001), the 6-Item Revised-*UCLA Loneliness Scale* (RULS-6; Wongpakarn et al., 2020), the *Mindful Attention Awareness Scale* (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003), and the *Flourishing Scale* (FS; Deiner et al., 2010). Participants were also asked if they had accessed MindfulU, and how frequently they had accessed it. Also included were questions about experiences (or lack thereof) with MindfulU including the value they perceived it to have and what they would like to see from the program moving forward.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through posters placed around campus with a QR code linking to the survey. This study employed mild deception, as participants were not initially told that the study related to MindfulU and were instead informed that it was simply regarding student well-being. Participants were presented with an informed consent form before beginning the survey. Prior to completion of the survey, participants were provided with a debrief form that informed them of the true nature of the study. At this point, participants were offered the opportunity to withdraw their consent if they chose to.

Results

Access and Engagement

Only a small portion of the total sample had accessed MindfulU before ($n = 28$). Most participants who had accessed MindfulU reported only rarely ($n = 12$) or occasionally ($n = 13$) accessing MindfulU (42.8% and 46.4% respectively). Of the sample, only three students in total had reported accessing MindfulU more regularly than that, with two students accessing sometimes (7.1%) and one student accessing MindfulU very often (3.6%).

Differences Between Groups

Independent samples T-tests were run to assess differences between students who had and students who had not accessed MindfulU. Of the six measures of well-being, two scales showed significant differences between the groups. Students who had accessed MindfulU tended to be significantly lonelier ($M = 12.04$) than students who had not accessed MindfulU ($M = 13.99$), $t(146) = -1.91$, $p = 0.29$. Additionally, those who had accessed MindfulU tended to be flourishing significantly less ($M = 42.96$) than those who had not accessed MindfulU ($M = 40.21$), $t(146) = -1.69$, $p = .047$.

Perceived Value of Attending

For those who had accessed MindfulU, participants were asked about the value they perceived to have gained from using the program. Responses tended to reflect that students felt as though MindfulU was a safe space (e.g., “It felt like a place I could be comfortable in”), that it provided them with a break from stressors (e.g., “It is nice to have a space to step away from stressors of class work”), and that they valued the connection MindfulU provided them with (e.g., “I met a new friend at a Puppy room”).

Students Who Had Not Accessed MindfulU

Students who had not accessed MindfulU most commonly cited never having heard of the program as being their reason for not accessing it ($n = 57$). Other reasons were being too busy ($n = 36$), and the available times not aligning well with their schedule ($n = 29$). Participants were also able to write in their response for why they had not accessed. These responses either related to a lack of clarity or understanding (e.g., “I’ve never really understood what it was or if it pertained to me”), that anxiety, shyness, or embarrassment acted as a barrier to access (e.g., sometimes I become unmotivated and sometimes embarrassed to talk to someone about my problems”), or that they had not accessed MindfulU because they didn’t feel the

need to, either because they were not in need of support (e.g., “never felt like I needed to”) or because they had other ways of coping (e.g., “I use other resources for my mental health”).

Additional Responses

At the end of the survey, participants were asked if there was anything else they would like to add. Half of these responses were expressions of concern for well-being (e.g., “I feel like most students/people are struggling right now”). Many of the remaining responses indicated that students appreciate that services such as MindfulU are available on the RDP campus, and these responses were present for both students who had and who had not accessed MindfulU (e.g., I’ve never accessed these services, but I feel grateful there is always the option”).

Discussion

The increasing mental health crisis and loneliness epidemic for post-secondary students has necessitated additional services for supporting student well-being (Baik et al., 2019; Curtis et al., 2023; Linden et al., 2021; Moghimi et al., 2023). MindfulU is a student-led program with the aim of enhancing social connection and supporting student well-being on campus. Though it appears that many students are only rarely using this service, they still indicated that they perceive it to be an extremely valuable and important service for RDP.

Students Seeking Out Support

MindfulU's intended purpose is to bolster student well-being and these results showed that students who had accessed MindfulU were scoring lower on certain aspects of well-being than their peers who had not accessed MindfulU. Although this may seem concerning at face value, it is important to take these students' extent of access into consideration. With most participants having only accessed MindfulU rarely or occasionally, it follows that these few visits would not lead to dramatic increases in well-being. Rather, this finding likely reflects that students who were struggling were seeking out support on campus, meaning that MindfulU was successfully reaching its target demographic. This is supported by the qualitative data that demonstrated students' perceived MindfulU to be valuable in supporting their well-being. Students suggested that they felt that MindfulU provided them with a break from the stressors of life, and that they felt as though this break was integral to their mental health. Additionally, because there is no pre-test data available, it is entirely possible that students who were accessing MindfulU were struggling to a greater extent prior to accessing this service.

Research has shown that students often feel that anxiety and stigma surrounding mental health act as barriers to accessing traditional counselling services (Curtis et al., 2023; Moghimi et

al., 2023). With MindfulU being a safe space for students to study and relax in, it may be acting as a barrier free entrance point for students to begin accessing mental health support. For example, a student may come to MindfulU to partake in a quick, fun activity. While there, they may meet one of the student volunteers, and as they become more comfortable in the space, they may become more willing to talk to a peer supporter about something they are struggling with in a one-on-one peer support session. From there, the peer supporter may be able to provide them with the support they need or can refer them to the counselling centre if they do require a higher level of care. In this way, MindfulU can act as a starting point for a struggling student who isn't sure where to begin in their mental health journey.

Future Directions for MindfulU

Participants were asked about what they would like to see from MindfulU moving forward. While many of these responses alluded to wanting more of what was already offered (e.g., more workshops) some participants also made specific suggestions for things that MindfulU could add. These provide a basis for the MindfulU team to explore future elements that may be beneficial additions.

As mentioned, there was a high number of students who were simply unaware of the existence of MindfulU. This suggests an increased need for advertisement of the program. Most students who had attended MindfulU reported having heard about it from their instructors, from social media, and from posters hung around campus, and many had heard about it from more than one source. This finding suggests that these are appropriate means of advertising to students, but that additional ways of reaching students may be required.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited in the fact that we were only able to gather data from a specific point in time, rather than collecting data of student well-being before and after they had visited MindfulU. However, this design was necessary so as to not impact the way that MindfulU was currently running. MindfulU is available for students to drop in at various times throughout the week, and so students will have varying levels of engagement with the program. Since there is currently not an existing feature of MindfulU in which students regularly come in at a set time in the week, like a regularly occurring support group, it was not possible to determine how MindfulU has impacted student well-being across time.

Additionally, the small sample for those who had accessed MindfulU, and the especially small sample for those who had accessed MindfulU regularly, may have impacted these findings. We expected to see a relationship between well-being and the extent that students were accessing MindfulU. Because there were only 3 students in the sample who were accessing MindfulU more than rarely or occasionally, there was not enough statistical power to determine if this relationship existed.

Impact

Through this study, awareness was increased surrounding MindfulU. In the survey, participants were presented with a brief description of MindfulU and the services that they offer. This was done to remind the participants of MindfulU, as many students may have accessed its services and did not recall it by name. This also acted to inform students who were unaware of MindfulU. There were 57 students in this sample who had reported never having heard of MindfulU. Through simply having taken part in the survey, these 57 students became aware of this program, and therefore may have found a new source of support on campus.

Finally, this study contributes to the further development of this program. With MindfulU having been recently implemented, it was important to understand how RDP students

perceive this service to ensure it is serving RDP students appropriately. The qualitative data underscore the value students have found in attending MindfulU. The qualitative data also provided valuable insight into the direction that students desire MindfulU to go in the future. In this way, this study has provided RDP students with another way to contribute to the future development of this program. Upholding student voices in the creation of programs such as this is not only important because it centers students as experts on their own experiences, but also because it creates increased awareness for these programs (Baik et al., 2019; Maunder et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Mental health issues and loneliness have been increasing on post-secondary campuses, and additional sources of support have become necessary as a result. MindfulU has recently been implemented to support RDP students and enhance connection between peers. With MindfulU only recently having been implemented, student engagement and awareness so far is low. Despite this, it is evident that students who are struggling have turned towards MindfulU as a source of support, and that students who have utilized this service have found value in doing so. Now informed by student perspectives, MindfulU will

continue to evolve in a way that can continue to benefit RDP students.

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