

RESEARCH-BASED ARTICLES

# The Impact of a Community Mindfulness Program on Online Student Persistence

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This deductive qualitative analysis study explored online undergraduate and graduate students' experience of participating in an online mindfulness community. Specifically, how their participation relates to their persistence through their academic program. Participant responses to short answer questions were collected online. Data analysis was approached through a priori theory emphasizing the four qualities of academic mindset and its relationship to student persistence. The four themes presented were: Belief in one's effort, Sense of belonging, Self-confidence, and Relevance and value. The article concludes with a discussion about implications and limitations.

The rationale for this study on mindfulness and online university student persistence is grounded in the growing body of evidence indicating that mindfulness can significantly enhance academic outcomes by reducing stress and mind wandering, which are critical factors affecting persistence among students (Alrashdi et al., 2024; J. Han, 2025; McCloskey, 2015; Murphy, 2021). People entering school for the first time in years or traditional students who have just started to embark on their new adventure of college years experience anxiety and stress due to daily pressures to perform in school, their personal lives, and employment (Yang et al., 2025). As a result, the ability of students to stay engaged in online degree programs is often compromised.

Murphy (2021) demonstrated that mindfulness practices can effectively lower perceived stress and mind wandering among online graduate students, which, in turn, can improve their persistence in academic programs. The study highlighted that online graduate students, who often balance multiple responsibilities such as work and family, are particularly susceptible to high stress levels. Stressful multitasking can negatively impact their academic performance and persistence. The pressures of college for second career and non-traditional students going back to school take their toll when having a family, career, and juggling the daily tasks of life. By integrating mindfulness practices into their routines, Murphy documented how these students were able to better manage their stress, maintain focus, and enhance their academic perseverance, thereby reducing dropout rates and improving retention.

Previous research has shown that sustained mindfulness practice can lead to structural changes in the brain associated with improved emotional regulation and cognitive function (Treves et al., 2024). Community

participation is expected to foster a sense of belonging and support, further enhancing students' motivation and commitment to their academic goals (Kelly et al., 2024). By practicing mindfulness, students can enhance their ability to stay focused on the present moment, develop a deeper understanding of their emotional and cognitive states, and reduce mind wandering. Our study aims to bring in student voices that are participating in the Mindfulness Training Collective and the impact it has on their academic program persistence, as demonstrated by the cultivation of the elements of an academic mindset (Ba et al., 2025; C. Han et al., 2017; Nazari & Far, 2019). The following section will explore the elements of the academic mindset.

### **Academic Mindset and Its Elements**

An academic mindset is a set of beliefs and attitudes that influence a student's motivation and approach to learning. It consists of four key elements: (1) *Belief in the Potential for Growth (Growth Mindset)*. This element is based on the idea that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and learning. Research by Dweck (2006) has shown that students who adopt a growth mindset are more likely to embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, and achieve higher levels of academic success. (2) *Sense of Belonging*. This refers to the feeling of being accepted and valued in the academic community. Studies have indicated that a strong sense of belonging can enhance students' engagement, motivation, and persistence in educational settings (Walton & Cohen, 2011). (3) *Value of the Work*. When students perceive their academic tasks as valuable and relevant to their personal goals, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged. Research suggests that connecting coursework to students' interests and future aspirations can significantly improve their academic performance (Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009). (4) *Self-Efficacy*. This is the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific tasks or situations. High self-efficacy has been linked to greater effort, persistence, and resilience in the face of difficulties. Mindfulness practices have been shown to enhance self-efficacy by improving students' ability to manage stress and maintain focus (Sampl et al., 2017).

These elements contribute to an academic mindset, which is crucial for student success and persistence in educational programs (Ba et al., 2025). Integrating mindfulness practices can support the development of these elements by reducing stress, improving focus, and fostering a supportive community, ultimately enhancing students' academic outcomes and persistence (Chen & Qi, 2025). Our study aims to build on Murphy's (2021) findings by examining the impact of participating in an ongoing mindfulness community rather than a short training module.

### **The Mindfulness Training Collective**

The Mindfulness Training Collective is a supportive online community, sponsored by an online university, where students can continually engage in mindfulness practices and receive ongoing peer and institutional support. The programming offered includes a weekly virtual mindfulness session

(Wednesday Morning Mindful Meetups), monthly workshops aimed at educating participants on applying mindfulness practices in their academic, professional, and personal lives, and a multi-month mindfulness training cohort program. The continuous nature of this collective is hypothesized to provide more sustained benefits in terms of cultivating an academic mindset, which is critical for persistence. The Mindfulness Training Collective offers a specific approach to mindfulness that is culturally aware and has a trauma-informed lens. The term we have coined to capture this important blend is *intersectional resilience*.

## Methodology

This article focuses on the qualitative portion of a larger mixed methods study, which was completed as a requirement for one of the authors' completion of her EdD program. The specific qualitative question we focused on was: *How does participating in an online mindfulness community impact online undergraduate and graduate student persistence?* To address this question, we used deductive qualitative analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) because we began our research with a priori theory (academic mindset) that we wanted to investigate further. Deductive qualitative analysis allows researchers to thicken their understanding of a particular theoretical lens by comparing anecdotal data offered by participants. This qualitative design leads to the construction of a theory that would link participation in a mindfulness community to academic persistence for online adult learners.

## Researcher Positionality

Five researchers worked on this study. Author 1 is a professor of counseling and directs the Mindfulness Training Collective. He identifies as a gay Jewish person of European descent and has practiced mindfulness since 2000. Author 2 was a doctoral student (since graduated), and she coordinated this study as part of her dissertation for an EdD in Organizational Leadership. She identifies as an Indigenous American and is multicultural. She was the lead researcher for the quantitative portion of this study. The final three authors served as research assistants for this study. Two were studying for their BA in Psychology, and the third for her MA in Counseling (all have since graduated). All identify as women and were from different ethnic/racial backgrounds, including European decent and Latina. The whole research team was in some way involved with the Mindfulness Training Collective, either as work-study employees, and/or participants of our programs.

## Participants

Participants were 48 students at an online university in 2024 who self-selected to answer qualitative questions that were part of a mixed-methods survey. All participants attended at least one program from the Mindfulness Training Collective. They were over the age of 18 and able to complete the online survey. Seventy-six percent of participants identified as women, 22% as men, and 2% as non-binary. Forty percent of participants identified as White

and of European descent, 20% as Hispanic or Latinx, 20% as Multiracial, 10% as Black or African American, and 10% as Asian or Asian Pacific Islander. Participants' level of education was 57.1% Master's, 32.7% Bachelor's, 4.1% Doctorate, 4.1% Associate, and 2.0% Administrative Credentials. Participants indicated the following participation frequency in the Mindfulness Training Collective throughout the year: Low participation (1–2 programs), 65.1%; Moderate participation (3 programs), 9.3%; More participation (4 > programs), 25.6%. Regarding familiarity with mindfulness, 53% of participants reported moderate practice, 39.5% identified as beginners, and 7.0% identified as advanced.

## Procedure

Institutional review board approval was received. A mixed-methods survey was sent to about 1,000 participants of the Mindfulness Training Collective. Students provided informed consent through the initial survey questions, then advanced to the main survey. The survey asked about demographics and included a survey of perceived stress as an online student, and a scale capturing persistence scores for online students. These two scales were used to collect quantitative data.

The survey included four open-ended questions, yielding qualitative data. The questions were: (1) *Please share a story, example, or experience from the Mindfulness Training Collective (MTC) that supported you in sticking with or completing your academic program.* (2) *If participating in the MTC affected you academically, please describe how it influenced your academic experience.* (3) *What do you perceive to be the benefits and drawbacks of participating in the MTC?* (4) *What would you like to share with others (students, professors, or leaders) about your MTC experience(s)?*

## Data Collection

The survey was sent through PsysData, and all answers were collected and stored in a password-protected account. Only the second author had direct access to all the data. Each qualitative question was followed by a short essay box in order to type an answer. The second author sent the first author a secure Google Sheets link in order to review selected data that pertained to the qualitative section of the survey. The first author copied all the qualitative answers into Taguette, a cloud-based online program that organizes qualitative research coding. A separate document was produced for each of the four questions above and uploaded into Taguette for coding. Thus, there were four documents with about 48 answers each that represented the qualitative data.

## Data Analysis

Extending from our overall methodology described above, we were guided by a collaborative inductive-deductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). We used this process for data analysis because it highlights the richness of participant experience within team-based coding towards a

theme-creation project based on a specific theoretical starting point. The first author trained research assistants (the final 3 authors of this manuscript) in qualitative research coding on Taguette. They collaborated on one document and then worked in groups of two for the remainder of the documents.

The documents were highlighted to produce a growing code list. The research team labeled 91 codes in total. The most often highlighted codes included: *persistence, connection, new skill, new behavior, struggle, career goals, relationships, support, stress, focus, manage stress, complete tasks, manage workload, confidence, and meditation*. We stayed in close communication as the coding progressed, and had two team meetings to review the code lists while returning to the documents as a way to thicken our understanding of how the codes related to the four qualities of academic mindset.

The first author then used ChatGPT by inputting the code list (without any participant data or information), asking the program to see how the codes fit into the four qualities of academic mindset. The output was reviewed by the research team and also against the original documents from which the data was extracted. From this process, the research team collaborated to construct the four themes presented below based on the four qualities of academic mindset.

### **Trustworthiness**

Throughout our research process, theme construction, and the production of this manuscript, our team centered the qualitative research value of transparency as the foundation of trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005). We have been transparent about engaging in our research analysis through a priori theoretical orientation. We have been transparent in our coordination with the quantitative portion of this study, and through our coding process and theme construction. Our team met throughout the data analysis phase in order to process the theme construction as offered by our a priori approach and use of AI. We returned to the original documents multiple times to deepen our understanding of our themes.

### **Findings**

As a result of collecting the short answers to the four questions listed above, our coding and theme construction process described above, we present below our four outcome themes. Our themes connect with the research question posed earlier in this article: *How does participating in an online mindfulness community impact online undergraduate and graduate student persistence?* The themes are aligned with the four qualities of academic mindset (Farrington et al., 2012) and speak to how participation in the online mindfulness community supported student persistence. Each theme is presented with a definition of the theme as integrated from theory and our data. We offer an affirmation for each quality and a practical skill that could be used as a community-engaged mindfulness practice by online students.

## **Belief In Effort**

Belief in one's effort is the belief that a student can succeed through practice and determination. A quotation from the transcripts that exemplified this quality was,

In the very first accountability group meeting, we all connected quickly. It was hearing the trials and obstacles that others go through that show me how much determination can push you to the end goal. We encourage one another, and this cohort has taught me a ton about the importance of self-care and love."

This student wrote about their participation in the Mindfulness Training Collective's certificate cohort. They expressed the benefit of mindful connection through small group discussions, which bolstered their belief in their own effort. An affirmation for this theme might be: I can overcome challenges through determination. A skill-based practice on this theme might be: Responding to difficulty with compassion and resourcing.

## **Sense of Belonging**

A sense of belonging is perhaps the factor of academic mindset that matters the most (C. Han et al., 2017). A student feels connected to the community, and there is a sense that they are struggling together with their peers and supported by the available resources of the institution. Two quotations from the transcripts that exemplified this quality were, "...the belief that one is a valued and accepted member of the learning community," and "Knowing every Wednesday morning I have the opportunity to connect with my Self and others helps." The first quote is understood to be a general sentiment of what has benefited this student through connecting with the Mindfulness Training Collective, while the second quotation emphasized ongoing participation in our weekly mindful meetup. The quotations both point to the quality of a sense of belonging in feeling accepted and connected in a mindfulness-based community. An affirmation for this theme might be: I belong to this learning community. A skill-based practice on this theme might be: Common humanity as a core of mindful compassion.

## **Self-Confidence**

Self-confidence is present when students believe that they have the necessary ability and information needed to work through uncertainty in order to succeed. Self-confidence is cultivated by acknowledging and honoring past successes. It emerges when barriers to self-esteem, like stress and anxiety, are decreased. Being able to validate one's own experiences can also contribute to confidence. An exemplary quotation from the data was, "It helped me to focus, which helped me to be a more confident student. I felt a decrease in my academic stress levels, which helped my grades improve." It is not clear from the quotation which aspect of the Mindfulness Training Collective the student is referring to, though it is clear that they experienced

greater focus. The enhanced focus contributed to their sense of themselves as a confident student and they also shared about a decrease in academic stress. An affirmation for this theme might be: I have what it takes to succeed. A skill-based practice on this theme might be: Remembering one's wholeness and honoring flexibility.

### Relevance and Value

Students want to know that what they are engaged in throughout their program has relevance and value towards their professional goals. When students engage in meaningful academic activities, the sense of meaning also transfers to the value they see in themselves – thus, there is a feedback loop between purpose and confidence. The following quote served as an example of this quality:

The workshops are phenomenal and the information gained is always valuable and relevant to my real life world, whether in my current healing, my studies, or my future endeavors. They add a relatable, extra dimension to my studies, helping me to see a bigger picture of where I fit into this world and what I can accomplish after I graduate.

An affirmation for this theme might be: This matters; I matter. A skill-based practice on this theme might be: Pausing to consider the purpose of what I do and who I am.

### Discussion

In the above section, we presented our four themes that align with the four qualities of an academic mindset. This current discussion section will explore the implications of our findings for online adult learners. There are two interdependent parts of the Mindfulness Training Collective that are represented in our themes. The first aspect is community engagement (Kelly et al., 2024; Messina, 2011; Pillar, 2017). Students who are engaged in community clubs and programs are more likely to persist through academic challenges (Schudde, 2019). The Mindfulness Training Collective is not just a one-time course; it is a continuous community that offers opportunities to connect throughout the year. For example, we hold our Wednesday morning meetup continuously, even through the Winter holidays. Students who complete our certificate cohort begin to facilitate the Wednesday morning meetup and offer workshops. There is a way to stay engaged and grow professionally and personally. Participants are invited to deepen their responsibility for the Collective.

The second aspect of the Mindfulness Training Collective is mindfulness. Our particular approach to mindfulness offers a cross-cultural lens that is trauma informed. Thus, it is a model of mindfulness that is for our particular students, constructed by our particular students. Through the years of our offerings, we have coined the phrase, *intersectional resilience* to describe our

approach to mindfulness. *Intersectional* is the honoring of multiple identities that hold varying degrees of privilege and marginalization (Johnson, 2026; Magee, 2019). *Resilience* is the mindfulness-informed cross-cultural ideas and practices that have allowed us to thrive through hardship and challenges. Our approach to mindfulness has a reciprocal relationship with community.

An example of this in practice is that at the end of many programs offered, we have a moment to quietly look at the Zoom screen, at each person present, and offer them a silent wish of care and compassion. Practices such as these wake up the academic mindset in participants by fostering a sense of belonging, possibility, ability, and meaning (Deep et al., 2025). A natural outcome for academic mindset engagement in this mindful way is increased compassion for self and others (Owens, 2023). Compassion is the final cornerstone of mindfulness at the Mindfulness Training Collective. Compassion can also be seen as the common denominator for the affirmations and practices offered along with our themes above.

### **Limitations**

As this study was qualitative, there is a limitation in the generalizability of the findings. Since we collected responses via an online survey, we did not have the opportunity to explore responses from participants in a more nuanced way. We were also unable to offer participant checks during our theme construction. We also did not investigate if there was a meaningful difference in responses from students who were lower versus higher participants of the Mindfulness Training Collective, or who had lower versus higher experience with mindfulness. We employed a priori theory to our data, so we may have limited our theme construction prematurely. Similarly, using AI as a first step to divide our codes into specifically chosen theme categories may also have limited our insight into our findings. Further research can address these limitations by conducting full interviews with students and using a different analysis approach that constructs themes without theoretical priming.

### **Conclusion**

Our article presented the qualitative subsection of a larger research project that looked at the relationship between participating in an online mindfulness community and student persistence for online adult students. The study centered on the offerings of the Mindfulness Training Collective, which is an online mindfulness community housed in the Whole Person Center of the JFK School of Psychology and Social Sciences at National University. 48 students responded to the qualitative portion of a mixed method survey, giving us the data for our deductive qualitative analysis. We applied a priori categorization of our codes to map onto the four qualities of academic mindset, and with the assistance of ChatGPT, we presented the following themes: Belief in one's effort, Sense of belonging, Self-confidence, and Relevance and value. This study assisted us in seeing how the specific approach of mindfulness through the Mindfulness Training Collective

enhanced student persistence. Student persistence seems to be bolstered via our cross-cultural mindful community that is trauma-informed and increases compassion towards self and others.

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