

Capitalizing on curriculum to promote postsecondary student wellness: Preliminary results from a study of for-credit mindfulness courses in two Canadian universities



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INTRODUCTION

- In 2021, 85% of Canadian post-secondary students endorsed moderate to severe psychological distress, with procrastination (61%) and stress (52%) emerging as the most common impediments to academic performance (American College Health Association, 2022).
- Although mindfulness is effective in addressing these challenges, it is usually taught in extracurricular programs, where attrition is high and compliance is low (MacPherson & Rockman, 2023).



OBJECTIVE

- Investigate the effects of for-credit mindfulness courses on undergraduate students at two Canadian universities:
 - The University of Waterloo (UW) course included an 8-week program of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR);
 - The University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) course included an 8-week program of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the impacts of for-credit mindfulness courses on undergraduate students' psychological and academic functioning?
- How do these students compare to undergraduate students not taking a for-credit mindfulness course?

HYPOTHESES

- Compared to students who are not taking a for-credit mindfulness course, students enrolled in a for-credit mindfulness course will report greater adaptive functioning and decreased maladaptive functioning over the course of the academic term and at 1-month follow-up, as indicated via:
 - Decreased stress and mental health difficulties;
 - Increased well-being and positive coping;
 - Increased integration of mindfulness and other self-care practices into daily life;
 - Increased academic performance, self-efficacy, and positive academic coping.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

- $N = 31$ undergraduate students taking a for-credit mindfulness course at UW ($n = 18$) or UFV ($n = 13$)
 - UW: $M_{age} = 21.6$, $SD_{age} = 1.0$
 - UFV: $M_{age} = 35.1$, $SD_{age} = 13.9$
- $N = 60$ undergraduate students not taking a for-credit mindfulness course at UW (comparison group)
 - $M_{age} = 21.1$, $SD_{age} = 1.3$

MEASURES

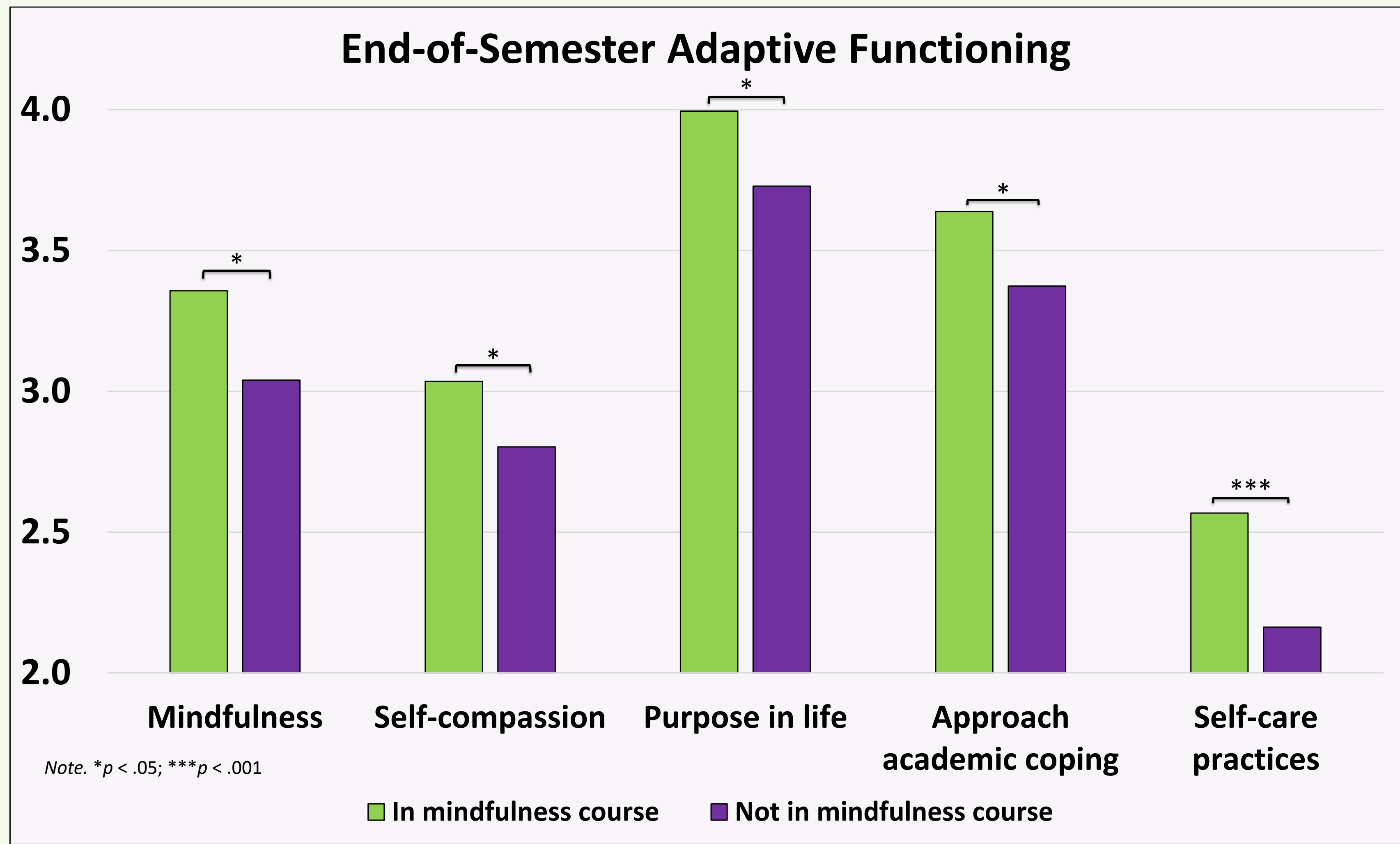
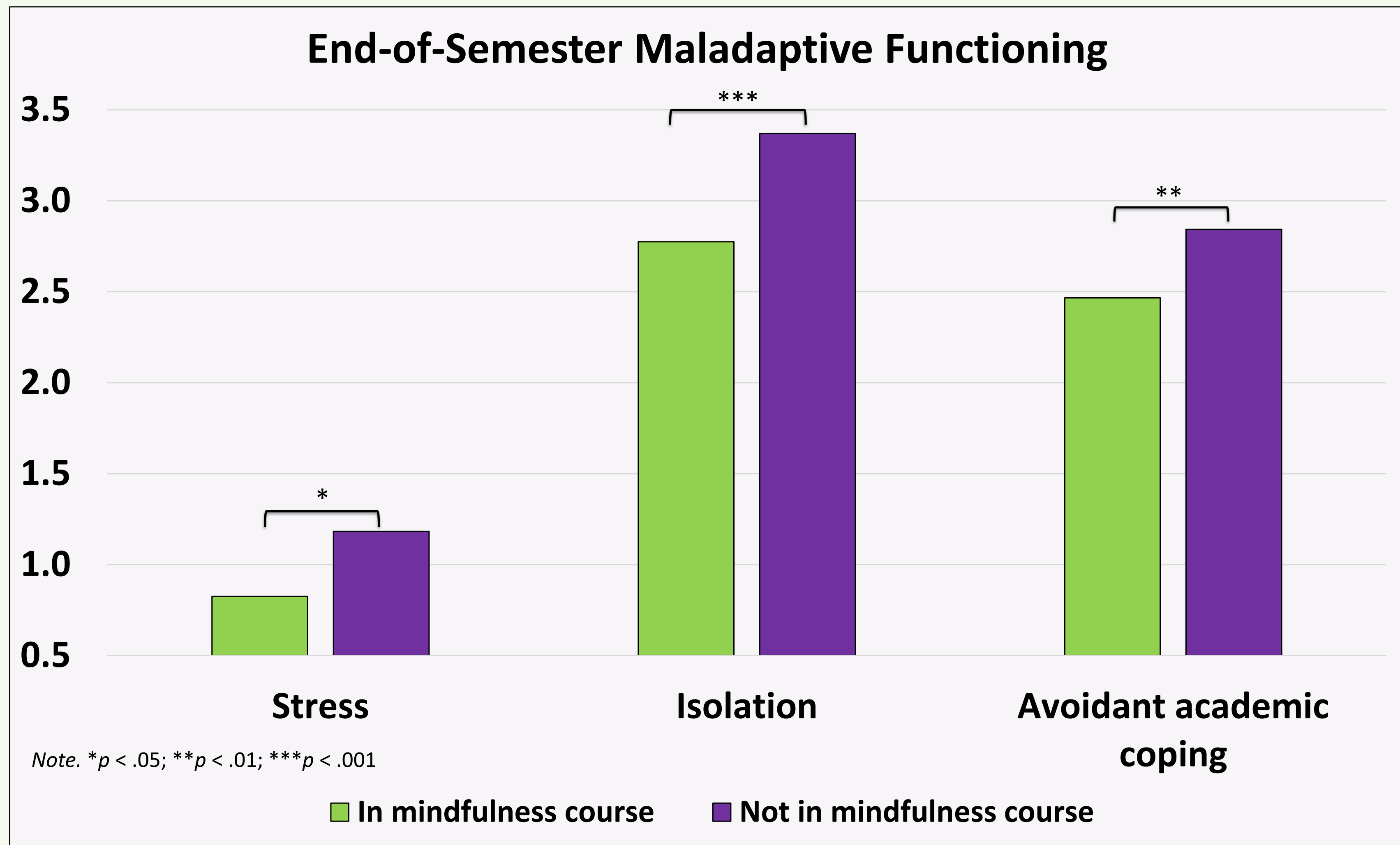
- Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale-21 (DASS21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)
- Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003)
 - Isolation subscale
 - Mindfulness subscale
 - Total scale (mean of all subscales)
- Academic Coping Strategies Scale (Sullivan, 2010)
 - Approach coping: Active attempts by the student to change the problem/their emotional reaction to the problem or to prepare themselves to handle the problem
 - Avoidant coping: Attempts to escape or disengage from the stressful situation, with no real attempt to solve the problem (i.e., avoid thinking about the problem altogether)
- Purpose in Life Scale (Robbins & Francis, 2000)
- Self-Care Practices Scale (Lee et al., 2020)

PROCEDURE

- All participants were asked to complete online surveys at the following 4 time points:
 - Part 1. Start of W2024 semester
 - Part 2. Middle of W2024 semester
 - Part 3. End of W2024 semester
 - Part 4. One month follow-up

RESULTS

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVAs) examined group differences in end-of-semester functioning scores, controlling for start-of-semester scores. Supplementary paired-sample t-tests were also conducted.



IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

For-credit experiential courses that center around empirically supported mindfulness programs, such as MBSR and MBCT, help to promote student wellness and academic success. They may attract and retain more students than extracurricular programs, though analysis of this is ongoing.

Qualitative data assessing students' reflections throughout and at the end of these for-credit mindfulness courses will be analyzed in the upcoming months. We expect that these analyses will help us better understand what students learned and experienced during these courses, as well as what impact the courses may have had on students' perceptions of their university.

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