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The Art and Science of Human Flourishing at Texas Christian University

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This article addresses the topic of *mindful flourishing* through the lens of “The Art and Science of Human Flourishing” (ASHF) course that is mentioned in this special issue’s introduction and first article. This article’s first section describes Texas Christian University’s (TCU) CALM Studies group’s collaboration with the Center for Healthy Minds (CHM) at the University of Wisconsin (UW) to bring the flourishing course to the Fort Worth campus, while the second examines the nuts-and-bolts of the course, which the three authors taught as a pilot in the spring semester 2022. The article’s final section looks ahead, summarizing the CALM Studies group’s vision for building a campus-wide movement dedicated to *mindful flourishing* in which ASHF will serve as the gateway course for a minor housed in the TCU CALM Center for Student Flourishing. The group envisions that center serving as a hub in the Southwest region that will promote not only the flourishing of students and other members of the campus community but also that of Mother Earth, non-human animals, and other forms of sentient life.



We propose that declarative learning and procedural learning are both equally important to mental health and flourishing, and strengthening flourishing skills through practices of awareness, connection, and other contemplative strategies may be especially conducive to durable enhancements of mental health and flourishing (Dahl et al., 2015). Therefore, courses on flourishing that address both a declarative understanding of flourishing concepts and strengthen skills through forms of practice that help one to actually flourish, according to our theory of change, are those that are most likely to produce substantive and lasting benefits on mental health outcomes and more distal risk and health behavior outcomes. (Hirshberg et al. 2022, 2245)

Section 1 Introduction

This article addresses the topic of *mindful flourishing* through the lens of the course The Art and Science of Human Flourishing (ASHF), which was mentioned in the introduction and the first article of this issue. This first section describes Texas Christian University's (TCU) CALM Studies group's collaboration with the **Center for Healthy Minds** (CHM) at the University of Wisconsin (UW) to bring the flourishing course to the Fort Worth campus, and the second examines the nuts-and-bolts of the course, which the three authors taught as a pilot in the spring 2022 semester. The article's final section looks ahead, summarizing the CALM Studies group's vision for building a campus-wide movement dedicated to *mindful flourishing* in which ASHF will serve as the gateway course for a minor housed in the TCU CALM Center for Student Flourishing. The group envisions that center serving as a hub in the Southwest region that will promote not only the flourishing of students and other members of the campus community but also that of Mother Earth, non-human animals, and other forms of sentient life.

The Creation of ASHF

As noted in the introduction to this issue, ASHF was developed by the Center for Healthy Minds (CHM) at the University of Wisconsin (UW) in partnership with the **Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia** (UVA) and the **Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center** at Pennsylvania State University (PSU). Those three centers began planning the course in the summer of 2016 amid concerns over the mental health of many college students and taught the pilot on their campuses in fall 2017; it has been offered in each subsequent fall semester.

As they started planning ASHF that summer, they envisioned creating a course that would teach students knowledge about the key "ingredients" of flourishing, referred to

in the quotation above as “declarative learning.” The course was also intended to teach students practical skills they could apply in their daily lives to more skillfully navigate the stressful transition from high school to college but could also deploy to flourish during their undergraduate studies and in their post-graduation lives. Those skills, referred to above as “procedural knowledge,” include mindfulness and meditation, compassion and gratitude, and other contemplative practices, of which many have roots in Buddhism and other Asian religious and philosophical traditions.

UW’s Version of the Art and Science of Human Flourishing

The University of Wisconsin’s version of the course, which TCU adopted for its spring 2022 pilot, has been taught each fall since 2017 by CHM’s Distinguished Chair in Contemplative Humanities John Dunne with the assistance of Senior Teaching Assistant Scott Anderson and several other teaching assistants. The course serves as one component of CHM’s Flourishing Initiative, which the center describes as follows: “During their college careers, between a quarter and a third of students will experience a mental health disorder such as anxiety or depression. The Student Flourishing Initiative offers a credit-bearing course aimed at first-year students to explore academic underpinnings of well-being as well as develop a personal practice to cultivate their own mental health throughout college and beyond” (CHM, n.d.).

Since that pilot, CHM has regularly updated the course by adding and eliminating content, enhancing its well-designed digital platform, and updating its user-friendly Healthy Minds Program app. That app, which was developed by the center’s nonprofit affiliate Healthy Minds Innovations (HMI), has been used to generate the sorts of research data described in the introduction to this special issue and has been quite popular with our students, as we describe below. Course revisions have also included larger class sizes, dedicated sections for groups who have often felt marginalized on the university’s campus, and a summer workshop for training instructors outside the university who would like to teach UW’s version of the flourishing course at their own institutions.

As seen in the list below, the course divides the semester into fifteen one-week topics clustered in groups of three that are subsumed within one of the five dimensions of flourishing, the terms in *italics*. Thus, the first three weeks of class would address the *foundations* of the course, devoting one week to an overview of flourishing, another to transformation, and a third to resilience.

1. *Foundations*: Flourishing, Transformation, Resilience
2. *Awareness*: Focus, Emotions, Mindfulness

3. *Connection*: Interdependence, Compassion, Diversity
4. *Insight*: Identity, Values, Gratitude
5. *Integration*: Courage, Community, Belonging

As students progress through these fifteen topics, they read academic articles and excerpts from scholarly monographs, watch TED talks and other video clips, and prepare other materials that cover the various ingredients of human flourishing. As suggested in the course title, these assignments are rooted in not only the sciences—neuroscience, psychology, and other disciplines—but also the arts, drawing from religion, philosophy, and other liberal arts disciplines. And throughout the term, students also put into practice the procedural knowledge they have learned, including basic forms of mindfulness, meditation, and other contemplative practices, to deepen their understanding and engagement with that week’s topic, be it resilience, interdependence, compassion, or gratitude.

ASHF at TCU

The TCU CALM Studies group learned about the early stages of planning for the flourishing course during John Dunne’s visit to TCU in the spring of 2016 in a talk he gave, titled “An Exploration of Buddhism and Neuroscience.” His talk offered an overview of CHM’s history, its research agenda, and tentative plans for the flourishing course, which, he explained, was being created in response to the mental health struggles of undergraduate students that were summarized in the introduction to this issue. He illustrated the seriousness of the situation by citing statistics about the deteriorating state of the mental health of undergraduate students drawn from counseling centers at American colleges and universities. Particularly striking was a graph he shared depicting a spike in their levels of anxiety that started rising in 2011.

In describing the course, Dunne explained that it would neither offer students a single, rigid definition of human flourishing nor teach them a prescriptive set of skills. It would, instead, provide students with a mix of ingredients oriented around the five dimensions of flourishing that they could combine to suit their individual backgrounds and sensibilities. We could imagine, perhaps, a group of chefs each of whom has been given a set of ingredients and invited to create their own delicious recipes, whether a spicy curry, a hearty soup, a crisp salad, or some other dish. Although the three centers at UW, UVA, and PSU created the course together, each envisioned tailoring it to its own campus environment and also imagined that other institutions, like TCU, who adopted it in the future would do likewise.

Several years after Dunne's 2016 presentation, the CALM Studies group received permission from CHM to teach its version of the flourishing course beginning in the 2021–2022 academic year. In the summer before teaching the TCU pilot, two of the three authors received extensive online training at CHM's first ASHF workshop, which introduced participants to the course's history, teaching techniques, and the Healthy Minds Program app, among other topics. In the spring 2022 semester, the three authors taught the pilot to fifteen students and received the wonderful feedback that we describe below. We plan on teaching the flourishing course every spring semester as a three-credit liberal arts course cross-listed in the TCU Departments of Religion and Philosophy, which are both housed in the university's AddRan College of Liberal Arts.

Much like UW's experience with ASHF, we anticipate updating our version each year by adding and possibly eliminating assignments, revamping the online course platform, and gradually increasing enrollments so that we are able to accommodate a larger number of first-year students. Unlike CHM, however, we will continue to teach it in the spring semester so it can serve as a complement to TCU's one-credit Introduction to University Life and one-credit Introduction to Pre-Health courses, which are both offered in the fall semester and were described in the introduction to this issue.

Section 2 The Nuts-and-Bolts of the Art and Science of Human Flourishing Course

As noted above, the goal of our ASHF course is to facilitate expanded self-awareness, enhanced social connectivity, and a greater ability to work with our own inherent capacity to change. We have sought to help students formulate their own sense of what it means to lead a flourishing life that sustains meaningful and fulfilling engagement with their studies, relationships, community, and career.

Through the course, students engage in integrative learning through knowing, experiencing, and acting. They *know* through analysis of theories on the nature and cultivation of human flourishing from multiple intellectual fields including psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, religious studies, and anthropology. They *experience* through engaging with contemplative practice in an inquiry that cultivates qualities of human flourishing from within. Understanding real-world applications, the students *act* through integrating contemplative practice and knowledge of course materials to establish a foundation for flourishing in their own lives and the communities in which they live.

A Typical ASHF Class

A typical class session begins with a short practice designed to cultivate the “CALM vibe,” as we call it. The CALM vibe involves belonging, compassion for self and others, wisdom and mental clarity, and flourishing. It attunes us to the deep suffering and inequity in the world and how to alleviate it, as well as instilling a deeply embodied calmness and sense of freedom and care that arises from meditation practice.

Prior to class time, we set the stage for the CALM vibe by arranging classroom chairs and tables in a semi-circle, with students joining virtually appearing on a screen that completes the full circle.¹ After all are seated, the opening practice starts with an invitation to attention, to become mindfully aware of the present moment, without judgment, and with our bodies in a comfortable but alert posture, feet on the floor and backs upright. We then spend two to five minutes moving through some basic meditations. Our most common starting practice is 4-7-8 breathing: inhaling for a count of four, holding for seven, and exhaling for eight. After a few rounds of 4-7-8, we might move through a few other quick practices, such as mindfully moving one’s thumb across the tips of the fingers of one hand or a full-body scan of progressive relaxation from feet to head.

Another favorite short opening practice is to synchronize one’s breathing with the words of a *gatha*, which is Sanskrit for song or verse. We regularly use an adaptation of a famous one by Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh: “I know that I am breathing in / I know that I am breathing out. / I calm my body and mind. / I smile. / I dwell in the present moment. / I know this is a wonderful moment” (adapted from Nhat Hanh 1987, 5). After a few times through, we would move to the short form, still timed with our breath: “In. / Out. / Calm. / Smile. / Wonderful. / Moment.”

With the CALM vibe established through the room arrangement and opening practice, we then move to a fifteen-to-twenty-minute didactic portion covering the topic of the day, exploring one of the models of flourishing from the five dimensions described above. Depending on the amount of material we have to cover and whether we watched a longer video clip assigned in the course, such as Richard Davidson’s TED Talk “How Mindfulness Changes the Emotional Life of Our Brains,” we either extend the teaching portion or transition to a longer meditation practice after about twenty minutes. A particular longer practice that has been popular with students is tree meditation, in which we visualize connecting to and exchanging energy with a tree located in a beautiful forest. Such longer meditations also include the *metta*, or loving-kindness, practice in which we wish wellness, happiness, and peacefulness for ourselves, a loved one, and others in an expanding circle that culminates with all beings.

Circling Ritual

In most classes, we engage in a “circling” sharing practice that involves reflecting on the topic of the day or perhaps students’ experiences with assignments completed outside of class. The circling practice begins with a stone. Holding the stone for all to see, the instructor says that the circle has begun and now only the person holding the stone may talk. All are invited to show respect and compassion by silently attuning ourselves to the speaker holding the stone. Students are encouraged not to worry about what they might say when it is their turn to speak but rather to focus mindfully on whoever is holding the stone. Then, the stone passes from student to student, with each sharing their thoughts according to the prompt. Depending on time and desired pedagogical purpose, the sharing might range from a single-word response to a few minutes for each student. For longer sharing sessions, we invite students to “loop back” to what previous students might have said or to “dip” into their own deep emotional and intellectual responses.²

An important aspect of circling is the pace. Students are encouraged to slowly pass and receive the stone, pausing for the giver and receiver to make eye contact. We also incorporate bowing. To signal that they have finished talking, a student cups the stone in both hands and bows slowly to the class from their seat. Then, in appreciation for what was said, the seated class together slowly bows back to the speaker. Only then will the student pass the stone to the next person. Often, the receiving student might sit silently for a few moments, absorbing what has been said or collecting themselves to speak. We encourage students to be comfortable with such silent moments that can often feel uncomfortable. Indeed, becoming comfortable with discomfort is a key flourishing skill that our course cultivates.

We often end class with an additional closing meditation practice. These closing practices range from a deep breath and a brief moment of reflection on something for which we are grateful to a longer guided meditation, often directed toward incorporating course insights into students’ daily lives. A favorite closing practice is the *metta*—loving-kindness—meditation mentioned above, which involves cultivating compassion for self and others through repeating the phrases: “May they be well. May they be safe. May they be happy. And may they be at peace.” *Metta* begins with self, then moves to a beloved other, then to someone who is having a difficult time, on to someone who has given us a difficult time, and further on to various groups from the campus community, such as the custodians and cafeteria workers, or groups from the wider community, such as the unhoused or victims of recent tragedies, and then finally encompassing the community of all life on Earth.

Outside Class

Outside of class, students' mastery of course concepts and information is reinforced through regular online quizzes. Students analyze course material and practices through weekly reflection journals that focus on different aspects each week in a repeating cycle: first, *learning*, in which students summarize and critically engage with key aspects of assigned readings or videos; second, *practice*, in which they reflect on their experiences with various assigned mindfulness practices; and third, *integration*, in which they put the course material and mindfulness practices into conversation toward changes in their lives and communities.

The assigned out-of-class mindfulness practices involve students' engagement with the Healthy Minds Program app described above. Students are required to progress through various didactic and practical modules in the app, and their reflection journals show how much they enjoy and benefit from it. Students especially appreciate that the app is manageable, scalable, and adaptable. Most lectures on the science of mindfulness are only a few minutes long, and most practices provide duration options from two minutes to an hour as well as options for seated or walking practice. Given their reported stress and time constraints, our students seem to most appreciate the short lectures and practices that can be done while walking, since they can be incorporated into their daily routines going around campus. All of our students report decreased stress and enhanced well-being from their regular engagement with the material and practices.

In addition to attendance, quizzes, weekly reflections, and app engagement, students are graded on three short (250–350 words) mindfulness essays and two longer (750–1000 words) flourishing ideas papers. Of these, the students' favorite easily seemed to be the animal/tree mindfulness meditation reflection essay, in which they are asked to dedicate at least thirty minutes to going outside to a park or to some spot on campus or in their neighborhood and then mindfully observing first a tree and then an animal. This is their first essay assignment and serves as fruitful material for reflection in their later coursework as well as our class discussions. Arising from their animal meditations, our classes have had semester-long, love-hate relationships with squirrels, which provided much amusement and edification.

Student Testimonials and Scientific Research

The small number of students who have completed the TCU flourishing course have reported to us positive and wide-ranging benefits, including less anxiety and greater concentration, and some have noted a stronger sense of being present in their daily lives and feeling connected with classmates and others in their social spheres. By introducing students to introspective and community-building techniques, we imagine that they

will be better positioned in their personal and professional lives to chart out their own path of *mindful flourishing*. We also envision that students who have completed the course will graduate and enter their careers embodying and transmitting an alternative vision for being in the world, one dedicated to promoting the flourishing of all life that is rooted in a deeply felt sense of connection, compassion, and joy.

Anecdotal reports from our students accord with the findings of research published by UW, UVA, and PSU described above, which drew from a larger sample size. That study reports that compared to controls, “ASHF participants reported significantly improved mental health (i.e., reduced depression) and flourishing, improvements on multiple attention and social-emotional skills (e.g., attention function, self-compassion), and increases in prosocial attitudes” (Hirshberg et al. 2022, 2243), which, the authors note, include empathic concern and shared humanity. The authors also state that they found no evidence that the course impacted health and risk behaviors, observing that such outcomes may require a longer period of time to change. They conclude that the course may serve as a “promising curricular approach to reduce and potentially prevent poor mental health while promoting flourishing in college students,” although additional research will be needed to refine these results required to confirm the conclusions of this research (Hirshberg et al. 2022, 2243).

Section 3 Looking Ahead

CALM Visions

In this third section of the article, we look ahead, imagining the role that CALM Studies can play in promoting *mindful flourishing* on the TCU campus and the Southwest. CALM Studies advances its mission to promote flourishing and a sense of belonging through innovative course offerings, weekly meditations, the community lecture series, the CALM Talk podcast, and the programs CALM Convos and CALM Buddies. We see growth potential in each of these areas, and as we envision steps forward over the next five years, our intentions are directed to two initiatives. First, we plan to develop a “flourishing classroom model,” which faculty members across campus can use as a template to transform their classrooms. Second, we see our collective work in these areas as establishing a firm foundation for launching the CALM Center for Student Flourishing. We outline each of these planned initiatives below.

The Flourishing Classroom

The Contemplative Sciences Center at UVA is developing “The University of Flourishing,” an online portal that will offer world-quality content, events, and classes from an international network of universities devoted to transforming education to promote greater student flourishing. We see ourselves as part of this movement to reshape

what a college experience looks like. The larger group supporting this initiative is the Flourishing Academic Network.

TCU is already leading universities in the Southwest with its evolving CALM Studies program and certain faculty actively teaching courses that weave contemplative practices and skills with discipline-specific content. Among these innovative offerings are The Art and Science of Human Flourishing (Departments of Philosophy and Religion), Mindfulness and Modern Life (AddRan College of Liberal Arts), Animals, Religion, and Culture (Anthropology), Happiness: Culture, Economics, Being (Anthropology), Native American Religions and Ecology (Anthropology), Mindfulness for College Students (Honors College), Buddhism: Thought and Practice (Religion), Mind Consciousness Self (Philosophy), Mind Body Ecology (Philosophy), and The Mindful Leader (Business). Such courses differ in important ways from those offered through the traditional, lecture-oriented pedagogical style that has dominated higher education in the United States.³

The flourishing classroom model would provide the resources and guidance for implementing and fine-tuning the conceptual and skills-based content that would establish and sustain consistency among such “flourishing courses” across campus, creating possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty and students, as well as potentially opening a path toward establishing a CALM Studies minor.

In addition to mastering discipline-specific course content, students in the flourishing classroom have the opportunity to participate in a variety of first-, second-, and third-person contemplative approaches that offer unique opportunities for self-understanding and self-discovery while growing their conceptual awareness of the various dimensions of flourishing, including our social and ecological interdependence, as well as cultural, racial, and ethnic understanding and compassion (see Komjathy 2018, Inkelas et al. 2021, and Hirshberg et al. 2022). Students may explore various evidence-based meditation techniques as well as mindful movement, deep listening exercises, digital awareness days, group circling discussions, and journaling about insights gleaned from meditation sessions and mindful activity.

The second-person group activities include the circling practice described above, which aims to create a sense of community by deepening understanding of and empathy for one’s peers’ lived experiences and personal stories. We have found that dedicating two days at the beginning of a semester to community-building exercises can foster a deep sense of belonging. Students have frequently commented on how this sort of interaction with their classmates is not only rare in their college experience but immensely valuable for creating a strong sense of community, which has been devalued in the corporatized model of higher education.

Third-person approaches help deepen students' critical understanding of worldviews, mindsets, social structures, and values (Woiwode et al. 2021), as well as fundamental concepts like happiness, flourishing, self, resilience, equity, and interdependence. Conceptual clarity can nourish students' ability to make meaningful and impactful decisions about how they engage with others and the places where they share space. Having a conceptual understanding of flourishing as well as a practical sense for flourishing can empower students to take responsibility for their lives and pursue what genuinely inspires them.

In addition to reducing stress, anxiety, and feelings of social isolation, the first-, second-, and third-person approach can (1) promote creativity, collaboration and adaptability; (2) bring a deeper awareness to cultural differences and human diversity;⁴ (3) help students develop a sense of the importance of active engagement in projects which link us to our world in a meaningful way (Wolf 2010); and (4) foster the ability to see more clearly the values of others so that we may better help them (Tiberius 2018).

CALM Center for Student Flourishing

We aim to create the CALM Center for Student Flourishing, which will serve as a locus of contemplative research and pedagogical innovation. The mission of the CALM Center will address these four questions that guide ASHF:

- What is the purpose of education?
- How does education relate to creating a flourishing life, one filled with deep satisfaction, well-being, resilience, and accomplishment?
- What can we learn from science and the humanities about the varieties of human flourishing and its key ingredients, and how can one develop a personal vision of that life?
- What skills and knowledge are key to realizing that vision?

The center will be modeled on TCU's Honors College in that in its early stages, it will rely mainly on flourishing courses being offered by "associated" faculty from, for instance, the Departments of Anthropology, Business, Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies, Dance, Music, Nursing, Philosophy, Psychology, Religious Studies, and Women and Gender Studies.⁵ Over time, with additional support, we would develop a CALM "fellows" program modeled on the Honors Faculty Fellows program in which one of the authors served as a fellow from 2016 to 2018. In that model, TCU faculty members who teach CALM courses would be invited to teach and perform service in the center for a period of two years.

Over time, we will add faculty to the center from various disciplines whose research and pedagogical interests intersect with the skills and research of flourishing. For instance, the group has held conversations with Dr. Scott Langston, the liaison for Native American Nations and Communities, about adding a Native American professor to teach Indigenous contemplative practices. But other hires could include faculty trained in neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, or religious studies whose work focuses on the intersection of contemplative practices with the healing professions, business, sports, and other fields.

With proper funding, the CALM Center could eventually serve as a platform for not only promoting excellence in contemplative teaching and pedagogy but also for developing innovative multidisciplinary research in an intersection of neuroscience, cognitive science, contemplative studies, cultural studies, Indigenous studies, gender studies, anthropology, dance, nursing, philosophy, psychology, and religious studies.

We believe that the flourishing course model and the CALM Center for Student Flourishing will be of great benefit to all members of the TCU community, particularly students, while both promoting TCU's teacher-scholar model and furthering TCU's mission to educate individuals to think and act—mindfully, we would add—as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community.

Like any grassroots movement seeking to make fundamental changes in deeply-embedded structures and ways of doing things, it will take time to build up critical mass. We are committed to the process. Indeed, our long-standing contemplative practices have taught us many things, including patience. Although our aspirations may be daunting, we are inspired and buoyed by the wonderful vision of those who created the original flourishing course to remake higher education in a model that privileges presence, belonging, and connection, one that promotes the well-being and flourishing of all beings. It is meant to teach our students how to live their lives mindfully while acting out of compassionate awareness for the suffering that bedevils and debases our society. It is a deeply hopeful and optimistic vision that we fully embrace and hope that you will too. We welcome inquiries about our experience teaching the course and building our community oriented around *mindful flourishing*.

Notes

- ¹ In spring 2022, TCU went to a hybrid model for classes where we taught face-to-face classes but were also asked to offer a virtual option via Zoom for those students who were quarantining because they had tested positive for COVID-19. Since the spring 2023 iteration, the course has been fully in person, and we have arranged the classroom space so that we sit in a full circle.
- ² For a discussion of these techniques, see Tan (2012, 61–62).
- ³ See discussion in Davidson (2017).
- ⁴ Consider the 2018 Mind & Life Summer Research Institute: Engaging Cultural Difference and Human Diversity, attended by Blake Hestir. For more, please see: <https://www.mindandlife.org/event/2018-summer-research-institute>.
- ⁵ As of June 1, 2025 the Department of Women and Gender Studies and the Department of Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies will be folded into the English Department.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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