With the increased stress facing college students, mental disorders are appearing more frequently among this population (Mauere & Cramer Roh, 2015). One in four students has a diagnosable mental health illness, yet only 40% of students will seek treatment (NAMI, 2018). Poor mental health is an epidemic across college campuses, and 50% of students are so anxious they struggle academically (Cox, 2015). Often students’ anxiousness will lead to a lack of focus, as well as an increase in cell phone usage and side conversations; ultimately, decreasing academic performance (McConville et al., 2017).

Informed by the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012), which suggests awareness leads to personal growth, the purpose of this study was to understand sport management students’ perceptions of participating in guided mindfulness meditation. According to McConville et al. (2017) mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally to the unfolding experiences moment by moment” (p. 27). Mindfulness practices have been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and depression (e.g., Smith et al., 2011; Uebelacker et al., 2010). Niksirat et al. (2017) believe “mindfulness meditation can help slow down things down and bring one’s attention to the present moment” (p. 2672).

Sport management students at both the undergraduate and graduate level participated in guided mindfulness meditation for five minutes at the start of every class taught by the primary researcher. The mindfulness meditation consisted of breathing exercises, imagery, and simple physical movements. A total of four sport management classes (105 students) participated in this study. On average, students in every class meditated for 131.25 minutes. On the last day of the semester, students in the four classes participated in focus groups where they discussed their perceptions of the exercise and reflected upon their experience. Focus groups allowed the students to be in a supportive setting and be encouraged by their peers to share their opinions (Creswell, 2009). Each focus group interview was transcribed, allowing for the subsequent analysis of meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Furthermore, the primary researcher participated in observation throughout the semester(s).

Driven by the study’s purpose to understand sport management students’ perceptions of guided mindfulness meditation, the focus group data emerged into five distinct themes: equanimity, rejuvenation, release, integration, and stability. Observation revealed meditation led to a deep classroom connection. In fact, the primary researcher found that initiating a mindfulness practice in the classroom allowed the students to be present, encouraged active participation, and created an environment where electronic usage was limited.

Mindfulness has the potential to calm the mind and body, creating awareness and self-acceptance. Overall, students responded positively to this innovative approach, which in turn assisted in creating a constructive learning environment. Just as most classes begin with learning objectives, perhaps students should be given the opportunity "to take a deep breath."