

College Students' Perspectives on Yoga for Mental and Physical Health

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Abstract

College students are a high-stress population given adjustment to major life changes and new responsibilities of adulthood and independence. Many suffer from physical and mental health issues due to stress, anxiety, and academic pressures they encounter in daily life. Since evidence-based research utilizing yoga practices has positively impacted college students, this study explores attitudes and perceptions toward these practices. This survey study aimed to assess college students' knowledge about yoga practices and openness toward research.

Keywords: College Students, Mental Health, Perspective, Physical Health, Survey, Yoga

Introduction

College students are a unique population as students must adapt to new social situations, are exposed to rigorous academic workloads, and bear greater financial responsibilities at this stage of life (Struthers et al., 2000). College students are a high-stress population because they have to adjust to new changes in life as well as cope with new pressures in a new environment (Kumaraswamy, 2013). Apart from academic responsibilities, students also experience stress and anxiety from interactions and expectations from their peers. Being away from family in a new environment and with new responsibilities leads to physical and health challenges in this population. These issues are further exacerbated due to pandemic-related challenges on and off campus.

Universities are aware of the issues faced by college students and continue to explore integrative health approaches, including Complementary and Alternative Medicine modalities such as yoga, which includes meditation and mindfulness. Instructors, advisors, and counselors often encourage students to participate in various physical and mental health-enhancing activities including exercise, yoga, and meditation. Research on yoga interventions in college students shows that the use of these modalities among college students is higher than compared to the general population (Nowak & Dorman, 2008; Akinleke, 2012; Liu et al., 2014). The practice of yoga synchronizes human physiology through controlled postures, breathing, meditation, a regular set of physical exercises, and relaxation techniques.

A recent review shows that most yoga studies on college students focus on examining factors such as emotional health, academic performance, substance use, sleep, and physiological parameters (Kanojia & Bhadane, 2018). Yoga seems to be an important application in reducing psychological and social problems related to emotional health, as well as bringing greater awareness to one's self in terms of life adjustment (Ramler et al., 2016). The systematic practice of yoga postures seems to enhance response time, increase alertness, and enhance cognitive skills, which leads to improved academic performance (Nagendra & Ganpat, 2013).

Adequate and consistent sleeping patterns are often a problem experienced by college students. It is not uncommon to pull all-nighters when studying for a test or hanging out with friends. Along with stress and anxiety, sleep, therefore, is another issue that college students could use help with. Studies utilizing pranayama and yoga nidra administration are shown to be correlated with an increase in alertness and better sleep (Kumar & Joshi, 2009).

Students have reported increased emotional and physical health and improvement in psychological well-being, in addition to a generally improved quality of life (Dua, 1998). Since yoga is an evidence-based practice often utilized by students and administered via universities, this study explores student attitudes and perceptions towards these practices on the University campus. This study aimed to assess the knowledge of college students about yoga practices and openness toward yoga studies and research.

Methodology

During the study, the University had a student population of 42,000 undergraduate and graduate students in Fall and Spring semesters. A sample of 1066 students from the University consented to a survey research study. Out of those 1053 students completed the survey of 21 questions which took about 10 minutes. The survey was approved by the institution's Internal Review Board and administered via a research management system that allows researchers to publicize their studies. The survey was made available to students from different colleges for two semesters. Descriptive analysis was performed on the collected data.

Results

The survey indicated that most respondents were from the College of Liberal Arts and Social Science, followed by the Colleges of Education and Architecture. Of those polled, the majority were undergraduates – Juniors (third year), Seniors (fourth/final year), Sophomores (second year), and Freshmen (first year), in that order. The overall current GPA score of 79.5% of respondents was greater than 2.90 out of 4.00.

Demographic characteristics of respondents indicated that most who took the survey were females (76.5%); did not live on campus; and were < 25 years of age. Race-wise respondents put themselves in Asian, Hispanic, White, and Black categories and most indicated that they identified as Christian and the second highest category as Agnostic-Atheist.

Out of the 1053 respondents, 75.3% indicated that they had practiced yoga before; 38.3% indicated practicing yoga "1-2 times per week" though many had not practiced yoga in the past semester. Out of the 75.3% who answered that they have practiced yoga before, 66.7% of the 477 who responded practicing yoga indicated that they "practiced at home" (Figure 1).

Most respondents indicated that yoga and meditation are calming techniques and benefits include reduction in the following aspects in order – stress, anxiety, overall well-being, sleep, and academic performance (Figure 2). As far as challenges to practicing yoga are concerned most cited "lack of time" and "not knowing how to properly practice" followed by "lack of financial resources to take a yoga class." About 45.8% of respondents indicated that they were interested in yoga courses that taught "postures and meditation." Many respondents seemed willing to volunteer for yoga-related research with 40.7% indicating "yes" and 35.9% indicating "maybe."

Discussion

Yoga is non-invasive, affordable to administer, can easily be incorporated into the academic curriculum, taught by trained teachers, and serve as a cost-effective policy solution to combat challenges such as student attrition, especially related to academic performance.

According to the survey results, interest in yoga exists among the college student population. The survey results show students are interested in taking yoga courses. Academic Affairs

could take note of this interest in offering yoga as an elective to 1) Empower students and teach them proper techniques via undergraduate course(s); 2) Make students aware of the activities available at resources such as the recreation center as well counseling and psychological services available on campus.

Since the survey shows that 79.5% might be interested in participating in yoga-related research at the University, it may be feasible to design a research study based on yoga involving the student population at the University.

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Figure 1. Response distribution of where students practice yoga. (N=477)



Figure 2. Response distribution of which aspects of yoga and meditation are most interesting to students. (N=1053)

