

Calm amid college storm

By: Bryce Bauer - The Daily Iowan

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For many, the effect of higher education on students' minds is simple and positive: It fills them with information.

But Fred Travis worries that many traditional universities, in the pursuit of giving knowledge to their students, may also be inflicting harm upon them.

"I would like colleges to really think about what they are doing to their kids' brains," said Travis, a psychologist at the Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa.

Travis is part of a contingent of Eastern-medicine researchers advocating a different approach to higher education: one of relaxation and meditation over energy drinks and sleeplessness. They say incorporating the practice of transcendental meditation into a normal college routine can help reduce stress and improve academic performance - and it's a claim that is receiving research dollars and attention from nationally respected universities.

Launched by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of India in the late-1950s, transcendental meditation is practiced for 20 minutes twice daily.

The goal is to reduce the effect of stress on, among other things, the brain's prefrontal cortex, which is necessary to compile and interpret information, Travis said. Under stress, the "CEO" shuts down so a person reacts to information instead of interpreting it. While this may be a useful feature for someone whose car is spinning out-of-control, it is prohibitive to understanding the fundamentals behind political philosophy.

The effects of transcendental meditation as creating "restful alertness," a state in which "where the whole brain is full, quiet, calm, but you are still alert."

That state-of-mind can help improve academic performance, advocates say.

Travis, who received his Ph.D. from the Maharishi school, recently completed a study along with others at American University in Washington, D.C. that analyzed the effects of transcendental meditation on 300 college students. They are in the process of submitting their paper for review.

When the research subjects came in for their readings, he said, the ones who had been meditating told him the semester "has been a challenge, and I learned a lot," while the ones who weren't practicing transcendental meditation commented that "it was horrible, I don't know how I am going to make it through finals week."

And while researchers have known about stress for a long time, its prevalence among college students is still high.

In a 2003 study published by the American Psychological Association, researchers at Kansas State University found that nearly 63 percent of college students reported feeling stress or anxiety between the years of 1996-2001, a 26 percent increase from the period between 1988-1996. The report analyzed data in multi-year blocks to temper year-to-year spikes.

David Watson, a UI psychology professor familiar with meditation techniques in stress management, said the practice can help people "create a state of mental relaxation" that is contrary to the stress-induced mental state of tension.

Watson, as did others, said he felt Americans live in a very high-stress society and that he saw many people whom he would term "stress junkies."

And while colleges and universities across the country offer students struggling with stress options to help mediate it, Travis, as well as others, said they were not aware of any traditional universities that have institutionalized the transcendental-meditation practice into their curriculum.

However, there is one American college where it is practiced across-the-board.

On what used to be the campus of the now-defunct Presbyterian-affiliated Parsons College sits the Maharishi University of Management - the school in which Travis now teaches. Located on the edge of Fairfield, Iowa, it is surrounded by the typical waving hills and corn and soybean fields of Iowa.

Like other tiny, Midwestern liberal-arts schools, the Maharishi University has a student union, a library, an athletics facility, and a dining hall. However, even a brief look at any one of these buildings, a visitor can instantly notice there is something unique about this campus.

Painted in the light-gold and soft, off-whites traditional with this type of architecture, each building always, and occasionally awkwardly, has its main entrance facing the east. Inside each structure is a central space reserved for silence. Every roof is adorned with a kalash - an ornament depicting a vase covered in leaves. Like the homes and businesses in neighboring Maharishi Vedic City - where the design elements are required by decree - the campus follows the architectural recommendations of the transcendental-meditation movement it embodies. And it does so in academia as well.

>From its one-class-at-a-time block system to twice-daily meditation breaks and no finals week, it breaks from the normal college set-up in many ways.

"The whole learning model is just different; I remember stuff and am like: how did I learn that?" said Tricia Spurio, a student at the university.

Spurio, who is originally from Arlington, Va., first heard about transcendental meditation a few years ago from a counselor, but at that time, she was unable to justify spending the \$2,500 required for professional lessons. Her interest in the practice continued, and when she heard American University was looking for subjects for Travis' study, she signed up. At that time, she was in her senior year at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., studying to be a social worker.

"For me it was a very timely thing - I had just lost my father, and I needed something to ground me," she said.

She spoke positively about the experience and, after graduation, continued her studies at the Maharishi University.

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