Decreasing Drop-out Rates by Increasing Student Engagement with Healthy Lifestyle Factors

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Abstract

The following report discusses the importance of minimizing dropout and increasing student engagement within college students. Student engagement is a primary concern for many universities across the United States (Lake, 2019). Approximately 70 percent of young adults attend a university. Unfortunately, less than two-thirds of those students will graduate from a four-year university. Of that 70 percent of students, approximately 30 percent of first-year students will drop out after their first year at the university (Lake, 2019). Previous findings suggest that there are ways to decrease these percentages by implementing healthy lifestyle factors that increase academic performance. By implementing daily physical activity, meditation, and healthy diets, student retention rates will increase (Cotman, Berchtold, & Christie, 2007), (Streeter et al., 2010), (Guiney & Machado, 2013), (Salmoirago-Blotcher, Druker, Meyer, Bock, Crawford, & Pbert, 2015). Students who implement one out of the three healthy lifestyle methods will assist in lessening the number of college dropouts per year and increase student engagement. This study compares these healthy lifestyle factors methods to investigate the optimal method for a college student’s performance during the or she’s heir collegiate career, which will then carry out throughout their professional career.
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Student engagement is one of the primary reasons students either have successful or unsuccessful college careers (Litoiu & Oproiu, 2018). Student engagement happens when the student makes a psychological investment in learning the specific material provided (Vilà, Aneas, Rubio, & Freixa, 2019). Students who decide to place a conscious effort into one’s studies, and fully understand the material, will be able to incorporate the information better and utilize it in their future careers.

There are many gaps in the current literature regarding student engagement and retention rates in college students. Considerable evidence suggests the need for improvement in retention and drop-out rates in college students, but limited amounts of articles that give ways to decrease these retention and drop-out rates. My research focuses on how to improve these retention and drop-out rates with three different methods that college students should implement into their college careers. When students apply either daily physical activity, meditation, and healthy eating habits, student retention rates will start to increase (Cotman et al., 2007), (Streeter et al., 2010), (Guiney & Machado, 2013), (Salmoirago-Blotcher et al., 2015). Previous findings suggest that all three of these methods may help students reach their full potential. I predict that the students who implement one of these three methods into their daily routine will be less likely to drop out of college and have higher engagement rates. Physical activity, meditation, and healthy dieting are compared in this study to discover the ideal healthy lifestyle for college student's performance.
Methods

Participants

Participants will be recruited from numerous psychology classes. I will ask several colleagues if they allow me to test their students. Each student will have previously taken a basic introduction to psychology course. For one class, there will be 45 total participants. Participants will range from ages 18 to 21 years of age. The participants will vary in ethnicity from all races, including Caucasians, Hispanic or Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, and Middle Eastern.

Materials and Procedures

Participants will be recruited from several psychology classes offered at the University. Participants will be given a consent form informing them of the process of the study, and asked how often they partake in physical activity, meditation, and dieting. After I receive the signed consent form, I will ensure all participants that, at any point in the study, they felt uncomfortable, they would have the option to leave the study. The participants will be randomly selected to one of the three manipulations or the control group. The participants will be instructed to fill out a questionnaire and 40 question exam. The questionnaire will ask how the students feel about physical activity, meditation, and dieting. The questionnaire will also entail personal questions, including family background, religion, GPA, and difficulties they may or may not be going through. The questionnaire will use a Linkert scale to record the participant's responses. This questionnaire will provide additional data when interpreting the results of the study. The 40 questioned exam will access the knowledge of the individual student. The exam will go over basic psychology from information previously provided to the students in their introduction to psychology course. The exam will also include information from the current course they will be taking. The students will then be informed of which manipulation they were randomly assigned.
The students who were randomly assigned to the physical activity manipulation will partake in group aerobic exercises each day of the week. The participant will have one rest day a week, where they do not have to participate in the group exercise. The aerobic exercise will be for 40 minutes each day for the duration of the class semester. Aerobic exercises will include biking, walking, and running.

The students who were randomly assigned to the meditation category will partake in group meditation each day for 40 minutes for the duration of the class semester. The participant will have one rest day a week, where they do not have to participate in group meditation. This meditation will depend on the personal religious preference of the student. Meditation classes will include Christian prayerful meditation, silent meditation, yoga, etc..

The students who were randomly assigned to the healthy dieting group will partake in healthy eating choices for the duration of the class semester. One cheat meal per week will be allowed. The diets will consist of a list of healthy fats, protein, healthy grains, and vegetables. Vitamins will also be given to the participants to ensure the participant is receiving the correct amount of vitamins.

At the end of the semester, the student will be given the same 40 questioned exam. The numbers will be randomized, along with slight wording changes. However, the difficulty level will remain the same. There will be a short questionnaire on the individual's enjoyment of participating in the study.

This study will assess the effects on long-term behavior within the students. After completion of the manipulation, the student will be urged to continue implementing the healthy lifestyle manipulation to their daily routine. The student will continue to be monitored as to whether or not they graduate and the number of years it takes to complete their degree.
Anticipated Results

My anticipated results will be that students who partook in the healthy lifestyle changes will have higher testing scores, and a lower drop-out rate, in comparison to the students who were assigned to the control group. Demographic information will be evaluated. A MANOVA will be performed to evaluate the effect of the dependent variables. Group designation will be analyzed through a regression model.

Discussion

Over the last two decades, attention spans in students have lessened due to the overconsumption of technology (Shows, Albinsson, Ruseva, & Waryold, 2018). I chose to only have 40 questions on the exam to maintain the attention spans within the students. The approximate time it should take is less than an hour, which will help students stay engaged and lessen the confound of distraction. Students were encouraged to receive an adequate amount of rest before the testing period to avoid sleep deprivation. Sleep deprivation has shown to have a significant effect on academic performance within students (Mirghani, Ahmed, & Elbadawi, 2015). Another possible limitation in the following study is the possibility of the confound of repeated measures. The students will be taking a similar exam at the beginning and end of the study. However, this confound was taken into consideration on this matter. In order to avoid a repeated measures error from occurring, the test questions were randomized, and wording was slightly changed.

By testing the students’ knowledge of that which they should have retained from their introduction to psychology course, I am testing the memory of past events. By testing information that will be included in the current course, the participants will be taking. I will be
testing memory and retention of the material they are currently learning while partaking in positive lifestyle modification.

Student drop-out rates are normally due to low academic performance. Students who may have lacked family support may have developed weak educational strategies, which result in low academic performance and success rates (Araque, Roldán, & Salguero, 2009). The students who are at risk of dropping out of University due to lack of educational strategies must learn how to combat those risks by implementing healthy lifestyle factors to ensure academic success. By comparing the test scores of the students in the healthy lifestyle manipulations, I will be able to monitor the academic success with in the student. I will then compare the graduation rates to previous findings to evaluate if drop-out rates increased or decreased. By the students signing the consent form, I will have given access to graduation records after the student has completed their collegiate career.

In a recent study done by Litoiu and Oproiu (2018), 49 percent of students stated that space for informal activities such as relaxing, and group activities were rated unsatisfactory during their college experience. Universities should invest in areas around campus that are dedicated to silent meditation, which provides a comfortable area for the student. Universities should invest in healthier dieting options, by minimizing fast food restaurants and instead of replacing the fast-food restaurants with healthier whole food options. Lastly, university professors should implement more physical exercise in their classroom settings to better grasp the student's attention. By increase the student's attention, the retention of the material learned by the student will also increase; this will lead to more successful student engagement and lessen drop-out rates.
Taking everything into consideration, students that begin to implement at least one of the three healthy lifestyle factors into their daily routine will start to see a significant positive effect on the individual's academic performance. Not only will the student begin to see a substantial impact, but so will the universities and education system. By implementing either physical exercise, meditation, or healthy diets will lessen the percentages of student drop-outs and increase the amount of graduating students per year. By changing these statistics, drop-out rates will decline, and student engagement and retention will rise.
References


