



Doctor of Education: Leadership, Learning and Community

The Effect of Contemplative Practices on College Faculty Perceptions of Stress

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Introduction: Fulltime faculty are experiencing stressors from the dissonance created by the changes impacting higher education. The cumulative effect of these stressor factors may be impacting the job satisfaction of fulltime faculty and their ability to react to these changes. Individuals who employ contemplative practices may be able to better process change and handle the stressor factors that they experience in their personal and professional life.

Problem of Practice: Increased, and prolonged exposure to stress may negatively impact the personal and professional wellness of fulltime faculty members impacting both their job satisfaction and physical, emotional, and cognitive health.

Research Method: A repeated-measures design was used to assess faculty perceptions of stress and state of mindful awareness using both the Perceived Stress (Cohen, 1994) and Mindful Attention Awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003) scales. Anonymous pre-test and post-test surveys were distributed to fulltime state college and university faculty in New Hampshire and Vermont.

Summary of Findings: Faculty perceptions of stress were not likely impacted by the introduction, duration, nor type of contemplative practice reported by participants. However, frequency (number of days) of practice was strongly correlated with statistically significant decreases in perceptions of stress, but only for those participants who increased their frequency between pre-test and post-test measures.

Limitation(s) of Study: As this was a repeated measures design, participants were required to self-report their pre-test and post-test responses six-weeks apart. This study is not generalizable beyond the sample due to the small sample size ($n=17$), as well as having taken place during the COVID-19 and a proposal to possibly close the campuses of some of the study participants.

Implications/Significance of Study: This study was the first to employ a repeated measures methodology for studying faculty perceptions of stress and contemplative practices. The findings from this study demonstrate that while perceptions of stress are correlated with mindful states, the nature and impact of that correlation is still unclear and requires further examination. This study though does illuminate the degree of stress that fulltime faculty are facing as a result of the changes stemming from declining enrollment, stagnated funding, and increased competition that are impacting higher education. Additionally, these findings help leaders understand how they may assist faculty in address and mitigating the factors that contribute to stress.