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Students find their centers at Maharishi

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Most high school students look forward to college as a time of new experiences: new friends, new classes, new parties. One thing most students don't think about: meditation. For students at Maharishi University of Management (MUM) in Fairfield, Iowa, however, that's at the top of the list.

The four-year, accredited university was founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The school, originally called Maharishi International University, took over the campus of a recently closed university in 1974 and opened its doors to hoards of students eager to learn through Consciousness-Based education. Now, the school has 1,233 full-time students, both undergraduate and graduate. While the school has many non-traditional students going back for second degrees or graduate school, there are many more students who arrive fresh out of high school.

Four years ago, when he was a high school senior, Brian Faulkner, 22, had a tough decision to make. He could go

to a school where he could continue playing soccer or go to MUM where he could continue practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM).

"Now I feel like, thank God I came here," Faulkner says.

Faulkner has been practicing TM since he was about 4, and it was important to him to continue the practice through college. Even though he had been in the habit for a while, Faulkner said his friends were surprised when he decided to go to MUM.

"The vast majority of my friends never knew I did TM," Faulkner says. "Some thought I was in a cult; others just said, 'OK, if you're happy.'"

"It's not a cult," says first year student, Supriya Vidic, 26.

Vidic started school at Maharishi after six years of military service. She says she was ready to reach an inner peace she felt she was missing while she served in the military.

"It's a total 180 from where I came from," Vidic says. "With the military, I traveled outwards. Here I travel inwards."

[TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION]

Many students find MUM because they're looking for something different. Students want to focus on themselves just as much as on their schoolwork. For most, the regular practice of TM is crucial to their educational journey.

First year students are enrolled in an introductory course when they first begin at MUM. This gender-separated experience helps ease students into the MUM way of life. One of the most important things students learn in the class is how to practice TM.

TM is not something that someone can begin on his or her own. While anyone can learn, the practice must be taught. In its most basic form, TM is the practice of closing the eyes, sitting still and settling the mind. Students and professors alike believe TM allows the mind to transcend to a point of pure awareness, allowing the mind to rest deeply and the brain to function with more coherence.

Fred Travis, an MUM professor, says it takes about four days to learn TM® and about six months to stabilize it.

"We can ask every student who comes here to learn TM because they can do it. It's not unattainable," Travis says. "Once you get the idea of how the mind transcends, you can do it on your own."

Students meditate for 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the afternoon or evening. Travis said this rests the brain and is crucial to Consciousness-Based education.

"You settle down to pure wakefulness," Travis says.

[CONSCIOUSNESS-BASED EDUCATION]

A healthy vegetarian diet, low homework load and TM are all a part of MUM's system of Consciousness-Based education. Classes at MUM are set on a block system. This means that students go to one class five days a week from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Students are completely immersed in one course for a month and then take a three-day weekend and start up another month-long course.

Professor Travis has spent his career crusading for Consciousness-Based education. He suggests that a switch to this type of learning creates a less stressful, more fruitful academic experience for both professor and student.

"Consciousness-Based education says that the student is the core," Travis says.

The method encourages less homework, more class time on one subject, sleep, exercise and a healthy diet. Students are encouraged to be in bed by 10 p.m. and are never assigned more than an hour and a half of homework each night, leaving them time to hang out with friends or join extra-curricular groups.

Travis believes that this type of lifestyle is much better than the classic education model. Most students at other universities take about five classes a semester and spend varied amounts of time on homework—all-nighters fueled by energy drinks—for different classes, which often leads to a sporadic schedule. Travis doesn't think that's right.

"You don't sleep, you don't get good food and then you go out and party," Travis says. "The brain has no time to relax."

Travis also finds the class structure of traditional universities lacking. Instead of a lecture class with a final exam at the end, he believes students should be interacting with each other and the professor in order to retain information.

"Final exams are structured forgetting," Travis says. "With active learning, the professor stops talking and lets the students talk."

[THE FOOD]

Just like any other college campus, MUM has a cafeteria where many of the students eat three meals a day. But MUM's cafeteria is 100 percent vegetarian with mostly local food and vegan options. And in a world of pre-prepared meals, the MUM cafeteria relies on fresh ingredients every day, often newly harvested from its own garden.

Though most people would find the food at MUM to be a huge step up from the classic cafeteria fare, it's not always easy to get accustomed to it. According to Ila Zeeb, the director of the first year experience at MUM, students don't always like the food right away. "For some students, this food is a huge change from home," Zeeb says.

While many students do enroll as vegetarians, others are confronted with a completely different diet.

Graham Torpey, 24, who graduated from Syracuse University and is now a graduate student at MUM, is thrilled with the meal offerings.

"Man, my health was bad when I was at Syracuse," Torpey says. "This place is a treasure trove for me. Now, I have a great meal every day."

The students are also knowledgeable about what food is offered in the cafeteria. Brooke Hadfield, 28, a second-year student from Australia, says it's important to her to know about her food.

"The honey is the only thing here today that I can think of that isn't organic," Hadfield says. "I mean, where else do you get organic food for every meal?"

[SOCIAL LIFE]

Once their bellies are full of organic quinoa and locally grown vegetables, many students head back to their dorm rooms for the evening. Of the 1,233 full-time students at MUM, 544 live on campus. At MUM, students have a single room to themselves, which the university cites as a way to ensure that students have their own quiet, private space.

The dormitories don't discriminate based on age or gender. That means at MUM, where there is an abundance of nontraditional students, a 20-year-old could have a 60-year-old student for a neighbor. Students don't seem to mind, though, embracing the opportunity to live in harmony with any age.

"I, personally, like the variety and diversity of ages and culture in the dorms," Hadfield says. "There's inherent peace in this environment. It's easy to live amongst other ages."

When students aren't doing their hour and a half of homework in their dorm rooms, Hadfield assures that they're partying just like any other college student. "The social life here is so much fun," Hadfield said. "I'm more social here than I am anywhere else."

Although Des Moines may be the "big city" of Iowa, MUM's home city, Fairfield, has a pretty bumpin' social scene. Faulkner described the downtown area as "an oasis of creativity." In a town of about 9,500, Fairfield has more restaurants per capita than San Francisco and a booming art and music scene. Along with its resident university, Fairfield provides young adults with unique social experiences.

Students and professors at MUM are the first to admit their school is different from most. Transcendental Meditation and Consciousness-Based education are crucial to their academic and personal life. Students are joined together not just by school pride, but also by a deeper journey of self-exploration.

"MUM is a place to grow," Hadfield said. "A place to expand our potential to function in the most healthy way; the most conscious way."

