

## PERSPECTIVE

# Innovations in Yoga Therapist Education: Developing a Yoga Therapy Program in an Academic Setting

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The educational standards created by IAYT are a big step forward in the professionalization of the field of yoga therapy. These standards support the alignment of competencies in training programs, and also provide a framework within which academic programs can be designed. Maryland University of Integrative Health (MUIH) recently designed a Master of Science in Yoga Therapy degree program in accordance with the IAYT standards that also meets MUIH's requirements for an academic degree program. This process brought to light the differences between studying yoga therapy at a yoga school or in a yoga therapist training program and earning a master's degree in yoga therapy from an academic institution.

Skills-directed and academic-oriented yoga therapist training programs are valuable avenues to proficiency. They are vastly different in their approaches, yet they share the common goal of supporting the development of competent yoga therapists. Academic programs emphasize critical thinking, research and scholarship, and effective communication as educational cornerstones. A foundation must be established to support lifelong study in a degree's topic area, and rigorous assessments must be in place to demonstrate the completion of all program requirements and educational objectives. Degree programs must continually gather evidence to prove that the required standards are being met. Although a number of academic programs offer yoga therapy training in the context of other clinical disciplines, the Master of Science in Yoga Therapy degree program at MUIH is one of the first dedicated to the study of yoga therapy in an academic and an applied context.

Embracing the yoga therapy field was an easy step for MUIH, which was formerly known as the Tai Sophia Institute. Since its inception in 1974 as one of the first acupuncture schools in the United States, this regionally accredited university has continued to expand, adding new programs devoted to the healing arts. At MUIH, traditional approaches to healing are taught in a way that integrates them with conventional medical approaches. The IAYT educational standards address many content areas that are very familiar to MUIH faculty, who for decades have taught the application of healing traditions, such as acupuncture and herbal medicine, as therapeutic modalities. The university's new challenge has been to develop a yoga therapy training program in the context of an academically oriented institution. Because much of Chinese medicine evolved from early yogic sciences, introducing yoga to MUIH was a very natural step. It seems fitting that the yoga therapy master's program was the first such program to be launched following Tai Sophia Institute's recent evolution to a university.

Developing and launching this degree program was logistically complex in that programs at regionally accredited universities or graduate schools are regulated by many different entities. In addition to the U.S. Department of Education regula-

tions, there are regional accreditation association requirements and state requirements. MUIH falls under the purview of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, along with all other accredited schools in our region. In Maryland, the Higher Education Commission is responsible for establishing academic requirements and providing programmatic approval for all new colleges and university degree programs. All degrees offered at MUIH must also meet the approval of MUIH's Executive Management team, Board of Trustees, and Faculty Senate curriculum review committee.

Typically, a master's degree requires completion of at least 30 academic credits beyond a bachelor's degree. One academic credit hour at the postsecondary level requires one of the following: 15 didactic (classroom lecture) hours, 30 hours of clinic/lab, or 45 hours of independent study. For every hour of didactic work, students must complete at least 2 hours of work outside of class. The Master of Science in Yoga Therapy program at MUIH offers no more than seven credits in a 15-week trimester, which represents 105 contact hours plus 210 hours of independent study. This adds up to an average of approximately 21 hours per week, which equates to full-time graduate study.

Regional accreditation enables the use of federal financial aid to support graduate education. Programs must be designed to educate students in areas in which they are able to thrive financially. Specifically, academic programs must demonstrate that gainful employment is a likely outcome following completion of the degree. In recent years, the U.S. Department of Education has tightened oversight of the use of financial aid in response to misappropriation of student loan dollars by some for-profit educational programs. When graduate programs do not result in gainful employment, students may default on student loans. MUIH's leadership continues to consider whether new graduates of the Master of Science in Yoga Therapy program will establish practices that will allow them to pay back student loans. This question, probably more than any other, will determine the success of this program. If graduates have brilliant intentions, the knowledge and skills to serve their clients, joy in their work, and the means to thrive financially, the program will have succeeded.

The MUIH degree program differs from that of many yoga schools in that its sole focus is to educate experienced yoga instructors in the application of yoga as a therapeutic modality. It accommodates students with diverse yoga backgrounds. In many yoga schools, a specific tradition of yoga is emphasized. Some in the yoga therapy community question the wisdom of offering a program that embraces diverse yoga traditions and training experiences, citing issues of consistency and safety. The master's degree curriculum devotes a significant amount of time to the safe practice of yoga therapy. Students, all experienced yoga teachers, are required to apply these principles

regardless which yoga tradition they practice or teach. This decision was based on experience gained while teaching herbal medicine and other forms of traditional medicine. We envision that an emphasis on the student's scholarly examination of traditional literature and practices will provide points of intersection that bridge traditions.

In addition to embracing multiple yoga traditions, the MUIH Master of Science in Yoga Therapy degree program offers education with respect to numerous yoga therapy perspectives. The first trimester includes teaching principles targeting the physical body, that is, strengthening weaknesses and stretching tight areas that lead to imbalance in the physical body and in the flow of prana. The second trimester involves reviewing lifestyle changes that support the vital organs, and the third examines the mind- and body-held emotions and memories. The second year includes master classes during which experts in the field of yoga therapy share their perspectives and demonstrate how they work with clients. Students will be required to critically assess what components of experts' traditions and practices are of value to them and choose a therapeutic approach based on these perspectives.

One of the goals of an academic program is to cultivate a student's ability to critically evaluate the yogic and bioscientific literatures to support clinical reasoning and treatment planning. This approach differs from that of many yoga therapy programs whose emphasis may be on learning skills from a specific tradition of yoga therapy. This does not imply that yoga schools do not teach scholarship, only that an academic education places scholarship as the top priority rather than a means to an end. An important outcome of any accredited master's program is development of the skills necessary to pursue lifelong learning and ability to contribute to the dissemination of knowledge using written and verbal communication skills.

MUIH has a long history of teaching clinical skills in a

mentored on-site clinic and at satellite locations. In our clinical practica, students examine clients in treatment rooms, then go to an adjacent "core group" room to briefly discuss their treatment plans with an experienced yoga therapy clinic supervisor. The supervisor may choose to examine the client, observe the student, or allow the student to function independently. In this way, the student gains independence in a supervised manner. Students also are required to complete a capstone project that includes reviewing the biomedical literature, researching the use of yoga therapy for specific conditions, and writing detailed case studies and reviews.

A master's degree program in yoga therapy must comply with multiple sets of standards. These requirements shape the curriculum offered and inform the nature and scope of students' work. The success of this degree program will be measured by the accomplishments of graduates and their yoga therapy practices, not by the number of students who complete the program. Graduates will be skilled yoga therapists who will also possess the skills to advance the field of yoga therapy through research and scholarship.

Academic institutions are often perceived as being disconnected from the "real" world where applied practice occurs. This leads to the failure of their programs to grow and evolve in partnership with the field and community they serve. Modern yoga therapy was born in many places, including in the hearts of yoga teachers who sought to bring relief and support to clients who needed tailored guidance. Yoga therapy programs in educational settings must honor the foundation created by yoga therapy training programs and work collaboratively and cooperatively with those outside of academia. Academic yoga therapy programs have the potential to make a unique and important contribution to the yoga therapy community. We hope you will guide us and partner with us in this new endeavor.

**Correction:** Braun, T. D., Park, C. L., & Conboy, L. A. (2012). Psychological well-being, health behaviors, and weight loss among participants in a residential Kirpalu yoga-based weight loss program. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 22, 9-21.

The article incorrectly stated that the "Health at Every Size (HAES) paradigm ... endorses cognitive restraint as a focal method of weight management." HAES implicates cognitive restraint (i.e., dieting) as a key driver of obesity and weight gain-related behaviors.