

Vocal Health and Wellness from the Undergraduate Vocalists' Perspective: A Pilot Study

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“...the voice is intricately bound to personal identity, self-esteem and self-image. The voice is our primary means of communication and expression, and it can be central to occupation, creativity, worship, and spirituality. This phenomenon becomes magnified for singers. For the singer, the voice is the source of...artistic and creative expression. The voice is the vocal athlete's instrument, and unlike other instruments, it can never be replaced...” (LeBorgne & Rosenberg, 2014, p.183).

The unique challenges of collegiate independence, coupled with increased solo and ensemble requirements and opportunities, can cause undergraduate vocalists to struggle with their physical, emotional, and vocal health. Researchers have equated the college vocal student to a vocal athlete in that each has unique physical demands that are essential to their best performance (Aaron, 2016; LeBorgne & Rosenberg, 2014). Occasionally, undergraduate music departments may offer wellness initiatives to support the mind, body, and voice, but there is no known research indicating whether or not students are aware of these initiatives. The purpose of this study was to investigate undergraduate vocal health and undergraduate vocalists' knowledge of the vocal health opportunities at their institution.

In September 2017, an online Qualtrics (2018) survey was sent to 120 undergraduate students auditioning for a cappella ensembles at a small liberal arts university in Pennsylvania. This university has had a vocal health initiative in place since 2016. Although the subjects' acceptance to an a cappella ensemble is unknown, many subjects participated in campus choirs, opera theatre, musical theatre, and solo voice lessons.

Subjects reported on demographic information, routine health practices (i.e., sleeping and eating habits), and their knowledge of their institution's offerings in vocal wellness. In addition, subjects were also asked about their personal vocal health experiences and concerns. A total of 42 surveys were collected, for an overall response rate of 35%. Surveys were collected from freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, however, 62% ($n = 26$) of the participants were freshmen and sophomores.

Data from this survey aligned with the limited amount of published undergraduate vocal wellness literature. The struggles that undergraduate students reported in this study, specifically hoarseness and other negative vocal symptoms, are similar to the findings of Aaron (2015) and Donahue et al. (2014). This research encourages university faculty and students to be aware of vocal health and wellness. The expectations of how undergraduates should care for their voice should be outlined in studio syllabi, and these initiatives should be discussed with students during recruitment and orientation. It is imperative that universities provide resources to promote positive vocal health and science on their campuses.

Additional research is needed to further determine beneficial ways to promote healthy wellness initiatives throughout the campus community. These programs could include collaboration with university health centers and local ENTs. Data from this pilot study will inform my senior honors thesis, *The Importance of Vocal Health and Science in Public School Music Programs*. This research will be completed in the Fall of 2018.

Sample Bucknell University Undergraduate Vocal Health Initiative

- Collaborations with nearby:
 - o Speech and Language Clinics
 - o Voice Centers
 - o University's Student Health Clinic
 - o University's Counseling Center
- Proactive and Reactive Care
 - o Laryngoscopies
 - o Speaking voice evaluations
 - o Performance anxiety discussions
 - o Yoga
 - o Mindfulness training

Applications to Music Education

- Voice/Choral teachers should consider engaging in professional development to advance their knowledge of vocal health and science. This study's data shows a high number of students experiencing negative vocal symptoms that can be avoided with teacher education of these topics.
- The choral classroom is often the first place that future undergraduate music students experience singing. Music educators need to be cautious when training new voices because this training is the student's foundation.

Resources

Aaron, A. S. (2016). *Vocal Health Protocols at Undergraduate Music Programs*. Research presented at National Association of Teachers of Singing: 54th National Conference in Chicago, IL.

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