



# THE THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS OF AFRICAN DIASPORA DANCE FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

By Kemuel Benyehudah and Beverly Pittman

Mental health issues among young adults ages 18-24 are trending in a troubling direction. This is true for college students as well as the general population. According to a 2018 report from the American College Health Association, more than 60% of college students reported experiencing “overwhelming anxiety” (p. 14). The COVID-19 pandemic and social distance restrictions appear to have exacerbated the problem. Among 18-24-year-olds overall, one in four have seriously contemplated suicide (Czeisler et al., 2020) and the stakes are even higher for people of African descent. Suicide rates among Black people have doubled since the outbreak of the pandemic (Bray et al., 2020). The college student population is not immune to these health trends; therefore colleges must be more responsive to their students’ various health needs.

African Diaspora Dance can provide additional therapeutic solutions for students of color facing health challenges during this difficult time. Murrock’s (2008) research team has shown cultural-specific dance to have improved health outcomes for African American women. These findings align with other research reports showing dance’s overall benefit for people experiencing anxiety and depression (Koch et al., 2014). Furthermore, Chouhan & Kumar’s (2011) comparative study of dance and relaxation therapy showed similar benefits between patients who received dance or relaxation therapy interventions.

Yet, despite the evidence of African Diaspora Dance’s positive impact on students’ health, it is seldomly integrated within higher education curricula (Connor et al., 2020). Since the pandemic, many colleges have instead chosen to slash their liberal arts budgets (Hubler, 2020). This is unfortunate because these cuts may result in reductions in services which could have detrimental effects on student life. Therefore, it is important for colleges to review their service cuts to make sure they are not adversely impacting their students.

African American students particularly can suffer additional stressors on campus. For example, African American women dance majors have reported that they faced significant barriers related to finances and lack of cultural course offerings on campus (Connor et al., 2020). African Diaspora Dance alone can’t solve racism on college campuses, nor can it provide financial relief or cure COVID-19. However, its social dance practices may offer another layer of support for students of color looking for cultural practices resembling those experienced in their home communities.

Noted dance scholars Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996, 2000, 2003, 2012), Halifu Osumare (2007, 2012, 2018), Kariamu Welsh (1993, 1994), and others have written extensively about the history, aesthetics, and erasure of African Diaspora Dance’s contributions in Contemporary Dance. However, despite their formidable intellectual contributions to the field, higher education has continued to marginalize African Diaspora Dance in the traditional college curriculum (Amin, 2016). The absence of African Diaspora Dance is an unfortunate loss for students in terms of aesthetics, but also for those students who could benefit from it therapeutically.

College students experiencing depression, and isolation may find therapeutic benefits from the group practices embedded within African Diaspora Dance (Connor et al., 2020). These therapeutic benefits stand at the core of the development of a panel discussion sponsored by the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice. The panel, “[The Therapeutic Benefits of African Diaspora Dance for College Students](https://proctor.gse.rutgers.edu/dance-panel),” will feature community-based practitioners including: Vince Johnson, Urban Movement Arts, and India Bernardino, Great on Skates; University Professors Crystal Frazier, Point Park University, and Thomas F. Defrantz, Duke University; and Afrocentric Dance/Health Specialist Beverly Pittman. These individuals are well-positioned to share with us the advantages that African Diaspora Dance offer to college students.

Colleges and universities across the country interested in centering their students' health and well-being will benefit from their insights and experiences. One takeaway we hope everyone comes away with is that African Diaspora Dance benefits are not limited to dance majors only, but are accessible to non-majors as well. Since the effects of the pandemic are poised to remain with us for some time, it's important for everyone to find accessible healthy options to support their mental health and overall wellbeing. Dance is one of those options.

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