

Utilizing Qualitative Feedback to Investigate Student Perceptions of a Basic Instruction Program

Jared A. Russell

Abstract

This research represents the perceptions of two hundred (N = 200) students enrolled in a doctoral-research university's basic instruction program (BIP) regarding their instructional experiences. The purpose of this interpretive case-study conducted in a doctoral-research university's BIP was two-fold: (a) to examine the characteristics of participants including the motives for enrolling in BIP courses, perceived value of these courses, and aspects of the BIP course structure that was most beneficial and least beneficial; and (b) to obtain student perceptions of the current BIP course teaching effectiveness evaluative process. Findings suggest that participants in BIP courses: (a) valued their instructional experiences; (b) appreciated the opportunity to provide non-traditional evaluative feedback concerning course structure and content; and (c) primarily enrolled in the courses to learn a new activity/skill and to socialize with peers. Implications from this research served as an impetus to develop more effective GTA instructional development and BIP course curriculum delivery processes.

Basic instruction programs (BIPs), also known as general, basic activity, or service programs, annually provide thousands of college-age students with formal opportunities to develop sport-related skills and fitness, as well as healthy lifestyle habits that are necessary for life-long recreation participation and increased overall health (Hensley, 2000; Savage & Sharpe, 1998). BIP course offerings have the potential to counteract the negative trends in lifestyle, fitness,

and overall health of Americans (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). However, in recent years, the effectiveness of BIP programs to effectively deliver instructional content and uphold the educational mission of the university has been called into question by students, parents, and administrators (Savage & Sharpe, 1998). Specifically, graduate academic programs have been admonished for their long-standing reliance on graduate teaching assistants, rather than faculty, as the primary instructors of BIP courses. Moreover, constituents have questioned the effectiveness and relevance of content and instructional practices commonly found in BIP courses at meeting the educational goal of effectively facilitating increases in student physical activity and awareness of healthy lifestyle practices (Poole, 1991; Russell & Chepyator-Thomson, 2004).

However, despite this criticism, graduate academic programs have yet to allocate sufficient attention and resources on processes that enhance GTA instructional supervision, training, evaluation (Rikard & Nye, 1997; Russell, 2006). Moreover, scant innovation has been demonstrated by graduate academic programs regarding the evaluation of the instructional effectiveness of their GTAs and viability of course offerings. Existing research emphasizes that in order to assess the quality of instruction offered by BIPs, it is essential that students are given ample opportunities to express their perspectives, instructional concerns, and recommendations for program improvement (Chism, 1998; Hensley, 2000). Furthermore, it would behoove graduate

academic programs managing BIPs to utilize student feedback to make structural, pedagogical, or content-specific improvements to course offerings and GTA instructional development processes. To date, BIP administrators have experienced reluctance to implement processes that could more successfully obtain student perspectives concerning the quality of instruction they encounter in their academic courses. Rather, there has been a consistent over-reliance on standardized evaluation instruments which traditionally obtain vague, unsubstantiated, or biased responses (McCormack, 2005; Russell, 2006). More disturbing is the lack of research initiatives focused on GTAs and their utilization of appropriate teaching strategies, methods, and content. More importantly, the students' perceptions of their educational experience within BIP courses have yet to be obtained in a systematic and consistent manner. This research represents an effort to extend existing literature focused on the development of effective GTA and BIP course evaluation methods. Specifically, the author explores the effectiveness of the inclusion of qualitative evaluation techniques to better obtain student perspectives on a wider range of issues relative to their educational experiences in the classroom. It is hoped that by offering this proposed evaluation design graduate academic program administrators, especially those in charge of BIP course management and GTA instructional development, will reassess the viability of their own evaluation processes.

Significance of the Study

This research was initiated with the anticipation of obtaining a more comprehensive understanding and awareness of student perspectives, recommendations, and pertinent issues regarding their educational experiences in BIP courses. This article represents the perceptions of 200 participants highlighting multiple commonalities of experiences and perspectives. The purpose of this interpretive case-study conducted in a doctoral-research university's BIP was two-fold:

(a) to examine the characteristics of participants including the motives for enrolling in BIP courses, perceived value of these courses, and aspects of the BIP course structure that was most beneficial and least beneficial; and (b) to obtain student perceptions of the current BIP course teaching effectiveness evaluative process. Having a non-traditional dialogue with students can provide the deeper insights into their ideas, recommendations, and perceptions of BIP courses and GTA instructional effectiveness. Currently such depth is lacking due to the use of current standardized course evaluation instruments. More specifically, qualitative-oriented student evaluative feedback can be utilized more effectively to make concerted efforts to inform the administrative, pedagogical, and support processes impacting GTAs who traditionally serve as lead instructors of BIP courses. To this end, the research questions that guided this study were:

- 1) What were the primary motivations for students to enroll in BIP courses?
- 2) To what extent did the participants find value in their BIP course educational experience?
- 3) What aspects of the BIP course structure, content, and instructional practices were most beneficial to their overall educational experience? Least beneficial?
- 4) What were their participants' perspectives of the viability of the BIP's current course teaching effectiveness survey process? What recommendations did participants have for enhancing those processes?

Methods

Qualitative research by its inherent nature is designed to propose, answer and support questions and conclusions regarding lived or social experiences (Merriam, 2002). An interpretive case-study approach was deemed the most efficient method of inquiry for this exploratory research (Creswell, 2003). Specifically,

ethnographic research focuses on acquiring, describing and effectively presenting the participants' "voices" as the lens by which the reader can interpret and make meaning of the values, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, that a specific group or "case" of individuals within an exclusive cultural setting contextualize their behaviors (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, case studies, which are bounded by time, space, location, and context, have been shown to be a highly effective method of evaluating the cultural or organizational behaviors of instructional programs and settings (Tierney, 1991).

Context of Study

This research was conducted in a major southeastern university's physical activity and wellness program (BIP) during the summer 2003 through summer 2004 academic terms. Particularly, the Department of Health and Human Performance's (HLHP), located in the College of Education, BIP was examined. The Department of HLHP offers doctoral and Master's degrees in exercise science (EXRS), physical education teacher education (PETE), and health promotion and behavior (HPB) academic disciplines and respective sub-disciplines. The university does not require students to enroll in or pass BIP courses to fulfill graduation requirements. However, BIP courses are graded via a letter grade system (i.e., A, B, C, etc.) and carry a two hour academic credit. Each academic term the BIP offers the university student body a selection of approximately 20 elective courses including individual sports (tennis, aerobics, kayaking, etc.), team sports (basketball, flag football, soccer, etc.), and content-oriented courses such as weight-control and wellness.

Participants

In light of the aforementioned research goals purposeful sampling was the most appropriate sampling technique. This strategy's goal is to obtain "information-rich" cases in an effort to explore relevant, in-depth and comprehensive

perspectives regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002). During the last four weeks of each academic term during the course of this research, students were asked to volunteer for alternative evaluation process. The participant pool consisted of students (N = 200) enrolled in a BIP course at the time of their participation in this research study. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize responses to the questionnaire used for this study. Table 1 in the Appendix provides a visual representation of the demographic and enrollment trend data of the participants at the time the study was conducted. Gender-wise 39% and 61 % of the participants were female and male respectively. Regarding academic ranking 44.5% and 24.5% of the participants were seniors or juniors respectively. Moreover, 89% and 7% of the participants identified themselves as having White American/Caucasian or Black/African-American ethnic backgrounds respectively. In regard to enrollment trends, 65.5% of the participants were enrolled in two or more BIP courses at the time of their participation in this research. Additionally, 67% of the participants had enrolled in at least one BIP course during the previous academic term. Lastly, 85.5% of the respondents had enrolled in two or more BIP courses during the academic year prior to their participation in this research.

Students were asked to volunteer for this research and upon agreeing to do so were randomly placed in either the *Individual Interview* (n = 80) or *Focus-Group* (n = 120) pool by the primary researcher. Prior to beginning their engagement in the research process each student reviewed and signed appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) paperwork giving the primary researcher permission to audiotape, videotape and disseminate their interviews and demographic questionnaire responses. Moreover, in order to maintain confidentiality of responses they provided the primary researcher with a pseudonym. Participants were not given any compensation, course credit or otherwise, for taking part in this research.

Table 1

Demographic and Enrollment Trend Questionnaire Items and Responses

Questionnaire Items	Number and Percentage of Participant Pool (N = 200)
Gender	
Female	78 (39%)
Male	122 (61%)
Academic Ranking	
Freshman	17 (8.5%)
Sophomore	41 (20.5%)
Junior	49 (24.5%)
Senior	89 (44.5%)
Graduate	4 (2%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White-American/Caucasian	179 (89.5%)
Black/African-American	14 (7%)
Pacific-Islander/Asian-American	4 (2%)
Latino/Hispanic-American	1 (.5%)
Other	2 (1%)
Currently, are you taking two or more BIP courses?	
Yes	131 (65.5%)
No	69 (34.5%)
Outside of your current course, have you taken a BIP course in the past year?	
Yes	134 (67%)
No	66 (33%)
Outside of your current course, have you taken two or more BIP courses in the past year?	
Yes	171 (85.5%)
No	29 (14.5%)

Demographic and Enrollment Trend Questionnaire

Each participant completed a demographic questionnaire at the onset of the research process prior to their individual or focus group interview. This instrument was designed to obtain basic demographic characteristics, enrollment habits, and preliminary insights into the perceptions of their BIP courses and instructor. The primary researcher, with the assistance of fellow HLHP pedagogy faculty, developed the demographic characteristics questionnaire for this study. Specifically, questionnaire items addressed topics including gender, race/ethnicity, current BIP course the participant was enrolled in, past BIP course enrollment habits, whether they would recommend the courses and instructor to fellow students, etc.

Individual and Focus-Group Interviews

Based on the nature of this inquiry semi-structured interviews, individual and focus-group, were the primary data collection processes. Participants were randomly assigned to either the *Individual Interview* or *Focus-Group* participant pools. Five focus-group interviews took place each academic term during the research process. Each focus-group was comprised of 6 participants. The goal of the focus group interviews was to have participants openly discuss and exchange ideas about topics relevant to this research's purposes (Kvale, 1996; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Twenty individual semi-structured interviews were conducted per academic term. Members of the total participant pool were interviewed once for the duration of this study via either an individual or focus-group setting.

From a qualitative research orientation, in order to more effectively understand and capture the perspectives and viewpoints of the participants, open-ended questions were utilized during both individual and focus-group interviews (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1998) (refer to Table 2 in the Appendix for a list of

interview questions). It was the intent of the primary researcher to engage the participant(s) in a face-to-face dialogue concerning their perceptions of the BIP course with a specific focus on course structure, content, perceived educational value, and the GTA's effectiveness as an instructor. Seidman (1998) asserted "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 3). Each interview was scheduled at the convenience of the participant(s) and lasted approximately one-hour and was audio- or video-taped for further analysis. Lastly, each interview was transcribed verbatim and participants were provided a copy of their comments within 10 days of the actual interview. At that time, participants were asked to perform a member check of their transcript in order to correct or identify any errors in comments or tentative themes generated by the primary researcher.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved the systematic organizing (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002; Wolcott, 1999) of interview transcripts and responses to demographic questionnaire items. Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection throughout this study. The researcher was able to identify tentative themes that provided context for future data collection processes. The product of this process was a thorough and comprehensive description of the phenomenon under investigation.

Collected data were analyzed in the following manner. First, the demographic questionnaire data were analyzed to determine the participants' general perceptions of topics including their educational experiences in BIP courses, enrollment habits, and views of the manner in which the department of HLHP evaluated BIP courses and GTAs serving as lead instructors in such courses. Quantitative data obtained from the demographic questionnaire was analyzed using the current Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 14.0. Descriptive statistics

Table 2

Interview Guide for Semi-structured Individual and Focus Group Interviews

1. What was the primary reason for enrolling in your current BIP course?
2. In regard to your educational experience, what were your expectations for this course?
3. From an instructional perspective, what characteristics, practices or strategies exhibited by the course instructor most beneficial to your educational experience?
4. From an instructional perspective, what characteristics, practices or strategies exhibited by the course instructor least beneficial to your educational experience?
5. In regards to your educational experience, what was the most beneficial aspect of your BIP course's structure or content?
6. In regards to your educational experience, what was the least beneficial aspect of your BIP course's structure or content?
7. What are your perspectives on the Department of Health and Human Performance's use of standardized course evaluation forms to obtain student feedback?
8. How would you recommend the Department of Health and Human Performance best evaluate the instructional effectiveness of BIP course instructors?
9. Once this class concludes, do you foresee yourself regularly participating in this specific course activity or using gained knowledge? Why or why not?
10. Overall, how would you rate the value of this course to your educational experience at Auburn University?

of participant responses generated and reported included means, frequency counts, and ratios (refer to Table 1).

Second, participants' responses to open-ended, semi-structured interview questions were grouped and analyzed to obtain insight into various aspects of the participants' experiences in BIP courses. Data categories are defined as units of information that comprise various occurrences, events, or happenings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Based on provisional interpretations of diverse participant statements tentative themes were generated. Themes were based on commonalities between participants' experiences regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2002). Findings in the context of this study are considered legitimate based on the extent to which the data shed new light on the phenomenon under investigation and provides the reader with a fresh awareness of the participants' experiences (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004). Moreover, thematic analysis was used to further generate categories and themes which in turn led to a better understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. Lastly, the participants' quotations were used to provide a richness and depth to the representation of their experiences (Creswell 2003; Wolcott, 1999).

Data Credibility and Trustworthiness

Although the quantitative-oriented terms reliability, validity, and generalizability are not considered applicable to qualitative research, this study addressed those constructs through multiple strategies to efficiently address issues of data credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002; Wolcott, 1999). *Member checks* were performed with each interviewee within ten days of the actual interview. An *external auditor*, from another academic department, reviewed and presented the researcher with concerns and suggestions regarding the research process. As a result, the researcher addressed these topics throughout the data collection, analysis, and

interpretation phases of this study. *Discrepant or negative case data* are provided throughout the results section. These findings provide the reader evidence that divergent participant perspectives and viewpoints were generated in the data analysis and presentation phases of the research. *Triangulation of data* was established through the use of multiple sources of participant feedback and presented in the results section. Thematic consistency was identified across and within data sources through systematic crosschecking of tentative interpretations and themes. *Peer debriefers* were utilized to review aspects of the study including tentative themes, methods, and conclusions to enhance the accuracy of the final report to be presented to the reader. Lastly, *a rich, thick description*, through the use of participants' quotations, has been provided to make available to the reader a clear understanding of the research setting, participants, and their perspectives.

Research Limitations and Generalizability

The research findings and analysis provide a descriptive account and recommendations rather than test, support, or develop a hypothesis concerning the nature of student experiences in BIP courses. Moreover, the intent of this research was not to generalize findings and conclusions to all students enrolled in BIP or similar courses. In fact, to attempt to do so would be unwise (Patton, 1990). The interpretations, findings, and conclusions that are a result of this study are particularistic to this research setting and group of participants. The documentation of the participants' experiences and findings generated might shed light onto the experiences of students in comparable settings at other institutions but nevertheless those experiences are yet particularistic to that setting (Creswell, 2003). The individual participants' perspectives are their own and as a unit are bounded by time, space, and their current perception of reality. Therefore, the uniqueness of the participants in their particular setting limits the generalizability and transferability of findings from one setting to another (Merriam, 2002).

Findings

Research Question 1: What were the primary motivations or reasons for participants to enroll in BIP courses? Three consistent themes were generated during the data analysis. The first was *to improve fitness or skill*. Josh, a sophomore, during an interview spoke to his desire to use the course to improve his personal fitness level. Specifically, he wanted to maintain his weight. He stated:

I need to drop some weight. I had too much fun this semester...so the jogging class kinds of keeps me in balance. I'm improving my fitness and maintaining my weight while having fun. Last semester [Fall] I didn't workout and it showed after Thanksgiving with the extra pounds. I feel like I'm finally getting stronger and in shape.

The second theme reason was *interest in activity*. Vaughn, a freshman, stated during a focus group interview:

This class was great. I had never played formal golf before so I wanted to give it a try. I really wanted to learn because my girlfriend played in high school and she can 'technically' beat me if she wanted to. Many of my buddies play golf so I wanted to learn the game so I could 'hit the links' with them and look half-competent. It's great that the school offers these courses because I always wanted to learn but couldn't see paying for formal individual lessons. Now I try to play once a month at least with my girlfriend or dad.

Lastly, participants responded that they enrolled in BIP course to *improve cumulative grade point average (GPA)*. Jamie, a senior, stated during a focus group interview:

I know I shouldn't say this but BIP courses are considered easy A's on campus. Usually TAs will be teaching them so you can relate to them better than faculty if a problem comes up and you miss class. But not only is the requirements not too hard

but you actually get the opportunity to work out and hang out with your friends. So it is a combination of reasons for taking the classes: not too hard, fun and I can get a work-out in.

Sebastian, a sophomore, asserted that the courses were easier and could replace the classes he dropped in his major. He stated during an interview:

I needed a GPA boost so I took three physical education classes this semester. I messed up and failed a class last semester so I'm trying to get my GPA up so I can continue in my business major. These are the best electives because I already have enough tough courses in my major. These classes were easier and fun. Plus I got to workout!!!

Research Question 2: To what extent, did the participants find value their BIP course educational experience? The consensus of the participants was that in light of their other university courses, *the BIP course was a valued educational experience*. Moreover, participants overwhelmingly asserted that they would continue to regularly participate in the BIP course's activity or use gained knowledge after class ended. Rick, a junior, noted the friends he had met in his jogging class and how they motivated him to stay active once the class ended. He stated in an interview:

The class was great and I enjoyed myself. I will be more active after this class. I got some friends to run with now and that motivates me more than I could myself. We have decided to run a few 5Ks this summer with the local track club since we are all in the class together. It is kind of like good peer pressure. If they show up to run I have to show up.

Similar to Rick, Amy, a freshman, expressed that the skills she learned in the class made it likely that she would continue to be an active swimmer upon the class ending. She stated in a focus group interview:

I sure will be active!!! I wasn't good at swimming before the class but the instructor did a good job of teaching the basics and fitness. I look forward to swimming every day especially since it is cold outside. I might even try the intramural swim meet in the spring if I can keep my practicing going. Compared to the other electives I have taken this class ROCKED!!! I saw changes in myself and my body.

A small percentage of the participants indicated that they would not use the skills or content they had received after the BIP course ended but they still found value in course educational experience and activities. Nick, a senior, stated in his interview:

I won't use the skill after class. I only took the course to get credit and have fun. I don't like racquetball that much. It wasn't the instructor's fault. I just don't play racquetball at home. Basketball and swimming are more my sports but I couldn't fit those classes into my schedule. The class was cool and I feel I didn't waste my time or money.

Some participants expressed that although the educational experience was valued, the course content or primary activity was not of particular importance. Jessica, a freshman, asserted during a focus group interview:

I valued the class but to be honest I won't be using the skills I learned in class once the class is over. I enjoyed the course because of the teacher and the other students but I didn't like water aerobics that much. The class was great but the activity wasn't what I expected it to be. I would rather jog or walk outside than be in a pool. It was no one's fault...I guess I chose the wrong course to take. Swimming and water just aren't my thing.

Research Question 3: What aspects of the BIP course structure, content, and instructional practices were most beneficial to participants overall educational experience? Least beneficial? In response to this question, students overwhelmingly asserted that *having an opportunity to socialize with their peers* was the most beneficial aspect of the educational experience. Ricky, a senior, stated during an interview:

Being with my friends and making new friends was a huge part of the class. I actually enjoyed talking to them and working out at the same time. The instructor made the class fun and loose so we could socialize as long as we completed our workouts. Swimming is hard but having others in the pool with you and struggling like you helps a lot. We supported each other and still hang out now that class is over.

Grace, also a senior, said having an opportunity to socialize was the primary reason for her signing up for an aerobics class. She stated during a focus group interview:

Several of my sorority sisters took BIP courses last semester and I decided to try one. The class was great and a hard workout. I actually got a chance to meet some nice girls from outside my sorority. Of all the good things about the class meeting new people and seeing them on a regular basis was the most important part of the class. We learned and worked out together and that made the physical education part of the course enjoyable. I really enjoyed everyone and it became like a mini-sorority in a strange way...all of the survivors of Ms. Taylor's [*not the GTA's real name*] hard-core aerobics class.

A secondary theme evident in the data was the impact of the *positive teacher's behaviors* on the

students' educational experience. The findings shed light on the traits and behaviors that students find most appealing about GTAs. Karla, a sophomore, stated during an interview:

I loved my teacher. She was fun and energetic and made the aerobics class hard, but not too hard. She was also fair and made sure that we understood course assignments and requirements. She answered every question we had, even the ones that were repeated over and over. I learned a lot and feel better about working out at the gym after this class. She was great!!! Plus it helped that she was close to my age. I felt like she could relate and wanted to be my friend but in a professional way.

Being available before and after class, showing knowledge of the subject matter, and looking fit and healthy were expressed as important characteristics of GTAs. Taylor, a freshman, stated during a focus group interview:

For me it was the teacher. The class was fun but the teacher was huge. He was an inspiration while I worked out. Plus he knew everything about weight-training. He was a stickler for details so we got every lift perfect. It's good to see a strong and fit instructor in weight-training class. I want someone who can help me get to where they are in size and strength. Plus he answered his e-mails and made time to talk to us before and after class. I would take him again because he knew what he was doing and was fun to be around.

The second part of this research question asked the participants to identify the least beneficial aspects of their BIP course. Themes generated from the data indicated that students saw the *mandatory quizzes/exams* and *formal attendance policy* equally problematic. Greg, a freshman, stated during an interview:

Exams and homework should not be part of the class. Attendance should be the only factor in grading. I took this class to work

out and play racquetball, not study. Outside of the rules, how much do you need to know about racquetball to enjoy the sport.

Trista, a freshman, like Greg, did not accept the relevance of testing during the course. She stated during an interview:

The exams and quizzes were hard and I never could study right for them. They covered too many concepts and theories. This was a simple wellness course. I wanted to do some activities, not read so much out of a book. The tests were a waste of time and were the part I liked the least about the class. I understand we need to know some basic concepts but I would rather not be graded on them...there has to be another way to give grades in this course.

Melanie, a sophomore, took issue with the attendance policy within the BIP. She stated during a focus group interview:

The attendance policy was crazy!!! Three points for an unexcused absence. There shouldn't be an attendance policy for this class. For math, I can go when I want to without losing credit. This is simply water aerobics. Give me a break!!! I'm paying for the class so I should be able to attend when I want to. This isn't elementary school where you had to go to class...even then you didn't lose credit when you had a legitimate reason for missing class. At least have a policy that is the same for all classes so we know what to expect in our classes.

Research Question 4: What were the participants' perspectives of the viability of the BIP's current course teaching effectiveness survey process? What recommendations did participants have for enhancing those processes? The one consistent theme generated from the analysis of participants' response was that in its present form the *course evaluation process was not perceived as meaningful or relevant towards improving the*

quality of educational experiences in BIP courses. Two sub-themes shed some light on the students' rationale for having this notion. The first was a *general bias by the students* towards teachers they like or disliked for a variety of reasons including attractiveness, rigor of course assignments, rapport with instructor, etc. Angie, a junior, stated during a focus-group interview:

I don't even really think about his teaching when doing the evaluations. I know for sure my friends don't either. If we like the teacher they will get good scores. If not, then bad scores. Most fall somewhere in the middle [on the rating scale]. Was he cute? That matters a little especially in courses like weight-training. The teaching part doesn't really factor in that much...Did I have fun or not? Did I get to workout and see friends? Did I learn something or did I waste my time? That's how I usually mark these kind of classes [BIP courses].

The second sub-theme focused on the *lack of perceived administrative attention in response to student feedback and criticism.* Sue Ann, a senior, discussed her frustration with the lack of positive change that resulted from providing course evaluation feedback. Specifically, she noted the lack of attention and action by program administrators to respond to negative feedback regarding the removal or reprimand of perceived ineffective GTAs. She stated during a focus-group interview:

To be honest I don't take those evaluations seriously. In my aerobics class we gave the TA bad scores and she was still teaching the next semester. She was a b*\$#& and called herself that. So I don't think her boss cares. I wonder if he even looked at them. So I don't really waste my time providing feedback, especially on the blank comment sheet. If you [administrators] aren't going to get rid of bad teachers I'm not going to waste my time... Plus they do the evaluation as the end of the semester. That doesn't help me or her [the

TA] any if I had to deal with her and her lousy teaching all semester.

When asked to provide recommendations for improving the BIP's current course teaching effectiveness survey process the participants consistently provided two suggestions. The first involved the instructors and/or BIP administrators meeting with students face-to-face in an environment conducive to open dialogue about their educational experiences. Marcus, a sophomore, asserted during an interview:

I would like to meet like this [his interview] near the end of the semester just to talk about what happened in the class. Nothing serious or meant to get the GTA in trouble but just a way to talk about the course and how to make it better for the students...that way we can't complain about not being able to talk about problems and other issues in class. A face-to-face meeting with administrators to take our suggestions back the GTAs would be great.

The second suggestions involved providing students with an anonymous on-line questionnaire to provide feedback. The importance of this type of feedback process was that the students could (a) provide feedback and particularly critical comments without fear of retaliation from course instructors, (b) do so from the comfort of their home and (c) reflect and provide feedback at their own pace. Suran, a junior, exemplified these sentiments and likened the process to using the popular website RateMyProfessors.com. During an individual interview she stated:

I need a way to really say what I want so say without getting caught. When I write comments I feel the instructor can figure out who I am by my handwriting or the issues I am raising. Plus I always feel rushed doing the evaluations. Instructors always give the evaluations after the final when we are just trying to get out of there. I'm trying to figure out how I did in the class based on the final...I'm not

concerned with grading the instructor. I can do that later from home after I wind down. That's what we need...something like RateMyProfessors.com but for these classes specifically and the GTAs.

Discussion and Implications

For over half a century, basic instruction programs (BIPs) have served a valuable role in the education of college students. Unfortunately, the proper instructional evaluation of BIPs have not been at the forefront of administrator's and GTA supervisor's agenda in relation to ensuring that students receive quality educational experiences (Housner, 1993; Russell & Chepyator-Thomson, 2004). The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives and characteristics of students enrolled in a BIP at a major university in the southeastern part of the United States of America. More specifically, the researcher sought to obtain these perspectives via qualitative techniques in conjunction with traditional standardized, quantitative-oriented student course evaluations. Although a clear limitation of this research was the relatively small number of students who participated, their collective feedback can be viewed as a "case-study" representative of the greater student body enrolled in the BIP under investigation.

Multiple immediate implications for this research present themselves for the BIP under investigation and the greater literature regarding GTA training and development. First and foremost, the students expressed that they found value in the educational experiences they obtained in the BIP courses in comparison to their other university courses. This finding supports and continues an existing line of inquiry that has examined the impact and relevance of BIPs in relation to student instructional needs, development of perceptions of health and wellness in young adults, and academic program design (Hensley, 2000; Trimble & Hensley, 1993). Additionally, the participants expressed that they truly valued the opportunities to socialize with their peers while engaging in the course content. Moreover, the energy, enthusiasm, and approachability of the teacher were expressed

as being a positive influence on the educational experiences of the participants.

Student feedback regarding aspects of BIP course's structure, content delivery processes and GTA instructional practices led to program adjustments in multiple areas. One, non-traditional course offerings were added to the BIP that focused on specific content areas such as body building, marathon training, high-intensity cardio training, women-only weight-training and yoga. Two, applicants for graduate teaching assistantships were screened with the intent to fill these BIP course instructional roles. Lastly, GTAs were trained and required to administer a minimum of two pre- and post-assessments in their courses in order to assist the student with monitoring their progression throughout the semester.

The finding that students enrolled in BIP courses primarily to have improve their current fitness level and learn a new skill or activity is consistent with research by Leenders, Sherman, and Ward (2003) and Savage (1998). More interesting was the conclusion that students enrolled in multiple BIP courses throughout their matriculation at the university despite there being no graduation requirement for obtaining BIP credits. Participants provided multiple reasons for this enrollment trend. However, BIP administrations should be wary of the much too common student "misperception" that BIP courses are simply a means of improving one's GPA or "filling up a schedule" in order to obtain the necessary credit hours to maintain full-time student status in lieu of tougher courses. As a result of this finding, the BIP under investigation instituted multiple administrative and curriculum changes. Specifically, the BIP developed and implemented a uniform attendance policy and the requirement that each course must include a minimum of two examinations of key health, exercise, and wellness concepts. The goal of these changes was to provide rigor to the BIP courses as well as shift away from the practice of attendance being the only measure of student learning and achievement. Moreover, as suggested by Leenders, Sherman, and Ward (2003) the BIP courses

provided students with conceptual information on physical activity and wellness in an attempt to facilitate the development of healthy lifestyle habits in the students' everyday lives.

The primary impetus for this non-traditional approach to course and program evaluation was the need of the BIP administration to provide students with alternative and practical means of expressing their perception of their educational experiences in BIP courses. More importantly, the depth and richness of the students' recollections and insights of their experiences provided transformative data that extends well beyond that which had historically been documented using standardized end-of-the-semester student course evaluations. The last implication of this research is that it clearly demonstrates that students are willing to provide BIP administration with the feedback that is necessary to evaluate the instructional viability of course offerings and effectiveness of GTA instructional practices. More importantly, I argue that the information obtained via qualitative methods complement, if not surpass, that which can be obtained via traditional course evaluations in richness and relevance. With this information, BIP administrators can work towards the development of processes that will allow for the proper recruitment, selection, development of graduate students who can take the lead instructor role and provide our students with a meaningful educational experience. It is hoped by the researcher that graduate academic programs take these conclusions and develop program specific processes to more comprehensively evaluate their respective BIPs and GTA instructional development processes.

REFERENCES

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2000). *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data*. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Chism, N. (1998). Evaluating TA programs. In M. Marincovich, J. Prostko, & F. Stout (Eds.), *The professional development of graduate teaching assistants* (pp. 249-262). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.
- Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Davis, M., Dias-Bowie, Y., Greenberg, K., Klukken, G., Pollio, H. R., Thomas, S.P., & Thompson, C.L. (2004). A fly in the buttermilk: Descriptions of university life by successful black undergraduate students at a predominantly white southeastern university. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75, 420-445.
- Hensley, L. (2000). Current status of basic instruction programs in physical education at American colleges and universities. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 71(9), 30-36.
- Housner, L.D. (1993). Research in basic instruction programs. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 64(6), 53-58.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Leenders, N., Sherman, W.M., & Ward, P. (2003). College physical activity courses: Why do students enroll, and what are their health behaviors. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 74(3), 313-318.
- McCormack, C. (2005). Reconceptualizing student evaluation of teaching: An ethical framework for changing times. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(5), 463-476.
- Merriam, S. (Ed.). (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples of discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Poole, J. (1991). Seven skills to improved teaching: Enhancing graduate assistant instruction. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 60, 21-24.
- Rikard, G.L., & Nye, A. (1997). The graduate instructor experience: Pitfalls and possibilities.

- Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 68(5), 33-37.
- Russell, J., & Chepyator-Thomson, J.R. (2004). Help wanted!!! Perspectives of physical education graduate teaching assistants on their instructional environment, preparation and needs. *Educational Research Journal*, 19(2), 251-280.
- Russell, J. (2006). Investigating perceptions of a collegiate physical education program's organizational culture, instructional supervision practices and socialization processes: A case study. *Educational Research Journal*, 21(1), 65-92.
- Savage, M. (1998). University students' motivation for participation in a basic instruction program. *College Student Journal*, 32(1), 58-65.
- Savage, M., & Sharpe, T. (1998). Demonstrating the need for formal graduate student training in effective teaching practices. *Physical Educator*, 55(3), 130-138.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Strauss, A.L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tierney, W. (1991). Organizational culture in higher education: Defining the essentials. In M. Peterson, E. Chaffee, & T. White (Eds.), *Organization and governance in higher education: An ASHE reader*, (4th Ed.), (pp. 126-139). Needham Heights, MA: Ginn Press.
- Trimble, R.T., & Hensley, L.D. (1993). Survey of basic instruction programs in physical education: 1993 [Summary]. In *Proceeding of the National Conference on Basic Instruction in Physical Education* (pp. 18-21). Reston, VA: National Association for Sport and Physical Education.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). *The Surgeon General's call to action to prevent and decrease overweight and obesity 2001*. Washington, DC.: Government Printing Office.
- Vaughn, S., Schumm, J., & Sinagub, J. (1996). *Focus group interviews in education and psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Wolcott, H. (1999). *Ethnography: A way of seeing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.

Dr. Jared A. Russell is a faculty member in the Department of Health and Human Performance at Auburn University, Alabama.