

Student Perception Of The Academic Rigor Of The College Physical Education Curriculum

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Abraham Lincoln once said, "Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed" (Bucher & Krotee, 1993, p. 374). Thus, public sentiment and public perception reveal a great deal about those things that are likely to be successful and those things that are likely to be unsuccessful. How do public sentiment and public perception impact the field of physical education? What perception does the American education community have of the American physical education system? In addition to these questions, other questions pertaining to American physical education recruits persist, including: how do recruits perceive physical education, what level of academic performance do recruits enjoy, and what are recruit's perception and sentiment concerning the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum?

American Public Perception

Unfortunately, public perception and public sentiment, historically, have revealed that the field of physical education has been relegated to a very low position on the educational "totem pole." Koslow (1988) reported that physical education, though wanting to be categorized as a recognized discipline, continues to struggle to reach a point of limited credibility. Lawson (1988) indicated that when compared to other school subjects, such as math, science, and

English in which mastery of the subjects is universally accepted the mastery of physical education was given limited attention and received a low status in comparison.

According to Lawson (1988), it was reported that a great deal of professional autonomy is given to the teacher-coach, but professional autonomy associated with physical education is primarily institutional neglect which results from the low or peripheral status of physical education as a school subject. Thus, it was reported that physical education's low status plays an important part in why physical education is surrounded by ambiguity as to its role and importance in the school setting. This ambiguity contributes to physical education being perceived as non-academic and having limited worth. Miller (1988) indicated that physical education in our schools is viewed by the public as being of negligible value.

American Education Community Perception

It was also reported that physical education often fights for respect from within the education community (Goc-Karp, Kim, and Skinner 1985). According to Lawson (1988):

The central question is how persons with power, both in and outside the school, view physical education. Although some persons view physical education as a school subject, "gym" also is viewed variously as supervised recess, a body-building experience, a "feeder system" for interscholastic teams, and as a "safety valve" where students can "let off steam." (p. 277)

In addition, Goc-Karp et al. (1985) while investigating the beliefs, expectations, and

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perceptions related to the field of physical education, reported that the vast majority of individuals viewed physical education as a “waste of time,” and was thus given a lower status than other academic disciplines. When asked how other teachers and people in the community viewed physical education and the role of the physical education teacher, the majority of students and professors felt that physical education was viewed negatively.

American Recruit Perception of Career Track

Even though physical education struggles in its quest for credibility, prospective physical education students continue to be attracted to a career in teacher education. What is it about the physical education profession that attracts recruits? Lortie (1975) examined recruitment into a profession and identified recruitment resources that serve as factors influencing the subjective warrant. As a result, the subjective warrant has been identified as an individual’s perception of the requirements and benefits associated with a given profession, weighed against self-assessments of aspiration and competence. Thus, the subjective warrant is the recruit’s perceptual frame associated with the view of the profession (Lawson, 1988).

Therefore, some of the influencing factors and experiences that attract recruits are as follows: a) the enjoyment of activity, with an emphasis on movement exploration and the development of athletic skills (Goc-Karp et al., 1985; Lawson, 1983; Templin, Woodford, & Mulling 1982); b) the aspiration to coach and the desire for continued association with sports (Goc-Karp et al., 1985; Lawson, 1988); c) the admiration of past teachers and coaches (Goc-Karp et al., 1985; Lawson, 1988; Templin et al., 1982); d) the enjoyment of being sport spectators and readers of sport related literature (Templin et al., 1982); e) the success associated with past athletic performance (Goc-Karp et al.,

1985) and f) the interpersonal and service dimensions of teaching (Lortie, 1975).

In conjunction with the subjective warrant, Lawson (1988) identified a type of socialization that influences persons to enter a career, which is termed occupational socialization. Occupational socialization is identified as a variety of things that initially influence persons to enter the field of physical education and that later are responsible for their perceptions and actions as teachers. Therefore, some of the factors that influence recruit’s perception, included: a) the perception that a teaching career involves learning how to play sports and games, and then teaching them to others (Lawson, 1988); b) the perception that they could serve in what was perceived to be the nearly identical role as physical education teacher and coach (Lawson, 1983); and c) the perception that teaching physical education is a “necessary duty that must be performed if the ‘first love’ coaching is to be pursued” (Lawson, 1993, p. 371). For as one recruit indicated, “physical education gives me a chance to pursue my interests in athletics, continue to play and even get paid for it” (Templin et al., 1982, p. 124).

American Recruit Academic Performance

According to Lawson (1983), recruits in physical education when compared with recruits from other disciplines do not fare well related to intellectual aptitudes and abilities. Dewar and Lawson (1984) reported that recruits with relatively poor academic records were attracted to physical education because of the comparative ease of entry. Templin et al. (1982) also reporting on the “ease of entry” theme, stated “even though the entrants enter with many desirable traits, an area of concern exists related to scholastic inefficiencies with which physical education students enter the college or university” (Templin et al., 1982, p. 130). In addition, a variety of factors, including a mediocre record of academic achievement

in high school course work and on standardized exams cause physical education recruits to be “hard pressed” to find other professional preparation programs that would accept them as applicants (Templin et al., 1982). There seems to be a strong possibility that entrance into physical education is facilitated by admission standards that provide the entrants with one of few pathways into higher education. According to Templin et al. (1982), one must seriously question the eased entrance in relation to scholastic aptitude of physical education recruits. In fact, “might not entrance into physical education be more loosely linked to an entrants inability to meet entrance standards” (Templin et al., 1982, p. 126). Thus, it is likely that the scholastic deficiencies limit the occupational options (Lawson, 1988).

American Recruit Perception of Academic Rigor

In addition to those things that attract recruits and influence recruit’s perception, there are likely other factors that entice prospective students to pursue a college physical education teaching degree. One possible factor may be related to the perception that the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum is less challenging than that of other disciplines. The physical education profession has fought to communicate its worth and content to the public (Brown, 1994). However, if students entering the profession have misconceptions of the academic rigor of physical education, then it is likely these students represent the population at large. In addition, it is possible that students may perceive physical education to be an academic “pushover,” and elect to pursue a different career path. Thus, physical education may be losing some very good students because of the perception that physical education is not academically challenging.

Hoffman (1985) suggested that the public perceives physical education to be less

academically rigorous than other disciplines because the public tends to link physical education departments with athletic departments. Pangrazi and Darst (1991) and Earls (1981) indicate that there is evidence in the research to suggest that students, teachers, and the general population often confuse the coaching of athletics with the teaching of physical education. Thus, it is possible that one of the reasons that recruits are attracted to the field of physical education is because of the perception that the college physical education discipline has little academic rigor.

Therefore, the reason for conducting the current study was primarily to assess college student perception of the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum. The specific purpose was to determine college freshmen (CFPEM) and college senior (CSPEM) perceptions of the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum.

Methods

Subjects

The participants either attended a freshman/sophomore level college or a junior/senior level college. Many of the participants completing academic requirements at the junior/senior level college transferred from the same freshman/sophomore level college. The schools were located in the northern part of Alabama. Seventy-seven students participated in the study. The students were placed into one of two groups. Group 1 (CFPEM) consisted of 45 college freshmen from the freshman/sophomore level college taking their first classroom (lecture) type college physical education class. Group 2 (CSPEM) consisted of 32 college seniors from the junior/senior level college. The CSPEM group consisted of students majoring in physical education, and completing the last college physical education requirement.

Questionnaire

Student perception of the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum was assessed through the use of a questionnaire. The contents of the questionnaire were evaluated for accuracy and appropriateness by experts in the field of questionnaire design and administration, and by experts in the field of physical education. Specifically, the initial review of the questionnaire was conducted by a group of psychologists. As a result of the review, recommendations were made as to the quality of each questionnaire item. The recommendations were honored, and slight modifications were made to several of the questionnaire items.

The next phase of the review consisted of an evaluation of the questionnaire by a group of physical education professors who regularly teach classes to undergraduate students and conduct research. The physical education professors, after being informed of the study's purpose, were instructed to evaluate each questionnaire item for appropriateness. Minor recommendations were issued, and questionnaire corrections were made.

Following the review by the experts, the questionnaire was administered to a group of 28 physical education majors in the third year of their academic program, at the same school, for the purpose of conducting item-analyses. Upon completion of the questionnaire, the students were verbally questioned as to their interpretation of each of the questionnaire items. The students were questioned individually by both co-authors of the study. When it was apparent that widespread misinterpretation resulted on a particular questionnaire item, the item was modified to reflect clarity of interpretation. In addition, the questionnaire was administered to the same group of students on successive days to assess test-retest reliability. The test-retest reliability results for each of the questionnaire items ranged from a reli-

ability coefficient of .98 on questionnaire item 1 to a reliability coefficient of .8 on questionnaire item 5. The questionnaires overall reliability coefficient was .93.

The questionnaire required participants to respond to 5 questions using a Likert scale. The response choices ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire contains 4 statements related to student's perception of academic rigor and one statement related to reason for selecting the college physical education curriculum (see Figure 1).

Please read the following statements and circle the appropriate score by referring to the legend below:

1-Strongly Disagree	2-Moderately Disagree	3-Slightly Disagree				5	6
4-Slightly Agree	5-Moderately Agree	6-Strongly Agree					
STATEMENTS:							
1. It is my perception that college physical education classes <u>are</u> academically challenging.							
			1	2	3	4	5 6
2. It is my perception that college physical education classes <u>are</u> as academically challenging as college courses in other academic disciplines.							
			1	2	3	4	5 6
3. It is my perception that college physical education classes <u>are</u> not primarily devoted to activity courses and coaching theory courses.							
			1	2	3	4	5 6
4. It is my perception that college physical education majors <u>are</u> required to complete as many homework assignments as are students from other academic disciplines.							
			1	2	3	4	5 6
5. One of the reasons I decided to pursue a degree in physical education was because I perceived the physical education curriculum to be relatively easy academically.							
			1	2	3	4	5 6

Figure 1. Student questionnaire addressing academic perceptions.

Procedures

The questionnaire was administered once to the students in each group, during the first week of the 1996 fall quarter. The questionnaire was administered to entire classes of students. The administration of the questionnaire was conducted by one of the co-authors of the study. The participants were instructed to respond to the questionnaire items as accurately as possible, and the participants were informed that confidentiality would be ensured.

Data Analysis

Data pertaining to the questionnaire items were computed using descriptive statistics, in which means and standard deviations for both groups were analyzed. In addition, an independent t-test was conducted on each questionnaire item to determine whether perceptions of the two groups differed. The significance level for the independent t-test was set at .05.

Results

Table 1 presents the CFPEM and CSPPEM means, standard deviations, and t-test scores. The data represents group means and standard deviations for each of the 5 questionnaire items, as well as t-test scores for each of the 5 questionnaire items.

Table 1

Summary of CFPEM and CSPPEM Means, Standard Deviations, and t - test Scores

Questionnaire	CFPEM Group (n = 45)		CSPPEM Group (n = 32)		t value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Item 1	3.3	1.5	5.3	.8	7.43*
Item 2	1.84	.84	5.25	1.2	13.62*
Item 3	1.78	.76	5.0	1.26	12.82*
Item 4	1.33	.52	5.03	1.05	18.2*
Item 5	4.42	1.29	4.28	.84	.573

In order, means for CFPEM on questionnaire items 1 through 4 were 3.3, 1.84, 1.78, and 1.33 (*SDs* = 1.5, .84, .76, and .52, respectively). Thus, the low mean scores on questionnaire items 1-4 indicate that the participants perceive the college physical education curriculum to be below average on academic rigor. In addition, CFPEM indicated slight agreement with questionnaire item 5 ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.29$).

In order, means for CSPPEM on questionnaire items 1 through 4 were 5.3, 5.25, 5.0, and 5.03 (*SDs* = .8, 1.2, 1.26, and 1.05, respectively). Thus, the high mean scores on

questionnaire items 1-4 indicate that the participants perceive the college physical education curriculum to be academically rigorous. In addition, CSPPEM indicated slight agreement with questionnaire item 5 ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .84$).

The results of the t-tests for questionnaire items 1 through 4 revealed that CSPPEM had a significantly different perception of the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum than did CFPEM. CSPPEM perceived the college physical education curriculum to have significantly greater academic rigor on questionnaire item 1 ($M = 5.3$, $SD = .8$) than did the CFPEM group ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.5$) $t(75) = 7.43$, $p < .05$; on questionnaire item 2 ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.2$) than did the CFPEM group ($M = 1.84$, $SD = .84$), $t(75) = 13.62$, $p < .05$; and on questionnaire item 3 ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.25$) than did the CFPEM group ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .76$), $t(75) = 12.82$, $p < .05$; and on questionnaire item 4 ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.05$) than did the CFPEM group ($M = 1.33$, $SD = .52$), $t(75) = 18.2$, $p < .05$. In addition, there was no significant difference at the .05 level between the CSPPEM and the CFPEM groups on questionnaire item 5.

Discussion

The principle finding of this investigation was that the CFPEM and CSPPEM groups had very different perceptions concerning the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum. CFPEM indicated that it was their perception that the college physical education curriculum was only slightly to, at best, moderately challenging. While the CSPPEM group, having nearly completed all college physical education course requirements, perceived the college physical education curriculum to be academically challenging. Although the composition of the CSPPEM group was different than the CFPEM group, it is likely that if the CSPPEM group had been asked to respond to the questionnaire as freshmen the re-

sponses would have been similar to the responses of the CFPEM group. In fact, when asked to respond to questionnaire item 5 both groups responded in a similar fashion.

In response to each of the questionnaire items, the CFPEM group had the perception that college physical education courses had limited academic challenge, were far less academically challenging than courses in other disciplines, required fewer homework assignments, and were primarily comprised of activity courses. While the CSPPEM group, in response to the same questionnaire items, indicated that it was their perception that the college physical education curriculum was academically challenging, was comparable in academic challenge to other disciplines, required a similar number of homework assignments, and were not primarily comprised of activity courses.

Thus, the fact that the groups had very different perceptions about the academic rigor may be attributed to a variety of factors. Specifically, the CFPEM perception concerning the lack of academic rigor may be attributed to the following: a) the perception that a teaching career involves learning how to play sports and games, and then teaching them to others (Lawson, 1988); b) the perception that they could serve in what was perceived to be the nearly identical role as physical education teacher and coach (Lawson, 1983); and c) the perception that teaching physical education is a "necessary duty that must be performed if the 'first love' coaching is to be pursued" (Lawson, 1993, p. 371). For as one recruit indicated, "physical education gives me a chance to pursue my interests in athletics, continue to play and even get paid for it" (Templin et al., 1982, p. 124).

CSPPEM, as opposed to CFPEM, perceived the college physical education curriculum to be challenging and comparable in challenge to other disciplines. Thus, it is likely that CSPPEM perception concerning the academic rigor was due to the fact that college

physical education requirements include such academically demanding courses as physiology of exercise, kinesiology, motor development, elementary and high school methods classes, tests and measurements, and a variety of other professional physical education academic requirements. It is no wonder that students about to complete the college physical education curriculum perceive the college physical education experience as academically rigorous. Therefore, it appears as though the academic reality of the college physical education curriculum is one in which academically challenging courses are the rule rather than the exception.

Unfortunately, it appears as though the CFPEM group, when compared to the CSPPEM group has a misconception concerning the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum. This misconception is likely to contribute to future adjustments and possible problems. It is speculated that the future adjustments and possible problems may be detected in the following areas: a) students may become dissatisfied with the college curriculum because the curriculum was an unexpected curriculum, b) students may be overwhelmed by the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum, c) students may become resentful of the college professors teaching the course content of the college physical education curriculum, and d) professors may become frustrated due to the fact that recruits have the perception that the college physical education curriculum is low in academic rigor, while college professors understand the complexities of the academic requirements.

Thus, based upon the results of this study, future researchers may be interested in investigating a variety of topics concerning perception associated with the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum. For example, future researchers may elect to expand the sample to include a

greater number and a wider variety of American colleges and universities to determine if this pattern is detected in all regions of the state and all sections of the country. In addition, future researchers may be interested in long term tracking of college students. Thus, it may be informative to investigate groups of physical education majors throughout their college careers for the purpose of determining when and to what degree the perceptions change concerning the academic rigor of the college physical education curriculum. In addition, it may be of interest to investigate whether socioeconomic status, age, and/or gender have an impact on the perception associated with academic rigor. Finally, future researchers may be interested in investigating professor frustration associated with the possible gap between academic reality and recruit's perception of academic rigor.

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