



9-1-2006

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Recommended APA Citation

Coelho, J. D., & Fielitz, L. R. (2006). Cadets' Perceptions of Gymnastics Instruction for Officer Development . *The Qualitative Report*, 11(3), 605-625. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol11/iss3/10>

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Abstract

The United States Military Academy has offered gymnastics instruction since 1838. Gymnastics continues to be an integral component of the physical education curriculum. The purpose of this study was to investigate cadets' perceptions of their experiences in a required gymnastics course using the critical incident technique. Students described experiences in the gymnastics class that they believed had a positive or negative influence on their development as cadets and future Army officers. Key elements of their responses were classified into 16 positively perceived and 11 negatively perceived categories. The top positive categories were confidence, encouragement, fear management, modeling, additional instruction, and teamwork. The top negative categories included lack of time, helplessness, discouragement, lack of relevance, unfair grading, and injury

Keywords

Military Instruction, Student Perceptions, Critical Incident, United States Military Academy, Cadet, Physical Readiness Training, Gymnastics, and Motor Fitness

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Cadets' Perceptions of Gymnastics Instruction for Officer Development

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The United States Military Academy has offered gymnastics instruction since 1838. Gymnastics continues to be an integral component of the physical education curriculum. The purpose of this study was to investigate cadets' perceptions of their experiences in a required gymnastics course using the critical incident technique. Students described experiences in the gymnastics class that they believed had a positive or negative influence on their development as cadets and future Army officers. Key elements of their responses were classified into 16 positively perceived and 11 negatively perceived categories. The top positive categories were confidence, encouragement, fear management, modeling, additional instruction, and teamwork. The top negative categories included lack of time, helplessness, discouragement, lack of relevance, unfair grading, and injury. Key Words: Military Instruction, Student Perceptions, Critical Incident, United States Military Academy, Cadet, Physical Readiness Training, Gymnastics, and Motor Fitness

Introduction

Nearly every war involving Americans has started with a defense force physically unprepared for the rigors of combat. During World War I, approximately one third of the men drafted for military service were found to be unfit for combat. After World War II, it was reported that half of all draftees were rejected or given non-combat positions because of poor physical fitness (Barrow & Brown, 1988; Oxendine, 1985; Wuest & Bucher, 1995). These and other military conflicts had a major impact on the status of physical education and physical fitness in the United States because military leaders realized that the lack of fitness would adversely affect soldiers' abilities to be successful in combat.

The lack of fitness of men drafted for military service during the World Wars resulted in many colleges and universities requiring physical education activity courses for all students. These mandatory activity courses were often referred to as the "service," "general," or "basic instruction" programs (Barrow & Brown, 1988; Oxendine, 1985; Wuest & Bucher, 1995). Oxendine stated,

Although physical education leaders would have preferred that basic instruction be established for its own worth, and not as a basis for war-preparedness, it cannot be denied that the World Wars created a receptive climate for physical education and conditioning (p. 33).

In the 1950's, the lack of physical fitness among Americans prompted President Eisenhower to establish the President's Council on Youth Fitness, which President Kennedy later renamed the President's Council on Physical Fitness (Powers & Howley, 1997).

While most colleges and universities have reduced or eliminated basic instruction programs because of budgetary restraints, curricular restructuring, and lack of institutional support due to academics, the United States Military Academy (USMA) continues to require physical education activity courses for all students because of its specialized physical outcome goals. The basic instruction program at the USMA, which includes gymnastics, swimming and survival swimming, boxing for men and self-defense for women, combatives, and a variety of lifetime sports is an integral component of each cadet's required physical experiences. Cadets learn basic movement skills that will prepare them for an active military, professional, and personal lifestyle. The physical program provides future officers with the physical skills, self-confidence, and knowledge needed to be successful in their careers in the Army and beyond.

Functional fitness for soldiers includes not only the health-related components of fitness: cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility and body composition, but also the motor fitness components of agility, balance, power, and coordination. Post-war Army Physical Readiness Training (APRT) programs, initiated to improve civilian and soldier physical fitness levels, are often ineffective because many youth deemed acceptable for military service from a health standpoint still lack the basic motor fitness and psychological discipline necessary for combat readiness (Krause, 2001; Thomas, 2000). The current APRT doctrine, which continues to stress the health-promotion model, developed during the 1980's, lacks the functional fitness emphasis and mental training necessary for the extraordinary requirements of war. To be effective, an APRT plan should integrate functional fitness, combat-related physical training, and the development of mental confidence (Krause; Thomas).

The current war on terrorism has emphasized the significance of physical education for functional fitness. Terrorist training camps are discussed in newspapers and on television (Associated Press, 2002; Miklaszewski & Windrem, 2002). Video clips of Al-Qaeda terrorists running across balance beams and traversing horizontal ladders illustrate that modern terrorists are training for functional fitness to prepare for urban warfare situations. To meet the current threat, the United States must prepare its officers and soldiers to excel on the complicated battlefield of the 21st century. Recently, General Ellis, a four-star Army general, emphasized the importance of physical readiness in combating terrorism. Ellis stressed that "Our soldiers must always be physically ready for anything" (Minarcek, 2003).

History of Military Gymnastics at the USMA

The USMA was founded in 1802. During the first 36 years of the Academy's existence, little emphasis was placed on organized physical education. Military drill and practical field instruction provided some diversion, while some cadets became involved in climbing, swimming, rowing, and ice skating. Most activities were self initiated (USMA, 1980).

European immigrants brought highly developed systems of warrior-based physical training to the United States in the mid-1800's. Gymnastics, along with its spirit of self-discipline, confidence, and duty to the country was the foundation of these APRT systems. "The common threads that link the best of Army physical readiness training throughout American history can be traced to the military and medical gymnastics developed over the centuries by physicians and warriors in both Western and Eastern cultures" (Thomas, 2000, p. 11).

In 1842, the Surgeon General of the Army recommended that a course in gymnastics be taught for the contributions it would provide to cadets. The apparatus was crude and the instruction was not of the highest caliber. However, the establishment of gymnastics as a valuable subject for the preparation of military officers was affirmed. Cadets received daily instruction in gymnastics during their sophomore year and on alternate days during their junior and senior years.

In 1885 Herman J. Koehler, a German Turner gymnast, was appointed Director of the Department of Physical Education at the USMA (Degen, 1966; Thomas, 2000). He had a strong influence upon physical education by immediately introducing formal gymnastics into the program and obtaining a physical education requirement for all freshmen (USMA, 1980). Under Koehler's guidance, gymnastics instruction was refined and became an integral part of the overall physical education program.

Gymnastics instruction is considered essential to the physical, psychological, and military development of cadets at the USMA. To improve gymnastics instruction, it is important to examine cadets' perceptions of their experiences in the course. Awareness of students' experiences and perceptions assists teachers and administrators in designing programs that will meet the needs of students and motivate them to value their physical activity experiences (McKenzie, Alcaraz, & Sallis, 1994).

Gymnastics remains a valuable component of the physical education curriculum at the USMA. The course serves as a basis for other athletic and military activities. Focus is placed on applied movement tasks designed to prepare cadets for future military physical training. In accordance with Army Regulation 350-41, training in units, the following skills are emphasized: Agility, to include fast movement in enclosed spaces; balance and controlling fear of heights; vaulting, jumping, and landing correctly; strength development activities and skills such as rope climbing, pull ups, and resistance exercises; crawling; and negotiation of natural and man-made obstacles (Department of the Army, 2006). The objectives of the course include: to demonstrate basic competency in selected movement and motor skills; to demonstrate sufficient levels of upper body and trunk muscular strength; to demonstrate basic spotting techniques; to demonstrate personal safety behaviors while performing gymnastics tasks; to demonstrate teamwork through partner assistance; and to enhance confidence by successfully overcoming fear and completing challenging tasks (United States Military Academy, 2006). The need to produce physically fit, confident soldiers who move well on the battlefield is one of the leading reasons that the USMA continues to offer gymnastics and movement instruction.

At the time of this study, freshman students participated in a 50-minute/lesson, 19-lesson gymnastics course. Men received instruction in tumbling, vaulting, vertical and horizontal rope-climbing, horizontal bar, rings, parallel bars, and an obstacle course. Women received identical instruction with the exception that the uneven parallel bars and balance beam replaced the horizontal bars and parallel bars. All students were taught and

practiced the Indoor Obstacle Course Test (IOCT). The IOCT is a twelve event course which includes a low crawl, tire, run, two hand vault, shelf climb, run across horizontal bars, jump through hanging tires, balance beam traverse, wall scale, horizontal ladder traverse, rope climb, and 300 meter run.

The purpose of this study was to investigate cadets' perceptions of their experiences in a required gymnastics course at the USMA. The research question guiding this study was: What are cadets' positive and/or negative perceptions of the required gymnastics course at the United States Military Academy?

Methods

This study sought to capture students' perceptions with the intent of generating understandings of their experiences in a required gymnastics course. From a constructivist viewpoint, seeking, understanding, and valuing students' points-of-view are important when developing the curriculum and meeting needs of students (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Coelho, 2000; Kirk & MacDonald, 1998; Rovegno & Kirk, 1995).

The researchers met with the Director of Physical Education at the USMA to explain the purpose of the study, obtain consent to conduct the study, and to use cadets as the population. A memorandum was then sent to the USMA Department of Institutional Research requesting permission to conduct the study. Final approval for the conduct of the study was granted by all appropriate agencies and levels of command at the USMA.

The participants of this study were freshman cadets that recently completed a required gymnastics class at the USMA during one semester. Critical incident solicitations were administered to 564 students or 52.4% of the total freshman population. A total of 176 cadets (138 men/38 women) responded to the critical incident solicitations. The response rate was 31.2%.

The researchers of the study were gymnastics teachers at the USMA. Therefore, it was important to avoid presenting ourselves as authority figures in our roles as researchers. We had to combine approachability and trustworthiness with an image worthy of the cadets' time and effort. In the initial request for participation (by email), all participants in the study were reassured that their comments would remain completely anonymous, would be used for research purposes only, and the data gathered from the study would be used to improve the gymnastics course.

The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was used to collect the data. The critical incident technique was initially developed for the purpose of conducting research in the Aviation Psychology Program of the United States Army Air Forces. Flanagan used the technique to analyze specific reasons why pilot candidates failed flight training schools.

The critical incident technique does not consist of a single set of rigid rules but is based on a flexible set of principles that can be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation. The technique consists of open-ended questions designed to elicit specific and detailed descriptions concerning critical events, behaviors, and circumstances. The critical incident technique requires a clear, concise statement of purpose of the study; specifications for the types of data collected; and guidelines for interpreting and classifying critical incidents. The primary features of the critical incident technique include that: (1) the technique focuses on actual events as opposed to general

impressions; (2) all data are reported by the participants themselves – the “insiders perspective,” using their own words and perceptions; (3) the participants are in the best position to determine what affects them; (4) a substantial amount of data about critical events and behaviors can be collected; and (5) the technique allows a relatively large subject sample (Flanagan, 1954).

The critical incident technique has been used successfully in studies focusing on student perceptions of physical education, and has been used in a variety of settings to include military, public, and educational environments (Coelho, 2000; Figley, 1985; Luke & Sinclair, 1991). “It is an open-ended instrument that allows each student to comment freely on selected events in their physical education experience” (Luke & Sinclair, p. 33).

The critical incident technique was adapted for use in this study to identify behaviors, experiences, events, and incidents that cadets perceived to have positive or negative influences on them. The technique offered the opportunity to gather responses and perceptions from a relatively large sample of cadets. At the same time, it allowed them to respond in their own words and in their own way. By using the critical incident technique, it was also easy to ensure the anonymity of the participants, by collecting only critical incidents without identifying participants’ characteristics.

For this study, cadets’ perceptions were defined as their subjective views and interpretations, based on their responses to the critical incident solicitations (Coelho, 2000). Students were asked to describe specific incidents in the gymnastics course at the USMA that: (1) they believed had a positive influence on their development as a cadet and a future officer and (2) they believed had a negative influence on their development as a cadet and a future officer.

Approximately one half of the freshman class takes the gymnastics course each semester of the school year. An electronic request (email) was sent to all students ($n = 564$) who recently completed the freshman gymnastics course at the USMA during one semester. The request described the purpose of the study, assured the participants’ anonymity, and included a link to a website of the actual critical incident solicitations. The website included a text form field for writing the response and a submit button with the statement, “By submitting your responses you are consenting to participation in this study.” The narrative responses provided by the cadets were automatically and anonymously downloaded to a database.

The criteria established for accepting critical incidents were:

1. The student reported an incident related to some feature of the gymnastics course at the USMA.
2. The incident took place during the student’s enrollment in the gymnastics course at the USMA.
3. The critical incident described a specific event or incident that occurred in the gymnastics course at the USMA.

Completed critical incident responses were received, reviewed for acceptability, and numbered. Each response was read and analyzed to identify key words or phrases that were judged to be most significant in contributing to the positively or negatively perceived incident. Some responses yielded multiple key elements. As critical incident responses were collected, key elements were identified, categorized, and compared. This

strategy is often referred to as the constant comparative method of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the constant comparison method, the inductively generated categories were assigned category descriptions. For example, as key elements were identified, similar elements were grouped together into clusters. As the number of key elements and clusters grew, each cluster was assigned a category description. Using the constant comparison method, the researchers placed key elements of the incidents under emerging categories and developed new categories as needed. Data analysis was ongoing and continued until no new categories emerged. The constant comparison method requires continuous revision and modification of the categories. The use of the computer database (MSExcel) required time to set up and develop, but proved to be a very efficient and effective way to manipulate, copy, and print data. The database also allowed the accuracy and reliability checks to be conducted in an effective manner because samples of data could be readily extracted, classified, and then compared to previous classifications.

Ensuring accuracy and trustworthiness required several steps. First, the two researchers conducting the study independently, checked the acceptability of the critical incident responses, identified key elements, and independently analyzed and classified the critical incident responses. The researchers then compared their results. A high degree of consensus was found between the two researchers. Any disagreements regarding the results were discussed, negotiated, and resolved until 100% agreement was achieved. This process allowed the researchers to examine the data independently and then come together to present and discuss their ideas until they reached a single unified version that they endorsed as the best representation of the data. Using two researchers to analyze the data provided multiple opinions and perspectives, helped circumvent the biases of any one person, and helped capture the complexity of the data. The consensus process relied on mutual respect, equal involvement, and shared power (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The researchers were able to question each other and remain open to broadening their own perspectives about ways to interpret the data.

Second, thirty critical incident responses were selected using a random digits table (Runyon, Haber, Pittenger, & Coleman, 1996, Table E). The first thirty random numbers that aligned with the numbered responses were submitted to a six-person review team. The review team consisted of professional physical educators employed at the USMA. They were familiar with the gymnastics course and the cadet population. They also understood the purpose of the study and were briefed on the procedures of constant comparison. The review team, as a group, determined the acceptability of the responses by using the criteria established for accepting critical incidents outlined by the researchers and identified key elements. Then, the review team was asked to categorize the key elements using categories derived by the researchers or, if necessary, to develop new categories (no new categories were created). The results of acceptability and categorization of the 30 randomly selected critical incidents, by the researchers', were compared to the results of the review team. A 90% agreement was achieved. The review team's results were carefully considered by the two primary researchers conducting the study. Disagreements between the review team and researchers were discussed and accepted or rejected by the two primary researchers based on their judgment and thoughtful consideration (Hill et al., 1997). Utilizing the review team helped to ensure the best possible construction of the data and added the benefit of multiple perspectives.

Third, throughout the study the researchers spot-checked the analysis by individually reclassifying samples of key elements on separate occasions, and discussing the procedures to ensure consensus, accuracy, and verification. The on-going process of reclassifying key elements allowed the researchers to become more familiar with the data, provided the opportunity to identify potential discrepancies or alternate interpretations, and verify the stability or “saturation” of the findings. Categories were continually modified as the researchers became more familiar with the data. Overall, the rigorous, consensual process between the researchers and review team, and between the two researchers, provided a systematic method to develop more accurate conceptualizations and increased trustworthiness and accuracy of the results.

Results

A total of 17 positive responses and 12 negative responses were deemed unacceptable based on the established acceptability criteria. Examples of unacceptable responses included statements about another course in the physical education program at the USMA or responses that did not include specific incidents. For example, some respondents simply wrote, “the IOCT” or “the horizontal ropes” to describe a positive or negative incident. An additional 6 positive and 45 negative responses were eliminated because the respondents wrote in “no response,” “none,” “I do not believe any of the events in gymnastics had a positive influence on me...,” or “no specific incident caused a negative influence on me during the duration of the course.”

Inductive content analysis (identification of important themes and patterns) of accepted critical incident responses resulted in the abstraction of 333 key elements from a total of 192 acceptable critical incidents. The inductive nature of the analysis allowed the patterns and themes to emerge from the data rather than being decided prior to data collection and analysis. A number of critical incidents contained more than one key element. These additional key elements were identified and categorized. Analysis of key elements resulted in the formation of 16 positive and 11 negative categories. The frequency and list of key elements are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency of Key Elements by Category

Positive Perceptions	Frequency	Percentage^a	Negative Perceptions	Frequency	Percentage^a
Confidence	72	34.6	Lack of Time	22	17.6
Encouragement	28	13.4	Helplessness	22	17.6
Fear	19		Discourageme	21	
Management		9.1	nt		16.8
Modeling	16		Lack of	21	
		7.6	Relevance		16.8
Additional	15		Unfair	13	
Instruction		7.2	Grading		10.4

Teamwork	13	6.2	Injury	11	8.8
Self Assessment	8		Public Embarrassment	5	4
		3.8	Bias	5	4
Fitness Improvement	7	3.3	Lack of Effort	3	2.4
Concern	6	2.8	Lack of Safety	1	.8
Leader Opportunity	6	2.8	Instructor Incompetence	1	.8
Skill Development	5	2.4			
Relevance	5	2.4			
Recognition	3	1.4			
Fun	2	0.9			
Attention to Detail	2	0.9			
Safety	1	0.4			
Total Key Elements		208			125

^aPercentages based on total number of key elements included in the positive perceptions theme (208) or negative perceptions theme (125).

The top six positively perceived categories and top six negatively perceived categories will be presented in detail, to include exemplars. Other appropriate categories will be used to support analysis and discussion of the data.

Positively Perceived Categories

Confidence

Students often described experiences in the gymnastics course that improved their confidence as affording them the opportunity to complete challenging activities and “to perform under pressure.” Many students initially felt some of the activities were beyond their ability, but were later able to accomplish the task. For example, one student wrote,

At the beginning of the round I wasn't able to finish the IOCT. I would get caught up on the shelf, monkey bars and rope. I could not finish it because by the time I got to the rope I was totally exhausted. With hard work and dedication I was finally able to finish the IOCT. It built confidence in me that if I tried hard enough I was able to accomplish things I thought were not possible.

Some students believed the confidence gained in class would transfer to other activities and situations.

This class has provided me with confidence to believe that I can do things I never imagined I would do. One of the best days in my cadet career was the day I learned the [vertical] ropes. At West Point, I find it is really easy to pass but it is really hard to excel at anything and getting a five on the ropes was the first time I did anything perfectly the first time here. It made my day and improved my confidence. I also now want to go to air assault school.

Encouragement

Many students described the positive influence of encouragement from the teachers. Teachers who provided praise and motivation appeared to make a positive impact on students. One student responded,

I retested on one of the vaults until I got a 5, and when I did, one of the instructors said "good job" and gave me a high five. That encouraged me to continue trying even though I'm not much of a gymnast.

Referring to the "IOCT Tab", a patch awarded for outstanding performance on the IOCT, one student felt strongly about the encouragement from the teacher.

One day, I had just run the IOCT and was half dead, we were marking cards and I reported my time for the course which was a few seconds faster than my previous best. It was a huge accomplishment and I still had like 25 seconds until I was within tabbing range, but the DPE officer I reported to sincerely congratulated me and encouraged me that I would earn that damn tab. It almost brought me to tears.

A student summed up the importance of encouragement from the teacher as, "The most impressive quality of a gymnastics instructor is their ability to encourage and motivate cadets through the difficult tasks presented by gymnastics."

Fear management

Students often described activities included in the gymnastics curriculum that contributed to their development of courage and ability to overcome fear. Confronting and overcoming fear contributed to the development of fear management skills. For example, "In almost every task we did (especially high bar, and long horse) we had to confront a physical fear. After we realized that we can do these tasks with relative ease...we are better able to confront other fears."

The fear of sustaining an injury was an issue with some students. One student wrote,

I believe that gymnastics is all about overcoming fear. There is an uneven-bars routine that requires the performer to swing off of the underside of top bar, clear the lower bar, and then land on both feet. Every last person trying it in my group was scared of hitting their head on the bottom bar or raking their back. When I finally completed the exercise I knew that fear was not something that could hold me back or keep me from excelling if I just tried.

For other students, the fear of heights was a concern. One student wrote, “Rope climbing. I would not generally say that I am afraid of heights; however, they do make me tighten up. Through gymnastics though, I was able to push myself past this fear.”

Modeling

Many students suggested that the gymnastics teachers served as role models. Teachers were described as displaying qualities of leadership and character that students wished to emulate. For example,

Many of the instructors have been good role models for future officers...I saw a lot of excellent qualities in the leadership and character of the officers teaching the course which I would like to emulate when I become a LT [lieutenant].

Another student described how her instructor’s concern for her well-being made a positive impression.

During one of the lessons, I was injured and went down to the trainers for evaluation and ice. At the end of the class period, one of the instructors came down to see how I was doing and how serious the injury was. His concern really made a lasting impression on me and was the perfect example of what I hope to achieve in my future relationships with subordinates...

Additional instruction

Many teachers offered extra time and provided individual and personal assistance to students having difficulty in the gymnastics course. Key elements in this category illustrate the importance that students believe extra instruction and personal attention have to their own and other’s performance and confidence. For example,

I achieved some success due to the work of an army officer instructor. The extra time he spent to help me learn was not just him standing idle nearby offering comments. He suggested a work-out program, and other exercises to help...

Providing additional instruction to students is a positive way for instructors to show they care. One student described how additional instruction contributed to trust and modeling.

Instructors who stay in between periods to give AI [additional instruction], especially when they are not the primary [head instructor], have a positive influence on cadets because they know they care. We trust the instructor and know they are here solely for us. It also enforces the idea that we as officers will have people who need help and it is our responsibility to help them achieve.

Teamwork

For many, the gymnastics course provided opportunities for students to work together as a team. The camaraderie and trust developed during the course had a positive impact on students. For example, "An incident that has had a positive influence on me is the teamwork demonstrated by cadets to each other to encourage them to do well and persevere throughout the course."

Another student wrote, "I feel that gymnastics has a positive influence on the development of cadets because it helps build teamwork and trust between cadets."

Some students mentioned how some of the class members assisted others having difficulty. For example, "The willingness of members of the class to set their own time aside for retesting to aide another classmate who may be struggling at a specific event [was positive]."

Negatively Perceived Categories

Lack of time

Many students perceived that the course did not allow for enough time to learn, practice, and test the skills due to large class size, too many events, or the accelerated pace of the course. The perceived lack of time to succeed appeared to be a negative influence on many students. One student wrote,

A specific incident that I have experienced that has had a negative influence is the lack of time given to conclude your performance. I do not like how you are taught the skills, but are never given any time to test on them. Thus, you tend to fall behind or have to make up skills at the end of the course. This only teaches us to be in a rush at all times which then causes us to forget about the details in which we need to remember. Yes it

helps us to work around a new schedule, but it tends to put us in a rush, which may possibly lead to failure.

Other students mentioned that the course requires too many skills. For example,

For a parallel bars event, an instructor demonstrated it for us and we got to practice once, but there wasn't enough time for any of us to grade on it. I think this course tries to teach us too many things in the 19 lessons.

Other students mentioned the lack of time to practice.

An event that has had negative influence on my development was the lack of time one had to practice and thus improve their scores. The course was based on training to time and not really to standard. I wish I had more time to practice events.

Some students felt there were too many students in class. For example,

I do not think that it is suitable to have so many people in a single class. There are enough instructors, but there is not enough time for everyone to test and get a score that reflects your ability, because most of the time you are just waiting in line for someone else to go. Even if you stay after class, there are still too many people to effectively work the skills.

Helplessness

Some students described a sense of helplessness. Their perceived powerlessness and inability to succeed, no matter how hard they tried, affected their self-esteem. For example,

This class is, in a way, bad for your self-esteem. I learned that sometimes no matter how hard you tried to do a skill you don't have the ability and your body does not help you. This causes you to feel bad about your abilities as a cadet who is supposed to be able to do these things...It feels bad that you are not able to get it right away like some of the instructors and classmates.

Another student questioned her ability of serving as an officer. "I have realized the limits of my physical ability, and am now afraid that I am not strong enough to perform the tasks required of me as an officer in the United States Army." A female cadet compared her performance to men in the course.

Not being physically able to climb the vertical rope hand over hand had a negative influence on me because I felt that I failed and would never be able to live up to the standard as a female when many of the men would easily live up to and exceed the standard.

Students often try to assist other students in the course. This student described his inability to help a classmate.

Sometimes I was unable to find a way to help a classmate get past a certain obstacle like the shelf [in the IOCT]. It was annoying and left me feeling useless. I didn't know what to tell her, and could only imagine what would happen if that happened when I am a platoon leader.

Discouragement

Students described some instructors as unsupportive or unwilling to teach and motivate. This had a negative effect on some students. For example,

There was a task that I simply could not do, and the instructor did not push me to try over and over until I completed it. If I had received more outside motivation on that one task or more help in practicing the task, I think I could have done it.

Another student shared her experience of being yelled at by a teacher.

Many of the instructors get angry at the students for not being able to do something... They'll say, "You aren't even trying!" or just get a frustrated tone with someone who is struggling. I don't think that the instructors should only respect and encourage the ones who do well.

A number of other students described incidents in which teachers "hazed" them or their classmates. For example,

While marking cards, one of the instructors started to "haze" me about not scoring points (in one of the first lessons). He continued to tell me how I was weak and needed to move into the higher end of the "weaklings". I feel that it is highly unprofessional and counter-productive to attempt to motivate by belittling, especially when it is obvious that a person is trying to succeed in an unfamiliar environment.

Lack of relevance

Many students described the course or some of the skills included in the course as useless or not having any application to their military careers. One student wrote,

Every exercise (rings, parallel bars, horizontal bar, trampoline and vaults and horses) that did not have specific application to military life was, in my opinion, a waste on time. How is learning how to do a corkscrew dismount going to help me in my career?

Another student wrote,

In gymnastics, very little of the things we do will ever apply to Officership or our development as a cadet. Specifically, I was forced to do the rings. I never see anytime in my future will I will be swinging around on rings. Nor do I see how learning how to do them makes me a better person in any way shape or form.

Unfair grading

The grading, in general, was perceived to be too subjective or the grading system was unfair. One student who felt the grading was too subjective wrote,

The grading system is actually degrading to cadets at times. I have experienced this on numerous occasions, and I have witnessed other cadets experience this. The grading is entirely too subjective, and exercises are not taught well enough before grading is required.

Some students perceived that the teachers were inconsistent in their grading. "On one event, an instructor gave me a lower grade, while another instructor gave a higher grade for the same level of performance. Inconsistency in grading led to students staying away from some instructors."

Injury

Some students were injured while participating in the gymnastics class or witnessed a classmate become injured. The fear of injury caused some students to be afraid to attempt an activity. For example, "I saw others before me get hurt while doing something and that in return caused me to fear the exercises before even trying it."

Even though safety considerations were used during instruction, some students were still injured. One cadet appeared to realize the risks associated with gymnastics training. "Despite all of the safety measures that are taken accidents will happen. I was working with my roommate and she fell off of the rope, breaking her leg in two places."

Another cadet thought a classmate may have been pushed beyond his/her limit, which caused injury. "A negative impact of the course was witnessing a classmate severely injure themselves by pushing themselves beyond their limit. I believe that they were pushed and that leaders must realize when they must stop pushing."

Discussion

Confidence emerged as the highest ranked positive perception. Many students suggested that successful completion of challenging skills and activities was a confidence building experience. Students often felt a strong sense of accomplishment and improved self-confidence after finally being able to successfully perform skills that "seemed impossible at first". Students mentioned that many skills in the course were a source of fear and anxiety. Fear of heights during rope climbing, vaulting over the long horse or

high vault, or a general fear of injury required many cadets to confront and overcome fear. The development of fear management skills was a positive outcome of participation in the course.

The USMA students set high standards for themselves and come from highly successful high school athletic careers. For instance, 88% of the entering Class of 2004 earned Varsity Letters as high school athletes (USMA, 2004). Failure to learn a skill or receiving less than an “A” was an uncommon experience for many cadets. Similar to other research, while some students found the course challenging and a boost to their confidence, others felt helpless and discouraged (Mitchell & Chandler, 1993). Some cadets suggested that they felt unable to overcome their weaknesses and fears, and often questioned their physical abilities during this course. They appeared to have an “either you have it or you don’t” attitude. Carlson (1995) found similar results with students who believed that “being competent in physical education was something one simply had or did not have as a personal characteristic” (p. 470). The knowledge of being less skilled when comparing ability to others made some cadets believe success was unattainable. Portman (1995) identified these behaviors as “learned helplessness”; “already believing themselves fatalistically doomed to failure in physical education classes” (p. 452).

“Lack of time” was the most frequent negative perception of the course. Students suggested that large class sizes, too many events, and the fast pace of the course contributed to this problem. The fast pace and perceived lack of time may have contributed to increased anxiety levels and the “helplessness” that some cadets felt throughout the course. Physical education, like other subjects, tends to pack too much information into too little time, at a significant cost to the learner (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Several incidents suggest that the relevance of gymnastics is not always obvious to students. Some students felt the course was not relevant to their development. Gymnastics was perceived to have little meaning or value. Other studies involving physical education have found similar results. Cothran and Ennis (1996) described “relevance” as a primary contributor for lack of student engagement, and Keogh (1962) found that students have conflicting opinions regarding the value of physical education in the school curriculum. Even when students view certain outcomes of physical education as being good for them, they seem unwilling to accept a required physical education as the price to pay for the value received. Cadets need to know and understand “why” they are required to take gymnastics. To improve perceptions concerning the relevance of the course, teachers should discuss the goals and objectives of the course with cadets. Each lesson should emphasize the relevance of the subject matter to cadets’ future careers as Army officers and to life, in general.

A greater curricular focus on the development of confidence may also help to improve the perceived lack of relevance that some students have for the course. Similarly, the gymnastics course at the USMA could be improved by providing early opportunities for success for all cadets, particularly the less skilled participants. As one student mentioned, “creating confidence early helped for the remainder of the course”. Individuals who are confident in their physical abilities are better equipped to lead and are essential to our nation’s combat readiness.

It was surprising that motor skill improvement, a central focus of the course and a possible future emphasis of APRT doctrine, did not emerge as a direct positive outcome of the course. Perhaps if students had a better understanding of the physical qualities necessary for successful mission-essential capabilities, they would perceive the development of motor skills as more important. However, many students mentioned they were able to “learn skills that seemed impossible at first,” which they described as improving their self-confidence. This suggests that cadets are learning motor skills, but placed a higher degree of emphasis on the affective area of improved self-confidence. Bain (1985) found similar results with college-age students who appeared to be highly influenced by a “subjective-affective” view that behavior is influenced by emotions and perceptions such as self-confidence, enjoyment, success, and personal meaning.

Research suggests an important indication of successful teaching is teachers’ personal characteristics and ability to interact with students (Aicinena, 1991). For many students, perceptions about the gymnastics course were closely connected to feelings about the teacher(s). Encouragement from teachers was a frequent positive influence that cadets felt was important to their development. Support and motivation were required to meet the high standards and expectations imposed at the USMA.

Leadership and character development are the cornerstones of the educational process at the USMA. Teachers who serve as positive role models are essential. Modeling was a highly ranked positive perception by many cadets. Teachers must possess the leadership characteristics that cadets can emulate. Students indicated the teachers were very professional, athletic, and skilled in physical activities. Students at the USMA, similar to other students (Rice, 1988) appreciated teachers who actively participated in the physical activity.

Encouragement and modeling by teachers helped cadets learn and promoted success in the course. Teachers’ high expectations and actions to assist students in meeting those expectations had a positive impact. Many students, particularly those who were struggling with the course, appreciated additional instruction and extra time. The individualized attention and support demonstrated leadership qualities and developed rapport and trust. Building trust and rapport is extremely important in teaching.

In this study, not all teachers or their behaviors were perceived in a positive manner. Some students found teachers to be sources of discouragement. Not pushing the cadets enough, being “hazed,” or yelled at by an instructor was discouraging for students. Some cadets felt that they were “put down” by the instructor and belittled in front of the class. The students felt that some instructors were unsupportive, and possibly even a barrier to learning. Many times, the difference between the positively perceived teacher and the negatively perceived teacher appeared to be associated with the teacher/student interaction and teachers’ interpersonal skills. Research has shown that teachers’ personal characteristics and ability to interact with students are indicators of successful teaching (Aicinena, 1991; Siedentop, 1983). To improve instruction delivered to cadets, teachers must have a reflective understanding of the “cadet experience” in the gymnastics course. Teachers must have an awareness of how the interaction between teacher and student affects cadets and their experiences (Coelho, 2000).

As members of the “Corps of Cadets,” students at the USMA interact in a variety of leadership, peer, and subordinate roles. In the gymnastics course, students were regularly required to spot and assist each other. They often encouraged one another, and

appeared to have a “we’re in this together” attitude. Some recognized the selflessness and team spirit demonstrated by others. Students would forego a grading or practice opportunity so a less skilled individual could succeed or get additional practice or grading time. The course seemed to develop a sense of cooperation and collaboration among students. Students would often encourage each other to pass the course. Teamwork and trust were developed, which is an attribute the Academy wants to develop in its graduates. The concept of team would even extend beyond the participants of the course. Upper class students, who previously passed the course, would return on their own time and provide assistance to freshmen currently enrolled in the course.

Cadets want to be challenged and, for many, it is the primary reason they chose to attend the USMA. Challenge and “success” are often associated with fun, enjoyment, and positive interaction from the teacher. Future changes in the course may necessitate that enjoyment be “programmed” into the curriculum (Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1993). Providing fun and enjoyable physical education activities may be an important planning consideration for teachers and administrators of physical education programs. Tannehill and Zakrajsek maintain that, “If it is true that young people are more likely to participate now and in the future if they enjoy their experiences, then we would encourage physical education teachers to include ‘enjoyment in their planning’” (p. 82). Although, Briggs (1994) suggested that there is little information which guides teachers towards manipulating instruction or the instructional environment for the purpose of increasing levels of student enjoyment. Placek (1983) found that student enjoyment influences teacher planning decisions to a greater degree than any other factor. Placek concluded that keeping students happy was viewed as one important feature of successful teaching in physical education. Siedentop (1983) contends that keeping students happy is important for effective teaching: Students should enjoy physical education. According to Siedentop, students who experience challenge and perceive themselves successful in physical education will be happy: “When students take on a significant challenge and experience success, a satisfaction ensues that represents a sustaining source of fun and happiness” (p. 258).

Not all students were perceived as being supportive. One student described an incident where students laughed at a fellow classmate while he was attempting to complete a skill. Other instances described students observing others not putting forth effort in the course. This type of behavior was not beneficial for the class. Although the negative examples were few, the fact that they even happened at all had a negative impact on other students and on the course.

The insights gained from gathering cadets’ perceptions can influence the way teachers design and deliver the gymnastics program at the USMA. It is important for physical education professionals and administrators to be aware of student needs and interests, and not be resistant to change the content of the curriculum to meet these needs and interests. The effectiveness of the gymnastics course, in part, depends on the development of positive cadet perceptions. Luke and Sinclair (1991) believe that effective curriculum improvements can occur when teachers identify and change those aspects of the curriculum that have resulted in negative perceptions, and to build on those aspects that have led to in positive perceptions.

This study supports the continued use of gymnastics instruction at the USMA and highlights areas for improvement and continued emphasis. When further developing the curriculum, care should be taken to continue to challenge and encourage cadets, contribute to the development of self-confidence, decrease or eliminate discouragement and feelings of helplessness, and spend more time discussing with cadets the purpose, importance, and relevance of gymnastics and motor skill development. In addition, providing more time for practice and the mastery of movement skills could enhance the experiences of many cadets enrolled in the course.

In this study, cadets provided information about their experiences in a required gymnastics class. Many of their responses revealed that they possess an awareness and appreciation of their gymnastic experiences, and how these experiences influence them. The existence of appreciable frequencies of similar positive and negative experiences highlights areas for attention and areas where improvements in the gymnastics class can be made.

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, and both positive and negative responses were expressed. All participants appeared to have one thing in common; an interest in being heard. The cadets may be one of the USMA's greatest sources of pertinent information for identifying more effective ways of teaching, interacting with students, selecting and arranging subject matter, and becoming physically educated. The insights learned from cadets in this study could possibly change the way teachers design and deliver gymnastic and other physical education courses at the USMA, and other institutions.

The United States must possess a highly trained, confident, and physically superior Army to defeat the enemies of the future. Improved self-confidence, fear management, teamwork, and other benefits can have a positive influence on students of all ages. Offering motor skills and gymnastics training to students at younger age levels will better prepare them for future sports, physical activities, military service, and life, in general. Gillam (1985) suggests that "Mankind must possess, maintain, and develop the 'basics' of movement to be, or continue to be productive members of society" (p. 129). America's physical education programs must support the need for the development of physically fit, confident, and skilled citizens in order for the United States to prosper and responsibly fulfill its role as a world leader.

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Article Citation

Coelho, J. D., & Fielitz, L. R. (2006). Cadets' perceptions of gymnastics instruction for officer development. *The Qualitative Report*, *11*(3), 605-625. Retrieved [Insert date], from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR11-3/coelho.pdf>
