Student Perceptions of Physical Education in a Mandatory College Program

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Written critical incidents were collected from students \( n = 236 \) to investigate their perceptions of physical education at the United States Military Academy. Fourteen students were interviewed to provide perceptions beyond the confines of a specific incident. The data were classified into three themes: (a) teacher and teacher behaviors; (b) curriculum, program features, and subject matter; and (c) social interaction and behaviors of students. Within the first theme, encouragement, additional instruction, and demonstrations were the most frequently perceived positive influences. Inappropriate grading, public embarrassment, and adversarial relationships between teachers and students were the most frequently perceived negative influences. The positive influences within the curriculum theme were overcoming fear, relevance, and challenge. The negative influences were unfair grading standards, irrelevant content, and injury. Support and encouragement, acceptance, and effective leadership were the top ranked positive perceptions within the third theme. Poor leadership and lack of sportsmanship were associated with negative perceptions.

According to Schunk (1992), “Student perceptions are thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about persons, situations, and events” (p. xi). Student perceptions of their activity experiences influence their attitudes about physical education (Steinhardt, 1992). Much of the early research on affective behavior in education has been concerned with student attitudes toward particular subjects (Erickson & Shultz, 1992). Interest in the attitudes of students toward physical education is attested by the many attitude scales that have been developed (Adams, 1963; Kappes, 1954; Kenyon, 1968; Martens, 1979; Sonstroem, 1974; Wear, 1951; Weick, 1975).

Many early studies about student attitudes toward physical education used college-aged adults as subjects. Wear (1951) developed an attitude inventory that has served as a model for the development of other scales used to investigate student attitudes toward physical education. Keogh (1962) used the Wear Physical Education Attitude Inventory to measure attitudes of male and female college students enrolled in instructional classes. Kappes (1954) developed an attitude inventory to determine attitudes of college women enrolled in physical education classes. Kenyon’s (1968) inventory, Attitudes Toward Physical Activity (ATPA) also targeted young adults.

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Subsequent studies attempted to revise the early scales to make them more suited for younger children. Simon and Smoll (1974) revised Kenyon’s instrument for use with elementary children and renamed the scale the Children’s Attitudes Toward Physical Activity (CATPA). Schultz, Smoll, Carre, and Mosher (1985) further revised the CATPA to make it suitable for third graders and provided norms and instructions for the instrument.

The research on attitudes has contributed to the present emphasis on student perceptions (Schunk, 1992). Research on student perceptions assumes that students are more than passive recipients and are active information processors capable of affecting the learning environment (Schunk, 1992; Weinstein, 1983). Students have the potential to influence instruction and its outcomes as much as teachers do. Students are central to the educational process and should be consulted (Dyson, 1995; Nicholls, 1992).

**Conceptions of Student Perceptions**

The development of one’s perceptions of physical education is an ongoing chain of events that begins in early childhood and continues throughout life (Haywood, 1991). Early experiences affect future decisions about participation in physical education. Children’s perceptions of their physical education experiences are very important in deciding whether they will, by their own choice, become more active. Their perceptions ultimately provide the key to future motivation and participation (Fox, 1991).

Student experiences should be studied throughout the entire student career in school (Erickson & Shultz, 1992). Haywood (1991) suggests that “physical education programs should be viewed in the context of public health over the life span, just as we view other school programs in terms of adult knowledge and behavior” (p. 151). An integral component of program design in public health and many business settings is input from the target audience. “Businesses are constantly surveying customers to find out how they like the products or programs the businesses offer and then redesigning and inventing new products or programs to satisfy the customers” (Graham, 1995b, p. 364). Viewing students as “customers” and being responsive to their likes and dislikes may provide insight into how teachers and physical education programs are being received and how instruction can be improved (Graham, 1995b; McKenzie, Alcaraz, & Sallis, 1994). It is important for teachers to evaluate the perceptions of students to ensure that their physical education experiences are having a favorable and positive effect. A positive “chain” of perception can be broken at any point and may need to be “relinked.” Likewise, negative perceptions may need to be recognized and corrected.

Recent qualitative research has provided information about children’s perceptions of physical education. Sanders and Graham (1995) investigated kindergarten students’ initial experiences in physical education. Through interviews and observations, valuable insight was gained about the students’ perceptions—what tasks the students did and did not like and why. Hopple and Graham (1995) attempted to determine what children think, feel, and know about physical fitness testing. Using face-to-face interviews with fourth and fifth grade students, these researchers determined that the students did not appear to have a clear understanding of the purpose of fitness testing. Without interviewing the students, the conflicts and misunderstandings of the children may not have been realized. The
researchers acknowledged that the interviews were extremely helpful to more fully understand what the children thought, felt, and knew about physical fitness testing. Portman (1995) interviewed low-skilled sixth graders to gain an understanding of how they perceive physical education. She found that the knowledge of being low skilled when comparing ability to others makes some students believe success was unattainable. Portman identified these behaviors as learned helplessness. Carlson (1995) found similar results with students she determined were alienated from physical education.

These studies gave children the opportunity to share their experiences in physical education. By listening to what students say and by knowing the perceptions of students, teachers can more effectively meet students’ needs, and improve the image and help communicate the goals of physical education (Graham, 1995a).

There is some evidence that the weak link in the physical education “chain of perceptions” may occur at the higher grade levels (Haywood, 1991). College students represent the final link in school physical education and are one source that may provide valuable insight into students’ positive and negative perceptions of physical education.

Curriculum plays an extremely important role in determining college students’ perceptions of physical education (Figley, 1985). Students often indicate that specific activities enhance their attitude toward physical education and that the variety of activities attracts them to physical education. The opportunity to choose a specific activity is also recognized as favorable to students (Figley, 1985).

College students appear to regard fitness more favorably as compared to younger students and indicate that physical fitness is a very important reason for participating in physical education classes (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987; Blair, 1984; Soudan & Everett, 1981; Weick, 1975). Specifically, the need for maintaining good health and physical condition and getting regular exercise is important to college-aged men and women. However, Bain (1985) concluded that physical fitness classes and fitness testing may need to be presented in a more positive manner. Improved self-confidence and a meaningful, enjoyable experience are often necessary for the development of positive perceptions of physical fitness in adults (Bain, 1985).

The recent release of the Surgeon General’s “Report on Physical Activity and Health” identifies the dangers of inactivity and has the potential to raise society’s awareness of the importance and value of physical education. This report underscores the importance of encouraging students to remain committed to a healthy, active lifestyle by introducing them to activities that they enjoy and will be inclined to participate in throughout their lifespan (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

Many high school and college students consider fun and enjoyment to be one of the most important objectives for participating in physical education (Soudan & Everett, 1981; Walling & Duda, 1995; Weick, 1975). Tannehill and Zakrajsek (1993) maintained 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).

The behaviors of teachers have been found to be a determining factor of student perceptions of physical education. Based upon a review of literature of teacher and student attitudes, Aicinena (1991) concluded that the quality of a teacher’s personal interactions with students had the most significant impact on student attitudes toward physical education. Figley (1985) found that teacher reinforcement, or lack of it, ranked first as a determinant of college students’ attitudes.
Teacher characteristics such as positive interaction, sensitivity, encouragement, commitment to learning, enthusiasm, involving students in decisions, and having high expectations for students appeared to have significant impact on student perceptions of physical education.

**Theoretical Framework**

It is clear that research indicates a need for more study in the area of student perceptions of physical education and how physical education programs influence student perceptions. Schunk (1992) suggests that student perceptions are influenced by many factors and have diverse effects in educational settings. Research on student perceptions has grown out of diverse literature and different theoretical conceptions, with varied purposes in mind (Weinstein, 1983).

Some researchers have used the term *subjective experience* when referring to attitudes, perspectives, and perceptions (Chen, 1996; Cooper, 1993; Erickson & Shultz, 1992). Cooper (1993) described the ethnographic methods used to capture people’s perceptions as “approaches that seek to illuminate the subjective experience of participants in particular social situations, with the intention of generating understandings” (p. 323). This is consistent with a guiding principle of constructivist theory, which is to seek, understand, and value students’ points of view (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Kirk & MacDonald, 1998; Rovegno & Kirk, 1995).

This study, like others investigating student perceptions, was framed using a constructivist educational viewpoint, which “assumes that individuals actively construct knowledge based on their interpretations of their experiences” (Lee, 1996, p. 24). Within a constructivist framework, students are challenged into constructing personal meaning and understanding about physical education. Students’ views are aggressively sought, and inquiry is not biased in favor of a particular outcome (Kurffiss, 1988). Nicholls (1992), who regards the student as an educational theorist, stated that

If students were seen as active theorists, their theories might be given more attention in school. Rather than attempting to manipulate students’ theories, teachers and researchers might treat them the way scientists should treat other scientists with divergent theories: by engaging in dialogue where it is uncertain whether one perspective will prevail or a new one will emerge. (p. 280)

When physical educators query students about their physical education experiences, needs, and interests, effective curriculum development can result.

This study employed a combination of the critical incident technique and interviewing to investigate college students’ perceptions of their physical education experiences at the United States Military Academy (USMA). The intent of this study was to illuminate the subjective experiences of participants in the physical education program at USMA. For this study, student perceptions were defined as the students’ subjective views and interpretations, based on their descriptions of events, behaviors, and other circumstances that are identified in the critical incident solicitation and interview responses. Research questions guiding this study were (a) what are the students’ perceptions of physical education at the United States Military Academy? and (b) what features of the physical education program at the United States Military Academy influence students’ perceptions of physical education?
Description of Setting and Participants

Setting

This study was conducted at the United States Military Academy (USMA). The Academy has a clear sense of its purpose and mission and has the advantage of preparing graduates for service in the same profession—to be leaders and officers in the Army. This purpose and mission is reflected in all of the Academy’s programs, including the development of the physical education curriculum and in teaching methods. One of the Academy’s goals is “To prepare graduates to have the ability and motivation to achieve and sustain in themselves and organizations, the high standards of health and physical fitness essential to military service” (USMA, 1995a, p. 3). The physical education program at USMA is designed to achieve this Academy goal. While other colleges and universities do not have the same mission as the Military Academy, some share similar goals for physical education and encourage graduates to engage in lifelong physical activity (LeBoeuf, 1994).

The physical education program at USMA includes instruction, physical fitness testing, summer physical fitness training, and competitive intramural and club sports programs. Physical education for students begins in the summer preceding their freshman year during Cadet Basic Training (CBT). The physical program of CBT consists of 23 periods of physical training, a swimming classification test, and intramural activities. At the time of this study, the required instructional courses for freshmen during the academic year were gymnastics, boxing for men, self-defense for women, swimming/survival swimming, and personal fitness.

During the summer of their sophomore year, students participate in Cadet Field Training (CFT). Cadet Field Training involves a morning program of structured physical training, instructional methods of administering physical training programs, and an orientation to obstacle courses. During the academic year, sophomore requirements include a fitness course and a combatives course (grappling and hand-to-hand combat).

Junior and senior students must complete one elective, lifetime activity course, such as racquetball, tennis, soccer, or basketball. The purpose of the elective, lifetime activity program is to expose students to a variety of sports activities that will form the basis for a lifetime of regular physical activity.

All students participate in instructional physical education two to three times per week all four years. Each semester is divided into two rounds of instruction; therefore, students have the opportunity to participate in four rounds of physical education instruction per year. Each round of instruction includes eighteen, 50-minute lessons.

Each year the Department of Physical Education administers a series of physical fitness tests to all students. These tests are designed to evaluate the physical fitness level of each student. The Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) is a three-event test that includes push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run. The Indoor Obstacle Course Test (IOCT) consists of ten obstacles and is designed to evaluate a student’s muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, agility, coordination, and anaerobic capacity.

Participants

The participants in this study were men and women students ($n = 236$) at USMA. To be admitted to the Academy, students must complete a physical aptitude
examination, a medical examination, and either the American College Testing Assessment Program examination or the College Board Admission Testing Program Scholastic Aptitude Test. The student body consists of just over four thousand men and women from every state in the country as well as several foreign countries.

**Methods and Procedures**

The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) and formal, semistructured interviews (Patton, 1990) were used to collect data about student perceptions of physical education at USMA. A critical incident solicitation form was developed to obtain specific data from students. The form gave two directions: (a) "Describe a specific incident that you have experienced in the physical education program at USMA that you believe has had a positive influence on you, your education, or future career," and (b) "describe a specific incident that you have experienced in the physical education program at USMA that you believe has had a negative influence on you, your education, or future career." The physical education program was defined to include all physical education instructional courses, intramural and competitive club activities, fitness testing, and the physical education portions of Cadet Basic Training (CBT) and Cadet Field Training (CFT).

All forms required for participation in the study were organized into packets. The packets contained a cover letter that included a brief description of the study and assurance of confidentiality, a demographic information form (gender, grade level), one "positive" solicitation form, one "negative" solicitation form, instructions about how to volunteer for an interview, and a return envelope for completed demographic and critical incident solicitation forms.

Packets were sent to a random sample of 900 students from four class levels (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) and both genders. A total of 236 students responded to the critical incident solicitations, providing the potential for a total of 472 or more incidents. However, in the final analysis, a total of 465 (223 negative, 242 positive) critical incidents were deemed usable by the guidelines established for this study. Six critical incident responses (2 positive, 4 negative) did not include enough detail so were deemed unacceptable. Eight participants included one additional separate positive critical incident; nine participants chose not to respond to the negative critical incident. The total number of positive and negative critical incident responses by class and gender are presented in Table 1. The criteria established for accepting critical incidents are as follows:

1. The incident must identify an actual event, behavior, or circumstance that the student had experienced or observed first hand.
2. The incident must be reported by the student participant about some feature of the physical education program (as defined in the solicitation forms) at the USMA.
3. The incident must have taken place during the student’s enrollment at the USMA.
4. The critical incident solicitation forms must be fully completed and must have described a specific event.
5. A demographic information form must accompany the critical incident solicitation(s).
Table 1  Total Number of Critical Incident Responses by Class and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the original random sample of 900 students, a total of 14 students (11 men, 3 women) contacted the researcher, volunteered for an interview, and provided informed consent. The busy Academy schedule and Academy rules governing the "use of student time" limited the number of interviews that could be completed. Care was exercised to schedule interviews that did not interfere with the Academy schedule or important functions. Sensitivity to the students' time constraints was an important and ongoing consideration.

Interviews focused on the students' experiences in physical education at USMA and their perceptions of these experiences. Probing questions were used to encourage students to elaborate on their experiences within the physical education program and to investigate some of the recurring themes and key features suggested by an analysis of the critical incident data. For example, students were asked, "What do you like best about physical education at USMA?" If a student interviewee referred to a topic or theme that was related to a critical incident category, the researcher asked follow-up and probe questions to gain more detailed information. This semistructured interview approach allowed the shape and direction of the interview to be dictated, in part, by the unfolding pattern of the students' perspective.

Critical Incident Data Collection and Analysis

Completed critical incident and demographic information forms were received, reviewed for acceptability, and recorded into a computer database. The database included records of gender, class, the assigned number code of each incident, and the complete positive and negative critical incident verbatim responses of the students.

Each critical incident response was read and analyzed to identify key elements (words or phrases in the critical incident that were judged to be most significant in contributing to the positively or negatively perceived incident). Similar key elements were grouped together, assigned category descriptions, and assigned a code. The code allowed for the filtering and separation of the critical incidents by category.

The process of identifying, coding, and comparing key elements is referred to as the constant comparison method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using this method, the data were arranged into categories and subcategories. Data analysis was ongoing and continued until no new categories emerged.
Coding accuracy. The determination of coding accuracy and trustworthiness required three examinations. Thirty randomly selected critical incident responses were submitted to a six-person review team familiar with the study. The review team consisted of six physical education professionals familiar with the critical incident technique and the physical education program at USMA.

First, the review team, as a group, determined the acceptability of the responses and identified key elements. Second, the review team was asked to categorize the key elements using the categories derived by the researcher. A 90% agreement rate was reached between the researcher and the review team. Third, throughout the study the analysis was spot-checked by having the researcher reclassify random samples of incidents on separate occasions.

Collection and Analysis of Interview Data

Student volunteers were interviewed at a time and place that was mutually agreeable to the student and the researcher. Interviews began with a discussion of the purpose of the study and an assurance of confidentiality. All participants provided informed consent. Interviews were approximately one hour in duration and were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis. After the interview data were transcribed, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted by meeting with each student interviewee individually to review and clarify their responses to correct any inaccurate statements or impressions; none were reported.

Finally, key features and common themes from the students' responses were identified and categorized. Words or phrases were grouped into units and typed into a word processor, then data were arranged, categorized, and further divided as necessary. Peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted throughout the analysis to ensure trustworthiness. Preliminary themes were discussed and negotiated with members of the review team. Refinements and clarifications were based on these discussions.

Results

Inductive content analysis of accepted critical incident responses resulted in the abstraction of 607 key elements from a total of 465 critical incidents. Analysis of key elements resulted in the formation of 50 subcategories that were grouped into six categories and three general themes: teacher and teacher behaviors; curriculum, program features, and subject matter; and social interaction and behaviors of students. The frequency calculations and the number of key elements are presented in Table 2. For the purposes of this article, the three top ranked subcategories from each category will be presented. Where appropriate, interview data are presented in addition to the critical incident findings.

Positive Perceptions of the Teacher and Teacher Behaviors

See Table 3 for the subcategories and respective frequencies and percentages of key elements.

Encouragement. Key elements in the Encouragement subcategory described the teacher as being supportive and encouraging to students in a variety of physical education activities. An encouraging teacher who had high but realistic goals for learning was often perceived as contributing to a positive experience in physical education
Table 2  Frequency of Key Elements by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive perceptions of the teacher and teacher behavior</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perceptions of the teacher and teacher behavior</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive perceptions of the curriculum, program features, and subject matter</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perceptions of the curriculum, program features, and subject matter</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive perceptions of the social interaction and behaviors of students</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perceptions of the social interaction and behaviors of students</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

at USMA. Referring to a teacher during a comprehensive summer physical training program prior to the freshman year, one student stated:

We were going on our longest run yet for the summer as a group. The green group instructor was great. He encouraged us all the way. He didn’t attempt to make us feel bad if we could not hang in with the group. Instead he just told us to push ourselves harder than we had on any of our previous runs. [Critical incident, male, senior]

Additional Instruction. Additional Instruction, whereby the teacher offers extra time for additional and individual help to students having difficulty, was the next most frequently perceived incident in the positive teacher category. One student responded:

In gymnastics I was having trouble with the shelf on the Indoor Obstacle Course Test . . . so he [the instructor] pulled me aside and gave me about 10 minutes of personal additional instruction. After that I never had any trouble with the shelf again, and I ended up passing the Indoor Obstacle Course Test. [Critical incident, male, sophomore]

Demonstrations. The Demonstration subcategory included student descriptions of the effectiveness of instructor demonstrations and how these demonstrations facilitated the learning of skills and techniques. Students appreciated the fact that instructors were able to demonstrate the physical skills taught in the courses. Demonstrations often helped students with the learning of skills:

The most positive incident I had was with an instructor of gymnastics. I had difficulty on one event . . . this instructor took me aside and explained how to do the apparatus, and then actually demonstrated the exercise for me. [Critical incident, male, freshman]

Negative Perceptions of the Teacher

See Table 3 for the subcategories and respective frequencies and percentages of key elements.

Inappropriate Grading. Examples in the Inappropriate Grading subcategory focused on the unfairness of teacher grading practices with regard to fitness testing.
Table 3  Perceptions of the Teacher and Teacher Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive perceptions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage(^a)</th>
<th>Negative perceptions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>Inappropriate grading</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional instruction</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>Public embarrassment</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>Adversarial relationships</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>Lack of concern—safety</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>Discouragement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Lack of concern—learning</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill development</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise &amp; public recognition</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming fear/dev. courage</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total key elements</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>121</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \(^a\)Percentages based on total number of key elements included in this category.
Many responses included key elements referring to students being unfairly graded on their push-ups during a physical fitness test. For example

I took the test for push ups and the grader cut me unfairly. He cut 20 push ups and I ended up with 39—failure. When he cut me for not locking my arms, I made the correction but he kept cutting my good push ups . . . very unfair grading. [Critical incident, male, junior]

Public Embarrassment. The Public Embarrassment subcategory included a large number of key elements that described incidents in which the teacher belittled or embarrassed students in front of classmates. During an interview, a male, sophomore student stated

When you’re getting guys that are failing at a lot of stuff, they’re not good athletes, they’re getting pounded down in boxing and [then] the instructor feeds them to the best fighter in class and the whole section just watches this guy get destroyed.

Another student wrote

[The teacher would] completely degrade students for spazzing and ridicule them in front of others. It was simply a haze session. I think it made students feel uncomfortable about themselves, their capabilities and their desire to excel physically. [Critical incident, male, sophomore]

Adversarial Relationships. Many times students viewed the teacher as antagonistic, unfriendly, or “out to get” them. Some students mentioned that they did not feel comfortable asking instructors for help and that the Department of Physical Education was “not a friendly or helpful department.” Students often used the word “haze” to describe how instructors treated them. When asked what “haze” meant, a male, senior student replied, “verbal assault, drill sergeant, kind of in your face, you’re not doing this right, it should be done right.” Another student wrote.

At the Army Physical Fitness Test, [the teacher] says, “we trust you [students] . . . yeah right.” That made me feel like an idiot and it promoted what I think to be an adversarial relationship. At the Indoor Obstacle Course Test the same thing occurred. [The teacher], during his brief states, “we trust you all . . . like hell we do.” I mean, how are we supposed to react to that? [Critical incident, male, senior]

All students interviewed were asked what they would change about physical education at USMA. Frequently, students mentioned the “instructors’ attitudes towards students,” and as one female senior stated, “a lot of people don’t like the adversarial thing . . . I don’t want to be best buddies but close the gap instead of make it wider.”

Positive Perceptions of the Curriculum, Program Features, and Subject Matter

See Table 4 for the subcategories and respective frequencies and percentages of key elements.
Table 4  Perceptions of the Curriculum, Program Features, and Subject Matter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive perceptions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Negative perceptions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming fear</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>Unfair grading standards</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>Irrelevant content</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>Injury</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun &amp; enjoyment</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>Unrealistic expectations</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness improvement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Rules and regulations</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awards</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Pace</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winning</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Lack of challenge</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership opportunities</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline &amp; cooperation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other—(Grading)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total key elements</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>115</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Percentages based on total number of key elements included in this category.
Overcoming Fear. Students often described situations and experiences included in the curriculum as contributing to their development of courage and ability to overcome fear. Boxing was the most often cited activity in this subcategory. For example, a student stated

One of the most positive experiences in my student career was boxing. It really gave me a chance to learn about courage. Nobody in the class wanted to get hit in the face, and nobody wanted to step into the ring . . . boxing taught me to overcome fear and face adversity. This was a very positive experience. [Critical incident, male, junior]

Relevance. Many of the students in this study perceived that the physical education program provided relevant learning. The variety of activities the students were exposed to seemed to add to the relevance of physical education for some students. One male, freshman student mentioned that “the intramural program offers variety.” Other students mentioned specific courses or activities that contributed to their perceptions of physical education at USMA as relevant. For example, one student wrote

The Combatives course has really made me aware of the dangers for young women . . . the course, in general gives me a sense of purpose. [Critical incident, female, senior]

Challenge. The key elements in the Challenge subcategory include descriptions of activities, tasks, and obstacles that students perceived as challenging. Participation in these activities generally contributed to the development of increased self-confidence and a sense of pride and accomplishment. For example, one female senior stated, “I like that [physical education] challenges me . . . It showed me I could do more than I thought.” Another student stated

Although difficult to overcome, the tasks I have encountered in gymnastics have pushed me beyond what I thought my physical capabilities were . . . the rope climb and IOCT were what I had originally perceived to be difficult tasks but was able to accomplish effectively by course end. [Critical incident, male, freshman]

Many students indicated that the challenge associated with physical education was the most favorable experience. A female senior mentioned that she looked forward to rock-climbing class: “I looked forward to it, it was the highlight of my day.” When asked why, she stated, “It was the challenge and it was something I wanted to learn.”

Negative Perceptions of the Curriculum, Program Features, and Subject Matter

See Table 4 for the subcategories and respective frequencies and percentages of key elements.

Unfair Grading Standards. Many students perceived that the evaluation standards for a course, activity, or test were “unfair.” Some students mentioned that it seemed impossible to receive a “good” grade in physical education classes,
even though they felt they had successfully completed the course objectives. One male senior stated, “Some things are too hard and the expectations are too high for some people... it gets to the point it almost becomes impossible to get a good grade.” Another student wrote

I believe the grading policy is the most negative aspect... It is very hard to earn above a C+ in the required courses. The courses are taught over a short period of time and they don’t allow time for mastery. ... I think the grading system should be revised. [Critical incident, male, freshman]

Irrelevant Content. Students described the content of some courses or activities as lacking relevance and personal meaning. One student responded

One complaint I have is about the physical aspect of CBT. I believe that the push-ups, sit-ups, and running served a purpose; however, all the other exercises were just bothersome. They didn’t seem to serve a purpose. [Critical incident, male, freshman]

Another student (male, senior) stated that, “I kind of got to a point in some of my classes where there was no relevant knowledge to be learned and you were doing it just to do it.” Interestingly, in many instances, these were the same classes that other students found to be relevant. Relevance appears to be a personal view based on individual experiences.

Injury. Physical harm caused or influenced by the participation of required physical education activities was categorized as Injury. Key elements in this subcategory commonly described instances where students were injured during participation in required physical education activities. In most cases, students perceived that a specific activity was the cause of the injury. For example, one student wrote

One incident was when I was running the Indoor Obstacle Course... I dislocated my shoulder. This year, after dislocating it a second time, I underwent surgery to repair it. This gave me negative attitudes and outlooks towards the Department of Physical Education. [Critical incident, male, junior]

Positive Perceptions of the Social Interaction and Behaviors of Students

Table 5 shows the frequencies and percentages of each subcategory in this category.

Support and Encouragement. Key elements in the Support and Encouragement subcategory described students as being supportive and encouraging toward each other during a variety of physical education endeavors. Commonly, students reported incidents of upper-class students helping and mentoring them. The findings also indicated that some students were very supportive of their classmates during physical education courses. One student stated

I was really motivated during Cadet Basic Training as my first platoon leader [student leader] was extremely motivated during morning physical training. His enthusiasm and energy helped transition me into the... environment a lot easier [and] with a positive outlook. [Critical incident, male, senior]

Acceptance. Some students believed that participation in physical education activities contributed to the development of friendships and feelings of acceptance.
### Table 5  Perceptions of the Social Interaction and Behaviors of Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive perceptions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage(^a)</th>
<th>Negative perceptions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support &amp; encouragement</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>Poor leadership</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>Lack of sportsmanship</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective leadership</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other—rank structure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total key elements</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *Percentages based on total number of key elements included in this category.*
This subcategory contains key elements in which students described the camaraderie, bonding, and favorable relationships developed during physical education activities, particularly in intramural and club activities.

The mandatory competitive sports program (intramural and club sports) appeared to play a key role in the socialization of students into the student body. Some students, especially freshmen, viewed the intramural and club programs as opportunities to interact, make friends with other students, and develop a support network:

The Army Crew Team [Club] was one thing that kept me going freshman year. Knowing that at the end of the day I could go down to the boathouse and be with my [teammates] kept me sane. The team takes people in and makes them feel they are important, which is something you need freshman year. [Critical incident, female, junior]

Many students made comments about "being on a team," "camaraderie," and "making friends" when discussing participation in intramural and club activities. The development of positive relationships with upper-class students was especially important to younger students.

**Effective Leadership.** Effective Leadership refers to instances when students were assigned to positions of leadership and made decisions that had a positive influence on their peers and subordinates. The incidences included in this subcategory showed that students who served as coaches or officials, or filled other leadership positions in physical education activities, were often recognized as effective in these roles by other students. One student shared his perception of positive leadership by other students during club rugby:

We were playing in the Rugby Northeast Championships and had lost the first game. We came back to win the second game because of the great leadership. The team captain and coaches [students] were able to lift everyone up by doing their job correctly and encouraging everyone else to do so. [Critical incident, male, sophomore]

**Negative Perceptions of the Social Interaction and Behaviors of Students**

Table 5 shows the frequencies and percentages of each subcategory in this category.

**Poor Leadership.** The Poor Leadership subcategory included key elements that described upper-class students in leadership positions as coaches, officials, and administrators, who abused their positions of authority, were poor role models, or lacked the skill and knowledge required of the position. Additionally, some students indicated that upper-class students forced others to participate in an activity that caused injury, embarrassment, or some other detriment.

Many of the comments and references to leadership focused on the leadership opportunities in intramural activities such as coaching and officiating. Officiating was the subject of many negative perceptions. It appeared that being an official of an intramural activity was not perceived as a popular or meaningful assignment. A number of students strongly suggested that the officials just didn’t have the experience and background in the sport to be effective. Many students agreed that, in general, the students assigned as officials did a less-than-adequate job. One student wrote
I believe that intramurals involves learning about teamwork and winning and losing. The thing that negatively affected me was the lack of knowledge of the game by one official. He make three bad calls and when asked by the coach, he couldn’t justify why he made the calls. [Critical incident, male, sophomore]

Lack of Sportsmanship. Behaviors considered to be unsportsman-like were perceived to have a negative effect on students. Common incidents described students as being inconsiderate and irresponsible toward other students and disrespectful to student coaches and officials. Some key elements in this subcategory also described instances in which students displayed a complete disregard for the safety and well-being of others.

Competition among students was generally accepted and expected. Although competition among students was generally viewed as positive and necessary, some students believed the competition got “out of hand” and at times became “cutthroat.” One female senior student mentioned that, “People resort to bad sportsmanship because they’re so competitive. . . . Sometimes the players and coaches [resort to] yelling at someone rudely or just try to pick a fight with someone.” Another student wrote

I was very disappointed this year during intramural team handball. Students were arguing with the referees over a goal, which would have tied the game. Instead of acting like gentlemen, they continued to fight over the call . . . most students would rather win by default than lose and still know they did their best. [Critical incident, male, junior]

Discussion

In their own words, students described their experiences in physical education at USMA. The research methods used in this study, the critical incident technique and formal interviewing, each contributed unique information, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of student perceptions of physical education at USMA.

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary; both positive and negative responses were expressed, but all respondents had one thing in common: an interest in being heard. Many participants in this study were interested to know if the information they provided would help to change and improve the physical education program. They believed that their perceptions were important and information they provided could be used to improve the physical education program at USMA.

Making a Positive Connection

Many times, the difference between teachers perceived in a positive versus a negative light appeared to be related to the teacher’s interaction and interpersonal skills. Research has shown that a teacher’s personal characteristics and ability to interact with students are indicators of successful teaching and that teachers can improve their interpersonal interaction skills (Aicinena, 1991; Figley, 1985; Siedentop, 1983).
This study found that physical education teachers at USMA who are encouraging, offer personal attention, and exhibit patience and concern are perceived by students as having a positive influence. Personal interaction, calling students by their first name, for example, was mentioned by some students as positive interaction. Cheering students on and showing compassion, respect, and consideration were also mentioned as being positive behaviors displayed by physical education teachers.

Teachers are often looked upon to be role models. The definition of role model may be quite different depending on the context of the learning environment. Certainly physical education teachers in a military setting represent a different image or role than physical education teachers at other universities. Military standards and regulations, and the purpose and mission of the Academy make teaching at USMA a unique experience. Physical education teachers at USMA are required to participate in most of the activities they teach. Students view this as "leading by example." Many students indicated that their physical education teachers appear to be in good physical condition and are very athletic and skilled in the physical activities they teach. Similar to other college students (Rice, 1988), the participants in this study appreciate teachers who actively participate in the physical education activity.

When any negative perceptions exist, regardless of how inconsequential they may appear, they can easily erode the student-teacher relationship. In this study, the perceived adversarial relationship between students and teachers is disturbing. It appears a "cold war" between teachers and students has existed for some time and has developed into an accepted but disliked tradition.

Many students may be avoiding interaction with physical education teachers because some teachers give the impression they are "out to get" students. Some students' perceptions that the teachers are adversaries suggest that teachers may need to evaluate how they interact with students. Physical education teachers at USMA may want to adopt a more humanistic approach. This is not to say that the physical education teachers should soften or lower standards. Experts agree that "humanistic educational settings should be challenging, growth enhancing, supportive and free from threat and coercion" (Siedentop, 1983, p.129). Acceptance and tolerance of individual differences is necessary for effective teaching in any context. Teachers must have the ability to adapt their teaching behaviors to meet the needs of all students. Siedentop (1983) suggests that "tolerance is more likely to lead to better knowledge of the person, better knowledge of the person's point of view is likely to lead to acceptance, and acceptance is more likely to lead to positive interactions" (p. 140). Students should feel free to express their feelings and perceive teachers as people who sincerely care about those feelings. While it is true that teachers do a good deal of talking to and with students, listening to and caring about students' perceptions is equally important within a constructivist framework (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Relevance

Students at USMA wanted to know and understand why they were taking physical education. They wanted to know the reasons why they have to take a specific class or participate in any physical education activity. Several incidents suggested that the relevance of physical education is not always obvious to the
students. All physical education courses taught at USMA should include goals and objectives referring to the relevance of the subject matter to the students’ future careers as military officers and to life in general.

Posing problems of emerging relevance is a guiding principle of constructivist pedagogy. Relevance does not have to be pre-existing for the student but can emerge through teacher mediation (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). “Teachers who operate without awareness of their students’ points of view often doom students to dull, irrelevant experiences, and even failure” (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 60). For many students, the requirement for mandatory physical education was often viewed in a positive manner. A number of students mentioned they would not have elected to take a course on their own but did benefit from the course. The requirement for physical education often guides students to courses that may benefit them the most (Kappes, 1954; LaPoint, 1982).

**Expectations and Grading**

The results of this study suggest that many students at USMA understand and appreciate the value of physical education, particularly physical fitness. Students regard their personal fitness and the knowledge of fitness as important to their development. Some research suggests that college-age students regard fitness favorably and indicate that physical fitness is a very important goal for participating in physical education classes (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987; Blair, 1984; Soudan & Everett, 1981; Weick, 1975). However, some studies indicate that physical fitness classes and fitness testing may need to be presented in a more positive manner. Self-confidence and meaningful, enjoyable experiences are often necessary for the development of positive perceptions of physical fitness in adults (Bain, 1985; Hopple & Graham, 1995; Luke & Cope, 1994).

Fitness evaluation was a common concern among students in this study. Fitness testing, primarily the APFT, appeared to contribute to negative perceptions of the physical education program and teachers. Some students viewed the APFT merely as a requirement with unrealistic and unfair grading standards and a threat to their class standing.

Research (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987; Blair, 1984; Weick, 1975) suggests that fitness testing should be presented as a means of monitoring progress toward personal goals and should be accompanied by positive reinforcement. Students should be encouraged to develop a sense of fitness competence. Ensuring that fitness-testing standards are met does not require threats, fear, or anxiety. A firm but fair approach should be adopted. Encouragement, motivation, and trust are necessary for students to reach their potential. If an institution expects to create students who are fitness independent and leaders in Army fitness, fitness testing should be taught as a personal fitness skill rather than using fitness testing as a threat or simply another grade.

In physical education instruction at USMA, many students felt they were graded on what they came to the class with—an “either you have it or you don’t” attitude. Some believed that any changes in effort were unlikely to make a difference in their performance or grade. They were turned off to physical education. This is very similar to what others (Carlson, 1995; Portman, 1995) have found and termed as alienation or learned helplessness. Students’ engagement is a function of their interest in the topic and their perceptions of personal competence (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).
Students wanted to be challenged, and, for many, it was the primary reason they chose to attend USMA. Many students perceive challenge as the primary goal of physical education. Students were very concerned about rank in class, grades, and meeting the standards. Grading standards should be set high but designed so it is, in fact, possible and realistic for deserving students to get an “A.” If students meet the strict physical admittance requirements of the Academy, then they deserve and, perhaps, even have the right to participate in a program based on development and not, as one student stated, “a way of weeding out the bad students.”

Although students appear to understand that they are attending a military academy, some perceive that the physical education teachers enforce standards more often and are stricter than teachers from other departments. Many students suggested that the physical education teachers “take it too far,” perhaps to the extent that learning in physical education is adversely effected. Instead of concentrating on learning objectives, teachers may get caught up with class management and regulation issues that, although relevant and necessary at a military academy, are not the primary goals of a specific lesson or class. Although some teachers may not have much latitude regarding content of lessons, most generally have some autonomy in determining the ways in which the content is taught (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Although the Academy has standards that must be met, organization, management, discipline, and control are not the only measures of successful teaching. These practices are very important, especially at a military academy, but “effective teaching should be based on a hierarchy of pedagogical practices in which organization, management, discipline, and control form the base, with student success at the apex” (Parker, 1995, p.136).

Fear in the Gymnasium

Students perceived some activities as being fearful experiences. For example, facing an opponent in the boxing ring was a fearful experience for some male students. Having the opportunity to affirm their ability to overcome fear was very valuable to many students. Being required to participate in fearful experiences and ultimately enduring and overcoming their fears, was a great boost to self-confidence.

Boxing was the activity most frequently mentioned that contributed to the ability to overcome fear. Students that stated they had lost matches or received a below average grade in boxing also admitted that the boxing experience had taught them more than boxing skills. For many, it provided lessons in courage and psychological endurance.

Other activities, primarily those involving heights, such as jumping off the high tower in survival swimming, climbing ropes in gymnastics, and negotiating obstacle courses were also cited as experiences where both male and female students had to conquer some fear.

Competition and Fair Play

In contrast to some research on competition (Carlson, 1995), students in this study, for the most part, viewed competition as a positive influence. In fact, for many students, it appeared that competition was necessary to “keep the standards high.” Competition for assignments and rank in class kept students striving toward excellence in physical education. Students at USMA continually compete for class rank, duty assignments, and grades. Competition inherent in the program is viewed
favorably and facilitates the will to win. However, it also allowed unsportsmanlike behaviors to surface. These behaviors were almost exclusively exhibited during intramural sport participation. Students offered several reasons for the display of unsportsmanship in intramurals. One of the main reasons cited was that many student officials did not know the rules of the game and were not experienced enough to be effective. Many students did not view the position of intramural sports official as an important or serious duty. In fact, some students mentioned it was an assignment to be avoided.

When student officials were perceived to be apathetic or inexperienced by a group of student players who took competition very seriously, it is not surprising that the two negatively perceived subcategories in the social interaction theme were Poor Leadership and Unsportsmanship. The issue is not too much or too little competition, but appropriate competition. Siedentop (1994) stated that, “There is much to be learned from appropriate competition, both individually and as a member of a group: the biggest lesson is to play hard, play fair, honor your opponent, and accept that when the contest is over, it is over” (p. 13).

Students need to take their coaching and officiating duties more seriously. They should be educated about the rules of the game and how to deal with conflict. Physical education courses with an emphasis on cooperation and social responsibility may be beneficial additions to the physical education curriculum. The intramural program at USMA is an excellent example of a Sport Education Model (Siedentop, 1994). In this model, students not only learn how to play, coordinate, and manage sports experiences but must also learn individual responsibility and effective group membership skills. Because there are so many roles to learn, teachers must define these roles, teach them, and “design an educational environment where fairplay and sporting values are taught, practiced and reinforced consistently” (Siedentop, 1994, p. 15).

The mandatory intramural program is perhaps the most important feature at USMA for positive experiences of social interaction among students. The intramural program provides students a rare opportunity to interact and develop friendships with a large number of other students from all class levels.

A military college can be a very stressful and frustrating environment. This is especially true for freshmen. Positive interaction, support, encouragement, and acceptance from upper-class students can make a huge difference in the life of a freshman. The Physical Education Program, primarily the intramural program, offers opportunities for students from all classes to interact, compete, cooperate, and socialize together.

References


