

College Physical Activity Instructors' Perceptions of Their Professional Behaviors on Students Experiences in Class

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Abstract

The *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs* (SHAPE, 2022) document states that the purpose of “college and university instructional physical activity (PA) programs is to build upon this foundation [of physical activity throughout life] and educate students to continue that journey to enhance well-being, and live healthy, physically active lives” (p. 5). One person that can educate college students regarding their lifetime physical activity is the class PA instructor. Professional behaviors are recommended that college PA instructors should implement in their teaching and interactions with students are outlined in the above-mentioned document. For this study, 10 college PA instructors were surveyed regarding professional behaviors exhibited by college PA instructors. Generally, the PA instructors felt that their professional behaviors did affect the students experience in their PA classes. Also, the participants in this study felt that PA instructors should take their professional behavior responsibilities seriously.

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Fahey and colleagues (2017) mentioned a number of factors why someone might be physically active. For example, participating in activities that are enjoyable, finding and having the time to exercise and participate in activity, or exercising with someone a person likes to be with. In a K-12 physical education (PE) and higher education setting, the PE teacher and physical activity (PA) instructor can impact a persons' physical activity in class and throughout their life (Larson, 2006). The higher education setting might be the last opportunity in an organized setting for an instructor to positively influence students regarding their physical activity (Barney & McGaha, 2006). The *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs* (SHAPE, 2022) document has been prepared to assist college PA instructors in teaching their PA classes. One of the objectives for "college and university instructional physical activity programs" outlined in this document is to "build upon this foundation [of physical activity throughout life] and educate students to continue the journey to enhance well-being, and live healthy, physically active lives" (SHAPE, 2022, p. 5).

Examples of appropriate instructional practices (AIP) found within the document that deal specifically with professional behaviors of instructors in college physical activity classes include, for example, "Faculty are on time to class... wear professional attire and make themselves available to meet with students outside of class" (SHAPE, 2022, p. 16) and "Faculty are sensitive to the needs of all students" (SHAPE, 2022, p. 16). Examples of inappropriate instructional practices regarding professional behaviors of instructors of college classes include, "Faculty are late, are insensitive with their language choice, wear unprofessional attire, and are unavailable to meet with students outside of class" (SHAPE, 2022, p. 16) and "Faculty are insensitive" (SHAPE, 2022, p. 16). While these recommendations for good instructional practice are common in all teaching contexts, this study focuses on their realization in the context of physical activity instructors.

The professional behaviors of college professors and instructors have been defined in the literature as faculty dispositions. These dispositions have been defined by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) as "attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities (NCATE, 2007, p. 269).

Lund, et. al. (2010) describes an example of how a professor might exhibit inappropriate professional behaviors to their students:

A student comes by your office looking for a colleague who teaches their class. They have several questions about topics covered in the weekly readings and come to the office area to ask questions of the professor during posted office hours. As usual, the professor is not around. In fact, the typical behavior of the professor is to materialize just before the start of class and disappears after the class ends, never to be seen until the following week (p. 269).

This example of a professor being casual regarding their responsibility of meeting with students can be impactful for PA instructors to better understand topics or concepts a student may need help with. Professors' teaching assistants (TAs) can be helpful to students, yet, when the professor makes themselves available to the students, they send a message that they are there to help the students.

Additional research in the literature has investigated specific professional behaviors of college PA instructors. Barney and Leavitt (2019) investigated how appropriate instructional practices in college PA classes had an effect on the learning environment in college PA classes. One of the main findings from this study was the PA instructors being positive and upbeat with students. Interview data from this study indicated, "Steve (instructor) is always prepared and excited to be in class teaching volleyball," and "Every time I have a question for coach, he has a smile on his face. I can ask him anything." This professional behavior of being positive and upbeat can be ineffective if the PA instructor is faking it. If the college PA instructor isn't positive or upbeat about what they are teaching, the students understand from the instructor that what they are doing and teaching isn't important or unnecessary, thus, negatively affecting student learning in class.

Another professional behavior of college PA instructors that can be exhibited, is encouraging their students to be physically active outside of class. Barney (2023b) studied college PA instructors' knowledge of appropriate instructional practices to be used in their teaching college PA classes. From the interview data in this study, the college PA instructors felt it was important to impress upon their students the importance of lifelong PA and PA outside of class. One of the instructors stated, "The point of these experiences/classes is to encourage or set a foundation for the love of activity. Finding a sport/skill you love and being engaged in it should be a lifelong pursuit." A second PA instructor said, "These PA classes have the potential to help these students be social and then use what they do in class in their lives." The college PA instructor has a part to play in helping their students be lifelong PA participants (Barney, 2023a).

One other professional behavior in the literature centers around instructors caring

for their students. Newland et. al. (2017) studied the relationship between perceptions of a caring climate on optimal engagement among college students enrolled in group PA classes. This study found that students were encouraged to greater levels of engagement in, and adherence to, physical activity with class activities when they felt safe and comfortable, were welcomed to class every day, and were treated with kindness. Another finding was when college students perceived the climate to be more caring, they were more welcoming and supportive towards their classmates and instructors. The researchers concluded that the college PA instructor has a responsibility to create a caring climate in their PA classes, which included sending a message that student attendance and activity in class are important, and that the student is known and cared for.

An extension of creating a caring climate for PA classes, is for the instructor to know their student's names. Barney, et al. (in press) studied caring behaviors of college PA instructors and the effects it had on college students. This study revealed that college PA instructors were important and positively affected the college students. One of the main findings was when the PA instructor used student names, it had a positive effect on the student PA class experience. One student stated,

He really made an effort to learn my name and always calls me by it. It means a lot especially in a class this large. It would be really easy to just come play basketball, but he makes us feel very welcome.

A second student said, "I had one instructor that would use my name and tell what I did well and what I should improve on and it was quite impactful."

It is evident from the literature that research has established that a PA instructor can have a positive effect on their students when they exhibit proper professional behaviors. PA instructors often do not have specific instruction in teaching expectations. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate college PA instructor's perceptions regarding common teaching expectations and professional behaviors as they relate to students and the possible effects of those professional behaviors on students.

Methods

Participants

Ten college PA instructors (six males & four females) were recruited to participate in this study. The participants included graduate students and tenured college professors. The PA instructors taught anywhere from one to four PA classes a semester. Teaching experience ranged from 1 to 25 years.

Materials

An eight open-ended question survey was developed based on the *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Program (2022)*, as well as being informed by existing literature (Table 1).

Table 1

Professional Behaviors Survey

Physical activity instructors: Please take a moment and answer the following questions regarding your professionalism as a physical activity instructor. Thank you for your help in this matter.

1. How important is it that you are on time to teach your class? Please explain your answer.
2. In your opinion does your attire affect how the student's view your role as an instructor? Please explain your answer.
3. Does making yourself available to your students before and after class have any affect on them? Please explain your answer.
4. Do you feel that when you are sensitive to the student it can affect them? Please explain your answer.
5. Do you think it is important to know names of students that are in your class? Please explain your answer.
6. Do you feel you should encourage your students to be physically active outside of class? Please explain your answer.
7. Overall, do you feel these professional behaviors on your part are important as your teach physical activity classes? Please explain your answer.

Gender: Male _____ Female _____

Five college PA instructors were asked to read through the survey questions, for the purpose of clarity and understanding. This process served as the method of establishing validity of the survey questions. The survey was pilot tested with seven college PA instructors who did not participate in the study, following which the survey was deemed valid and reliable. A demographic question was also part of the survey.

Procedures

After gaining permission from the university Institution Review Board (IRB), permission was received from the university PA administrator, who is the person that over-

sees all aspects of the university PA classes). Ten PA instructors agreed to participate in this study. Survey administration took place over the course of several days and at different times in the day, to be flexible with the instructor's schedules. After the instructors completed the surveys, the PA instructors returned the survey to the researcher.

Procedure

The college PA instructor's responses to the open-ended statements were transcribed with all participants given a pseudonym. The data was then analyzed for each statement. Participant responses were analyzed to find common themes for each survey statement (Mueller & Skamp, 2003), which led to the identification of emerging themes.

Results

After multiple readings of the responses collected from the PA instructors, the following themes emerged: (1) The importance of the instructor caring for students, (2) knowing student names, and (3) professional behaviors of PA instructors do have a positive effect on their students.

Caring Actions

The first theme that emerged from the survey data dealt with the PA instructors caring/showing care for their students. Tom stated, "These students need caring instructors, they see us two times a week. I feel like when I have compassion and try to get to know them it makes a difference in my life and the student's life." Mary said, "My students know I am always available to chat. It builds trust they can talk to me about school and any life's situations. It shows that I care." While Jane shared, "It demonstrates you understand them and trust them as adult learners."

Knowing Students' Names

Knowing their student's names was the second theme that emerged from the PA instructor survey data. Susan's opinion was that knowing student names is "Essential! For them and me. I learn the names of all my students before the first day of class. That's sometimes 150+ students, but it helps me connect with them." Larry explained, "Any way you can make a student feel important or special will help them. They know when I know them by name, they are not just some random kid in my class, but I care." Alluding to the fact that this may be challenging yet still vital, Robert shared, "I struggle with this, but I think it is very important, so I try to know their names."

Instructors Professional Behaviors Effect on Students

The third and final theme that emerged from the data was the effect PA instructors' professional behavior had on their students. Mark felt "It is important to set a good example and be prepared. I think it helps students be more motivated. Getting a good start to class is important for the rest of the class." Mary stated,

I believe that my example sets the expectation for the behavior of the students. I believe my attire affects a student's view of the class. I think workout gear needs to be appropriate, clean, good looking, lacking holes or excessive wear. I feel my appearance does affect my students.

Tom's statement summarized this point when he said, "I believe what you do speaks much more loudly than what you say. I have seen this a number of times with my students."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate college PA instructor's perceptions and opinions regarding professional behaviors as they relate to students and the possible effects of those professional behaviors on students. Generally, the PA instructors felt that it was important to model professional behaviors to their students. Furthermore, the PA instructor's felt their professional behaviors did have a positive effect on their students.

One of the first findings from this study was that the PA instructor's professional behaviors was the importance of exhibiting caring behaviors towards their students. Barney, et al., (in press) studied college student's perceptions and opinions of PA instructors caring behaviors towards students. The researchers felt that caring teaching behaviors can have a far-reaching impact towards promoting a positive experience for students. The following caring behaviors were discovered during interviews with college students enrolled in PA classes. The behaviors were: (1) instructor gives feedback during class activities, (2) the students felt comfortable in class because of the caring behaviors of the PA instructor, and (3) the instructor interacted with the students. The researchers felt that these caring behaviors have the potential to have students engage in class activities, which leads to students learning and creating a positive attitude towards lifelong PA. From this current study, Stanley stated, "I feel there is only positives to this [showing care]. Everyone wants to be treated respectfully, which shows you are caring. If you don't then the student will do the same to me." Robert explained, "I think if I am insensitive to the students, it can negatively affect the student. I have noticed that when I genuinely care and am sensitive to a students' situation, they appear to appreciate my efforts." These acts of caring for students can have a significant impact on their PA class experience being positive, with the hope that the students will carry their PA experiences throughout their lives.

A second theme from the college PA instructor for this study was knowing student names. Barney (2023b) studied college PA instructor's knowledge of appropriate instructional practices in their PA classes. For this study, college PA instructors felt that knowing student's names was an important and appropriate instructional practice to be used in class. An instructor stated, "Names make a large difference for creating relationships and the class environment with students. Especially in college having large class size, it's nice to know that someone cares enough to try to connect that way." A second instructor stated, "This is a simple thing. But it can really make a difference for the student. Plus, I like getting to know the students. This is important." From this current study, college PA instructor's results showed that knowing student names was an important part of professional practice. Comments such as, "It helps them feel a sense of belonging and that the instructor cares about them as an individual," and "I noticed it helps quite a bit. Shows that you took the time to learn their name and they aren't just another random student in your class," illustrated the view of the study participants. PA instructors' responses from the survey, included words and phrases dealing specifically with how vital they viewed knowing student names, with some examples including that this was "Essential!", "A must", and "being valued." Clearly, college PA instructors viewed the positive impact participants felt knowing and using student names has on students.

The third and final finding from this study was that the PA instructors felt that their professional behaviors do have a positive effect on their students. In the *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs* document (SHAPE, 2022) document it is posed that as college PA instructors implement professional behaviors contained therein, along with the other Appropriate Instructional Practices (AIPs), that it can "educate students to continue the journey to enhance well-being, and live healthy, physically active lives" (p. 5). More specifically from this current study Alice shared insights along these lines,

Physical activity classes are just as important as other classes here on campus. I need to look, act, and be professional. Living what I believe is important for them to see on a daily basis can be a guide throughout their lives.

Considering how his professional behavior might contribute to students approaching class in a way that would help them in the future, Larry said,

The students are here to learn so I need to be at my best to help them learn and find ways to make it enjoyable. If they think you goof off too much, they won't take it as seriously. Thus, it can help them in life.

These professional behaviors have the ability, when properly exhibited, to encourage, motivate and solidify in the student's mind the importance of physical activity throughout

their lives. It is hoped that PA instructors understand the impact, for good, they can have on the students they teach and will teach in the future. It is vital for college PA instructors to approach their teaching with professionalism and give specific attention to showing student they care, knowing and using student names, and continually remembering that their professional behavior does have an impact on students.

Implications

This study surveyed college PA instructors regarding professional behaviors and the impact on students. This data can be helpful for those that teach and/or college administrators of PA programs. For college PA instructors, the results from this study should reinforce the important role they play for their students. Students will observe their instructors' professional behaviors and, as explained by the study, that teaching PA classes is important and their professional behaviors do affect students. As stated previously, participants expressed the notion that their professional behaviors do affect the students' experiences in their PA classes. Those that administer college PA programs have the responsibility to prepare and train their instructors to teach their classes with a broad view of appropriate preparation that includes clear expectations for professional behavior. Many of the PA instructors do not have experience teaching students, nor do they have a background or professional training as teachers. Thus, they need to be exposed to pedagogical methods and professional behaviors to assist them in their teaching. Brock and colleagues (2018) provided suggestions for PA administrators to help and strengthen their PA instructors. One of the main suggestions was to provide a two-to-three-day training and instruction for teaching college students. Certainly, this training would not provide all the answers and training needed to teach PA classes for the instructors; however, it could help the PA instructors understand the responsibilities they have to the students they will teach. This study has highlighted three important topics that would be important to include in training such as this.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is that participants came from one university. This may not allow for a representative sampling of participants from other colleges and universities and limits the generalizability of the results. A wider sampling of participants would offer results that have a deeper breadth of information. While beyond the scope of this study, expanding not only the study size but also evaluating for possible differences, if any between various categories of participants (e.g., tenure-track vs graduate students, male vs female, age) could further expand the discussion of this matter and how conversations around college PA professional behaviors might proceed.

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