

# *Help Wanted!!!: Perspectives of Physical Education Graduate Teaching Assistants on Their Instructional Environment, Preparation and Needs*

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*Higher education physical activity and wellness programs, also known as service, general, or basic instruction programs, play a vital role in providing thousands of undergraduates with formal and structured opportunities to develop sport-related skills, fitness and healthy lifestyle habits. These skills and conceptual knowledge are necessary for life-long recreation participation and subsequently, increased overall health well after their formal education is complete. The purpose of this research was to identify instructional concerns of physical education graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and to obtain their perspectives on and recommendations for improving their work environment. Nineteen GTAs took part in this study. Data was collected using a questionnaire that consisted of multiple demographic survey items and three open-ended questions. Qualitative case study data collection and analysis techniques were used to*

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*develop themes and categories. Major concerns expressed by the GTAs included: (a) the need for increased communication with administration, b) obtaining instructional resources, and (c) the development of a more effective pre-teaching GTA orientation. Recommendations included: (a) providing formal opportunities for interacting with program administrators, departmental faculty, and peers within an instructional setting; (b) establishing a GTA instructional resource center within the department; and (c) formatting the pre-teaching orientation so that more emphasis was placed on instructional issues and strategies.*

*Key words: teaching assistant; concerns; development*

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are invaluable assets to institutions of higher education (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1992) because they enable institutions to control operating costs and support new areas of research. In return, the GTAs, receive assistantships to finance their graduate studies and at the same time learn skills relevant to their future roles in higher education, sport industry, or K-12 education. National organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC & U), and the Council on Graduate Schools (CGS) have spearheaded the development of initiative such as the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program on various campuses to effectively support and train graduate students as instructors and socialize them for possible future academic positions.

Recently, national reports indicate that approximately half of USA's young adults and adolescents are not physically active on a regular basis (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Participation in physical activity declines significantly through high school and college and subsequently, roughly 60% of the United States' adult population does not meet the minimum recommended amount of physical activity consistently (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Given this social predicament, universities provide a valuable service to society by instituting basic instruction or physical education programs in the areas of physical

activity, weight control and wellness for students coming from varied academic disciplines across the university. Basic instruction programs (BIPs) play a vital role in providing thousands of undergraduate students with formal opportunities to develop sport-related skills, fitness and healthy lifestyle habits necessary for life-long recreation participation and increased overall health. GTAs often serve as the primary instructors in lieu of professors in BIP courses that routinely have large numbers of students (Housner, 1993).

Despite GTAs' critical importance to the mission of delivering distinctive education for undergraduate students in higher education, they are often under-trained with little pedagogical skills and insufficient departmental or institutional support for their instructional development and preparation (Evaul & Hilsendanger, 1993; Savage & Sharpe, 1998). This shortcoming in instructional support and development has taken place despite research emphasizing the need for paying careful attention to the experiences of GTAs in health and wellness related academic disciplines. The challenge for universities and colleges is to identify and address issues and concerns connected to the socialization process and training of GTAs (Bedient, 1997; Nyquist & Sprague, 1998; Smith, 1996). To do so, it is imperative that the GTAs themselves are allowed to voice their concerns and recommendations about their supervision and training (Black & Kaplan, 1998; Smith, 1996), and to have effective means to facilitate program change. Research on GTAs in higher education, and particularly in the area of physical education, has focused on policy reviews, training and development guidelines, and student responses to GTA instruction (Hensley, 2000; Mondello, Fleming, & Focht, 2000). But scarce research is available in the literature that centers on GTAs' accounts of issues and concerns about their roles and responsibilities as instructors as provided in other academic disciplines (Nyquist, Austin, Sprague, & Wulff, 2001; Temple et al., 2003). In fact, scant scholarly research focuses on the development of BIP GTAs within the context of the institutional mission of their respective academic programs at all (Rikard & Nye, 1997) which is crucial to the overall development of GTAs as instructors and future scholars in the profession.

This case-study sought to further GTA research in the area of instructional training, development and socialization. The purpose of the study was to identify the instructional concerns and challenges of BIP GTAs and to obtain recommendations that address these concerns to enhance their professional development, socialization and training. Three research questions guided the direction of this study:

1. What instructional concerns do Basic Instruction Programs (BIPs) GTAs have about their assistantship responsibilities?
2. What recommendations do they have to improve their work conditions?
3. What perspectives do they offer on their experiences as GTAs?

## **Methods**

### ***Research Context: Setting***

This case-study was conducted in the School of Health and Human Performance (HHP) section of a major university located in the southeastern part of the United States. The School of HHP offered Master's and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in the exercise science, recreation and leisure studies, health promotion and behavior, and physical education and sport studies academic disciplines. The university required all undergraduates to successfully pass one credit hour of basic physical education to satisfy graduation requirements.

All Basic Instruction Program (BIP) courses were based on a Pass or Fail grading system. The BIP offered two types of courses to meet the needs of the student body — Basic Physical Activity (BPA) and Fitness for Life (FFL). The Basic Physical Activity (BPA) courses included basketball, weight-training, racquetball, golf, and tennis which were offered twice a week for fifteen weeks. The Fitness for Life (FFL) courses included aerobic dance, jogging, and swimming and met three times a week for ten weeks. The FFL courses consisted of a fitness activity, exposure to cognitive fitness concepts and theory taught via lectures.

### **Participants**

At the time of this study, the School of HHP employed approximately seventy graduate assistants. Of that seventy, nineteen ( $N = 19$ ) served as GTAs. These GTAs were assigned a teaching load of approximately four classes. Their teaching load consisted of: Basic Physical Activity (BPA) courses, Fitness for Life (FFL) courses, undergraduate introductory courses in their respective academic programs or a combination of the three. The GTAs were primarily assigned classes based on their willingness to teach and demonstrated instructional ability as derived from their assistantship applications. Additionally, their graduate course-work schedules influenced their instructional assignments. Participant demographic data included information such as gender, ethnic background, instructional experience, and degree program (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Demographic and Background Information Data**

Demographic category	Number and percentage
Gender	
Male	12 (63.2%)
Female	7 (36.8%)
Ethnic background	
Caucasian/White	15 (78.9%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	3 (15.8%)
African-American	1 (5.3%)
Current program of study	
Physical Education & Sport Studies	11 (57.9%)
Exercise Science	6 (31.6%)
Recreation & Leisure Studies	2 (10.5%)
Health Promotion & Behavior	0 (0%)
Degree program	
Doctorate (Ed.D/Ph.D.)	10 (52.6%)
Master's (M.A./M.Ed)	8 (42.1%)
Others (Specialist, etc.)	1 (5.3%)

### **Instrument Development**

The researcher developed the questionnaire that was used in this study. The questionnaire items posed on the instrument were derived from previous research studies that were uncovered during the literature review (Chism, 1988; McBride, 1993; Nyquist & Wulff, 1996). A list of possible

questionnaire items was constructed and experts in the areas of GTA socialization, development, and training were asked to provide comments and modifications concerning the accuracy and rigor of the instrument's items. Once this feedback was obtained, revisions were made to the instrument and sent back to the experts for final checking.

The data collection instrument consisted of two sections. In the first section, demographic and background information of GTAs' teaching load and self-rating as connected to their instructional effectiveness were obtained. The second component asked the participants to respond to three open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were designed to gather thoughts of the participants in terms of instructional concerns, recommendations, and personal insights regarding their work environment. These questions were:

1. Do you feel you were adequately prepared to teach the Basic Physical Activity (BPA) or Fitness for Life (FFL) courses assigned to you in past terms? Why or why not?
2. What aspect(s) of the Basic Instruction Program's (BIP) pre-teaching GTA orientation were most beneficial to you and why? Least beneficial and why?
3. What perspectives on instructional concerns and recommendations can you offer that can aid the BIP administration to better support you as a GTA?

### ***Data Collection***

Questionnaires were placed in the GTAs' departmental mailboxes in an envelope near the end of one spring academic semester. The participants were asked to return the questionnaire via campus mail to the researcher using an enclosed enveloped within two weeks of receiving it. There was a 100% return rate. The confidentiality of the participants was ensured by not indicating the name of the participant anywhere on the questionnaire. At the time of the research study, all of the participants had taught in the BIP for a minimum of one academic semester.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data obtained were analyzed with the use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Means, frequency counts, and ratios were drawn from the demographic survey items and reported (refer to Tables 1 and 2). Qualitative data obtained from open-ended question responses were analyzed in an effort to enhance understanding and aid in the presentation of results to others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The data from the open-ended questions were analyzed using techniques of qualitative research such as: constant comparisons between written responses, open-coding and formulating hypothesis based on the data under consideration (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Qualitatively, the analyses were performed to identify themes in the data that would lead to a better understanding of the recommendations, concerns, and memorable experiences that the GTA had at the time of the study.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this research was to provide a voice to Basic Instruction Program (BIP) GTAs to express their instructional concerns and challenges, and to obtain recommendations to improve their professional experiences as instructors. Based on research goals and questions, the perspectives of other possible stakeholders within the academic setting such as administrators and students were outside the scope of this study [but a second study that considers the stakeholders is forthcoming]. The goal of this research was not to develop or test a hypothesis or theory but rather to investigate a specific phenomenon and the perspectives of the individuals situated in the particular academic setting. As Merriam (1998) wrote, “in qualitative research, a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true to the many” (p. 208). In addition, a case study research design was appropriate based on the nature of the study. The research was designed to examine a particular sample of participants that are bounded within a specific

setting. As Creswell (1998) explained, “this bounded system is bounded by time and place, and it is the case being studied—a program, an event, an activity, or individuals” (p. 61). Hence the findings from this research are not to be viewed as generalizable to other settings or populations although the findings may corroborate experiences of graduate teaching assistants in similar settings at academic institutions within or outside the United States of America.

## **Findings**

Extant literature provides scant research on of BIP GTAs concerning their instructional environment and issues that impact their experiences as teachers. The following sections present findings of the study as pertinent to instructional concerns and recommendations that the GTAs considered significant for better teaching experiences and student learning. The GTA demographic and background information are presented first followed by the themes that emerged from the data in response to three open-ended questionnaire items.

### ***Demographic and Background Information Data***

The first portion of the research instrument consisted of survey items that sought background information, teaching experiences, self-rating based on instructional effectiveness, and teaching load. These data can be found in Tables 1 and 2. The following sections focus on responses to open-ended questions.

### ***Open-ended Survey Questions***

*Survey Question 1: Do you feel you were prepared to teach the Basic Physical Activity (BPA) or Fitness for Life (FFL) courses assigned to you in past terms. Why or why not?*

Survey item one was designed to identify whether the Basic Instruction Program (BIP) or institution adequately prepared its GTAs to teach the BIP courses assigned and to discover the extent to which the GTAs felt prepared



**Table 2 Demographic Survey Item Data**

Demographic category	Number and Percentage
Experience level	
New (no experience)	15 (78.9%)
Experience (at least one previous semester of teaching)	4 (21.1%)
Course-load specification	
Combination of course types	14 (73.7%)
Basic Physical Activity courses only	4 (21.1%)
Fitness for Life courses only	1 (5.3%)
Self-rating of instructional effectiveness	
Poor	0 (0%)
Average	5 (26.3%)
Above-average	8 (42.1%)
Excellent	6 (31.6%)
Adequately prepared for course assignment (Yes/No)	
Yes	15 (78.9%)
No	2 (10.5%)
No answer	2 (10.5%)

to teach. Further, they were asked to evaluate why they did or did not feel they were prepared. It is important to note that the open-ended responses to this question were approximately the same as the survey item that was placed on the first section of the questionnaire. Seventeen ( $n = 17$ ) or 89% of the nineteen GTAs reported that they felt prepared to teach assigned courses and three themes emerged from the data analysis. In Appendix A, the themes derived from the data and examples to support them are provided. The number of respondents for each category is provided because the question is constructed in a “Yes or No” format and thus easily defined by the two categories. This was not the case for Survey Questions 2 and 3 because the responses were not as easily broken down into similar categories.

*Felt prepared to teach due to Basic Instruction Program (BIP) and/or institutional intervention.* Three participants acknowledged the impact the BIP had on their instruction and socialization into their teaching roles. Examples of intervention included the GTA coordinator’s supervision and university and BIP’s pre-teaching orientations. A third-year Ph.D. candidate stated “... the materials and instructional resources from the program [Basic Instruction Program] were helpful and straightforward. Also Mr. K [GTA

coordinator] was very helpful and [provided] hands-on [materials] in the beginning to assist me when needed.”

A second GTA noted the impact that the university’s campus-wide and departmental pre-teaching orientations had on their sense of worth and their role as a teacher within the context of the institutional mission:

The campus-wide orientation really exposed me to others who were in the same boat as I was. I had very little background in teaching but to know that I was not under-qualified for the position but rather just developing as a new instructor was encouraging. Just like after the departmental orientation I didn’t understand the theory behind my development but I knew I wasn’t a bad or clueless teacher. (1st year Master’s candidate)

*Felt prepared to teach due to non-Basic Instruction Program or institutional intervention.* The majority ( $n = 11$ ) of the GTAs in this study pointed out that their success as instructors was due primarily to factors outside of the university and the Basic Instruction Program (BIP). They suggested, among other things, that their educational backgrounds, instructional experiences in other settings, peers, and past athletic experiences were primarily influential in their socialization and development as instructors. A second-year Master’s candidate stated the positive influence of his background as a physical education major: “It gives me a good foundation of the steps that we go through. You know how to inform, apply, extend and all those kinds of different things.”

Other respondents acknowledged the influence of their previous athletic and instructional backgrounds within public school, college settings or camp settings.

*Felt prepared to teach due to BIP, institutional and/or other intervening factors.* Three GTAs stressed that a combination of factors positively impacted their instructional development. Their responses represent a combination of the prior two themes. More specifically, factors including past teaching experience, personal motivation, pre-teaching orientations, collaboration with non-GTA colleagues within the department, and

mentorship from outside the institution aided their development as instructors. A GTA wrote: "I work hard and want to do a good job. Thankfully I have a teaching background because the orientations are not enough. The older GTAs have helped me fill in the spots where I am lost".

However The GTAs also expressed that if they were asked to teach courses outside of their experiences, they could do an adequate job of teaching but would be stressed and concerned about their effectiveness. This phenomenon happened with those GTAs with limited teaching experience and who were asked to teach both Basic Physical Activity (BPA) and Fitness for Life (FFL) courses. A second-year Master's candidate responded:

Yes, I felt prepared for the basic classes [for example, basketball, tennis]. I am an overachiever when it comes to sports so I prepared myself in the areas I was weak in. The Fitness for life classes [such as, jogging, aerobics] were a different story due to the information and content of the lectures that we had to emphasize in class. This was the time for supervision and instructional support. This was when I needed help!!! [because] my background wasn't in wellness or nutrition but primarily in team sports.

*Did not feel prepared to teach assigned courses.* Only two GTAs felt that they were not adequately prepared to teach the courses assigned. These respondents emphasized that they received little instructional support in the form of mentorship, resources, or supervision during their time as instructors. These GTAs, who were first-year Master's candidates with limited instructional experience, were asked to carry a teaching load of four classes. As one of the GTAs expressed, "in the four activities that I have been required to teach, I feel I needed some background about the sport/activity and would have liked to have more [instructional] resources available." The second GTA in this category indicated that she received no preparation for the courses she was scheduled to teach and that the pre-teaching orientation was not helpful. She responded with the following statements, "No preparation was given for the courses I taught. I felt it overwhelming to throw together lesson plans a few days prior to teaching the first class. There were no guidelines or helpful ideas for preparation."

*Survey Question 2a: What aspect(s) of the Basic Instruction Program's (BIP) pre-teaching GTA orientation were most beneficial to you and why?*

This item focused on the beneficial aspects of the BIP's pre-teaching GTA orientation. The participants' responses are grouped into three thematic categories that emerged from the data. Appendix B provides a summary of the GTAs' responses to Survey Questions 2a and 2b.

*Extensive coverage of Fitness for Life (FFL) courses.* This theme focused on the BIP's coverage of the FFL courses. During the orientation, an extensive review of the FFL courses was provided including coverage of standardized exams, systematic lectures, and grading procedures. A GTA responded, "...coverage of FFL course objectives was the most beneficial because these two areas I was not clear on due to the structured lectures and addition of wellness or nutrition materials." The FFL handbook provided to all GTAs during the orientation was helpful because useful information related to lecture topics such as sample exam questions and other instructional resource sources were provided. Several of the GTAs who taught FFL courses were comfortable with the content because the department took considerable time in discussing the mechanics or processes of communicating (teaching) the content to students.

*Opportunity to socialize with influential individuals (fellow GTAs, faculty, administrators).* This category examined GTAs' opportunities to socialize with their peers and faculty during the pre-teaching orientation. The social aspect of the pre-teaching orientation included informal socializing with peers and potential future colleagues, which the GTAs saw as particularly important. Indeed the orientation served as a way for the GTAs and professors from the various academic departments within the School of HHP to socialize. During this time important information and instructional topics were discussed between the GTAs that were not covered in detail during the BIP's pre-teaching orientation. The information shared related to classroom and student management discussed in the context of realistic teaching situations. A first-year Master's candidate supports this point and said: "The

most beneficial aspect of the orientation was meeting with my peers and other professors within the various academic departments. I learned so much about teaching, student issues and made many contacts that have proved helpful in getting resources.”

*Coverage of university, Basic Instruction Program rules, regulations, and policies.* The university and BIP instructional and grading policies related to teacher conduct, and assignment of grades stood out as beneficial to many GTAs’. A GTA stated, “I was very clear on grading procedures as far as filling out paperwork to turn in grades. There was no way I was going to mess that up.” Another GTA expressed: “It was important that the GTA coordinator took the time to go over the grading policy because this was the first year of teaching at the university for me and I was not familiar with the university’s grading policy.” Several GTAs indicated that the BIP coordinator’s clear explanation of institutional grading policies and safety procedures associated with the BIP courses were greatly appreciated. Throughout the various lectures provided during the pre-teaching orientation, the GTAs recalled and stressed the importance of these policies. Specifically the department’s Hold Harmless policy was stressed as important which stated that... every student enrolled in a BIP signs this document to acknowledge their awareness of the possibility of injury during activity. A GTA responded:

**After the [departmental] orientation there were no surprises about dealing with students and the grades. If I learned anything it was how to submit student grades and what to do if a student got hurt. The coverage of the Hold Harmless policy was also important because I am teaching basketball and I know someone is going to get bumped or fall at some point (2nd year Master’s candidate)**

*Survey Question 2b: ... least beneficial and why?*

The second part of question two addressed the perceived least beneficial components of the BIP’s pre-teaching orientation. Responses concerned the manner in which information as communicated to GTAs during the

departmental orientation and its impact on their development as instructors. Overall, two themes emerged from the data.

*Untimely and rushed orientation.* This theme concerned the overall format and timing of the BIP's pre-teaching orientation. The GTAs negatively expressed the timeliness and management of the orientation lectures. The pre-teaching orientation was held the week before classes started and subsequently just several days after most of the new graduate students arrived on campus. A GTA explained that: "for the new GTAs, the time for GTA orientation was late (only one week before class begins). If they knew what they would teach in advance, they would feel less pressured at the beginning of classes." A first-year GTA wrote: "the orientation was a little rushed and a lot of material was covered in a short time [two days]. It was too much for me to take in and integrate into my classes." The consensus from the responses was that the departmental pre-teaching orientation sessions were rushed with little time devoted to GTA concerns and perspectives, too much policy-oriented information was provided during the sessions and the orientation was conducted too close to the start of classes to be effectively received.

*Unengaged audience.* Respondents focused on the lack of meaningful interaction and relevance during the BIP's pre-teaching orientation between the lecturers and GTAs in relation to the orientation's format and topics of discussion. The presentation style and content of the BIP's coordinator's lectures during the orientation was seen as monotonous and ineffective and therefore was perceived to have little impact on the development of GTAs' instructional skills. A GTA wrote:

I came. I sat. I left. That time [time at pre-teaching orientation] should have been used to prepare syllabi or lesson plans. It could have been so good but the lectures were so boring. The GTAs should conduct these sessions rather than the coordinator. We may have more pertinent things to say related to actual teaching and student issues. Everything was policy-oriented nothing about actual teaching. (1st year Master's candidate)

Indeed, the lecture-oriented and monotonous nature of the departmental pre-teaching orientation was perceived by the GTAs as wasted opportunity to facilitate the development of effective lines of communication between themselves, the BIP administration and their peers. The basic format of each presentation was lecture-oriented with very little feedback sought from the GTAs. According to the GTAs, they were not engaged during the lectures nor were they able to effectively raise instructional issues and concerns. Experienced GTAs had to attend the BIP's pre-teaching orientation despite similar information being presented in previous years.

*Survey Question 3: What perspectives on instructional concerns and recommendations can you offer that can aid the Basic Instruction Program's (BIP) administration to better support you as a GTA?*

This question focused on the GTAs' instructional concerns and recommendations concerning BIP's administration in order to better support their development as teachers. Their responses are grouped in categories described in the following paragraphs. Appendix C lists instructional concerns and recommendations that GTAs expressed.

*Increased communication.* The recommendations in this section addressed the manner in which input from the GTAs was obtained to design courses, assign classes, evaluate instruction, and develop measures to increase and improve formal communication between the administrators and the GTAs. The GTAs expressed the lack of communication on course development, instructional effectiveness and supervision with the BIP's GTA coordinator. A GTA stated:

Several GTAs suggested that the coordinator could meet with them during the semester individually and as a group to identify concerns about instructional roles and duties. The consensus was that BIP's GTA coordinator should provide significant instructional and moral support. Increased communication between the GTAs and coordinator was seen as a means of bolstering the positive attitudes of the GTAs towards developing into effective teachers. Further the GTAs could provide the BIP administration

insights into their work conditions and their recommendation for improvement. As a 2nd year Ph.D. candidate indicated, “simply stated — better communication. Possibly even monthly ‘staff’ meetings to go over teaching techniques or content suggestions. I have some ideas on how to make change so that everyone benefits—GTAs, administration, and students”. A third-year Ph.D. candidate supported the importance of communication, supervision and recognition for effective instruction. She wrote:

I believe a little more attention from administrators — Maybe a little supervision would be encouraging. I know teaching is rewarding in itself but a little recognition from the department would be nice. Nothing fancy or extravagant. Just something to show that you know I am alive and teaching reasonably well.

*Improve the Basic Instruction Program’s (BIP) pre-teaching orientation.* The GTAs acknowledged that BIP’s presentation of instructional skills, policies, and guidelines during the pre-teaching orientation lacked creativity and relevance. Specifically, the GTAs reported that the content of the lectures should have included topics concerning instructional strategies and classroom management. A GTA wrote, “It was fine to discuss the grading procedures and how to drop/add students. But as a first-year, I needed more about how to construct a syllabus and manage thirty plus students on a tennis court in January.”

In order to ease the transition of novice GTAs into the program, meaningful and formal interaction was seen as necessary between veterans and novices. The orientation was one of the few times during the academic year that all the GTAs were together in a formal, structured setting. Unfortunately, such interaction was only possible during the BIP’s pre-orientation’s cook-out on the last day. A third-year Ph.D. candidate stated:

Talk about being thrown to the wolves. We need to get with the new guys now because once classes start, we hardly see each other. The orientation would have been a good time to build those relationships even if only to pass around old handouts and syllabi. The cook-out did not have enough time to help anyone get started.



*Allocation of instructional resources and in-service training.* The GTAs expressed a need for better in-service instructional training and support which would include workshops that would expose them to injury prevention techniques, relevant instructional methods, and instructional resources. A Ph.D. candidate pointed out that, "It would be nice to have a couple of workshops regarding injury prevention and immediate treatment of possible injuries in various activities. We are teaching activity classes." Further recommendations included providing in-service workshops for GTAs regarding student learning strategies, assessment techniques and how to balance their roles as instructors and graduate students. The GTAs also expressed a desire for an instructional resource center to house examples of old syllabi and exams, alternative textbooks relevant to the courses they were teaching, videotapes, and miscellaneous equipment such as CD players. In Appendix C, the GTAs' instructional concerns, issues and recommendations are listed.

## **Summary of Findings**

This research study examined the BIP GTAs' comprehension of the work environment and their roles as teachers. Demographic data provides an interesting picture of the GTAs that took part in this study. Of the nineteen participants, 78.9% of them had one year of less of experience as a graduate teaching assistant. Roughly seventy-four percent (73.7%) of the GTAs taught a combination of Fitness for Life (FFL) and Basic Physical Activity (BPA) courses. When asked to rate themselves as instructors based on a scale of "Poor" to "Excellent", 73.7% of the GTAs rated themselves "Above-Average" or "Excellent". Further, when asked if they felt adequately prepared to teach their assigned courses, 78.9% of the respondents answered "Yes", but the qualitative data suggested that they felt prepared for a variety of reasons outside of departmental or institutional training and development.

A qualitative analysis was performed on three open-ended items that provided a deeper understanding of the instructional experiences, concerns,

and recommendations of the GTAs. Findings indicated that although the majority of the GTAs felt prepared to teach their assigned courses, which mirrored the quantitative data, there were varied reasons for their preparedness. The GTAs compensated for a perceived lack of training and preparation by the department and/or university primarily by using peers, past teaching, athletic, and educational experiences along with their own self-motivation to educate and prepare themselves to teach the activities.

Another area of analysis was the GTAs' perceptions of the beneficial and non-beneficial aspects of the BIP and university's pre-teaching orientation. The most beneficial aspects of the orientations were the opportunity to socialize with peers and administrators. Also the extensive exposure to knowledge about departmental and university policies and the in-depth coverage of the FFL courses was considered of utmost importance. The FFL courses had a laboratory component in addition to the physical activity aspect of the class, which required additional lectures and grading protocols was beneficial to the GTAs. The least beneficial aspects of the pre-teaching orientations were the ill-timed and hurried lecture sessions, lack of involvement during the lecture discussions on GTAs' teaching responsibilities, and an over-emphasis coverage of policies or protocols rather than on actual teaching development and strategies.

## **Discussion**

Few scholars have inquired about instructional concerns and training of GTAs in the areas of basic instruction, activity, general, or service program (Housner, 1993; Savage & Sharpe, 1998). In the current study, the GTAs expressed concerns and provided recommendations corroborated in GTA training literature across academic disciplines. Specific areas discussed include: (a) development of meaningful lines of communication with peers, administrators and faculty, (b) implementation of an effective pre-teaching orientation, and (c) provision of adequate in-service instructional support and resources. GTAs stated that there was a lack of meaningful interaction

with departmental faculty and BIP administrators concerning instruction, which corroborates findings from previous research studies (Milner-Bolotin, 2001; Zapata, 2002). An implication is that there is a need for professors and administrators to take a formal and systematic role in the instructional development of the BIP GTAs, especially with first-time instructors. The establishment of effective lines of communication, adequate provision of needed resources, and recognition of individual differences and needs is essential to GTAs' learning of instructional skills and socialization into the departmental structure and role expectations (Meyers, 2001).

There was a perceived lack of sufficient initial training consistent with their instructional backgrounds, responsibilities and duties in the current study. Recent research discussed the concern of placing incompetent GTAs in situations of complete control in classes without proper training, and the need for new GTAs to be progressively moved from less demanding instructional tasks to the lead position in a course (Nyquist & Sprague, 1998). Essentially, without a comprehensive pre-teaching orientation or some form of in-service workshops, GTAs often struggle as instructors (Lucas, 2001). Several authors cite the lack of an effective pre-teaching orientation as being a major hindrance to the overall development of GTAs, particularly during the transition of a GTA from being a student to undergraduate instructor (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1992; Nyquist & Wulff, 1996).

In the context of this study, the BIP's pre-teaching orientation served as the only opportunity to prepare the GTAs for their instructional duties, and ironically was the only organized meeting between the GTAs and administrators. During this orientation, GTAs expressed that more emphasis put forward to improve their instructional effectiveness than on administrative roles and duties such as grading assigned student coursework and following safety procedures. Respondents agreed that the pre-teaching orientation failed to serve as an effective means of preparing the GTAs for their instructional duties.

Despite the fact that existing research (Darling & Earhart, 1990; Meyers, 2001; Temple et al., 2003) outlines potentially effective formats and content

knowledge for pre-teaching orientations, nothing beyond coverage of basic administrative duties and procedures was provided in this study. The GTAs expressed that there was a lack of in-service to support their instructional concerns. The participants pointed out that the GTA coordinator should facilitate formal meetings with program administrators during the academic semester to assess where the GTAs are as instructors, and to identify any of their instructional concerns and issues. Moreover instructional resources such as videotapes, course handbooks, old syllabi, and old course exams should be housed in a departmental “GTA resource room” that is readily accessible by GTAs. As Milner-Bolotin (2001) suggests, academic programs that employ GTAs must develop means of building supportive relationships between the BIP’s GTA coordinator, faculty, administration and the GTAs.

Unfortunately, GTAs in this study were left to their own devices to determine the most effective means of instructing their classes. This “on-the-job” training was a source of frustration for most and scholars criticize it in existing literature (Nyquist & Wulff, 1996; Savage & Sharpe, 1998). The findings of this study indicate GTAs to utilize a variety of means including forming relationships with their peers, as well as colleagues outside of the BIP to obtain instructional support and resources. Although the majority of the GTAs expressed that they felt adequately prepared and confident in their teaching, the lack of perceived instructional training and support from the BIP is disconcerting but not uncommon (Prieto & Meyers, 2001). The importance and number of undergraduate courses offered by the BIP is such that more attention has to be paid to the overall performance and preparation of the GTAs in colleges and universities.

## **Implications**

The findings of this research study reveal the need for training and development programs in many academic departments to carefully select, train, and supervise GTAs as they perform their instructional duties and responsibilities. This and other research studies suggest that GTAs are often

required to take on a significant instructional burden without adequate instructional supervision and support (Black & Kaplan, 1998; Savage & Sharpe, 1998). It is the constituents of higher education institutions (parents and students) that are short-changed when any university or college academic program places under-trained and under-supervised instructors to teach classes. Besides, the quality of the educational experience that the GTAs receive in terms of training to assume future roles as faculty is greatly jeopardized.

Graduate teaching assistantships represent more than opportunities to finance graduate studies in higher education institutions. Teaching assistantships provide on-the-job training for the future professoriate of physical education and exercise-related academic disciplines. Negative experiences as instructors can impact the future willingness and ability of graduate students to participate in academia just as positive experiences can provide the confidence and competency to effectively fulfill the responsibilities and obligations of a faculty position (Davis & Fiske, 2000; Gaff, 2002; Golde & Dore, 2001). GTAs should be treated much like a junior faculty in relation to their instructional training and mentorship. With proper mentorship and supervision, GTAs can prove to be exceptional instructors who enlighten their students on the life-long benefits of physical activity just as faculty. The ultimate goals of any GTA training program is to provide a climate of support, identify and develop teaching skills, and aid the instructor in gaining confidence and control of their instructional environment (Nyquist, Austin, Sprague, & Wulff, 2001). Through the implementation of an effective preparation and support program, GTAs can enjoy important intellectual stimulation as well as gain valuable job related training skills.

### **Recommendation for Basic Instruction Programs**

The goal of this paper was to inform administrators, coordinators and supervisors of Basic Instruction Programs (BIPs) about instructional issues and concerns that GTAs have about their teaching and to offer authentic

recommendations from GTAs. In reference to the research findings presented in this paper, the following recommendations are provided:

1. The GTA coordinator should set aside time at the end of each academic term to conduct one-on-one meetings with each GTA to discuss perspectives on their performance during the semester, student evaluation feedback, instructional concerns and recommendations for improving instruction.
2. Extend the BIP's pre-service orientation to a minimum of two days to give the GTA coordinator ample time to cover the nuances of teaching in specific academic programs. Topics of discussion can include specific and relevant aspects of each course, proper syllabi construction, discussion of university policies and regulations, and appropriate instructional practices.
3. Provide opportunities for GTAs to take part in workshops, or "brown bag" lunches that bring them into contact with GTAs and administrators within and outside of the Department and School of Health and Human Performance. This will allow for networking and socializing among the GTAs and will facilitate their continued orientation to the campus.
4. Integrate CPR, and injury prevention and care, into the pre-teaching orientation and in-service training program. In physical education settings, the opportunities for injury are heightened and such information could prove invaluable.
5. Develop and promote among the GTAs an instructional resource library. Instructional resources should include textbooks, relevant scholarly journals, videotapes, past tests and skill assessments, and multiple examples of syllabi. Each GTA should routinely make a contribution to the library in order to ensure that materials do not become dated.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Scant research is directed to the training and development of GTAs employed in Basic Instruction Programs (BIPs) especially as it relates to instructional

evaluation and supervision. Constant program evaluations and instructional research are needed in order to ensure that quality instruction is being provided by GTAs (Housner, 1993; Mondello, Fleming, & Focht, 2000). Research into student perceptions of instruction, motivation for class enrollment, and program status or characteristics form the foundation of inquiry into BIPs (Lumpkin, Ormond, & Smith, 1995; Trimble & Hensley, 1993) but the perceptions of the GTAs themselves is overlooked. The amount of scholarly inquiry on instructional issues, concerns, and other facets of the educational experiences that the GTAs deliver should not remain stagnant but continue to evolve in depth and breadth. In this view, future research endeavors may consider following areas:

1. Assess the obstacles and barriers to effective GTA instructional socialization and training program development from the perspectives of the GTAs and their administrators.
2. The impact of GTA coordinators' choice of supervisory practices and format on GTA instructional development, effectiveness and socialization.
3. Effects of peer coaching on instructional effectiveness and the proper means of preparing GTAs for such endeavors.
4. The potential benefits and role of videotaped instructional analysis on BIP GTA development, training and supervision.
5. Curriculum development and standardization of course content across Basic Instruction Program (BIP) courses and the ramifications for GTA development and instructional effectiveness.
6. Longitudinal studies that investigate whether or not experiences as GTAs are beneficial and relevant to graduate students' ability to obtain employment in academia and their subsequent effectiveness as instructors.

Concluding remarks are that effective supervision, training, and development of GTAs in BIPs are important to the healthy lifestyles of undergraduate students and to the professional development of graduate students in college or university settings. BIP programs offer opportunities for undergraduates to engage in meaningful and informative physical activities that is hoped to motivate students to conduct a healthy lifestyles

well after their formal education is complete. Roughly 60% of all Americans do not engage in consistent physical activity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996) and courses offered in BIPs are needed to counteract the negative trends in lifestyle, fitness, and the overall declining health of Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997). More often than not, BIPs courses provide the last formal and structured educational opportunities for young adults to take part in recreational and fitness related subject matter (Dale & Corbin, 2000; Pearman et al., 1997). Positive educational experiences can provide the potential intervention that motivates students to remain physically active, develop health conscious behaviors, and strive to be competent in matters of wellness and nutrition through the remainder of their lives.

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## Appendix A

### Thematic Categories and Examples Drawn from Responses to Open-ended Survey Item 1

Thematic category	Example to support
I felt prepared to teach due to Basic Instruction Program (BIP) or institutional intervention ( $n = 3$ ).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Basic Instruction Program (BIP) pre-teaching orientation</li> <li>2. Accessibility to old instructional resources (syllabi, exams)</li> <li>3. Support of the GTA coordinator</li> <li>4. University GTA orientation</li> </ol>
I felt prepared to teach due to non-Basic Instruction Program or institutional intervention ( $n = 11$ ).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Educational background</li> <li>2. Instructional experiences (camps, teaching jobs, etc.)</li> <li>3. Peers (fellow GTAs, classmates)</li> <li>4. Faculty (within and outside university)</li> <li>5. Trial and error</li> <li>6. Past athletic experiences</li> <li>7. Self-taught (primarily through textbooks and Internet)</li> </ol>
I felt prepared to teach due to Basic Instruction Program (BIP), institutional and/or other intervening factors ( $n = 3$ ).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Combination of previous two themes</li> </ol>
Did not feel prepared to teach ( $n = 2$ )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of clarity on instructional role and responsibility</li> <li>2. Limited instructional background</li> <li>3. Insufficient instructional support and training</li> </ol>

## Appendix B

### Thematic Categories and Examples Drawn from Responses to Open-ended Survey Items 2a and 2b

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Survey Question 2a: Beneficial aspects of Basic Instruction Program's pre-teaching orientation	Survey Question 2b: Least beneficial aspects of Basic Instruction Program's pre-teaching orientation
1. Extensive coverage of Fitness for Life (FFL) courses	1. Untimely and rushed lectures and meetings
2. Opportunity to socialize with influential individuals (peers, fellow GTAs, faculty)	2. Lack of interaction between lecturers and GTAs
3. Coverage of university and Basic Instruction Program (BIP) rules, regulations, and policies	3. Unengaged audience
	4. No input from GTAs
	5. Repetitious information

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## Appendix C

### Thematic Categories and Examples Drawn from Responses to Open-ended Survey Item 3

GTA instructional concern/issue	GTA recommendation in relation to instructional concern/issue
Lack of communication between GTAs and coordinator	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monthly or semester meetings</li> <li>2. More on-site evaluations by BIP's coordinator</li> <li>3. Less mass e-mails from BIP's coordinator</li> <li>4. More opportunities to socialize with fellow GTAs and faculty in less formal, semi-structured, instructional settings</li> </ol>
Ineffective BIP pre-teaching orientation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Expand to two days minimum</li> <li>2. Cover Fitness for Life (FFL) and Basic Physical Activity (BPA) courses with equal depth</li> <li>3. Less policy coverage and more instructional practice</li> <li>4. Discuss instructional evaluation process in more detail</li> <li>5. Involve more experienced GTAs and faculty in orientation</li> </ol>
Lack of accessibility to instructional resources	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop a resource room to house textbooks, old syllabi and other instructional resources</li> <li>2. Provide GTAs with relevant textbooks and instructional aids in a timely manner</li> </ol>
No substantial in-service support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hold regular in-service meetings and seminars with topics related to instructional effectiveness</li> <li>2. Hold seminars on non-instructional topics such as CPR and first-aid</li> </ol>
Ineffective supervision	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BIP's coordinator should evaluate GTAs in person rather than depend solely on student evaluations</li> <li>2. BIP's coordinator should discuss student evaluations with GTA in detail in a formal setting</li> <li>3. More personal interaction between GTAs and BIP's coordinator within instructional context is needed</li> </ol>