ASSESSING PREBACCALAUREATE HUMAN PHYSIOLOGY COURSES

Vikki L. McCleary

Department of Physiology, University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Grand Forks, North Dakota 58202

Two surveys were conducted between 1994 and 1996. The purpose of the initial survey was to obtain demographic information about prebaccalaureate human physiology courses. Of the 117 responding physiology departments, 50% offered human physiology at the prebaccalaureate level to 14,185 students during the 1994-1995 academic year. The mean was 245 students per year (±30 SE). Class size was limited by 44% of the respondents. Prebaccalaureate human physiology was offered as a separate course from anatomy by 93% of the departments. Sixty-one percent scheduled the course once a year. The purpose of the second survey was to determine how physiology departments evaluated prebaccalaureate physiology courses and faculty. All responding departments utilized student feedback; 38% of the departments included physiology chair review, 38% peer review, and 9% allied health faculty review. Twenty-eight percent of allied health programs evaluated the course. Results indicated that, whereas a significant number of undergraduate students are enrolled in prebaccalaureate physiology courses annually, those courses appear to lack formal, consistent formative evaluation.


Key words: undergraduate; allied health student; teaching effectiveness; formative evaluation

The physiology department at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences offers a prebaccalaureate (undergraduate) human physiology course for the allied health, premedicine, and physical education students. The prebaccalaureate human physiology course was offered in both the fall and spring semesters to a total of 240 students per year. However, by 1992, the number of students requesting enrollment increased significantly. The physiology department did not have the resources available to teach 50–60 additional students per semester. This increased demand delayed the students' enrollment in the course, postponed admission to their selected programs, and increased the number of semesters necessary for graduation.

A search of the literature was undertaken to determine whether other physiology departments had encountered increased demand and what methods were suggested to modify enrollment practices. Before 1994, no organized demographic information regarding prebaccalaureate human physiology courses was available. The physiology department faculty thus determined that the 1994 survey would be a cost-effective method of obtaining information about how similar physiology departments managed enrollment, the frequency of course offerings, service to respective student populations, the number of credit hours allotted, whether laboratory experiences were included, and how the course was evaluated (see APPENDIX A).
The purpose of the 1996 survey was to ascertain current criteria by which physiology departments evaluate undergraduate human physiology courses and instructors. It was hoped that this shared information would assist the physiology faculty in developing criteria specific to the assessment of teaching effectiveness (see Appendix B).

METHODS

In May 1994, a questionnaire was mailed, along with a cover letter explaining the questionnaire, to the 158 department chairs, and to physiology department chairs, of schools of medicine in those universities in the United States and Canada that offer a baccalaureate degree in physiology. A current listing of the department chairs of schools of medicine and the 1988 Institutions Awarding Academic Degrees with a Major in Physiology (1) were used to as a mailing list. Those physiology departments that did not respond were sent another copy of the same questionnaire in October 1994.

In March 1996, a questionnaire was mailed, along with a cover letter explaining the questionnaire, to 50 physiology department chairs who had been identified from the initial survey and from correspondence. Physiology departments within schools of medicine that offer prebaccalaureate human physiology courses were chosen exclusively for the 1996 study. The physiology department chairs who did not respond were sent a second copy of the same questionnaire in October 1996.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data from the 1994 and 1996 surveys.

RESULTS

Of the 158 physiology departments sent surveys in 1994, 117 responded, and 32 of 50 responded to the 1996 survey. In the 1994 survey, 50% of the responding departments offered human physiology at the baccalaureate level. Of these respondents, 39 were medical school physiology departments and 20 were institutions offering a baccalaureate degree in physiology. A total of 14,185 students per year were enrolled in those 59 institutions in the 1994–1995 academic year. The number of students enrolled ranged from 8 to 1,200 students per year (Fig. 1). The mean was 245 ± 30 (± SE) students.

Prebaccalaureate human physiology was offered as a specific course, separate from anatomy, by 93% of the physiology departments. Twelve percent offered both a combined and a separate course, and seven percent offered only a combined anatomy and physiology course. The frequency with which the prebaccalaureate human physiology course was offered varied from once a year to more than three times a year. Sixty-one percent offered the course once a year, twenty-four percent twice a year, and fifteen percent three or more times per year. Class size was limited by 44% of the physiology departments. The majority of physiology departments limited enrollment to <200 students, giving priority to allied health students. The methods used to limit enrollment are listed in Table 1.
The number of credits awarded for the prebaccalaureate human physiology course ranged from three to five semester credit hours and from six to ten quarter credit hours. The majority of departments awarded four or five semester credit hours for the course as shown in Table 2.

Twenty-three physiology departments offered a laboratory component; eighteen included credit for a laboratory component in the total course credits, and five offered the laboratory as a separate course. Live animal experiments, video demonstrations, computer-assisted instructions, and computer simulations were used to explain physiological concepts in the laboratory. These results are presented in Fig. 2.

Only six of the departments charged the students a laboratory fee, ranging from $10 to $30. The number of allied health programs requiring a laboratory component is shown in Table 3. Physical therapy, nursing, and occupational therapy programs required that a laboratory component be included with the course more often than other programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methods of limiting enrollment in prebaccalaureate human physiology during 1994–1995 academic year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Students</th>
<th>Priority to Allied Health Majors</th>
<th>Registrar (Class Level)</th>
<th>Academic Performance</th>
<th>Space Limitation</th>
<th>Quota System</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–50</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–100</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101–150</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151–200</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201–250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251–300</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301–350</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>351–400</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>401–450</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>451–500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501–550</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>551–600</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>601–650</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>651–700</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>701</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Credit hour for laboratory included.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credit hours offered for prebaccalaureate human physiology during 1994–1995 academic year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credit Hours</th>
<th>Physiology Departments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (Semester)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (Semester)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (Semester)</td>
<td>17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (Quarter)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (Quarter)</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (Quarter)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Credit hour for laboratory included.
Demographics from the 1996 survey revealed that 85% of the physiology departments offered human physiology at the junior/senior class level, and 31% offered both lower and upper class-level physiology courses (Table 4). Whereas the majority of physiology departments offered only one undergraduate physiology course, other departments offered exercise physiology and specific organ systems courses.

Of the responding physiology departments, 86% critiqued the course. The majority solicited student ratings, whereas only 12% included more than one assessment tool to evaluate the course. The methods used by the physiology departments to evaluate teaching effectiveness are presented in Table 5. Student ratings, physiology chair, peer, and allied health program reviews were methods utilized by the physiology departments surveyed. Thirty-one percent of the physiology departments exclusively used the student ratings to assess teaching effectiveness.

The second survey also included criteria to evaluate teaching strategies. In addition to lecture, clinical applications, laboratory experiences, computer-based multimedia instructional materials, and assigned problems or homework were methods utilized. The amount of student contact time for each of these methods ranged from 1 to 8%. These results are presented in Fig. 3.

Methods of assessing student achievement in the course are listed in Fig. 4. All physiology departments assessed student learning by multiple-choice exams, whereas other methods of assessment accounted for 1-7% of the student’s total grade.
DISCUSSION

In the 1994–1995 academic year, 14,185 students were enrolled in prebaccalaureate human physiology courses. Considering this impressive number of students enrolled each year, it is apparent that faculty teaching in these curricula represent an important role models (18). The quality of these instructors’ teaching may significantly affect the career choices of many of these students (18).

Almost all of the physiology departments offered prebaccalaureate human physiology as a separate course from anatomy. Sixty-one percent scheduled the physiology course once a year, and sixty-three percent awarded four to five credit semester hours for the course. Thirty-nine percent of the courses offered a laboratory component; the majority used live animals to demonstrate physiological concepts. Only...
22% of the departments utilized computer-assisted instruction and video demonstrations.

In addition, the second survey found that 100% of the physiology departments utilized the didactic lecture format for 81% of total student contact time. The incorporation of active learning opportunities into the lecture format, when teaching strategies can be modified, has been reported in the literature (2, 12–14, 16). One questions why physiology teachers are not incorporating other teaching modalities into their courses. Is a lack of formative (improving faculty teaching) evaluation a factor? Self-reflection, student achievement, student ratings, and chair peer reviews are recommended by teaching strategists to be included in formative evaluations (2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 17, 19).

The use of self-evaluation is as important an aspect in teaching as scholarship (4). John Dewey’s description of reflective inquiry not only applies to students’ critical thinking processes but also to assess whether the instructor’s classroom actions reflect his or her epistemology (6, 7). Developing alternative actions and then monitoring change within the classroom must be an important part of self-evaluation if teachers are to grow/develop in the profession of teaching (3, 5, 19).

Assessment of student learning is a fundamental parameter utilized to evaluate teaching effectiveness. Multiple-choice examinations provided 85% of each student’s total grade; however, not all students equally demonstrate competency by multiple-choice examination (2, 9, 11, 15). Because of the increasingly diverse student population, alternative student assessments may include essay examinations, term papers, homework, laboratory experiences, and cooperative learning. However, we do not currently appreciate the degree to which student assessment is being utilized by other disciplines in course evaluation. The limited inclusion of other methods of evaluation of student achievement shows a lack of instructional awareness of the changing enrollment characteristics of undergraduate students.

All physiology departments in the second survey utilized anonymous student ratings as a measure of appraising teaching effectiveness, which corresponds to almost universal usage in the university setting in the United States (5, 19). Limited involvement by physiology department chairs, peers, and allied health programs is troubling. Students lack the background to provide the evaluative information that the chair, colleagues, and allied health programs can provide. Another limitation is that few students have developed the ability to assess their metacognitive skills, a student’s self-awareness about himself or herself as a learner and awareness about strategies that can be used to accomplish academic goals (3, 10). Despite the fact that educational strategists recommend a multifaceted approach for improving teaching in the classroom, only one study has previously addressed evaluation of medical school physiology teaching (4).

CONCLUSIONS

The data presented here highlight the importance of renewed focus on prebaccalaureate physiology education and, furthermore, justify the potential formation of a prebaccalaureate committee within the American Physiological Society that would plan research/pedagogical sessions aimed at those physiologists most involved in undergraduate education. Additional joint seminars with the Human Anatomy and Physiology Society members is also recommended.

Formative evaluation of prebaccalaureate physiology teaching is encouraged. Increased physiology department chair, peer review, self-evaluation, allied health faculty, and program involvement may increase teaching effectiveness and facilitate professional development.

APPENDIX A

University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences Physiology Survey

1. Do you offer a human physiology course at the prebaccalaureate level? How often is it offered?
2. Number of credit hours: ______
3. Is it combined with anatomy? ___ yes ___ no
4. At what level of difficulty is the course offered?
   ___ freshman ___ sophomore ___ junior
5. How many students are enrolled in the course per year?
6. Do you limit the size of the class?
7. If so, how do you determine which student to admit?
   ___ Quota system (% from each major requiring the course) ___ Average combined academic performance for each major ___ Priority system based upon those students admitted to a major program ___ Limited to specific major only ___ Level of credits earned ___ Other
8. Is a laboratory offered with the class? If yes, is the lab: ____ required, ____ optional
9. If optional, is it required for any of the following majors? ____ Athletic training, ____ Dietetics, ____ Nursing, ____ Clinical laboratory science, ____ Pre-medicine, ____ Occupational therapy, ____ Physical therapy, ____ Other
10. Is a laboratory fee charged? If yes, how much: ____
11. Is the lab fee charged: ____ student, ____ department major
12. Do any of the experiments involve live animals? ____
13. If yes, ____ frogs, ____ turtles, ____ rats, ____ dogs, ____ rabbits, ____ other
14. If no, are audiovisual materials and/or computer simulations used as an alternative? If yes, please list.
15. How is the content of the class evaluated? Please comment.

APPENDIX B

University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences Physiology Survey

Number of different prebaccalaureate human physiology courses offered per year
Class level(s) for each of the prebaccalaureate human physiology course(s) offered (specify for each course)
____ Upper level (junior/senior)
____ Lower level (freshman/sophomore)

1. How is each prebaccalaureate physiology course evaluated?
Student (anonymous) evaluations during the course offering: ____ yes, ____ no
If yes, answer the next question; if no, go to question 2.
Are the student evaluations in a computerized format? ____ yes, ____ no
Does it include a section for individual comments? ____ yes, ____ no
Does it include an evaluation of critical thinking? ____ yes, ____ no
If no, how is student evaluation of the course’s approach to complex thinking processes evaluated?

2. Yearly evaluation by the Physiology Department chair? ____ yes, ____ no
If yes, answer the next question. If no, go to question 3.
Does the Physiology chair evaluate course content? ____ yes, ____ no
Is an evaluation of the presentation of physiological concepts in lecture evaluated? ____ yes, ____ no
Are the method(s) of presentation evaluated? ____ yes, ____ no

3. Is the course evaluated by peer review? ____ yes, ____ no
If yes, answer the next question. If no, go to question 4.
Is the peer review completed by faculty in the Physiology Department? ____ yes, ____ no
Is the peer review completed by faculty from Biomedical Science Departments in Medical Schools that offer prebaccalaureate human physiology courses? ____ yes, ____ no
Comments: ____

Is the peer review completed by allied health faculty that have agreed to participate in the evaluation process? ____ yes, ____ no

4. Do allied health faculty for the programs that require the course evaluate the course? ____ yes, ____ no
If yes, answer the next question. If no, go to question 5. This evaluation is performed: (check all that apply)
____ by allied health faculty assessment of student learning of concepts necessary to perform successfully in their program’s courses
____ by reaccreditation approval by the program’s national accreditation evaluation
____ by allied health faculty evaluation of the course content
____ by allied health faculty evaluation of the presentation of physiological concepts
____ by allied health faculty evaluation of the syllabus
Comments: ____

5. How is the course content presented? (check all that apply)
____ didactic lecture, ____% of total contact time
____ clinical correlations, ____% of total contact time
____ computer assisted, ____% of total contact time
____ instructional material, ____% of total contact time
____ assigned questions/problems to hand in for grading
____ lab experiments, ____% of total contact time
____ computer assisted tutorials and study materials
____% of total contact time

6. How is student performance evaluated? (check all that apply)
____ multiple-choice exams, ____% of total grade
____ essay exams, ____% of total grade
____ assigned coursework, ____% of total grade
____ laboratory experiments, ____% of total grade
____ group presentations, ____% of total grade
____ in depth reports, ____% of total grade
____ drop quizzes, ____% of total grade
____ other: ____%

I thank Kathleen Call, Carol Winkels, and Stephanie Bolken for secretarial assistance and the Division of Biomedical Communications for technical assistance.

Address for reprint requests: V. L. McCleary, Dept. of Physiology, Univ. of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, 501 N. Columbia Rd., Grand Forks, ND 58202.

References


