Introduction

The expectations of scholarly activity are increasing at most colleges and universities, while funding for research is decreasing. As a result, instructors at these institutions are broadening the definitions of “learning” and “research” and bringing these two activities together in their courses. Few studies, however, have examined the effects of a research-based curriculum from the students’ perspective or explored the ways in which students may experience research throughout their curricula.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether incorporating an actual research study into a graduate course would increase graduate students’ confidence in conducting their own research projects.

Methods

Graduate students (n = 9) in their first semester of a master’s program and enrolled in NHM 613 Health Behavior Theory were involved in designing, implementing, and analyzing focus group discussions with residential undergraduate students on their food beliefs and attitudes towards eating healthy on a university campus. The graduate students developed and pilot tested questions based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Figure 1). They were involved in IRB submission, student recruitment, room set-up, moderating and transcribing recordings, and analyzing discussions using qualitative software. Four focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 14 participants recruited by graduate students. The graduate students were then surveyed on the benefits of incorporating a research project into the course curriculum and given a self-assessment of their own confidence in conducting research.

Results

Graduate students were asked four survey questions regarding their perception on incorporating a research project into a graduate course. The first question asked students how much exposure to research they had prior to this course. On a scale 7-point Likert (7 Extensive to 1 None) students responded “more than some” (M = 4.44) research experience. Questions 2-4 were also measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 7 Very Important/Very Good to 1 Not at all/Not Important. The results showed that students believe it is very important (M = 6.44) to incorporate a real research study into a course to help students in better understanding the research process and the research process was somewhat as they expected (M = 5.44). Students also believed that focus group discussions were a good (M = 6.22) research project to incorporate into a graduate course. Questions 5-10 asked students how confident they were in conducting the various aspects of research prior to and post participating the focus group discussions research project. Mean how confident there were in conducting the various aspects of research prior to the project to incorporate into a graduate course. Questions 5-10 asked students how confident they were in conducting the various aspects of research prior to and post participating the focus group discussions research project.

Discussion

The graduate students’ responses indicated that they viewed the incorporation of a research project into the graduate Behavioral Theory course as very important. They also rated the focus group research positively. This supports Visser-Wijnveen et al. who found that students who participated in research during a course reported better understanding of their discipline and greater appreciation of research.

In an open-ended survey question, the students reported participant recruitment as one of the most difficult parts of the project. This challenge allowed them to use conceptual skills and critical thinking in developing recruitment methods.

Conclusion

The goal of incorporating a research project into a graduate course was to increase graduate students’ confidence in conducting research with the desired outcome being that the majority, if not all, NHM graduate students conduct thesis research. Presently all 9 graduate students that participated in the focus group discussions research project are working towards completing a thesis. The faculty member teaching the NHM 613 plans to continue incorporating a research project into the course curriculum.

References