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**Advancing the Profession of Exercise Physiology**

**Professional Organizations and Entrepreneurship**

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As the ASEP leaders have discovered, too many exercise physiologists are a *“…perfect expression of the context, driven, driving, but going nowhere.”*

*-- Warren Bennis*

I

**N MANY WAYS**, organizational development is not a natural thing to evolve. More often than not, it goes against the traditional pattern of thinking. Creating and developing the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists* [1] has not been easy. It has been work and a lot of it. But, it can be learned and, as long as it is treated as a duty, and as long as it is carried out in a disciplined manner, it can be done.

For ASEP to continue its influence on exercise physiology, it must create a structure that encourages exercise physiologists to be entrepreneurs. The leaders must think beyond their everyday way of thinking to change and to adapt the ASEP 21st century perspective. This means that ASEP must remain organized as the professional organization of exercise physiologists in the United States. Obviously, this requires the support of all exercise physiologists [2]. They are responsible for nourishing the struggles of professionalism.

In particular, exercise physiologists who are college professors must step up to the plate. They are uniquely responsible for changing the thinking of exercise physiology as a discipline to that of a profession and, more specifically, to a healthcare profession. Postponing action and support of ASEP can’t help the change process. No matter how busy they may be or for whatever reason they may want to stay disengaged, they must learn to try and extend themselves to make better what the ASEP leaders have already started.

This means there must be special moments at work or elsewhere to share with their colleagues the importance of ASEP and its work towards ethical thinking, accreditation, board certification, and standards of practice [3]. Even though they may know relatively little about each, by virtue of their identity with exercise physiology, they are responsible for extending themselves, for marketing exercise physiology, and for helping to change the work of exercise physiologists from the fitness gym mentality to that of a healthcare entrepreneur and innovator.

This doesn’t have to be a 24/7 way of living or thinking, just more than what has been the case for a decade. The American Society of Exercise Physiologists is a new organization. It is still in its infancy (just 14 years old) compared to the professional organization of physical therapists that is 90+ years in existence. No wonder the PTs are doing so well in healthcare. It will not be long that PTs will be recognized as the experts in developing exercise prescriptions for health, fitness, and rehabilitation. No doubt the APTA organization has its leadership working on specific vision and goal statements for tomorrow as more PTs become healthcare entrepreneurs and innovators.

Why aren’t exercise physiologists making the same plans? Why can’t they see the big picture [4]? Why must exercise physiologists continue to neglect what other healthcare professionals have been doing for decades? Must exercise physiologists remain Bob’s Gym for $12 or $14 an hour without health benefits? The ASEP leaders don’t think so and yet, to ask the leadership to continue working 24/7 to shoulder the full burden of change and developing a new organization is like asking a gymnast to run a marathon day after day for 14 years. It can be done, but obviously very slowly. The innovative effort that underlies professionalism in exercise physiology is multifaceted, requiring the work of many to experience the benefits of change in a timely fashion.

The most important caveat is: If you believe that change is possible and you are willing to make it happen, then, it will happen but only in proportion to your support and that of your colleagues. Second, it is very important to reach out to exercise physiologists who are not involved in improving sports medicine and/or exercise science. After all, neither area of study is exercise physiology and only entrepreneurs at heart can understand this point. They get rather quickly the traditional purpose of rules, policies, and bureaucratic agendas than non-entrepreneurs. But, more importantly, they are driven more by creativity and the spirit of encouraging the start-up of new ventures.

Exercise physiology entrepreneurs understand the impact of new thinking, particularly job creation and economic growth. That’s why college courses exist to teach the vital components of entrepreneurship. In fact, Katz [5] indicates that “Approximately 2,200 courses are offered at 1,600 colleges and universities nationwide, more than 200 colleges and universities have majors and concentrations in entrepreneurship and at least 20 business schools require that all graduates of their institutions take entrepreneurship classes as part of their curriculum.”

Clearly, in regards to exercise physiology, two simultaneous problems prevail at the present time. First, there is a major shortage of entrepreneurship faculty at every academic rank. Second, there is the lack of PhD programs that provide a course in entrepreneurship for exercise physiologists. It is a fact that research in entrepreneurship should be an accepted and respected part of exercise physiology. Entrepreneurship is now a part of mainstream healthcare, especially in nursing and physical therapy.

If entrepreneurship is important, why aren’t more educators teaching their students the business fundamentals to enhance the probability of start-ups [6]? It is a good idea that the students’ entrepreneurship education should reflect the real-world environment, including paying attention to writing the business plan, new market development and expansion strategies, and financing and operating a business. Likewise, students need to know how to write a mission statement: What business is it in and what is its reason for being? Getting the statement right provides a direction to the entrepreneurs.

But, as Mathilde Krim said in Warren Bennis’s 2003 book [7], “People give their allegiance to an institution, and they become prisoners of habits, practices, and rules that make them ultimately ineffectual.” Similarly, Norman Lears is reported to have said in by Bennis that, “The first step toward change is to refuse to be deployed by others and to choose to deploy yourself. Thus the process begins.” That’s the trick, isn’t it? As exercise physiologists learn to step outside the influence and allegiance to institutions (such as sports medicine), thus refusing to be deployed by them they learn that change is possible. This means that they should have doubts about professionalism and entrepreneurship, it is natural to feel that way.

Doubts and mistakes are part of the change process. No one has to be perfect with the first step of something new. As Paul Tillich said, “Courage is self-affirmation in spite of that which tends to hinder the self from affirming itself.” Thus, regardless of the feelings of not being up to the task of creating a profession of exercise physiology, knowledge of what is right is a force that drives change. That is why Batten and Hudson said [8], “…the power for success lies in only one person and that is YOU. It’s in your mind.” It is time to stop surrendering our individuality and dreams. It is time to stop settling for less than what “all” exercise physiologists, not just the college professors, deserve – professional respect!

The bottom line is this: Exercise physiologists can’t be loyal to two masters. This is a fundamental principle of all healthcare professions. They understand that to grow in greatness as a profession requires a highly singular focus on integrity and authenticity. Both represent a freedom from phoniness or pretense [9], and both argue for genuineness and sincerity. Thus, the question: How can academic exercise physiologists be authentic, regardless of their enthusiasm for research, when they serve sports medicine? They can’t. Their judgment is clouded. No wonder it is difficult to talk and write about professionalism in exercise physiology, much less entrepreneurship.

Nevertheless, the burden of change and participation in shaping academic conditions and circumstances is the exercise physiologist’s responsibility. Far too much time has been lost to confining the college professors’ decisions strictly to the didactics of instruction. Clearly, at present, it is true that the ASEP leaders’ claim that exercise physiology is a profession is difficult to defend. In many ways, from the general public’s point of view, the applicant with a degree in exercise physiology is no different from the personal trainer with a weekend-warrior certification. This is why exercise physiologists must educate the public sector as they claim to do in colleges and universities. Potential employers need to understand that exercise physiologists have their own special knowledge that isn’t generally shared or known by non-exercise physiologists.

Questions about the profession of exercise physiology should be answered based on the context of their work, the complexity of the context, and the special scientific knowledge, hands-on skills, the complexity of the context, and the burden of judgment entailed. This is as the ASEP leaders believe, and why they are involved in creating a “true” profession of exercise physiology. And yet, even after a decade since its founding, the use of words [10] such as “…*profession*, *professional*, *professionalism*, and *professionalization* have been accompanied by an alarming lack of discourse.” It is not surprising and most unfortunate that a person who is a little bit knowledgeable can be considered as an authority in the use of exercise as medicine.

The dismaying part of this thinking is the failure of the academic exercise physiologists to capture and build on the concept of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession. In fact, it has proven difficult, even ugly on behalf of some colleagues, to engage them in issues surrounding the role of exercise as medicine the implications of this for exercise physiologists. The concept of exercise physiology as a profession separate from sports medicine is simply too much to grapple with. And yet, unless they acquire the backbone to embrace the ASEP vision [11], the moral imperatives that arise out of the academic study of exercise physiology for enculturating students remain untouched.

The most obvious moral deficiency in this area is the failure to academically and professionally support the students of exercise physiology. The faculty is driven to do research after research and support generic organizations while neglecting their students’ issues and challenges in locating financially good jobs in the public sector. It is not enough to just lecture and assign grades, however important. A profession, such as the emerging profession of exercise physiology, cannot stand idly by in the face of evidence that academic exercise physiologists continue to turn a blind eye to the student’s financial investment in the academic major. Society cannot afford college teachers who fail to understand and assume the moral burden that goes with accessing knowledge and applying the same to pay the bills as an employed professional.

If exercise physiology is to become the responsible, credible academic major that it must, the college professors must be purposefully engaged in the work of professionalism. They must start recognizing exercise physiology as something different from sports medicine and exercise science. Self-proclamation of their professional beliefs and status is important. They must assume the responsibility for continuing to: (1) educate the public sector that exercise physiologists have a strong “scientific” knowledge base; and (2) that the ASEP restrictions on “what is exercise physiology” and “who is an exercise physiologist” are important to being recognized as having power and prestige as a healthcare profession. It is with this insight that exercise physiologists recognize legitimacy is directly linked to their combination of knowledge complexity and technical innovations.

Here, it is also important to recognize the shift in rhetorical grounding of the past to a fundamental shift in the rhetoric of ASEP leaders (i.e., with the letting go of long-held beliefs). Professionalization is the central focus of contemporary ideas and concerns that drives the improvement of exercise physiology. It is a highly specific rhetoric that clusters around notions pertinent to knowledge, such as the application of physiology to sports and athletics. Yet, this is not the concept that captures the essential meaning of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession. The challenge before academic exercise physiologists is to design career opportunities for their students. Not surprisingly, then, why not teach students how to start their own healthcare business? Why not teach exercise physiology entrepreneurship? Start-ups can be thought of in the same context as a new research project!

When properly prescribed by a Board Certified Exercise Physiologist, regular exercise improves mind-body health. But, unfortunately, there are not enough healthcare start-ups by exercise physiologists. The so-called fitness professionals and personal trainers have instead taken the lead. Almost overnight it seems, the word “trainer” has gained in popularity. But, since they are not scientifically trained in exercise physiology, there is a very strong reason to think that exercise physiologists add a new layer to the healthcare in the United States. The exercise physiologist’s cardiovascular training and scientific way of thinking are highly valued. And yet, if the trainer is believed equal to the exercise physiologist, the road to successful career paths will be long and arduous.

Hence, one thing is clear. Working at Bob’s Gym without health benefits or as a part-time cardiac rehab technician does not cut it. Think about it. Many college graduates have more than $100,000 in tuition loans! The competitive advantage lies in exercise entrepreneurship whereby the exercise physiologist takes the lead in managing his or her own economic and social well-being. So, if you are advising exercise physiology students, why not have them take courses in accounting, finance, marketing, management, and entrepreneurship along with the traditional exercise physiology courses? If you are a student, why not take an entrepreneurship and small business education course that teaches the “how to” about hanging a shingle and developing a financial strategy [12]?

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