**Journal of Professional Exercise Physiology**

ISSN 1550-963X

**January 2012 Vol 10 No 1**

**Thinking the Impossible**

Tommy Boone, PhD, MPH, MAM, MBA

Board Certified Exercise Physiologist

Fellow, ASEP

Professor of Exercise Physiology

The College of St. Scholastica

Duluth, MN 55811

If you’re really interested in restructuring your life, you must give up some of your resources without a full guarantee that things will turn out the way you want them to.

--Gordon Porter Miller

F

|  |
| --- |
| *Sooner or later everyone sits down to a banquet of consequences**-- Robert Louis Stevenson* |

OR BETTER THAN a decade now, I have been thinking the impossible. In a certain sense, it is required of me to do so. Also, it is my choice to not live my life defined by the beliefs of others. Despite how easy it would be to do so, I simply cannot be part of an academic system in which students are virtually invisible to society. Thousands of college students major in academic degrees of which there is no real possibility of finding a job that will help them become successful. If college degrees exist for the amusement of others, then, they should be criticized. Under no circumstances is it appropriate to promote a meaningless degree. Students need to know the truth if they are to avoid years of disappointment and financial difficulty.

Making sense of decades of nonsense is required of all college teachers. It is a matter of discarding poor thinking and putting in its place straight thinking. Think about it: Is a college degree necessary to be a personal trainer or fitness instructor? Why then do students spend thousands of dollars in tuition fees to end up working at Bob’s Gym? Why are they encouraged to major in exercise science? Frankly, there are several reasons for students doing so. Students enjoy associating with athletics and the exercise science degree allows for a type of closeness to the sports world that other degree programs do not allow. They enjoy satisfying their immediate emotional and social needs. But, as so many students have said in retrospect, they didn’t realize the mistake they were making and how it shaped their lives after college.

|  |
| --- |
| *To be able to choose the line of greatest advantage instead of yielding in the path of least resistance…is the essence of freedom.**-- George Bernard Shaw* |

Later, when they realize that “exercise is medicine” and yet, they aren’t scientifically prepared to prescribe exercise as a medical treatment, they are disappointed, sad, and feel betrayed by their professors. They realize that their friends in other degree programs are locating excellent jobs in the public sector. Yet they aren’t, and it occurs to them for the first time that pursuing a career is academically related to a credible degree program. Then, it begins to hit hard. They learn to manage their anger and their lives, but disappointment is huge. Their reality is that “exercise as medicine” must be prescribed by qualified healthcare professionals. The sense of powerlessness is increased month after month without an income to survive financially, much less begin payment towards their tuition loans.

Personal trainers and fitness instructors are not healthcare professionals. Of course, it doesn’t mean that a trainer or an instructor isn’t a professional at what he or she does in the gym. The bottom line is this: Being professional isn’t the same thing as being academically credible. To think otherwise can be considered as a tragic illusion – tragic, because it is clear that trainers and instructors are not educated in the scientific thinking of applied anatomy and physiology. Yet, the ASEP board certified exercise physiologist are educated and approved to work with diverse healthcare populations.

In learning how to make a difference that helps exercise physiologists, it is necessary to think outside the mainstream. In short, it is learning to think for “yourself.” This thinking is more specific and professionally-oriented than taking traditional physical education courses in an exercise science or kinesiology major. It is “thinking” that drives mentors, friends, and colleagues of an established healthcare profession to take action and support each other. Such experiences and knowledge gradually become a way of thinking. Point in fact, that is why the exercise physiologists’ code of ethics is now recognized as critically important when working with clients. Similarly, the accreditation of academic programs is required of healthcare professionals.

|  |
| --- |
| *To give up the opportunity to define yourself is to give up your freedom to decide what you want to become.**--Gordon Porter Miller* |

If you are a student, why not pause for a moment and think about what you want in life? Clearly, the leftovers dilemma of yesterday’s thinking must be addressed and corrected. That’s why every college graduate is not prepared to be career-oriented healthcare professionals. The decision to major in an academic field cannot be confused with just another decision. It is a big decision that must be linked to a desirable outcome. Students who can’t locate a credible healthcare job majoring in exercise science must commit to restructuring their thinking. If they are really interested in finding a great job and being able to pay back their tuition loans, there must be some reasonable guarantee in regards to the academic major. If not, then, it is logical that the majority of the college graduates will need to go back to college to major in another degree that will provide them the opportunity for financial success.

Why is this important? How about this, have you heard the expression: “Wake up and smell the roses?” It is as simple as acknowledging that time, energies, and effort misspent are wasted forever! Why allow that to happen, especially when it cost so much. We live in a world of financial risk and great responsibilities. College students have unprecedented opportunities to blend professionalism, exercise medicine, and entrepreneurship. Yet, it requires thinking the impossible. Faculty members must abandon their old views of an academic position. This means transforming the exercise science major to the exercise physiology major. It is simply inappropriate for exercise science or kinesiology majors to refer to themselves as exercise physiologists. The ASEP leaders have made it clear that continuing to do so is wrong.

Exercise physiologists must depart from yesterday’s thinking if they are to navigate the ASEP mindset from which a new world of career opportunities await. Some will argue that everything is good as it is. They will say that it is unnecessary to change from exercise science to exercise physiology. Thus, they will keep right on doing exactly what they have been doing for decades. Nothing will change for them, that is, until others realize what they are doing fails to make sense. Then, as they come face to face with departments closing and their survival financially speaking, the uncertainty will force them to see seek a better understanding of the problem. Rather than waiting for such an outcome, why not “think differently?” Others recognized the need to think differently in their own fields of study. Most their work towards professionalism got started 50 to 90 years ago. Why have exercise physiologists caught on to the need for their own professional organization, professionalism, and other fundamental concerns and opportunities of promoting exercise as medicine.

|  |
| --- |
| *Taking control, I repeat, does involve some risks. You have no guarantee of what you want.**-- Gordon Porter Miller* |

Transforming exercise science and related degree programs to exercise physiology begins with changing the way exercise physiologists think about the academic major and the profession of exercise physiology. Yes, it may come across as an impossible thing to do so. But it isn’t impossible to do so. All that is required is a new mindset and the willingness to do what is necessary to help the students and the profession. After all, it isn’t a foregone conclusion that all doctorate prepared exercise physiologists must work for the departments of exercise science, kinesiology or “whatever the title may be” versus working in an exercise physiology department itself – or, is it? More often than not, this certainly seems to be the case. Why not think the unthinkable? It is possible to think as an exercise physiologist who is also responsible for educating exercise physiology students so that they can find credible careers in healthcare.

For certain, it is pastime to think differently. Continuing to do so will only result in being left behind, academically, professionally, and personally. Why not become college teachers of a vision of something better for the students and the profession? The students need their professors to switch horses and get with the ASEP 21st century perspective. Change will bring such noticeable differences that professors will say, “Why didn’t we do this a long time ago?” “Why were we so locked into the past way of thinking?” “Why didn’t we see what our students were going through?” “We should have been more flexible and open to new ideas, especially the work of the ASEP organization.

This is not to say that exercise physiologists cannot continue to benefit from or engage in some of the behaviors and experiences of the past. All change is carried out on a two-way street that allows for experience the new and the old ways. Eventually though, the primary model of thinking will emerge consistent with the new way and less so the status quo. This is expected, and it is less ambiguous in terms of “staying the course of change.” If it is true that the new way is finally realized as a paradigm whose time has not yet come, then, that too will be a lesson learned. However, looking for new ideas and ways of succeeding requires both effort and boldness to find light in darkness. Every new organization, plan, and idea builds upon the commitment of many. In the end, it will turn out to be a win-win situation for both the profession of exercise physiology and exercise physiologists.

|  |
| --- |
| *To be able to choose the line of greatest advantage instead of yielding in the path of least resistance…is the essence of freedom.**-- George Bernard Shaw* |

Look across the healthcare professions. It will be obvious that they have been engaged in thinking about what they are and what they do that exercise physiologists have not been doing. From identifying their own code of ethics to profession-specific accreditation and standards of practice, members of these professions get it. They understand why they are supporters of their own “profession-specific” organization. They get why it is necessary to pull together their strengths and commitment to solve problems. They recognize the barriers to their work, and they have plans for dealing with the challenges. In a nutshell, they are not flying upside down as the academic exercise physiologists continue to do.

If only exercise physiologists would get past their own self-imposed barriers, they too could reinvent themselves. They could do the impossible and transform the students’ lives. All that is necessary is a mental map of the new exercise physiologist not as an instructor or trainer but as a healthcare professional. This need for unlearning the old and supporting the ASEP infrastructure to support it and to build trust among its members is great. It is the means to bridging the gap between the old and the new. In short, it is the means to transforming exercise physiology. It is what exercise physiologists must do, regardless of how radical the ideas and perspectives might sound. Trusting your gut is fundamental to having faith in bringing friends and colleagues together. It is all about knowing when to shift from one approach to another.

Switching horses isn’t irrational when it is the right thing to do for the right reason. The right thing is the commitment to exercise physiology as a healthcare profession. The measure of the professional should be defined by an accredited undergraduate degree. The concepts of professionalism and professional development must be taught and adopted. Therefore, the faculty must change the way they think about exercise physiology to transform the academic infrastructure. This means they must open their mind and begin to think for themselves. If you are college professor, ask yourself this question: “What can I do for my students?” Why not write down the things you think are possible? It’s not a matter of least resistance, but rather dealing with the forces that keep exercise physiology students from competing successfully with other healthcare students.

|  |
| --- |
| *There is something within you that is being called by eternity.**--Dr. Myles Munroe* |

Today, more than ever, it is vital to exercise your freedom. You can always continue to choose the past way of thinking or you do something about it. This is the critical choice, isn’t it? Take a moment to think about your own life. If you are a college teacher, what are some of the things you would like to do that you think you can’t do? Obviously, from the ASEP perspective, the goal is to learn how to avoid decision paralysis when you are faced with uncertainty. Otherwise, if you fail to realize your own professional goals, you will be bound to a life of doing what sports medicine and others think you should do. You are what you think. Throughout life, we are faced with countless decisions. Do this thing or that thing, then, do something else, or don’t do “whatever.” People learn to manage their lives by making well-considered choices.

The sense of powerlessness that has resulted from decades of mis-managed ideas is corrected by the exercise physiologist’s freedom to direct his/her own life. It is all about discovering what was true at the beginning but was not figured out until later. It is about being recognized as a healthcare professional. Understandably, it is not a simple process, and there are no guarantees. The tragedy is it has taken so long for exercise physiologists to get the big picture. Awareness of choice helps with avoiding the path of least resistance (i.e., sports medicine/exercise science). Today, more than ever, it is imperative that exercise physiologists recognize their commitment to exercise physiology and not sports medicine. If exercise physiologists don’t try to support their own professional organization, one thing is certain: They will have no say in their future.

***Suggested Readings***

Boone, T. (2010). [**Integrating Spirituality and Exercise Physiology: Toward A New Understanding of Health**](http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=8105&pc=9)**.** The Edwin Mellen Press, 166 pages.

This book proposes that health care is not just about physical abilities but mental and spiritual beliefs as well. The author argues for a more complex understanding of the psycho-physiological connection and advocates for a more holistic approach that may presently be perceived as a radical way to think about the practice of exercise and exercise physiology as a profession.

Boone, T. (2009). [**The Professionalization of Exercise Physiology: Certification, Accreditation, and Standards of Practice of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP)**](http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=7686&pc=9). The Edwin Mellen Press, 645 pages.

Exercise physiology is evolving and will continue to do so for a long time to come. This is the natural progression of things evident in most established professions. The chapters in this textbook represent a partial record of the change process. All professions are unfinished to some degree. The important point here is that a collection of individuals, usually members of a professional organization, are continually in pursuit of better procedures, guidelines, and policies.

Boone, T. (2007). [**Ethical Standards and Professional Credentials in the Practice of Exercise Physiology**](http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=7217&pc=9). The Edwin Mellen Press, 416 pages.

This is a book about ethics and professionalism in the practice of exercise physiology. Implications of unprofessional behavior are discussed, how to anticipate legal issues, and the future career expectations of exercise physiologists in healthcare. The author shares a academic vision for the future that requires serious analysis and decision-making on behalf of all exercise physiologists.

Boone, T. (2006). [**Exercise Physiology as a Career: A Guide and Sourcebook**](http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=6921&pc=9). The Edwin Mellen Press, 220 pages.

This book is designed to be a guide and sourcebook for persons who are considering exercise physiology as a career. This handbook includes twenty chapters that have been divided into the following five parts: Introduction, Exercise Physiology, Professionalism, Healthcare Professionals, and The Exercise Physiology Niche.

Boone, T. (2005). [**Exercise Physiology: Professional Issues, Organizational Concerns, and Ethical Trends**](http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=6311&pc=9)**.** The Edwin Mellen Press, 353 pages.

This book describes the founding and importance of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP). It explores the professional issues, organizational concerns, and ethical trends that all exercise physiologists face. A significant purpose of this study is to continue the changes in exercise physiology and the expected professional results ...

Boone, T. (2001). [**Professional Development of Exercise Physiology**](http://www.mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=6105&pc=9)**.** The Edwin Mellen Press, 215 pages.