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Dr. Frank Wyatt, EPC

*Board Certified Exercise Physiologist
Editor, ASEP newsletter*

A Program's Worth

Introduction

As a Professor and Graduate Coordinator of an academic Exercise Physiology program, I am often faced with students asking the question: "Is this a good program?" Students move from one major to the next within the university and graduate students select one university over another based on some sort of criteria. Right! Then, what drives their decision?

Universities across the nation have reputations as do programs within universities. How are these reputations established? As a faculty member, I promote our programs with the intent of persuading students to choose the program over many others. I explain to the students what they should look for in making their choice?

One important beginning point is to help the students determine the qualifications of the teachers in a specific academic program. Are the

teachers responsible for teaching the course content experts in their field? If that appears to be the case, what establishes this expertise? Perhaps, it is the scholarship the professor brings to his/her work. This “scholarship” is manifest in publications, research presentations, and grant procurement.

Additionally, one may look to the teachers’ involvement in professional organizations such as The American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) as part of a validation process to determine the professionalism of a professor. Is the faculty member credentialed within the profession-specific organization?

Not to be forgotten in a student’s search for “good” teachers within an academic program is the ability of the teacher to communicate. In other words, for a particular program to be considered “good,” teaching is a vitally important component. Does the teacher read his/her lecture notes in class? Or, is it apparent that the teacher knows the subject matter, given his/her ability to talk about a given subject for hours? Is the teacher passionate about teaching?

In sum, it is important that students have some knowledge of the academic qualifications of the faculty members in the department they are going to major in. As an example, how many publications do they have, how many presentations do they make each year at the state, regional, and national level, what is their academic rank (e.g., Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Full Professor), what are their certifications, are the certifications generic or profession-specific, and what are their teaching qualities?

Another vitally important component of an academic program is the content of the curriculum assigned with the program. This can differ to some extent based on departmental and university driven initiatives. Is the major Exercise Physiology, Kinesiology, Exercise Science or some derivative thereof? Often, this simple distinction in naming a major sets the curriculum for that major. Is the university considered a “Research” university and, if so, what exactly does that mean? Are undergraduate programs taught by doctoral students or tenure-track professors? On average, what is the class size? How many students attend the laboratory experiences? Do the teachers

oversee the labs vs. graduate students? Answers to these questions help to determine the worth of an academic program.

Do programs in question facilitate undergraduate research as a teaching tool? What about the discrepancy in credit hours within the major vs. the “general” credits required by the university? Many programs rely on credits from outside the department. A good example would be credit hours in Biology or Chemistry. Then, too, curriculums are developed and modified based on market demands as well as to establish pre-requisites for those seeking graduate work.

All of this can be quite confusing as students try to determine what classes are relevant, the level of classes offered (i.e., lower level vs. higher level based on rigor of material), and the number of credit hours obtained in a specific discipline.

One last observance I would like you to consider in evaluating Exercise Physiology programs is in the realm of student involvement. To begin with, look at class size as a preliminary tool for evaluating student involvement. It makes sense that the smaller the classroom size and student to teacher ratio, the greater the possibilities for student involvement. Note the class size requirement for labs. As a professor, I can tell you that the larger the number of students in a lab, the less individual involvement takes place.

Similarly, are students encouraged to become involved in student health fairs? What about campus presentations within the field? Are students encouraged to present their thoughts and/or research as undergraduates and graduates at professional meetings? Does the department promote and support internship opportunities? All of these represent a level of student involvement that is an invaluable aspect of any program.

With all of these investigative recommendations, it is still difficult for a student to determine the worth of a program. I have hinted through professional credentialing at how one might conclude their investigation and ultimately make the right decision in their choice of major and/or university. Earlier in this piece I mentioned that students should look at a professor’s involvement within professional

organizations as well as whether or not they hold credentials from these organizations.

Credentials such as the ASEP Board Certified Exercise Physiologist (EPC) tell a student that this individual has met a competency in a specific area within his/her field. In addition, certifications keep individuals current by requiring periodic evaluations through continuing education credits (CEC) or continuing education units (CEU). These credits or units are obtained through attendance and presentation at professional meetings, new course preparations, publications, etc. In other words, by being a credentialed professional one must stay current in the field to maintain their credentials. The same is true for programs.

The American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) has established criteria for accrediting educational programs. These programs must provide a high standard for their faculty, their curriculum, and student involvement. This is a way for students to ultimately answer the question: "Is this a good academic program"? For those attending universities with accredited programs in Exercise Physiology with credentialed faculty, the answer is an emphatic "Yes!"

*The best way to predict the future is to create it.
- Peter Drucker*