

Professionalization of Exercise Physiology_{online}

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The ASEP View of the Profession of Exercise Physiology

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Before you can inspire others, you have to be inspired yourself.

-- James M Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner
The Leadership Challenge

The purpose of this article is to suggest that the exercise physiology community can turn the failed rhetoric of sports medicine to good use, both for the profession and for those who need a solid healthcare plan. The failed rhetoric has shocked those who understand the mistakes. They understand that something is seriously wrong with the current exercise science thinking, and that to ensure the trust of the American people exercise physiologists must do what other professionals have done to be credible. The most badly needed changes are professional, which isn't that difficult to understand or apply.

My main argument is that the time has come for academic exercise physiologists to embrace the ASEP view of what is exercise physiology and who is an exercise physiologist. Students throughout the United States need a shared understanding of exercise physiology, and they need the conviction and support of academic exercise physiologists. It is no longer acceptable to encourage college students to major in non-exercise physiology degree programs. In particular, exercise science is an illusion! It is a useless degree, as is true with the kinesiology major and other related programs of study and/or concentrations. The bad news is that students cannot graduate and find acceptable jobs in the public sector. The good news is that ASEP is doing what it can to help correct this historical mistake.

Coincidentally, to put this problem in perspective, since exercise science is really a water-down physical education degree, and since physical education majors can locate teaching jobs worldwide, the problem this article addresses is the exercise science degree itself. It is beyond a scandal. It is a ridiculous mess. Seldom has such an academic program existed so long without being challenged, eliminated, or updated. All one can say is that the great majority of academic exercise physiologists have missed the mark, and they continue doing so semester after semester. Why they haven't stopped in their

tracks to consider the political and ethical dimensions of continuing unchanged is to some extent a mystery. Of course, it is always easy to avoid taking responsibility by simply continuing to turn a blind eye to the students' problems after graduation. As one student put it, "I'm going to put my degree in the fire place to keep warm before I become homeless." Another student said, "I really thought there was something to this degree, but it turns out to be the major for anyone who wants to play sports and still graduate."

The proliferation of the exercise science mentality has created a wave of mistrust and concern, especially among parents. Imagine, as a parent, you save money to help your son or daughter to attend a local community college. During the first visit, your son speaks with another student getting a two-year degree in exercise science! Now what, when the parents should throw up their hands and ask "why this area of study," a faculty member approaches the father with his hand extended and says, "Yes, your son will be able to work in cardiac rehabilitation." "Really," the father says, and "What kind of salary will he make?" Almost jokingly, he says, "I'm not sure, but I hear it is pretty good." So, what could possibly be wrong with this picture? Everything is wrong with it. The future employment marketability isn't something to joke around with. Sure, there are exceptions, but much of what students end up with in established healthcare professions isn't happenstance.

It would be nice if after graduation our majors could actually help us find employment, or at least leave us with the capability of being employed.

-- Russell Howe

The Trail, Student Newspaper of the University of Puget Sound

The assumption is, "Get a college degree and, then go to work. It's not complicated." It is embarrassing to write about this academic scandal. Exercise physiologists are too smart to keep playing along with the mistakes of the past and, yet their behavior is exactly the opposite of the educated, critical thinker their scientific publications suggest. Why then do students find themselves in the middle of a meaningless degree with nowhere to go but back to school, often at a higher tuition? Why? Because as time passed from the first serious recognition that the physical education degree was problematic at a national level, no one has seriously questioned the exercise science degree. Other "useless degrees" have been brought into question by students. They range from an undergraduate degree in music therapy to outdoor recreation. To be more specific, read the following list of the 10 most expensive but useless degrees in America (as posted on December 16, 2008 on College Crunch, <http://www.collegecrunch.org>).

- Philosophy (Wesleyan University – Middletown, Connecticut, \$38,934/year)
- Dance (Ball State University, \$27,046/year)
- Leisure Studies (University of Iowa, \$32,801/year)
- Latin (Colgate University, \$39,545/year)
- Communications (Harvard, \$32,896/year)
- Art History (Hollins University, \$26,500/year)
- Physical Education (Capital University, \$32,000/year)
- Women's Studies (George Washington University, \$40,437/year)

- Art Therapy (School of Visual Arts, \$25,500/year)
- Poetry (Johns Hopkins University, \$35,900/year)

The main cause for continuing with certain degree programs is the extraordinary convergence of two trends, the sort of American expectation that continues to support original ideas even if they are less than perfect. One trend is survival within the academic institution. After all, college teachers are employees who must work to pay for their family bills and college loans. Under no circumstances are they comfortable not working or even the thought of it. Imagine the following brief encounter of several faculty members.

Okay, then, the department chair says, “If not physical education and without a strategy or plan otherwise, what is the best alternative.” Immediately, a hand goes up in the back of the room. He is dressed with gym clothes, having just finished his 5-mile jog. “Hey, how about calling PE exercise science? You know, the ‘science’ word sounds important. Another person says, “Call it what you want to, it is still PE.” The chairperson thinks for a moment and says, “All we have to do is disguise the PE content by getting rid of a few activity courses.” After a pause and some laughter, a female volleyball coach said, “Fantastic, I’ve always wanted to be scientist. Why don’t we put a little spin on it and call ourselves, Exercise Scientists.” Then, everyone laughed and, unexpectedly, the jogger threw his sweaty shirt across the conference room towards the coach, only to fall short, while saying in flight, “Get real, no one is going to think we are scientist. Honestly, people – I was joking.” For a moment, they knew how stupid and blatantly wrong it was to support such an idea. But they did so anyway. Instead of saying a firm “no” to the suggestion, they asked, “How can we do that and get away with it?” The rest, as they say, is history.

Often, even educated adults engage in thinking that falls short of good commonsense, perhaps, unintentionally but nonetheless harmful behaviors. Rarely do they come forth to argue that they were wrong. Questionable initiatives are understood and put aside -- forgotten. Converging instead is the aftermath of the vagaries of collective greed over doing anything to save their jobs. This is the ultimate failure of all academic exercise physiologists today, and it is the price paid by students caught in the quicksand of mediocrity. In looking back, one could say with reasonable certainty that this outcome wasn’t the intention of the coach with the hand held so high. Above all, it was meant to be a joke. Everyone in attendance knew it was a joke. Life has many interesting turns and possibilities, many often unannounced and lacking in clarity. If students are to weather the twists and turns, it should be in the interest of college teachers to get it right. Unfortunately, what was put into action decades ago is still being played out much like a perfect storm without survivals.

The second trend is rarely ever talked about. Ironically, it is the untapped power that could change everything. However, more often than not, either students lack the will to question status quo or simply don’t care. This interpretation, it seems, is fundamentally sound and closely aligned with the doctrine of “what’s in it for me.” Meaning, as so often heard over the years, nothing really is important or worth my personal time away

from my own interests. Hence, it is the convergence of yesterday's mistake by those who thought they understood the challenges ahead of them and the norms of students today that keep the quicksand mixed and ready for exercise science graduates. Many sink up to the necks in tuition loans. Others have disappeared altogether. Trapped by the reality of higher costs for everything, nothing escapes without some anger if not depression even though it may not be realized until years later.

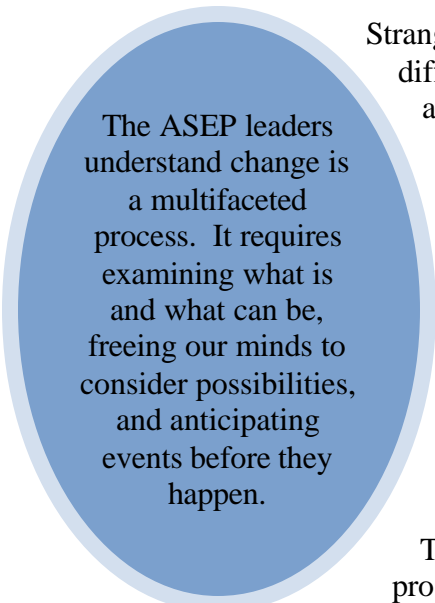
Okay, so what is the cure? What is the magic next suggestion? Who will raise his or her hand high to the sky and say, "In light of "what is" versus "what could be," I believe ASEP is taking the right steps to put us on track towards success? The short answer is "Not many." The primary reason is partly related to the character of each and every person that says, "I don't want to get involved." Another reason is more simply the fear of being wrong, humiliated, and exposed. Human beings are subject to both, whether in high school or college or even after financial success or several academic degrees. Self-confidence, determination, and persistence are learned in much the same way as we learn everything else in life. Hardly anyone grows older and wiser without working on behalf of others. The important thing is that each person must bring into play his or her full potential, whatever that might be. This is likely the only way to deal effectively with the indifferent leadership and the discouraging conformity of behavior both within and outside of academia. In fact, too much of life is normalized and suppressed out of little energy or desire to do the right thing.

The simple truth is that what we need now is a transformation of how we think, individually and collectively.

At times, we don't actually know our own feelings -- having lost our individuality and purpose. We are left to skate on ever-thinner ice, realizing we are less than we expected to be. We are left with the everyday knowledge of living our failures, given the clever means of others to keep us confused. This is obviously not what most college students expected years after graduation. Occasionally, a student can be heard saying, "Who's in Charge?" only to realize the depth of the problem. There are no leaders, just researchers and book authors. Where have all the leaders gone? Unfortunately, it is questionable whether there were leaders even from the beginning.

The simple truth is that what we need now is a transformation of how we think, individually and collectively. Only a deep down emotional and mental transformation of major proportions will do. Nothing short of an explosion in "doing the right things for the right reasons" will work. Otherwise, countless ones of us will be left hanging as victims of our lack of initiative and self-will. This message, however hard to digest, is the ASEP rhetoric of the 21st century. The leadership understands the challenges. Let us admit it: Outside of the ASEP organization, there is no profession of exercise physiology. It is up to you to anchor yourself to the vision of the ASEP leaders. Otherwise, it is hard to imagine that exercise physiology will ever be more than a discipline of academic researchers. Everyone else will be fitness instructors, not healthcare professionals.

Are you ready to do what is necessary to counteract the political struggles and the greed of others to superimpose their thinking on exercise physiologists? Are you ready to talk the talk, to manage the problems, to deal with the conflicts and differences that influence your status, financial income, and influence in the healthcare sector? Or, are you an exercise scientist without status and without a laboratory? To put it another way, can you afford the salary of an exercise scientist at Bob's Gym? Listen to your inner voice. Trust it. You can't make it in these economic times working as a personal trainer without health benefits. It is no wonder therefore you are confused, if not provoked, given how you have been shaped by opportunity and corruption designed by others. It is no wonder a student said recently, "I'm not sure that I should stay in exercise physiology if we aren't going to come together to support ASEP." Under the present-day circumstances, the student's comment is a fair statement.



The ASEP leaders understand change is a multifaceted process. It requires examining what is and what can be, freeing our minds to consider possibilities, and anticipating events before they happen.

Strangely enough, choosing to live is actually not that much different from choosing a profession. There are hardly any absolutes in either, except for how each person may connect with his or her personal and/or social connections. Even with the best of intentions, as in marriage, often, much more often than most people realize, the two walk away from each other while looking for someone else to replace what was believed to be the "one and only – only to find out he (she) was the one." Choosing to attend college, to major in exercise physiology, and communicate passion and hope for marriage requires the willingness to take risks, to experiment, and give it your very best. Life is certainly a work in progress.

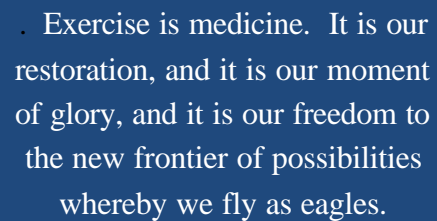
There is no reason it would not be true for evolving professions. Similarly, while some of us start the process of change earlier than others, each person often finds him- or herself at a point in time when a critical decision requires that person to break free from the restraints of yesterday's thinking. It is then students and others begin to believe in their own thinking. They learn to trust their own thoughts and experiences. It is then they free themselves from their earlier circumstances. It was exactly this thinking that drove the ASEP leaders to transcend the conflicts of exercise science to find the right path for all exercise physiologists who wanted something better. They found that no one could be trusted to give them the right information. That is why they created the professional infrastructure necessary to define their future.

After aligning their thinking with established professional principles and ethical standards, they feel that those who follow them have the right to expect a new reality with equal opportunity in healthcare. But, first, how soon will exercise physiologists come to understand what has to be done? The ASEP leaders understand change is a multifaceted process. It requires examining what is and what can be, freeing our minds to consider possibilities, and anticipating events before they happen. Obviously, the process is complex and unending. The challenge of every exercise physiologist is to grow

in the highest standards of ethics, as demonstrated by the willingness to learn all that which was not learned or practiced decades earlier.

There is nothing novel about these points or the importance of professionalism. It is prudent therefore that exercise physiologists demonstrate their commitment to a higher level of expectation than understood by individuals who claim to be exercise physiologists simply by adopting the title. The tensions and struggles that often result from thinking of those who fail to follow the path of academic professionalism and credibility are especially challenging, but not without resolution. Hence, in the midst of public confusion or, more simply, lack of knowledge, the widening gap between those who aren't and those who are is always on the side of practical-minded, pragmatic individuals willing to push forwards even when short of certainty.

There is nothing inherently difficult in getting the point just described. Become who you are and live it for betterment of others. What follows, then, is a vision of the future as seen from the minds of the ASEP leaders. Why not reach out to your peers and colleagues and share your thinking, perhaps, in an essay regardless of the risks or inhibitions? Why not become a vital part of the change process? Why not define yourself as an ASEP force for change? Why not break from the failed rhetoric of exercise science? Why not think about what you can do for exercise physiology and not what it can do for you?



Exercise is medicine. It is our restoration, and it is our moment of glory, and it is our freedom to the new frontier of possibilities whereby we fly as eagles.

After all, it is through your voice, defined and delivered by your passion, that the ASEP organization is capable of shaping the collective future of exercise physiologists. It is your commitment that hastens the change process towards professionalism. You are an integral part of the present-day history and, indeed, the future of the profession of exercise physiology. Reach out to others and help them to get past their confusion. Help them to deal with the inertia and the downside of remaining unchanged. Reach out to everyone everywhere, regardless of their attitude or resistance, because we are all shareholders of our future and that of society.

Our distinction is “Exercise as Medicine” because we are the experts of exercise! Our success comes from the shared understanding of this most precious item of life – exercise. Exercise is medicine. It is our restoration, and it is our moment of glory, and it is our freedom to the new frontier of possibilities whereby we fly as eagles. We know this because nothing contributes more to a trusting relationship with our clients and patients than the dedication to ethical behavior and the commitment therefore to professional development.

In summary, this understanding is all too clear with the ASEP leaders. They will not allow for any undercutting of strategic steps necessary to compete successfully with other healthcare professionals. Nothing is more important than the complete 100% success of

each and every member of ASEP. They are driven to deal with the sports medicine rhetoric without apology, and they understand the necessity to promote the ASEP reality on a daily basis without pause or compromise to promote trust in the profession of exercise physiology, to improve long-term profitability, to advance credibility through strategic and competitive in-roads into healthcare, and to significantly influence the longevity of Americans.