

## Realistic Thinking and Exercise Physiology

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*The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.*

*--Max DePree*

**S**HARON, why not be realistic? The evidence shows that exercise physiologists have failed to evolve as professionals. That's the bottom line. Also, that's why the ASEP leaders developed the professional infrastructure necessary to realistically think of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession. Without an organization dedicated to exercise physiologists, without a code of ethics and standards of professional practice for exercise physiologists, it is not realistic to think of exercise physiology as a profession. This thinking is simply being realistic, which is no different from what physical therapists and other established healthcare professions have done.

*You can't build a profession without the members supporting a profession-specific organization (such as the American Society of Exercise Physiologists).*

Being real about exercise science isn't difficult. It allows for the obvious conclusion that it isn't exercise physiology. Yet, so many people fail to understand the importance of realistic thinking that they confuse apples with oranges. It wouldn't be all that problematic if money wasn't involved, if dreams were put aside, and if expectations meant nothing. But, there is money involved in the form of thousands of dollars in tuition fees and living costs. Dreams and expectations are seldom realized, except of course by the academic exercise physiologists!

Realistic thinking is linked to what is true about something. For example, is it true that John, a personal trainer with a degree in sports science, is as qualified as Jim

who just graduated from an accredited exercise physiology program who subsequently passed the ASEP Board Certification? No, of course not since it is not realistic to even think so. People who argue otherwise are simply not being realistic. They are failing to engage realistic thinking! In short, exercise physiologists throughout the United States have exaggerated their success as researchers and minimized their deficiencies in the obvious need for professionalism in exercise physiology.

*Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing has happened.*

*-- Winston Churchill*

John C. Maxwell (1) said it best, "...the truth will set you free – but first it will make you angry!" Realistic thinkers learn to deal with the truth because it is necessary to find the right path. So, what are the facts regarding exercise science?

1. It is clear that the majority of the exercise science graduates end up without finding credible career opportunities with financial stability and healthcare benefits.
2. If the graduates are not lucky enough to find a job in an altogether different field of work, they end up applying for graduate school.
3. The bottom line is that society understands exercise science is not a healthcare profession.
4. Realistic thinking provides the truth about exercise science as a springboard to physical therapy (that requires ~\$100,000 more in tuition fees, if accepted in the program).
5. The academic exercise physiologists are obviously teaching exercise physiology courses in the exercise science degree, but they do not refer to themselves as exercise scientists (i.e., if they value the title, exercise physiologist).
6. Exercise science is designed for students more interested in sports and athletics than in a healthcare profession.
7. Exercise science is essentially (i.e., a course or two aside from the PE activity courses) a physical education degree without teaching certification).

8. It is a generic degree that is meaningless for building a professional career in healthcare, thus it is a waste of time and money!

Just to press the point, read the following paragraph taken from one University website (2) that was randomly chosen regarding the department exercise science major: “A bachelor of science in exercise science provides an excellent academic foundation for students choosing to pursue graduate and professional degrees in a wide array of health careers, such as exercise physiology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, medicine and athletic training. Because these fields require post-baccalaureate degrees, students will need to take additional pre-requisites as appropriate for their field of interest. Students who choose to not pursue a post-baccalaureate degree can pursue a career as a personal trainer, wellness coordinator, strength and conditioning coach, or in corporate wellness.”

Facing up to the truth requires analysis of the three sentences. The first sentence argues for the degree as a springboard to graduate and professional degrees. That’s it. The degree itself is not a healthcare career-specific degree program that is the case for exercise physiology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, medicine, and athletic training. That makes the 4-year degree program meaningless without spending more tuition dollars. The second sentence argues for the obvious fact that the degree is too general to actually allow a smooth transition into one of the health careers without taking additional course work. Once again, there is a necessary expenditure of money.

So, what is the college graduate with the exercise science degree going to do? The third sentence is the big let down after 4 or more years of college and thousands of dollars spent in tuition and living expenses. The college graduate can always “...pursue a career as a personal trainer, wellness coordinator, strength and conditioning coach, or in corporate wellness.” Honestly, do personal trainers need a college degree? Are they required to have a college degree and, if so, what is the degree? What percent of the

*Our society finds truth too strong a medicine to digest undiluted.*  
-- Ted Koppel

**Key Point:** *Some people feel the same way when it comes to the truth of “what is exercise physiology” and “who is an exercise physiologist.”*  
-- <http://www.asep.org/>

wellness coordinators have a degree in exercise science? If not, what about a physical education degree or a human performance degree or a degree in sports science or even kinesiology or nursing?

The point is that the physical therapist competes with other physical therapists for a career in healthcare while the exercise science major competes with college graduates with a major in one of 40 or more different degree programs. This renders the degree programs useless given the lack of a career philosophy and professional infrastructure. It is not complicated, but as long as no one is interested in understanding the problem, it will simply continue and get worse. These are the facts. That's why exercise physiologists must get rid of their yesterday's views of exercise physiology. That's why they need to put their preconceived sports medicine-driven opinions and prejudice aside to see the truth. Yet, having said that, take a look at the list of academic courses identified on the earlier website that are taught within the department:

1. KIN 275 – Introduction to Exercise Science
2. KIN 300 – Strength Training & Conditioning
3. KIN 445 – Organization & Management of Exercise and Wellness Programs
4. KIN 350 – Exercise Physiology
5. KIN 315 – Functional Anatomy
6. KIN 414 – Exercise Adherence
7. KIN 410 – Exercise for Special Populations
8. KIN 316 – Biomechanics of Human Movement
9. KIN 416 – Exercise Assessment/Programming
10. KIN 412 – Biology of Cardiovascular and Metabolic Disease
11. KIN 418 – Physical Activity & Public Health
12. KIN 460 – Internship in Exercise Science
13. KIN 426 – Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation

This is an excellent list of courses. The students are taking excellent academic courses. So, “What is the problem you ask?” The problem is this: Where is the course that teaches key concepts about professionalism and “why degree title” fails to produce a distinct career title. John C. Maxwell (1) said, “One of the keys to maximizing realistic thinking is aligning your resources with your objectives.”

In other words, the key to success is to maximize alignment of the degree title with meaningful career objectives. As a beginning point, why not change the title of exercise science to exercise physiology, which is a healthcare profession. This means

that students will be strategically aligned with credible career options that exercise physiologists are qualified to perform. Note the important point here. Exercise physiologists should graduate from an accredited program that requires the graduates to pass the ASEP Board Certification that, then, requires the exercise physiologists to

adhere to the ASEP code of ethics and carry out his or her practice in accordance with the ASEP standards.

*One of the best ways to grow ASEP is to develop the mind-set that allows for fantastic thoughts. Hence, why not support ASEP and put aside the status quo? Why not think of the possibilities of something truly wonderful for exercise physiologists. Why not? Remember what George Bernard Shaw said, “Some men see things as they are and say, ‘Why?’ I dream of thing that never were and say, ‘Why not?’ ”*

The alternate view isn't attractive, smart and consistent with creating new career opportunities. For example, students with a bachelor's degree in exercise science find themselves required to complete a master's degree and, then, pass certifications in personal training and/or clinical exercise physiology. Why personal training? What does it have to do with a college degree? Why “clinical” exercise physiology when the degree should cover non-clinical and clinical just as degrees from established healthcare professions do? As you can see, on one hand, there is a contagious necessity to keep doing the same thing. On the other hand, there is the failure to

broaden the horizons and dream bigger possibilities.

Possibility thinking is required of the change process. It is the belief that the impossible is not a barrier to change. Thinking positive is very much like having the right attitude towards “Why not? I believe that I can make something of myself. I'm going for it regardless of everyone telling me that's it is a bad idea.” In other words, positive thinking is helpful in reflecting on the possibility of something better for all exercise physiologists. For example, a Society of exercise physiologists is possible because it has already been done!

*We must discard the idea that past routine, past ways of doing things are probably the best ways. On the contrary, we must assume that there is probably a better way to do almost everything. We must stop assuming that a thing which has never been done before probably cannot be done at all.*

*--Donald M. Nelson (1)*

In closing, exercise physiologists are at a time in their history that great things are possible. But, they must first believe this is so and, then, they must act on their dreams. That is exactly what ASEP exercise physiologists have done and continue to do. They have done it unselfishly, often with negative returns and yet, they are determined to help exercise physiologists achieve success as healthcare professionals. John C. Maxwell (1) said it best, “The lesson to be learned? Simple. Instead of trying to be great, be part of something greater than yourself.”

***One Final Thought:** We become what we think, what we talk about, and what we do. If we think our work is for the right reason, if we think that our actions will bring forth positive results, and if we start living as professionals, we will become our vision.*

## **References**

1. Maxwell, J.C. (2009). *How Successful People Think: Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life*. New York, NY: Center Street.
2. <http://www.siue.edu/education/khe/undergrad/exercise-science-under-overview.shtml>