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Finding Meaning in a College Degree

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Unless we remember, we cannot understand.

-- E. M. Forster
Aspects of the Novel

SEPTEMBER of 1962, I was a freshman in the health and physical education major at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, LA. It was an intense 4 years of study, work to pay the bills, and gymnastics every afternoon. As I recall, the teachers were the epitome of professionalism. Students always responded appropriately and respectfully when in the presence of teachers. None was indifferent to their instructions or suggestions.

I remember lectures and participation in dozens of different activity classes. After all, we were educated to teach physical education throughout the public school system. Yet, the course work was not all about learning how to teach sports and activities. I remember taking physiology of exercise (vs. the title, “exercise physiology” today), kinesiology (i.e., muscle origins, insertions, and functions), motor learning, statistics, and professional development of health and physical educators.

What is important to remember is that our laboratory experiences consisted of gyms where we learned different motor skills so that we could teach our future students. We did not have a laboratory for the physiology of exercise course. We did not learn to use metabolic equipment to determine steady-state or VO₂ max or other hemodynamic and/or physiologic functions. Clearly we would have benefited tremendously had that

been the case, but how would that be possible since the department faculty and academic major were both created in the image of “physical educators” throughout the United States.

I would like to point out that my purpose in writing this article is not to put down the departments of yesterday or today, but to highlight the importance of remembering “what was then” is no longer right for “what is today” so we can understand the reasons for the ASEP’s emphasis on changing. Frankly, it isn’t always easy to imagine or even plan for the right strategic move of a discipline or a profession. However, no matter how much we may turn a deaf ear to change, it is inevitable. Exercise physiologists, in particular, must try to foresee not only what they should be doing, but also what their colleagues are already doing regarding healthcare.

I have learned over the years that it is important to trust your own thinking and what you personally value. As an example, my basic instinct is that the information posted on the majority of the department’s web page about the exercise science degree is misleading and potentially legally questionable (1). I can see no value in stating that exercise science is a great degree to becoming a physical therapist or some other “established” healthcare professional.

My point is this: while there is nothing wrong with being a physical therapist or a nurse, why is the exercise science degree considered as a transitional degree to another degree and not a credible career in exercise science? Is it because the faculty members have not taken the time to think about exercise science beyond their classroom duties? Or, is it because they understand that exercise science is essentially another word for physical education and not a healthcare professional?

The truth is there are few credible jobs waiting for the exercise science major after college. As a parent, it is a waste of hard earned money spent on a college degree that is meaningless from a credible career perspective (2). This point speaks so loudly I cannot help but say, “There are no financially stable career opportunities in exercise science for young married couples who are looking to buy a home, buy a car, raise a family, and meet other financial obligations.” Yet, it is common to speak of these programs in the same context with personal trainers or fitness instructors. The reality is

that almost anyone with or without a college degree can be a personal trainer or a fitness instructor.

Since 1997, the ASEP leadership has asked the question, “Who’s in charge?” Their feeling is that there is no one home. The exercise science departments, the kinesiology departments, and all similar departments lack leadership. The reason this is the case is because no one in these departments appears to be interested in a vision of something different. Students and faculty are doing the same things as they did decades ago. The fact is the majority of these departments are modified physical education programs from decades past. Why haven’t the chairs and faculty put forth a shared set of 21st century values, goals, and objectives? Students need administrators and teachers around them who are devil’s advocates, who can help guide them in being successful.

The future requires optimism, not static thinking. Leaders must be willing to try new ideas regardless of whether they fail or not (3). In fact, failure is one way to learn and to improve. Not wanting to fail, the so-called leadership of many academic departments is littered with degree programs stained by past thinking. This is the case, especially given the lack of unity and failed job opportunities for the majority of the college graduates.

Yes, it is a heavy responsibility to take on the change process. Success though is: try, keep trying, and never give up. It isn’t right that exercise science (in particular) benefits only the doctorate prepared professionals. After all, students went to college to improve their chances of getting a credible job and to make a respectable income.

The non-doctorate prepared college graduates are notably less prepared to advocate for themselves. Moreover, in most instances, they are ignored by their teachers who are

We have a crisis of leadership in America because our overwhelming power and wealth, earned under earlier generations of leaders, made us complacent, and for too long we have been training leaders who only know how to keep the routine going. Who can answer questions, but don’t know how to ask them. Who can fulfill goals, but don’t know how to set them. Who think about *how* to get things done, but not whether they’re worth doing in the first place. What we have now are the greatest technocrats the world has ever seen, people who have been trained to be incredibly good at one specific thing, but who have no interest in anything beyond their area of expertise. What we *don’t* have are leaders.

-- William Deresiewicz
The American Scholar
Spring, 2010

caught up in publishing. This is a problem in academia. Yet, the faculty comes across as being unaware of the consequences of their actions. Instead of doing something constructive and inventive, they keep to the same academic baggage. Why not support one academic degree title rather than 40 or more? Why change exercise science to exercise physiology? This is the main argument in the ASEP organization. Time has come to market one degree that is unified and credible.

In other words, the proliferation of similar degree programs with students hired as personal trainers has created a wave of mistrust of academia. Society recognizes that only a small percent of the personal trainers and instructors are financially successful. So, why are the college administrators continuing to support such departments and programs? The main cause is the lack of leadership. The simple truth is that the college degree must be credible, which is defined by ASEP as college graduates who can locate financially meaningful career opportunities. The graduate's quality of life depends on the quality of the college degree and its leaders.

Why hasn't the leadership figured out why change is imperative? This question is instructive. Innovative thinking is the means of defining ourselves and changing the way things are. There is nothing good about becoming narrow-minded academics who may be good at publishing research, but who are unfinished as educators. The bottom line is this: it isn't acceptable that the undergraduate degree in exercise science is nothing more than a transitional degree to physical therapy or nursing. Such thinking is not responsible given the tuition costs to complete the undergraduate degree. Yet, with decades of experience behind them, the academics (even the exercise physiologists within these departments), appear to be hiding behind the easier road of keeping their jobs rather than standing up and fighting for their own rights and those of their students.

Academic exercise physiologists should be doing what they can to update the exercise science title and curriculum to exercise physiology (4). The college graduates, then, recognized as healthcare professionals should be recognized as the responsible professional to administer exercise medicine to help correct the signs and symptoms of hypokinetic diseases throughout society. On the other hand, if the academic exercise physiologists do nothing, then, it is highly questionable that exercise science graduates will get a job in nursing without a degree in nursing. They forget about teaching in the

public schools without a teaching certificate. Nutrition isn't likely to happen without a stronger academic background in nutrition and licensure. Forget physical therapy or counseling without a degree in either field.

To see exactly how exercise physiology differs from exercise science, why not look at the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP). First, ASEP was founded for exercise physiologists, particularly Board Certified Exercise Physiologists who graduate from an ASEP accredited exercise physiology academic major from which they are held accountable to the ASEP Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Practice. The ASEP leaders are the first to build the organizational infrastructure for professionalism of exercise physiology (5).

From the beginning, the intention was to align the interests and needs of exercise physiologists more closely with those of other healthcare professionals. As the first professional society of board certified exercise physiologists, the heavy emphasis on professionalization dominates the organization. There is nothing new about why the emphasis on professionalism is important. Back in 1915, physical therapists spoke of their need for a professional organization. It was this thinking that gave credibility to physical therapy. This point will be recognized by exercise physiologists as we move further into the 21st century. In fact, it is highly probable they will come to understand there is a difference between a professional organization and a generic organization.

Why? The students' basic needs are financial. This is why their college teachers must stop thinking as they did decades ago and start questioning the degree title, curriculum, its purpose, and what the students can do with it when they graduate. Cynics may sneer at ASEP's point of view, but the challenge to academics is, in part, a matter of responding to the students' needs. As it is, the simple repeating of yesterday's rhetoric is going nowhere and, frankly, we are flooded with issues and problems to which the academic community is unresponsive.

Perhaps, Mathilde Krim's comment (6) will help to clarify the unsustainability that confronts us, "People give their allegiance to an institution, and they become prisoners of habits, practices, and rules that make them ultimately ineffectual." It is the same with many college teachers who have become complacent with the sports medicine model, dogma, and politics. The norm that "we are the biggest and the best" and that all

other organizations or thinking that is different is unimportant pervades the larger academic community. We can see this norm at work in countless instances with the fierce need of bigger organizations and the need to win at all costs. The hypocrisy is obvious to anyone with a powerful set of ethical principles.

The sports medicine and exercise science community does not have a vision of something better for the students who attend colleges and universities. Yet, this is what the ASEP leaders did years ago. They wrote a guiding vision that generates hope, provides endurance, and motivates the discouraged. Being straight with students and their parents is all about “personal and professional integrity.” Students need full value for the tuition dollars. They need the truth about the academic major, and they teachers who care about them. No matter how difficult the change process is, the essence of a vision is to see the future by answering the following three questions (7).

1. What the organization wants to be?

To be recognized as the leading professional organization of American scholars and practitioners in the study and application of exercise physiology to fitness, health promotion, rehabilitation, and sports training.

2. What it wants to accomplish?

The Society of Exercise Physiologists is dedicated to unifying all exercise physiologists in the United States and worldwide to promote and support the study, practice, teaching, research, and development of the exercise physiology profession.

3. Whom it wants to serve?

Through proactive and creative leadership, the Society empowers its members to serve the public good by making an academically sound difference in the application of exercise physiology concepts and insights.

The ASEP leadership also developed the first-ever professional definition of Exercise Physiology, which is “...the identification of physiological mechanisms underlying physical activity, the comprehensive delivery of treatment services concerned with the analysis, improvement, and maintenance of health and fitness, rehabilitation of heart disease and other diseases and/or disabilities, and the professional guidance and counsel

of athletes and others interested in athletics, sports training, and human adaptability to acute and chronic exercise.” They understood that such thinking would move them apart from their colleagues, but with such passion for exercise physiology it was necessary. In so doing, they were also inventing a new view of exercise physiology that put the students’ interests ahead of everything else.

What we don’t have, in other words, are *thinkers*. People who can think for themselves. People who can formulate a new direction: for the country, for a corporation or a college, for the Army—a new way of doing things, a new way of looking at things. People, in other words, with *vision*.

-- William Deresiewicz
The American Scholar
Spring, 2010

Since the ASEP focus is on the well-being of students and developing the first-ever accredited exercise physiology major, they wrote the first professional definition of “who is an exercise physiologist.” Only then, it became possible to define who is and who isn’t an exercise physiologist. For example, from the ASEP point of view, an “Exercise Physiologist is a healthcare professional who either has an academic degree in exercise physiology or who is certified by ASEP to practice

exercise physiology [via the Exercise Physiologist Certified exam (EPC)], or who has a doctorate degree in exercise physiology from an accredited college or university.”

The ASEP vision and definitions acknowledge that board certified exercise physiologists are healthcare professionals who are held accountable the professional infrastructure of the exercise physiology profession. As is often the case, as the solution to the obvious problems students face with meaningless degree programs and less than stable financial career opportunities, the impetus for change must begin with exercise physiologists willing to go about revitalizing and upgrading the ethical expectations of exercise physiologists. Gradually, the old way of thinking and antagonism will be replaced by mutual respect. Political differences will be transformed to serve student well-being.

In sum, finding meaning in a college degree must be understood as a high priority among college teachers and administrators. The extreme emphasis and insistence that publishing takes precedent over the conditions of the students’ life has defined winners and losers. The students are obviously the losers, and the prevailing view is that they can always apply to graduate school. However painful and awkward the struggle is to

change and adapt to a more ethical consciousness of providing a credible academic degree, it must be done.

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