

Professionalization of Exercise Physiologyonline

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Choosing Our Own Future

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I HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT the ideas expressed in this article for a long time. Even as an exercise physiologists in the 1970s while teaching at Wake Forest University and working in the cardiac rehabilitation, I was bothered that exercise physiologists did not have their own professional organization. As a professional, I was always asking myself the question: “Why are we graduating exercise physiologists from an exercise science program?”

As I continued to teach at the college level later at the University of Southern Mississippi, I encountered many of the same concerns. As Graduate Coordinator, I helped to revise the course work at the master and PhD levels. When I thought the time was right, I suggested changing the title of the doctorate degree from Human Performance to Exercise Physiology. At the time, it was a radical idea. Today, nearly 30 years later it still is the case. There are very few doctorate programs in exercise physiology by actual degree title.

The message is simple: Many academic exercise physiologists are not interested in breaching their contact with sports medicine. Of course, my earlier sense was then and still is today that the exercise physiologist’s sense of self-worth, their relationship with each other, their students, and their future would lead to rejection of their past way

Building a better organization, not just a bigger one. That’s an ambitious goal, especially at a time when academic exercise physiologists are under pressure from all sides to stay committed to their past way of thinking.

of thinking. There seems to be something deep in their soul that causes exercise physiologists to think less of themselves every time they separate themselves from the sports medicine/physical education connection.

Yet, the question keeps coming back to me: “Why can’t exercise physiologists conclude that they are exercise physiologists and that is enough?” I am stunned by the exercise physiologist’s attachment (if not dependence) on the failed rhetoric of sports medicine. My experience as a college professor has taught me that much of the

Investing for the future. ASEP is working to build a better exercise physiology for all exercise physiologists. Professionalism is at the core of what the ASEP leaders do.

exercise physiologists’ inadequacy as professionals stems from their failure to liberate themselves from the restricting conviction that they are researchers more so than teachers. It would be nice to see exercise physiologists step into the future uncontaminated by mistakes of the past, encouraged by the knowledge that they are healthcare professionals and need not repeat the same mistakes again.

Perhaps, the starting point for exercise physiologists to free themselves from the feeling that they will be punished if they think differently than their professors in college is to accept their imperfections. There isn’t any reason to expect perfection. In fact, the existence of other healthcare professionals demonstrates that developing the professional paradise of autonomy and credibility is a professionalization process. But somehow the idea of professionalism and exercise physiology is the equivalent of “eating the forbidden fruit and feeling shame immediately afterward” than doing something good on behalf of the students of exercise physiologists or at least those who want to be part of the emerging profession of exercise physiology.

Why didn’t the exercise physiologists who are college and university teachers deal with this problem of “professional independence” decades ago? Why didn’t they make a distinction between their intellectual understanding of prescribing exercise and that of other healthcare professionals? Since they didn’t then and since they aren’t doing so now, except for the ASEP leaders, they are throwing their students’ future away. This is a sad point to think about, especially since it means that thousands of college graduates will be left without credible jobs in the public sector.

As long as academic exercise physiologists are tempted by the fruit of research to act like real “physiologists,” they will miss the power of teaching. By accepting the academic role of the professor as research more so than anything else, inevitably they fall short of understand what it means to teach. Rather than condemning students to non-competitive financial salaries working at Bob’s Gym as a group instructor and/or as a personal trainer, I would like to suggest another way to think about exercise physiology. I suggest that it makes better sense of the events of past decades, leaves fewer loose ends, and paints a more positive picture for ourselves and our students.

Exercise physiologists have done something they should not have done. Convinced they would prosper as researchers, in the end they have ended up naked as the rest of the so-called “fitness professionals.” It is not that being naked is altogether the problem, rather that exercise physiologists with a sense of their own future know the feeling of failing to be what they actually are. As human beings, exercise physiologists recognize the gap between what they are and what they can expect to be, and of being embarrassed by that gap. Hence, I would also like to suggest that exercise physiologists

Anyone else a little bit flabbergasted that it's 2012? So here we are: the start of a new year. Resolutions to make. You may have already started your own New Year's list: the places you hope to work, changes in your financial life.

become members of the **American Society of Exercise Physiologists**, not of sports medicine but of the Profession of Exercise Physiology, not of exercise science but of the birth of a new healthcare profession. In short, it is important to stop giving up control of what exercise physiologists have created – “exercise is medicine.”

The distinction here is crucial, because exercise physiologists are the experts in the prescription of exercise and in understanding the scientific basis of applied exercise and its translations into mind-body medicine. Failing to recognize and plan properly for this major success on behalf of exercise physiology has the power to hurt everyone and everything remotely related to exercise physiology. Even world-class students who are driven to be exercise physiologists, they know that it is not likely (without the doctorate degree) to find a financially stable career as an exercise physiologist. To stay

in the field is to suffer financially for making the one mistake of majoring in exercise science, kinesiology, or sports sciences.

Still others have moved on, often at a major financial price and emotional pain. It is time to get “what is exercise physiology” right. In fact, it is pastime that exercise physiologists learn to think of themselves as healthcare professionals. Let us agree to forget the past mistakes and move on so we can stop draining the joy of life out of our

*We are Board Certified
Exercise Physiologists:
The 1st Grammys
October 19, 2020*

students. Also, if possible, let us agree to stop making exercise physiologists unpleasant colleagues. Let us be brave enough to try something new, like ASEP, without being afraid of getting it wrong. It is okay to make mistakes. No body in life is perfect except those who fool themselves into thinking otherwise. It isn't just okay but expected that exercise physiologists will eventually get the message of professionalism, credibility, and healthcare. It is okay to stop with the feelings from others who make us uncomfortable, even ignored or worse.

If it necessary for others to judge us, so be in. No one is perfect, and certainly not those who are so quick to judge others. No organization is perfect either. Neither the ASEP leaders nor the exercise physiologists who want their own future have done anything wrong. There is no right reason to reject anyone for trying to make the future a better place. So, let us all agree to get over being preoccupied with others insisting that we exist and do things their way as if it is the only way. Let us agree in saying, “We did what was believed correct early on,” and now it is time to think differently and “Stop holding it against those who are choosing their own future.” The issue is not whether we have made mistakes. We have and no doubt big ones at that. Everyone has made his/her share of mistakes, such as supporting this or that certification without the right rationale to do so.

As an advocate of professional-specific organizations and certification-specific academic credibility, I am deeply embarrassed by the tendency of so many exercise physiologists to play on the college graduates vulnerability as a way of promoting generic certifications. They teach us that the certifications are credible. They warn us that everyone needs them. They prey upon our feelings of inadequacy, saying things

like, “You can’t get a job without the sports medicine certification.” Later, after spending what little money the recent graduate may have, still there is no job (at least not one that will pay the bills, much less the \$40,000 to \$100,000 plus in tuition loans).

I have often been amused to hear the academic exercise physiologist talk about clinical exercise physiology as if it is something different from exercise physiology. When properly understood, that is, without all the mixed messages and bias, the “talk” is little more than manipulated propaganda. Often, it comes from feelings of guilt and ignorance. The authentic healthcare professional understands the shortcomings and the decades of failure. They understand the disappointment and broken souls that must be mended primarily by the graduates’ return to yet another academic major. The hearts of many students are broken by complacent and arrogant PhD exercise physiologists.

So, let me be very clear about this. Exercise physiologists as college teachers are obligated to emaciate themselves from the failed sports medicine rhetoric. The only good thing that has come out of the decades of following the wrong path is a “generally important” feeling that exercise physiology is a viable area of study. No, it is not recognized as a viable area of work, especially for anyone without the doctorate degree. This message is simple. It is pastime to stop with the brainwashing. Exercise physiology meets society’s expectations of attractiveness, even though many people still aren’t sure what is meant by the expression, “I’m an exercise physiologist.”

Stop traveling with the wrong crowd. Fix your credibility. You have choices for who you want to be. Choose wisely.

I would guess that many people think that an exercise physiologist is a coach or, perhaps, a PE teacher. Interestingly, while it is the word physiology that is attractive, given that the majority of the people understand that physiology must be complex, the “exercise” physiologist is little more than strength coach. Thus, in short, the exercise physiologist must be smart – right? And yet, the reality is that the word exercise is the core essence of exercise physiology since it is “exercise” that is “medicine.” I would guess that the PhD exercise physiologist still doesn’t get this point since they prefer to call themselves physiologists and not exercise physiologists.

It is amazing what people will do to be acceptable to others if not to themselves. For example, have you heard a colleague say lately, “I’m a physiologist and all non-PhD people are “exercise” instructors, specialist, or trainers.” Unfortunately, the standards of professionalism believed important by the ASEP leaders isn’t understood at all by many in academia. Even today, they fail to understand that they aren’t helping their students when they encourage them to not support ASEP. In time such thinking will allow non-exercise physiologists such as the accountant with an interest in fitness and the personal trainer without a college education to step up and prescribe exercise as medicine.

It is important to understand what this means. If exercise is medicine and if it is prescribed as medicine, aren’t exercise physiologists who administer the medicine worthy of the title healthcare professional and not instructor or trainer? For exercise physiologists, it ought to be with a sense of relief that the recognition of their work as

*LOVE THE ASEP
ORGANIZATION!
Make it yours.*

healthcare professionals means they are not settling for mediocrity. Or, is it likely that they will feel guilty by saying something stupid like, “I am not a true healthcare professional like physical therapist. I really don’t deserve the title because I wasn’t taught about a code of ethics, professionalism, and board certification.” Imagine feeling guilt and shame due to the students’ lack of insight and understanding that they are healthcare professionals, but their professors failed to get the main points across when lecturing.

At best, the ASEP leaders’ work to build professionalism in exercise physiology represents a fresh start, an opportunity to begin again with the benefit of the experience of previous professions but without the burden of their entrapment by sports medicine. The truth is students need help to think of themselves as healthcare professionals. The illusion of being so-called exercise professionals needs to die. The death of that illusion and the bringing to life of the ASEP perspective is clearly an act of courage. The real exercise physiology healthcare professional will come to life only when the illusory importance of exercise science dies.

I have often suspected that one of the reasons exercise science is believed to be a viable career is not just that the doctorate prepared exercise physiologist are still living

in the past, but because a great many of the same people are simply out of touch with reality. While they should have a better sense of what's really important, they don't. Just because they continue to define themselves as they have done for decades just as their teachers did leaves little room for hope that they will eventually out run their limited psychological insights. This is most unfortunate because one of the basic needs of every student is the need to be successful, to have one's wishes and feelings taken seriously, to be validated as an educated professional who matters in healthcare. The students' education helps to fill that need, as does seeing their name and/or picture identified among the healthcare professions.

It is interesting that so little has been written about the shortcomings of exercise science and similar degree programs. After a decade of writing about the problems, especially the lack of good paying jobs in the public sector, I have come to live with the sense of hope that exercise physiologists will eventually step up to the plate and make the argument for change. Collectively, we have the power to do so. But, as time has passed, and as the ASEP effort has been contaminated by power, politics, and greed of colleagues and others, the fear of being rejected by their peers has kept many from acting. This failure to give themselves permission to be assertive instead of living a safe life is part of the numerous obstacles that work against the change process.

*Good things come in
small packages.*

Regardless of what book authors read, exercise physiology is not a discipline. It is a profession because it meets all the requirements of a profession, particularly a healthcare profession. Also, while presently many academic exercise physiologists want their students to think that the "exercise physiology course" is the key to the future success of exercise science students, it isn't. This is true because the same course is not by itself sufficient to prepare exercise physiologists. Equally important is the fact that professionals with a physiology degree are not responsible for answers to the following two questions: "What is exercise physiology?" and "Who is an exercise physiologist?"

It is inappropriate in the 21st century to conclude that the typical definition of exercise physiology is correct (i.e., the study of physiological responses to acute and

chronic adaptations to regular exercise). Just for the “advertisement effect” please read the ASEP definition of exercise physiology, especially since the content supports the thinking of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession: “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.”

Once again, academic exercise physiologists (who also refer to themselves as exercise science professionals, if that isn’t confusing enough) can’t see beyond their years of past thinking. In other words, they are interested in promoting the idea that careers in health, fitness, medicine, athletics, and rehabilitation rely on exercise

*How can it be?
There are many
talented exercise
physiologists who
work within their
systems to widen and
strengthen the
knowledge of
exercise physiology.*

physiology as a core component of their respective curricular. Thinking of this kind is irresponsible, outdated, and hugely problematic because the conclusion is that “the only exercise physiologists” are ones with the doctorate degree. Everybody else is referred to as an exercise science practitioner or a so-called exercise professional. Just think about this one point. Is the exercise science graduate actually going to apply the basics of the scientific method while working part-time for \$12/hr with little to no health benefits at Bob’s Gym?

The “experts” may want the undergraduate or master-prepared exercise science practitioners think that they are going to apply the scientific method while working under the direction of a physical therapist in cardiac rehab, but the truth is it isn’t likely to happen. Also, it is highly unlikely that the same people will be successful in publishing their “research” in peer-reviewed journals. Regardless of what the so-called experts want students, parents, deans, and others to believe, fitness instructors as exercise leaders and personal trainers with and without a college degree are not members of a profession. The worst thing for exercise physiology right now is the idea that personal training is a healthcare profession. To continue advocating the idea is a serious issue of failed rhetoric.

The gold standard is exercise physiology. What do you think? What do you do? For certain, it is not sordid, dangerous, or exploitative. What makes us, after all, is our ability to impose a layer of professionalism on the scientific method and prescription of exercise as medicine. Exercise physiologists are incomplete until they find that other factor to make them whole and self-sufficient. That factor is linked to the enduring power of incorporating professionalism in exercise physiology. But, the first thing exercise physiologists have to do is free themselves of the idea that sports medicine gave birth to them. Exercise physiologists are not condemned to the ranks of exercise professionals (whatever that is), nor should they be punished for having the guts to become the best they can be.

I don't understand why so many exercise physiologists are so reluctant to face the truth. If only they would leave the decayed thinking behind them and embrace the ASEP perspective, it would help to free them from despair and disappointment. It would help them begin the first steps to find themselves and their healthcare connection. Here, I think what Albert Schweitzer once wrote, "We must all become familiar with the thought of death if we want to grow into really good people....Thinking about death produces love for life." Time is right. Time is precious to get on with becoming familiar with the thought of something new and different, ASEP, if we are to grow into healthcare professionals. Moreover, thinking about ASEP and its benefits singly and collectively for all exercise physiologists helps to diminish the pain, the anger, and the bewilderment so common among college graduates.

What ASEP members know is that FREEDOM shouldn't be squandered. There is more than one way to discover a destination.

This knowledge of our right to think as healthcare professionals gives us the opportunity to declare that certain things – exercise prescription, exercise is medicine, exercise physiology, exercise physiologists – as being important to us because we are willing to take risks to defend them, and by implications – our jobs and all that which associates with them – are less valuable because we are prepared to serve the profession. When was the last time that you were prepared to put something of value on the line for what you believed in? In American, the land in which essentially

everyone is achieving except exercise physiologists is an embarrassment and, frankly, it is witnessed by others (men and women of character) as a failure. As long as we cherish the past more so than the present, we will continue to cheat ourselves of our rightful future.

Interestingly, when we are students, we turn to our college teachers to help us find our way in the academic world, to make us what we think we want to be, and to make our dreams come true. When we graduate from college, we turn to “the” organization of importance to find our way, to give us peace of mind, and to be among all others. But, when we grow older and wiser, we turn to something with substance and meaning to help us deal with the inadequate outcomes and behaviors, particularly a way of thinking beyond what is now perceived as having missed or lost during the years of obedience. And when we reluctantly conclude that life could have been much better earlier than later had we exercised our power sooner, it is difficult but part of the transitional process of remembering and changing for the better for all the tomorrows we can envision.

Understanding the exercise physiology quest for something better is all about the differences between generic and professional organizations and the difference between

*No more Mr. Nice Guy!
Forget that you are in control
of me. I can guarantee you
that I am in charge of me.*

thinking in the past and the future. Exercise physiologists have aspired to greatness and they have stumbled miserably. They want to be held accountable as professionals, but more often than not they act irresponsibly. Some would say that they are acting as children or mentally defective since they have had plenty of time to figure out what they are doing wrong. Actually, at times I find myself wondering if there is something in the exercise physiologists’ connection to physical education and sports medicine that wants to destroy new ideas as their way of saying, “This is the way it is going to be. Get lost. There is no reason to do anything differently.”

Meanwhile the real challenge is the story of the quest for integrity. The ASEP leaders and exercise physiologists are struggling to be as good as they can. They aren’t interested in letting their obstacles be a reason for giving up the struggle. The leaders

are tired of focusing on issues and differences, which largely overlap with established professions and their efforts toward professionalism. They understand the concept behind “the survival of the fittest” as proof of their energies in struggling with the slow pathways of the change process. As survivors since 1997, members of the organization seek to work with their neighbors, to engage in education and support of the students, and to perpetuate the “professional” guarantees of the future. There is a wholeness about ASEP exercise physiologists that has helped them to come to terms with their limitations and their courage. This means, in short, being a human being, members of ASEP are not exempt from making mistakes or from making statements such as, “As the Captain of the ship. This is the way it will be done.” If that confuses someone or disfigures their perfect mentality, then so be it.

Immanuel Kant once wrote, “Out of timber as crooked as that which man is made of, nothing perfectly straight can be carved.” The lesson here is this. There are no reasons to give up on a person or an organization or even a way of thinking, but rather to

*New Year’s Resolution:
Earn more respect and
join the ASEP
organization.*

stop searching for perfection. Maybe the real truth is that today is different from decades of yesterday and, therefore, whatever becomes of the ASEP perspective is perfectly okay. Maybe there isn’t any reason to be so-called perfect, but what exercise physiologists can do, with all of their imperfections is to create a better future for everyone interested in the profession of exercise physiology. Life is challenging, so everyone who expects perfection already condemns us. Failing to say the right thing at someone else’s time interval isn’t a mistake, it is the disqualification of that person as a friend. The goal is not to go day after day without making a mistake or failing to say exactly the right thing. The goal is to do more good than we do bad, knowing that many days we will fail to achieve our best. If we can do that we are successful in our efforts to promote professionalism in exercise physiology.