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Exercise Physiology as a Healthcare Profession: It Depends Totally On You!

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If you wish to see change in the world, you must be the change you wish to see.

-- Mohandas Gandhi

This is an article for renewing exercise physiology that can begin immediately. It needs no one's approval. The answer is a practical one. *It depends totally on you.* You have the ability and the power to convert exercise physiology from just a research perspective to a healthcare profession. All it takes is the courage to stand up to the current organizational leaders of exercise science and the failed

Do it now is more than a motto; it is a way of life. Character grows when do it now becomes a habit.

-- William Arthur Ward

leadership of non-exercise physiology related degree programs who want to keep things as they have been for decades. It is most unfortunate that they do not get the big picture.

This thinking is prompted by several insights. First, exercise physiology is for all exercise physiologists, not just for individuals with the doctorate degree. In fact, although the majority is not represented by non-doctorates, it is the person without the doctorate degree who is struggling in the public sector. That is why the movement to renew exercise physiology must begin with you. But, in coming to this understanding, you must realize that the academic exercise physiologists,

the hierarchy of today, will consider you a threat if you are not in agreement with their agenda. Second, the sports medicine model of the 1950s became popular after the fall of physical education. In other words, the leadership of yesterday has grown to like their association with sports medicine and exercise science, and they have grown accustomed to their popularity and status.

From a research and financial perspective, they are not interested in academic exercise physiologists who think it is their right and/or obligation to be members of their own professional organization. That is why they are not interested in supporting professionalism in *all* exercise physiologists, especially if they do not have the doctorate degree. For financial reasons, it is better for the doctorate prepared exercise physiologists to keep the undergraduate and master-prepared college graduates thinking about “instructor, trainer, or specialist” jobs and/or certifications.

In contrast, physical therapists, nurses, medical doctors, dietitians, and athletic trainers think of themselves as healthcare professionals who are first responsible to their own professional organization and, then, to a generic organization like the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM). Shouldn't the same thinking be true for exercise physiologists? Yet, by comparison to exercise science degree programs, there are only a few academic majors in exercise physiology at the undergraduate level and only slightly more at the master's level. In short, there is minimal to no leadership to pull the academic programs and students together to think as healthcare professionals do.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

-- Lao-tzu, *The Way of Lao-tzu*
Chinese philosopher (604 BC -
531 BC)

The blame for the continuation of the failed sports medicine and exercise science rhetoric and the meaningless degrees falls also on the backs of most faculty in academic institutions throughout the United States. Those who have looked into the merits of exercise science as a means to uplift or make do without the physical education major understood decades ago the need to separate from what was believed then a failing paradigm. It was a movement with the kind of

thinking that nurses understood as they worked to be recognized in the hierarchy of healthcare and continue to do today many decades later.

Similarly, physical therapy today is well-recognized, and physical therapists are in an excellent position to locate a credible job after graduation. This is not true for the exercise science major or one of a dozen other academic degrees (e.g., sports science, human performance, and kinesiology). In many instances, the students' tuition fees and living expenses are wasted when they major in degree programs that are not career driven. All such degree programs have erected a wall of separation from a real career with financial stability and success. This is a serious point. It has created paralysis among college graduates throughout the United States. Ask the parents what they think and you will come to understand their frustration and sadness when their children fail to locate a credible job after graduation.

Think about it. The average annual wage for the fitness instructor is likely to be less than \$30,000 and those hired by hospitals may earn a few thousand more. Forget about finding employment in schools and other instructional facilities. The majority of schools at all levels do not hire college graduates with an exercise science degree. Given that exercise science is primarily a non-teaching major that

A leader is a dealer in hope.

-- Napoleon

has a connection by exercise only to concerns that relate to obesity, physical inactivity, and risks for developing chronic diseases, then why not develop the academic curriculum and degree title to help ensure that the students will be employable? The idea that a master's degree or a doctorate degree is required to find employment is outdated thinking at today's college tuition costs.

The exercise science degree is marketed by colleges and generic organizations as "the" degree to locate for careers in fitness, (YMCA and YWCA), health clubs, personal training, and strength and conditioning. But, for many of these jobs, they are part-time without healthcare benefits alongside individuals who are likely to either have a college degree in music or accounting or no academic degree

whatsoever. That is partly why the certifications from organizations such as ACSM, National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), and Aerobic and Fitness Association of America (AFAA) are believed to be important. That is, when the academic degree itself is outdated and meaningless, the answer is to get a certification. No wonder the undergraduate exercise science majors come to the conclusion that they must apply to “professional” degree programs such as physical therapy, occupational therapy or a master’s exercise physiology program to find respect, credibility, and financial success.

Why the academic exercise physiologists do not get this point reveals the underlying structure of power that has applied political pressure to keep the hierarchy in control. It isn’t any different from the same narrow, self-interested, and arrogant behavior of

People seldom improve when they have no other model but themselves to copy after.

-- Oliver Goldsmith

hierarchs of the past who believed their way was the only way. It sums up everything that is wrong with misplaced politics and power that is built on the foundation of the financial greed. That is why the academic administrators, department heads, and their faculty have laid themselves open to a number of justifiable criticisms. They have allowed for and encouraged a failed system to exist for the sake of money! They are hypocrites.

How many times have you heard someone say, “I have an undergraduate degree in exercise science and hate my job as a personal trainer so much that I am now going back to school to get a nursing degree.”

The current academic leadership has failed the students, their parents, and society. This is why the students of exercise physiology and exercise physiologists at all levels must start thinking – **Revolution!** Exercise physiology needs a revolution to start thinking and to think differently, to make the best of what other healthcare professionals do to grow and deal with opposition, and to put aside the decades of failed thinking that has centered entirely on what benefits the non-exercise physiology organizations.

Otherwise, what will continue is a cult of superiority driven by the doctorate degree and the need for research. In their training, doctorate prepared exercise

There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else.

-- Sam Walton

physiologists are led to believe that their research is the driving force behind their behavior and actions. Thus, they are committed to a research driven academia and a way of thinking that is self-centered. Their work is not about their students, what they need to succeed, or how they can help society along other lines of healthcare

involvement (such as “exercise is medicine). This, in my opinion, is a mistaken commitment to a false view of the importance of academic institutions. Don’t misunderstand me. Research is important, but not at the expense of career opportunities and the success of college graduates.

The most obvious point here that academic exercise physiologists don’t want to see their careers sidetracked or terminated. Thus, without question, the sports medicine hierarchy must be smiling among themselves. They have achieved their goal of silencing anyone not a member. There is nothing about sports medicine that is a democracy, especially given their agenda to take the power of exercise physiology away from the exercise physiologists. This is the problem, isn’t it? Sports medicine has positioned itself as an absolute monarchy of importance, ignoring the students’ problems and other signs of failed leadership.

Without question, sports medicine and non-thinking exercise physiologists who continue to blindly support exercise science and related degree programs have deprived exercise physiologists of their birthright as healthcare professionals equal to, for example, physical therapy. They have followed a policy of “doing their thing” regardless of the impact on others. Yet, exercise physiologists know that exercise physiology belongs to them, and they have the responsibility to take back its powers of health benefits when fallen into the wrong hands. Exercise physiologists must think of the next generation of students and, yes, the future role of exercise physiology in society. Many have abandoned exercise physiology

for other healthcare professions, and why not? It has no value without sincere leadership. It is up to exercise physiologists at all levels to save the profession.

In sum, who is eligible to join the change process that recognizes exercise physiology as a healthcare profession? Anyone who is willing to leave his/her hierarchical distinctions at the door is eligible. This extends to the undergraduate students of exercise physiology or students of programs who want to be exercise physiologists. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the positive aspects of the profession of exercise physiology are linked to the tumbling cascade of ironies of fitness and exercise and the ability to understand and maintain an interest in professionalism and credibility.

The current crisis is one of leadership. There is no doubt about who leads sports medicine and exercise science. It is the old 20th century way of thinking and, therefore, everyone who feels he/she owes the past strict obedience is a part of yesterday's continued failure. It is not simply a mistake anymore. It is a failure to try something new. This includes the hundreds of non-exercise physiology academic departments and degree programs that assume a certain "look-alike" relationship to exercise physiology. Understanding our heritage is one thing. But who allows it to continue its negative effects on today's reality is experiencing an enormous failure to think straight. It is pastime to reject the current structure and declare it no longer valid.

Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.

-- Albert Einstein

As the Prophet says, "For everything, there is a season...a time to tear down and a time to build" (Ecles 3:1,3). I strongly feel that this is "the" time to build the profession of exercise physiology. Our role is to accept responsibility for what we are and what we want to be. Our role is to be professional and not allow others to lead us astray. We are responsible for becoming our dream. No one else is. It is up to you to create the profession of exercise physiology.