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The Importance of Thinking Straight

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Change your thoughts and you change your world.
– Norman Vincent Peale

If you are a young person looking to enter college in a few months, you may want to ask the following questions: “Is the academic major accredited? If it is accredited, is the accrediting body credible?” Answers to these questions are important, especially given the tuition dollars for college courses. Also, there is the concern that if the degree program is not accredited, how will it influence your education? Will the academic major influence your career opportunities? Answers to such questions are obvious with well established healthcare degree programs.

It is unfortunate but true that exercise physiology as an academic degree at the undergraduate level is relatively rare across the United States. There are dozens of related degree programs, such as exercise science, kinesiology, human performance, sports sciences, and so forth. While many of these programs offer similar academic course work, more often than not they are primarily generic degrees. In fact, the exercise science major is a generic degree with few serious career opportunities following graduation. The usual statement (1) on a department’s website is this: “The exercise science major prepares students for leadership roles in a number of career opportunities, including clinical exercise settings and corporate and hospital wellness programs, or as personal fitness trainers, exercise specialists, and strength and conditioning coaches.” The bottom line is that most students end up applying to graduate school to help position themselves for a career in healthcare.

After all, it is common knowledge that most graduates with an exercise science degree either become personal trainers or they go back to school for a different degree. That is why the majority of the academic departments that offers the exercise science major state on their website the following: “A major in Health and Exercise Science (2) ...

is designed to serve as a pre-professional degree only and does not prepare the student to enter the job market upon graduation with a bachelor's degree."

There is a tremendous amount of misinformation and confusion as to what degree programs are credible and which ones are not. For certain, regardless of what a website says, it isn't always true. For example, "the exercise science major prepares students for career possibilities in exercise physiology," is an entirely incorrect statement. The exercise science degree is not an exercise physiology degree! The exercise science graduate is not an exercise physiologist! Title does matter. While this may not be obvious, it is important to point out that just because students may take an exercise physiology course, it does not warrant the students the title – exercise physiologist when they graduate. To be an exercise physiologist, according to the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP), a person must either graduate with an exercise physiology degree or pass the Exercise Physiologist Certification (i.e., after meeting all the requirements to sit for the exam) to earn the title.

If you are interested in exercise physiology, you should know that the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) is the only professional organization of exercise physiologists in the United States. It is the responsible organization to accredit academic degrees at the college level. To date, with the help of the ASEP organization, there are five academic departments in the United States that have converted exercise science or one of 30 or more other degree programs to exercise physiology. No doubt the process of transitioning through the inertia of past thinking will take place across the next 20 to 30 or more years. As I said on November 16, 2011 (3) — "Transitions are always a bit crazy. Nothing transforms easily. However it is desired, reorienting one's mind around the future vs. the past is a matter of "caring and making the most of change" and just surviving. The difference between the two is huge, especially in terms of the need for change."

ASEP is all about getting rid of the dust of the past and moving into the 21st century. It is different from generic organizations that work to keep the membership base up and, of course, the bottom line as well — money! Those who oversee such organizations aren't really interested in the psychological agenda of a discipline that is becoming a profession. They understand this point and, therefore, failing to let go of the past is exactly why exercise physiologists are easy targets for existing organizations. So, with that knowledge, it is imperative that they stand up and move through the transition of a research discipline to a healthcare profession with not only feelings of comfort but knowing that it is the "right thing to do."

Alfred North Whitehead, an American philosopher, said: "We think in generalities, but we live in detail." I agree, except the ASEP leadership would say that "We live in response to an agenda defined by either a personal goal or an organizational vision." It is time, if not pastime, to exit from the exercise science mentality so that exercise physiologists can become who they were meant to be from the beginning. Why not HOLD on to ASEP...why not rise to the occasion and state before the world that YOU are an

EXERCISE PHYSIOLOGIST. After all what they want you to do isn't complicated. They want you to stand silent while they keep repeating the old dogma of the past (4): "Exercise science prepares the graduate to provide services in the use of exercise and fitness activities in the clinical, corporate, and commercial environments." Instead of keeping with the same old stuff, why not get outside of the "in between-ness" of exercise science and ASEP and discover the new world of exercise physiology within ASEP?

Why, because the reality of the majority of the academic settings is this statement (5): "The exercise science concentration prepares students for graduate study in exercise science-related degrees." Really, is that what the departments are all about? The degree itself is meaningless! If so, is that the reason the department's legal "defense" is one of always talking about the "exercise science-related careers" (such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, chiropractor, athletic trainer, etc.) and their salaries based on location, training, and experience? The student who doesn't want to spend more tuition dollars on graduate school is usually making a salary ~\$30,000 a year as a personal trainer vs. the physical therapist's average of ~72,000 per year.

The beauty of exercise physiology is that it is a healthcare profession and those who major in exercise physiology will do much better, particularly if they are Board Certified Exercise Physiologists (6). This was pointed out in 2010 in a small piece (7) entitled, Greener Grass! As Charles Darwin noted, "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." Can exercise physiology meet the challenge of changing? I think it can. One way that demonstrates the exercise physiologist's desire to take charge of their profession is by anticipating the benefits of entrepreneurship. As beginning practitioners, they are choosing a path that represents "greener grass." This is exactly what Ahrens did. She is an ASEP Board Certified Exercise Physiologist. When she graduated, she started the Ahrens Exercise Physiology business. It has made all the difference in her life. That is also why the ASEP Accreditation Guidelines are so important in the preparation of exercise physiologists (8). Accreditation helps to move from a paradigm of gym fitness and/or just cardiac rehab to one of total healthcare promotion and wellness.

This new thinking requires new knowledge and especially the hands-on business skills to be successful and an effective leader in healthcare. With a few business courses that are 100% within their reach while in college, the exercise physiology major sets he/her business thinking and opportunity for success. Then, in their healthcare business setting, exercise physiologists meet clients on their turf instead of the traditional instructor, specialist, or trainer perspective that dominates exercise science. The ASEP perspective is that healthcare involves the biological, physical, sociological, cultural, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of a client's life. It also involves teaching the client about self-responsibility and awareness of cardiovascular fitness, nutritional competence, and stress management. Change and success are possible with straight thinking.

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