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Problems and Opportunities in Exercise Physiology Higher Education

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Higher education is special or at least it should be. After all, what is after high school... work or college or both? The fact is that the majority of the students do both for 4 or more years to earn a college degree. Higher education is the primary method by which young men and women gain access to professionally credible and financially sound career opportunities. Of course there is also the expectation of the never-ending search for the truth. In fact, it is utmost important that the recently graduated student transitions from college to the public sector with the knowledge, attitude, and skill to help others and him- or herself.

It should be noted that it is the teachers' responsibility if not their commitment to higher education to avoid pontification or laying down the word about the "degree program" as a transitional step to some other academic program. In fact, it is in their best interest to make a full analysis of the factors that contribute to the students' success or failure. The faculty members who achieve tenure should understand this thinking. Yet the reality of higher education suggests otherwise.

I am aware that life is complicated and higher education is important for obvious reasons, but coming to understand the narrow and often isolated thinking of many teachers is disappointing. Why they are not continuous learners remains to be analyzed and understood? Why they neglect reading about professionalism so they can spend more time on research and publishing is a problem? Growth in excellence as a teacher and as exercise physiologists is greatly dependent upon a growing knowledge that they understand professionalism and the psychophysiological factors that influence health and well-being.

Beneath all this there is a deeper paradox. Although it is true that exercise physiologists are constantly doing research, they differ from other doctorate prepared healthcare

professionals in that they fail to understand the overwhelming importance of belonging to and supporting their own profession and professional organization. Such overt behavior represents a generation of failed thinking that destroys the academic atmosphere of good will and mutual trust.

The ASEP exercise physiologists have escaped the age-old conception of him- or herself as a researcher and a disher-out of stored facts and figures. Clearly, research is important. It awakens us to new ideas and possibilities that help to keep exercise physiologists from hovering tenaciously around a few standards ideas and beliefs. But, to fulfill his or her role as a teacher beyond superficial qualities that can be very deceptive, there must be a zest for finding the truth beyond status quo.

Education of the future will require that college teachers learn the importance of professionalism and credibility as healthcare professionals. They must learn the complexity of this topic and of how very few academic exercise physiologists understand and practice it. This process involves engaging and intimate changes within the teachers and the academic departments. It involves analyzing and arriving at conclusions and determining values based on sound reasoning. It also involves weighing the relative merits of that which is written, spoken, or thought on behalf of all students who want to be exercise physiologists.

Thus, the responsible and honest college teachers will find the time and opportunity to pursue the truth. They will learn the value in distinguishing the significant from the trivial, especially when the latter is driven by non-exercise physiologists of generic organizations. To know who they are is to ask insightful and meaningful questions about the origin of exercise physiology and its relationship to healthcare. The straight thinkers understand this point. That's why they are willing to listen to those who support the seldom-questioned failed rhetoric of sports medicine and exercise science.

The responsible exercise physiologists do not disagree merely for the sake of disagreement, nor does he or she make arguments just to do so. In other words, there is a purpose in the examination of "what is" versus "what it should be." They understand why distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant allows for a clear decision to change. While careful not to stretch a point of view, their thinking provides continuity and support for the change process. This is especially evident when mediocrity is a condition that drives the lack of independence of mind and the subjugation of relevant and proven ideas.

Understandably, the desire to support professional development does not come naturally. But, the seed of its necessity compared to the alternative automatically drives the process when nourished by just a little comparison to the reality and courage of others. The

conviction of physical therapists, as an example, speaks volumes. Their understanding and work towards professionalism in physical therapy encourages and sustains students and professionals alike.

That exercise physiologists can be taught to think as healthcare professionals appears to be open to question. Thus, what are the conditions for its development? First, the influence of non-exercise physiologists must be understood as negative. A second requisite is the opportunity to pursue the belief that professionalism in exercise physiology is worth developing and be developed. This means that there must be the opportunity and freedom, particularly within academia to think anew and to propose uncommon ideas that will allow for reflection, speculation, and analysis of present day dogma.

Students have the ethical right to major in an actual exercise physiology degree by title, not an exercise physiology look alike. They have the right to expect that their professors will play a large role in cultivating and nourishing existing and potential career opportunities to help ensure their success after college. Similarly, it is the students' prerogative to expect that their educational journey will be enriched by faculty guidance driven by the spirit and necessity of professionalism.

The teaching-learning relationship should support the shared thinking of professionalism across the healthcare professions. Academic exercise physiologists should show an active interest in talking about the importance of a career-specific code of ethics, accreditation, and standards of practice. They should show concerns for their students' problems by promoting and publishing professionalism research, articles, and books. To deny this direction of purpose and work is to negate the value of what the established professions have already done.

A great injustice lies in failing to know specifically "what is exercise physiology" and "who is an exercise physiologist" and why it is essential to promote and develop professionalism in exercise physiology. Exercise physiologist with and without the doctorate degree must come together in the freedom of thought and action to form a better image of what we want to become. The temptation to conform to yesterday's thinking must be replaced the intellectual curiosity, aptitude, and power to leverage new ideas and concepts.

The desire to choose a new path is fundamental to the concept of academic freedom. For this reason each academic and non-academic exercise physiologist must explore what he/she is, why he/she is doing it, and doing whatever is necessary to assume responsibility for "what is right" and "what is wrong" with the way and manner in which exercise physiologists define and perform as exercise medicine professionals. The need for

identifying our true purpose and direction in higher education in the midst of stupidity by others is great.

Young professors cannot allow their sense of work to be defined by just publishing their research articles. Research is important but so are the responsibilities of teaching and professionalism. College teachers are responsible to educating their students without distorting the truth of problems that stem from indoctrination and indifference to “get ahead.” Playing the conformity game is thought to be prerequisite to success, but in reality it is the ultimate failure of autonomy, freedom, and independence.

After all, when we picture the college or university with all of its faculty and curricula, what single word comes to mind is “service.” The institution’s purpose is to serve the students. The students do not exist to serve the faculty, regardless of their expectation otherwise. When the latter is the case, the students’ education suffers as well as their opportunities and success after college. This faculty-centered environment rather than student-centered environment needs changing. The faculty must be willing to see the difference between “what is” and “what should be.”

The thesis of this brief article is not that academic exercise physiologists have not done a good job on many fronts, but that the work is incomplete. In order to achieve full understanding and appreciation of everything that has gone before and is present today, college professors must also take on the challenges of the 21st century need for professionalism in exercise physiology. The hope is that they will sooner than later.