

# Professionalization of Exercise Physiology<sup>online</sup>

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Advancing the Profession of Exercise Physiology

## **Moral Courage and Exercise Physiology**

Tommy Boone, PhD, MPH, MAM, MBA  
Fellow, American Society of Exercise Physiologists  
Board Certified Exercise Physiologist  
Professor, Department of Exercise Physiology  
The College of St. Scholastica  
Duluth, MN 55811

*“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew....”*

*– Abraham Lincoln [1]*

**A**LL OF US SHOULD BE AWARE of the reasons for the founding of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) as the professional organization of exercise physiologists. Perhaps, some of us are tempted to say that it was a mistake. After all, aren't most of the doctorate prepared exercise physiologists still members of the American College of Sports Medicine? Why are they still supporting ACSM? Perhaps, to oversimplify just a bit, is it because they continue to mimic what others tell them to think? If so, why aren't they asking questions? Asking questions and thinking about professionalism remains indispensable for all exercise physiologists.

**Key Point.** The ASEP leadership believes that many academic exercise physiologists know the right thing to do, but do not have the courage to do it. Compton Machenzie [2] said, “One of the hardest test of a man's moral courage is his ability to face the disapproval even of his friends for an action which strikes at all the traditions of his class but which nevertheless he feels compelled to take in order to be at ease with his own conscience.”

It is no longer sufficient to create an educational degree that is meaningless. Today it's economically important to create a credible degree. The capacity for logical thought must prevail. That is why the ASEP leaders believe exercise physiologists must awaken from a certain naïveté of pseudo-professionalism that has become a very firm dogmatic obstacle to the change process. It is most unfortunate this is the case since it suggests that they either do not understand the problems with the exercise science major or do not care. Another possibility is that they may be afraid to express their true beliefs about exercise science. Groupthink [3] continues to have a profound negative influence on the exercise physiologist's ability to think straight.

### **A Healthcare Profession**

The ASEP leaders want something better for exercise physiology and students. They understand that one way to ensure a better future is to get involved with the political, economic, and professional forces that shape professions. For those who believe exercise physiology is a healthcare profession, it is imperative that they look to the future of exercise physiology. Although it may at first be unsettling, given the major challenges ahead, ASEP exercise physiologists are interested in finding new avenues for employment as healthcare entrepreneurs. For this reason, the ASEP exercise physiologists believe it is their obligation to shape current thinking and the future of exercise physiology.

To survive in this world of healthcare professionals, individuals and organizations must examine what they're doing to support their profession. Maybe, what is needed is a whole new mindset.

At some risk to themselves, especially the academic exercise physiologists, they continue to engage in behaviors that are believed profoundly inappropriate to traditional sports medicine views. As others have done through the civil rights movement or on issues of war or abortion, ASEP exercise physiologists have their

own views about “what is exercise physiology” and “who is an exercise physiologist.” Hence, they no longer believe exercise physiology is just the study of acute and chronic changes to regular exercise. They understand that such wording cannot be the foundational thinking required to develop a healthcare profession. For that matter there can be no success without acknowledging that the generic sports medicine thinking is simply inadequate for people willing to pay the price for professionalism in exercise physiology.

*Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society.*

-- Robert F. Kennedy [4]  
1966 speech

*US Democratic politician (1925 - 1968)*

Healthcare is the key word of the future, not fitness. The shift from gyms to healthcare clinics isn't an option. It is the way of the future for the profession of exercise physiologists. People don't follow those who engage in sit-ups and other types of activities to maintain well-being of the mind-body complex if they know circumstances demand more. They follow individuals who understand the new and attractive healthcare role for exercise physiologists. They know that society is changing, and that more people are interested in healthcare professionals and less so in fitness instructors and personal trainers. Fostering preventive behavior changes towards healthier lifestyles will emerge as a targeted area for increased career options for exercise physiologists.

***Professionalism matters. Professional organizations are required of a profession-specific membership.*** Have you notice that academic exercise physiologists seldom ever talk about the certifications that make little sense to professionals? There are at least two reasons for this. First, it has to do with the historical aspects of the problem. Second, there is very little leadership regarding professionalism in exercise physiology. As a matter of fact, if exercise physiologists are not a member of ASEP, as disturbing as it is, they are likely to support most generic certifications.

The prediction of a major shortage of healthcare professionals presents many problems for the graying of America. It is more than intuitive that exercise physiologists must take a leadership role in healthcare, especially the board certified exercise physiologists. Core scientific values and a strong knowledge based in accreditation and professionalism are leading credentials in the work of professional development and recognition. More exercise physiologists need to be aware of the ASEP mission [5]. The fact that regular *exercise* is increasingly recognized as central to preventive measures and the rehabilitation of many illnesses and diseases brings into play not only new and increased career services for ***exercise* physiologists**, but helps to ensure a brighter future for all exercise physiologists.

The **American Society of Exercise Physiologists**, the professional organization representing and promoting the profession of exercise physiology, is committed to the professional development of exercise physiology, its advancement, and the credibility of exercise physiologists [5].

### **Moral Courage**

Writer Mark Twain [6] said, “To do what is right is wonderful.” What is right for exercise physiologists is their own professional organization. But, it takes moral courage to speak out and do the right thing. And yet, regardless of the fear of doing so, it is time to stand for one’s core professional values (e.g., the generic organization is not a professional organization). Why the difference? Why not ask the physical therapist, nurse, dietitian, occupational therapist, or athletic trainer? They have put principles into action, and they have gained so much momentum from supporting their own professional organization. It is time to take charge of exercise physiology, regardless of risks of humiliation, rejection by your peers, and unemployment. It has never been more important for exercise physiologists at all levels to understand the logic of the change.

The bottom line is that the roles and responsibilities of the exercise physiologist today are different from decades ago. This shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone. The emphasis is on the board certification, not personal training. It is all about specialized knowledge and hands-on laboratory skills that provide exercise physiologists with continuous opportunities for employment over the lifetime of their careers. The ability to encapsulate and contextualize regular exercise as medicine has become more important today, given the sedentary existence of the majority of Americans.

*The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.*  
-- Albert Einstein [7]

Which side are you on? Whether the organization is ACSM, ASEP, NSCA, or one of a dozen other organizations, the question is always loaded. Can you be

Many of the ASEP changes that were implemented early on can be viewed as attempts to change the strategic thinking of exercise physiologists from one that values just research and publications to one that values students' issues and problems and who are willing to share their disjointed career opportunities.

on several sides at the same time? If so, what does that mean to one side that needs you more so than the other side(s)? If being on several sides cannot mean the same as being on one side, is the question valid? Something tells me that a person can be a member of several organizations and be happy, but I am not sure this is

always a good thing.

Again, think about the physical therapists and APTA. They understand the struggles and the enthusiasm for supporting the American Physical Therapy Association. Why don't the academic exercise physiologists get this point? Understandably, sacrificing loyalty is at times a very questionable thing to do. It seems to always put a person in an uncomfortable position. Hence, the question is this: Do you want to support ACSM, NSCA, or ASEP? The question deserves some serious reflection. Life is too short not to find the right path or to show that

you have moral courage. In other words, as Trevor Baylis [8], the inventor said: “The key to success is to risk thinking unconventional thoughts. Convention is the enemy of progress. As long as you’ve got slightly more perception than the average wrapped loaf, you could invent something.”

That something is the inspired and inventive insight that accompanies the willingness to make a go of it, to listen to the students’ concerns, to struggle with the stuff of professional development, and to create the lifeblood of something better. This capacity to see the big picture is the antidote to the inertia of the past way of thinking. That is, whether the

*Leadership is about empathy. It is about having the ability to relate and to connect with people for the purpose of inspiring and empowering their lives.*

-- Oprah Winfrey [9]

academic exercise physiologists want to recognize it or not, the reality of past mistakes has already crashed down upon us thousands of college students. The thinking of the ASEP leaders is that they need non-doctorate exercise physiologist as leaders to do a better job of communicating the need to change.

They understand that leadership styles have changed. Exercise physiology is no longer just about research and attending national meetings. It is a different mindset now to be an effective communicator and/or educator. It takes someone who is willing to think outside the box [10], who is willing to learn a new way of thinking about exercise physiology, and who is willing to get involved. Such a person needs to be a critical thinker with the communication skills to change how others think, to access information, and to move in a direction to achieve the ASEP mission. It can be done, and it will take dedicated and disciplined exercise physiologists to pull it off as the ASEP organization continues to grow in the future and spread its influence.

Instilling a sense of professional pride and having students and colleagues buy in to this line of thinking is extremely important. This might sound like an unorthodox way of thinking, but the reality is when you see exercise physiology students who have dropped out and are now re-engaged in the profession, the

traditional emphasis on sports medicine and exercise science has to change. The students get it, so why don't their teachers? Yesterday is just that, yesterday! It is time to contend with the 21st century reality of exercise physiology. It is beyond time to acknowledge the innate desire of students to be successful, and yet fail not as a direct result of their own deficiencies. Why not demonstrate the ability to imagine yourself in their shoes, to feel their pain, and to see through their eyes the challenges before them?

Empathy makes us better than otherwise. Meryl Streep [11] said it best, "The greatest gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy." Is anyone listening? In short, the point is this: When exercise physiologists act as though they are professionals, then, they should be professionals! There is no use trying to play the game of being a professional without actually being one. And yet, that is the academic exercise physiologist's story, which in turn leads to a cartoon sense of what they represent. With brevity, not wanting to say more than should be said at this time, the test of being a professional in a particular area of study and work is to know without a doubt the professional organization to which he/she belongs and is responsible to. After all, it is all about empathy.

*Empathy is the fore-runner for emotionally intelligent people, because they have the strength to put their own emotions on hold to truly understand the other person.*

*-- Z. Haseeb  
Intek World*

At the very least, we ought to take professionalism seriously because of its demonstrated importance to improve our lives and that of our clients/patients. People who take issue with this thinking or choose otherwise to embrace a generic organization have found purpose in something other than the profession of exercise physiology. However controversial this point or some form of it, the merging of professionalism and exercise physiology as a healthcare profession is part of a more sweeping trend in healthcare. It makes sense that the basic desire to find purpose and meaning in what exercise physiologists do is understood in the language of professionalism.

*Professionalism cannot be a given; it must be pursued and lived.* That is why turning our attention to unlocking the inertia of past thinking is critical to a mix of factors, including social networking, to making money and experiencing the positive aspects of professionalism. The person who disagrees with this view isn't thinking straight. They are on the wrong path; one that isn't centered to help students realize their dreams or that of the natural gratitude or comfort as part of doing one's work. As sad as it is, they don't get that exercise physiology has changed from a discipline to a profession. Why, because it represents a threat to exercise physiologists who have had control over their work as defined by non-exercise physiology thinking.

To argue for change, as the ASEP leaders believe is imperative, is to evoke thinking that isn't responsible to earlier experiences and competencies. No wonder the exercise physiology educators have been so slow to change. Despite their desire, perhaps, to embrace ASEP, they suppress such thinking to maintain their bargaining rights with ACSM or NSCA. Virtually all doctorate prepared exercise physiologists remain as researchers and not as healthcare professionals. From a historical point of view, this is expected as the researchers learn to define the difference between a discipline and a profession. Change is obviously a slow process, and total commitment is ultimately achieved as each person learns the importance and implications of empowerment.

I have heard it said that I can make a difference. Can I? But, what if I try and fail? What then? Everything about my life may be threatened? That is the point. Making a difference is not easy, but it is important to do so. It is about a new way of thinking, a new organization, and a self-reliant empowerment that is linked to SUCCESS!

That is the question, isn't it? Building competence and establishing the authority to make substantive decisions regarding exercise as medicine. How will exercise physiologists develop and extend their competence? There are other questions, too. How will they achieve continuous improvement as healthcare professionals? How will they come together to trust each other and do the right thing on behalf of the profession of exercise physiology and their clients and



patients? Is it a matter of shared governance? If this is the case, it makes for a much better sense of exercise physiology. And yet, while it is empowering, shared governance results from exercise physiologists getting involved in the authority, control, and autonomy of “what is exercise physiology” and “who is an exercise physiologist.”

Strange as it might sound to some hard core sports medicine performers, the ASEP leadership provided answers early on regarding these questions during the early development of the ASEP organization. Today, the biggest change in the change process is how and if exercise physiologists should decide to work together. There isn't any question that improving job opportunities for students and enhancing organizational performance demonstrates progress. Make no mistake that the students are the reason the ASEP organization was founded. The ASEP vision is a simple and clear operational vision to encourage a participatory process that involves all exercise physiologists.

Robert Green Ingersoll [12] said, “The great test of courage on earth is to bear defeat without losing heart.” That is the point, isn't it? In nearly all cases,

*Doing the right thing is, more often than not, not the easiest option in the short term and often requires more time and energy than doing the easy thing. In the long term, of course, it's the right decision.*

-- Jo Ann Love [13]

the restructuring of how people think is a function of moral courage, time, and commitment to an idea, which is one of the keys to successful restructuring of long-established turf boundaries. So, in one sense, enough said on this subject. So, under the best of circumstances, organizational change is a process of dealing with cultural beliefs and values, and of course the products (i.e., certifications) and services offered to members of various organizations. Under the best of circumstances, change is a very slow process. It is the same with most things, especially when perceived as new. Exercise physiologists who are not in the swing of change are resistant to adopting new ideas. Instead, they are more easily associated with the dogma of past thinking. The adoption of new ideas and

behavior new to their colleagues is threatening and uncomfortable. Hence there is the tendency to abide by yesterday's thinking. The notion of change and innovation is less profound if not politically the wrong way to think.

The diffusion of thinking that there should be something different and yet the failing to be part of the ASEP reengineering of exercise physiology [14] is a huge collectively failure of key professionals to clarify and disseminate the purpose of the exercise physiology degree. Regardless of the degree title, if it is related in some way to exercise physiology and students graduate thinking they are exercise physiologists, then, there is a problem. Knowledge of this thinking is imperative among professionals, especially those involved in academia. Their awareness of this growing problem should be an awakening. In fact, shocked by what they know is true, they should have identified alternative strategies for the integration of exercise physiologists in healthcare.

In an era when the old maxim "Change is the only constant" appears to be a reality, it is more important than ever before for college teachers to understand the process of organizational change to improve student education while protecting the professional viability of exercise physiology. Students are the reason college teachers exist. Why not actively collaborate to develop a shared leadership to build day-to-day policy and professionalism? The attitude of "if it ain't broke, fix it anyway" can help with the awareness of the need to change.

Why not take a moment to read the ASEP vision? It is a gift to exercise physiologists. Vision generates hope, provides endurance, and motivates the discouraged. No matter how difficult, the essence of the ASEP vision is to see the future [15] by asking and answering three questions. **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

*"Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."*

– Anonymous

***This is MORAL COURAGE!***

physiology to fitness, health promotion, rehabilitation, and sports training. **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. **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.

Exercise physiologists are living in a time when one way (the sports medicine way) is dying and the new age (the ASEP way) is not fully accepted, but well on its way. We cannot doubt this as we look about us and expect to see the necessary changes in the definition of exercise physiology, in education of the students, and almost every aspect of what it means to be a member of a healthcare profession. A choice confronts exercise physiologists. Will they stay in the past, withdrawn from the 21st century reality of change? If they do, they will have surrendered their chance to participate in the forming of a new profession! They will have forfeited the opportunity to influence the evolution of the profession of exercise physiology, and in doing so they will have betrayed themselves.

It is a truth, recognizable in all of us that when we don't want to become involved, when we don't want to confront even the issue of whether or not we'll come to the aid of someone who is being unjustly treated, we block off our perception, we blind ourselves to the other's suffering, we cut off our empathy with the person needing help. Hence the most prevalent form of cowardice in our day hides behind the statement "I did not want to become involved."

-- Rollo May [16]

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