

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

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## Failure of Academic Leadership

Tommy Boone, PhD, MPH, MAM, MBA  
Board Certified Exercise Physiologist

*Never waste your time trying to explain who you are to people who are committed to misunderstanding you.*

*-- Dream Hampton*

At its core, the academic degree is driven by a purpose. So, immediately upfront what is the purpose of an academic degree? Is it to say that I have a college degree? Or, is it to get a financially good job after college? I believe the latter is the most obvious reason parents send their children to college. They want their sons and daughters to get a great job and move on with their lives. Otherwise, the obvious alternative is to graduate from college “educated so to speak” and, then, move back home and, frankly, this happens more often than we want to think about. From my point of view, that means the college degree is meaningless. If so, what responsibility do the college teachers, chairs, deans, vice-presidents, presidents, and others have in marketing academic degrees that do not help students to be successful in life? Where is the academic and administrative leadership to help ensure that college produces successful graduates? This is primarily the point of this brief article.

*From Durham, NC, Richard H. Brodhead wrote in 2013, “You can scarcely open a newspaper or financial journal these days without finding headlines like ‘Higher Education: Not What It Used To Be’ or ‘Is College Worth It?’”*

As Chair of a Department of Exercise Physiology for 16 years, I had parents say to me that, “College administrators are a major part of the students’ problem, if not ‘the’ problem that my son is living at home and that all the tuition money was poorly spent.” Parents have asked me, “Isn’t the purpose of going to college to help my daughter get a better paying job than her friends who decided not to go to college?” The administrators

understand this point when it comes to their children! No doubt that is why they make sure their sons and daughters major in a career-driven academic degree program.

Getting a college degree must be more than just getting a degree. It must be offered within the framework of a purpose that is shared by parents who send their children to college. After all, the parents are often paying tuition and living costs not to mention

*A Complaint of Dashed Hopes: The New York Times chose as commencement feature a young woman who had finished a four-year private university in Ohio \$120,000 in debt, requiring more than \$800 in monthly payments which she was working two restaurant jobs to repay.*

*-- Richard H. Brodhead*

providing a car while paying the notes and insurance if not the gas to and from college plus some spending money. The academic leadership understands this thinking as well. But, interestingly enough, their thinking is driven by a shared desire to protect their jobs at all costs. This means they are compelled to commit to the common cause of sustaining their status quo, which is doing whatever the person above them wants done.

This is a problem. College teachers and administrators who are willing to commit themselves to securing their jobs while not doing what is in the best interest of the students is a failure in academic leadership. Why, when leadership is effectively carried out, it results in a collegiate team of people with the expectation of their collective work to empower college graduates. They expect the students to locate credible and sustainable jobs. That is why they place their names, pictures, job titles, and place of work on the department web pages. The students' success helps to promote the department and the academic institution to potentially new students. The idea is that these students are successful and "you" can be as well. But, strangely enough, while the department chair and faculty understand this point, they do relatively little to actually plan for the students' success. In other words, they come across as caring more about their jobs, income, and success.

Faculty members and departments cannot be successful if they turn a deaf ear to the work of their competitors. Take, for example, physical therapists, occupational therapists, nurses, and athletic trainers, each profession understands the necessity of comparing and evaluating the different practice standards and work within the community. With very little appreciation of the business aspects of healthcare, academic exercise physiologists come across as failing to understand that if they don't act now as leaders in exercise medicine, then other established professions will do so. After all, they will simply see it as "good business." In fact, the truth is that when exercise physiologists do not support the vision and mission of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) as their professional healthcare organization and spend little time thinking about the role and interest of the physical therapy association's in exercise medicine, they are in fact setting up their students and the students' parents as well as the profession of exercise physiology to fail.

For the most part, it is correct to conclude that recognizable consumer dissatisfaction (particularly the parents of exercise science students) has not reached the department level yet. It will and when it does all hell is going to hit the fan. The criticisms will reflect upon the out-dated purpose of the departments across the United States and faculty as well. The primary issue will be the obvious fact that the exercise science and related degrees (except exercise physiology under the supervision and direction of ASEP) is not career-driven and, therefore, is meaningless when it comes to graduates finding credible jobs after college. While this outcome should have produced change in the departments decades ago, it hasn't and is in fact a major failure in academic leadership at both the department and the upper administration levels.

It isn't strange at all there are not many critics of the academic majors from within academia. No doubt some faculty members fear for their jobs should they speak up. The majority of the faculty appears to be indifferent to the concerns highlighted in this article. Even the tenured faculty members realize that their tenure is no protection from sharing the truth, especially if it highlights the failure in academic and/or administrative leadership. Yet, no academic department can be successful for long if it isolates itself from the students' reality of expecting to find a "credible job" after college. Working at Bob's Gym for \$10 to \$12 per hour without health insurance is not worth the \$25,000 to \$130,000 tuition debt after graduation. The ethical implications of the growing interest of the leadership of academic institutions to survive with the highest financial income without the appreciation of the challenges faced by students have become a matter of heated controversy for many in the public sector

Where is the academic leadership and where is the academic accountability in charging increasingly higher tuition fees for an academic degree that cannot produce desired satisfaction? The graduates of higher education institutions must be prepared for a professional career with a reasonably good salary when they graduate.

Otherwise, what is the point of the college degree? Where is the academically strong and vigorous curriculum from which society will recognize the graduates as credible healthcare professionals? What is the career connection, if any, with a degree in exercise science or one of a dozen similar degree titles? Why is there so much emphasis on the faculty members doing research and so little attention given to teaching? Why isn't there an academic course that addresses professionalism, ethics, and entrepreneurship? Where is the integrity in an academic degree that is disconnected from real world reality?

The students, alumni, university administrators, and parents need answers to these questions, and they need them today not decades from now. No parents should ever allow

*In Virginia, the call to document education results has produced a law requiring all public and private colleges and universities to post the incomes of their students one year after graduation broken down by college major, so the public can know what course led to what result.*

*-- Richard H. Brodhead*

much less encourage their children to major in exercise science or any degree program that is not career-driven. Yes, this is a bold statement. But, it is the conclusion reached by many parents I have talked to during my 47 years of college teaching. A vote of no confidence doesn't just happen. When young men and women return home earlier than their parents had expected from their job search possibilities, there is a problem. Either they were not able to think through critically important ideas, understand complex issues, or meet the employers' expectations, or they were seduced into thinking there would locate a credible job when they graduate. The truth is without leadership development, training, and transformation efforts, nothing will change. Decades from now, parents will still feel that they were robbed of the money they paid to the academic institutions towards helping their children earn a college degree.

*Parents from all across the United States believed that they were getting honest feedback from academic advisors and college representatives, but this is rarely true. In fact, many parents and some college teachers have come to think of this common belief as a myth that is consistent with the purposeful intent of employees to avoid "speaking truth" for a variety of reasons --- mostly, to protect their jobs. This is worth repeating, especially since it is so pernicious.*

Consumer dissatisfaction does not begin to address the problem of failure in academic leadership. Higher education must be reformed and updated if it is going to benefit the public. People with integrity must get into the driver's seat. The teachers who are in it just for themselves must be replaced. Significant reform is required of the exercise science programs that are in reality one or two courses away from the curriculum of the traditional

*The cost of higher education has risen well above inflation or family earnings increases for many years, outstripping even the rising cost of health care.*

*-- Richard H. Brodhead*

physical education degree. But, while the physical education teachers earn a degree that is linked to a teaching and/or coaching career, it is not true of the students in the exercise science. Also, while the proliferation of the exercise science related degrees and meaningless certifications generate money for institutions and organizations, they do not provide a credible education and public recognition by which college graduates can survive financially.

Why the faculty of these academic programs do not get that exercise science related degrees are largely undifferentiated in the eyes of the public is a mystery. All I can say is that it must result from a strong status quo driven solely by faculty interest that is independent of the educational and/or career needs of the students. As such, then, the behavior of the faculty members de-values teaching and student learning. Also, as long as sustainable change and continuous improvement in the students' education must come from within the academic department, it is foreseeable that

the core elements of their mindset will remain unchanged as is unfortunately true with the students' education.

Then, too, since it is true that college teachers are responsible to the administrators who have the ultimate control over whether they are tenured or not, professors aren't likely to go against the institution's emphasis on research and writing grants to bring in money and recognition. This means the faculty members' commitment is first on behalf of the faculty and much later to the students. The obvious conclusion is that the academic culture values itself more so than overcoming the formidable challenges faced by the students who have no idea they are getting a degree that will require them to apply to graduate school in hopes of making up for lost time and money.

It is sad to say but true that if the college teachers don't know who they are (i.e., exercise specialists and/or exercise professionals vs. exercise physiologists) and if they don't know how to move out of the 20th century, then, learning and growing might be out of the question. Although seldom if ever discussed is the related fact that students want to be taught and guided by face-to-face honest teachers who understand they are members of a healthcare profession compelled to make a difference in the lives of their students. The students I have talked to are tired of college “professors” and department chairs inattentive to their needs. They believe the teachers' benign neglect of embracing and promoting a new academic culture in academia is dysfunctional and selfish.

For certain, I have worked with college teachers over 4 decades who did not have a commitment to academic development and/or the mentoring of students. The fact they had earned the doctorate degree meant that they could spend the rest of their academic lives publishing research papers and building their resumes. The challenge of teaching hardly ever surfaced to the point of disturbing their everyday reality. The act of teaching was nothing more than another part of their job. In fact, it was simply tolerated. Teaching was not a passion and they did not have a commitment to help or empower students beyond the usual classroom expectations. Even the act of working among colleagues within the same department is looked upon as a required necessity with neither a vision nor the pursuit of a common cause.

The students' financial return on their ever-increasing tuition debt is complicated by the parents' fear of not being able to pay for their children's education. Students and parents want to know that the administrators and faculty members understand the importance of the college-to-career mentality and vision. They want the degree to prepare them for a life in the real world working as a credible healthcare professional. But, instead, the college teachers tell them that they can “...always apply to physical therapy program or some other established healthcare major.” In essence, then, they are saying to the students that the exercise science degree is a meaningless major.

*Nowadays, part of the work of educators is working to remind ourselves and others what, in the deep sense, education could really be. We have work to do.*

*-- Richard H. Brodhead*

The faculty does this to avoid talking about the meaningless qualities of the degree. Think about it for a moment and ask yourself this question: "Where is the accountability?" "Where is the academic competence?" The answer to both questions is that there isn't any! Likewise, where is the integrity in continuing to stay with an outdated academic degree that benefits no one except the faculty? The students go along to get along, hoping for the best and producing little more than average results. They cannot find work and default on their loans, and the institutions have borne little to no responsibility.

Isn't academic integrity at the very center of living up to the high standards expected of college faculty and administrators? If so, where is the honesty in not updating the exercise science degree to the exercise physiology degree? Where is the truth in continuing to offer a non-career degree? It isn't fair to the students and their parents. Therefore, to simply continue to turn a blind eye to the problems faced by the students is to fail in respecting the students and their parents. Sure, most people are reluctant to alert the chair, vice-president, or some other administrator, both because this would potentially hurt people's feelings and because it might injure a person's effort at getting tenure. As such the quest for truth can't come from the institution or its employees. The otherwise expected climate of collective trust and fairness in the interactions of students, faculty, and administrators does not exist.

In closing, it could exist, that is, a better academic degree, but first the exercise physiologists must dare to talk about it even if they find themselves the only faculty in the department standing up alone. They must believe that they can make a difference in the face of department and administrative indifference. Helping others understand who they are and why change is important will begin the process of removing barriers and increasing accountability and professional productivity. With an enriched culture of responsibilities toward students and the academic major with a more entrepreneurial spirit, characterized by increased competitive zeal on being the market leader in prescribing exercise medicine, college graduates will be happier because they will be successful healthcare practitioners.

*"...a quarter of college graduates who earn less than \$50,000 a year now say their degree was a bad bargain."*

*-- Karin Fischer*

Thus, to restore public trust, the college administrators, department chairs, and faculty must embrace and support the ASEP vision of exercise physiologists as credible healthcare professionals. The bottom line is that the future

of the undergraduate degree depends upon the personal integrity of everyone involved so that the students' return on their investment is clearly stated and verified to the public. Trust is prerequisite in higher education. Accountability is absolutely imperative. Faculty members with integrity who understand this point also get the importance of sharing intelligible and transparent information with students and their parents.

***Suggested Reading:***

*Introduction to Exercise Physiology.* ISBN 978-1-4496-1709-7-ISBN 1-4496-3 - Soft Cover - Publisher: Jones & Bartlett Learning - 2013 - Author: Tommy Boone

*The Professionalization of Exercise Physiology: Certification, Accreditation, and Standards of Practice of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP).* ISBN10: 0-7734-4855-1 ISBN13: 978-0-7734-4855-1 - Hardcover - Publisher: The Edwin Mellen Press - 2009 - Author: Tommy Boone

*Ethical Standards and Professional Credentials In The Practice of Exercise Physiology.* ISBN-13 978-0-7734-5245-9 - Hardcover - Publisher: The Edwin Mellen Press - 2007 - Author: Tommy Boone

*Exercise Physiology As a Career: A Guide and Sourcebook.* ISBN: 0773456295 - Hardcover - Publisher: The Edwin Mellen Press - 2006 - Author: Tommy Boone

*Exercise Physiology: Professional Issues, Organizational Concerns, and Ethical Trends.* ISBN: 0773460772 - Hardcover - Publisher: The Edwin Mellen Press - 2005 - Author: Tommy Boone

*Professional Development of Exercise Physiology.* ISBN: 0773473807 - Hardcover - Publisher: The Edwin Mellen Press - 2001 - Author: Tommy Boone