

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

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## Exercise Science Students: What Are They Owed?

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*The obligation of an individual or organization to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner. It also includes the responsibility for money or other entrusted property.*

-- Business Dictionary.com

Getting a college degree is a big deal. There is the obvious expectation of finding a job that pays well. Moreover, the idea of academic excellence and workplace readiness has been part of the American lifestyle for decades. As parents have said, "Life is good when your sons and daughters are college educated, employed, and making a good salary."

Life isn't so great when the academic degree is not helpful in locating a good paying job. It is then you can hear the disappointment of college graduates and their parents. Without a good paying job students cannot pay their student loan debt, and now the debt across the U.S. is in the billions. While the exact numbers are probably not necessary to grasp the problem, Pew Research Center in 2011 published that one in five households owes student loan debt with an average debt of \$23,300.

*Character is not reflected by what we say, or even by what we intend, it is a reflection of what we do.*

-- Anonymous

Bennett (1) said in 2012, "Unlike credit card debt or automobile loans, student loans are virtually impossible to liquidate, even after bankruptcy. So 20- and 30-year-olds buried under student loan debt are forced to put off purchases crucial to the health of the economy, like buying a car or home or investing in the markets. Many are moving back in with their parents and delaying marriage and starting a family...." Of course, this raises the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this problem?
- Are the college graduates simply lazy?

- How about the university administration and department chairs?
- What role did the faculty play in this huge mess?
- Is the federal government responsible or, at least, partly so?

What is obvious or at least it should be is that students look to their professors for guidance in identifying an academic major. Their parents believe that the well-educated academics will give the right guidance to the students. They believe that success, through the right professional guidance, education, and investment in education and training is just four years away! Perhaps, it is true if the college degree is linked to meaningful jobs in the public sector. Parents and students do not understand that some college degrees are meaningless when it comes to getting a financially credible job.

*Character is how you treat those who can do nothing for you.*  
-- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The bottom line is this: Success depends on students majoring in the right academic degree. But, unfortunately, students fail to ask the right questions and, worst yet students eventually realize that they were taken for a ride by the members of the academy. The same people who they looked up to as freshmen, and the same institution they paid their hard earned tuition dollars for an education took advantage of them. This conclusion was reached after teaching at the college/university for 47 years!

Shouldn't the mission of higher education be consistent with the needs of the students? That is, shouldn't academic degree programs provide real and serious opportunities for college graduates to obtain a good paying job? After all, that is why the majority of the students attend college. If so, then, it is logical that the academic majors must be linked to an accountability system. One essential issue is the institutions' responsibility to students. They are the reason for the existence of colleges and universities - right? Academic institutions exist to serve the students and the general public. How? Very simply, by virtue of the existence of higher education, it has a huge responsibility to the students and their parents.

William Penn (2) said, "What is wrong is wrong, even if everyone is doing it. Right is still right, even if no one else is doing it." So many faculty members take the easy way out. Why, because it requires little to no explanation. Yet, the truth is every college teacher should know there is no substitute for doing what is right. If no one is going to take responsibility for the academic side of the problem, then, no one should go to college. For those who still want to attend college, they must get a better picture and analysis of the value of certain college degrees. This is where the high school guidance counselors and college admissions office can do a better service to the young adults interested in attending college.

There are two major problems mentioned in this brief article. As a reader, have you picked up on the second one? It has been stated several times, that is aside from the tuition

loans, it is the poor college education that the students are getting. Students are graduating poorly equipped to find a credible job in healthcare and, if someone should be lucky enough to find a good job in healthcare, is he or she properly educated to do the job? The short answer is NO ... the majority of the exercise science majors are still teaching courses that made up the physical education degree of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. The majority of the exercise science students are unprepared to work in healthcare!

Reform is needed at so many levels that it is almost impossible to expect change for the better. However, being an optimistic person, I have to believe that the college teachers will wake up and get with the change process for a better education of our young adults. In fact, it is absolutely imperative that they recognize their lack of academic leadership and irresponsible behavior. Why, to repeat, given the importance of this topic, the student loan debt is out of control and college graduates are not finding financially good paying career options when they graduate. This problem has financially crippled a generation of young adults and, if something isn't done about it, it will destroy thousands of other graduates. Surely, some of the college teachers who have their children in college programs understand this problem. Yes, I understand how great it is to be a college teacher with the opportunity to do research and get recognition and so forth, but teaching is (or should be) about the students!

*If you are building a culture where honest expectations are communicated and peer accountability is the norm, then the group will address poor performance and attitudes.*

*-- Henry Cloud*

This thinking isn't any different from the car mechanic who is responsible for fixing my car. Neither my car nor I exist for the mechanic to empower him. The mechanic's job is not about him, but rather what he can do for my car. Similarly, the college teacher's job is not about him- or herself but what he or she can do for the students. Yes, understandably, the students bear some responsibility for the problem. But, isn't it the role of the college teacher to influence and teach students to help them grow in new thinking and hope of a better future for themselves and their families?

A student asked me several years ago, "Is anyone reading what you write?" No, the majority of the academic exercise physiologists are interested more in their promotion and tenure via more and more research publications than teaching their students. I know for a fact that the majority of whom I talked with turns a deaf ear to the student loan debt in of 1.2 trillion dollars! At that price, every student should be 100% hired, working, and moving on with his/her life. But, no, that is not the case because only a small percent of the 40 million American college graduates get credible jobs.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the class of 2014 has the distinction of being "the most indebted ever..." Imagine what the difference might be had they spent more time preparing for the real world. Imagine how life might have been if they had received sound and honest discussions from their counselors, friends, and professors. One outcome

is that they might not have moved back in with their parents. They might have gotten married earlier. They might feel more positive about themselves, and their parents would be happier as well.

Students are owed more than what they are getting. Too many college teachers have turned a deaf ear to the concerns of their students. Yes, students must study and pass tests and courses, but they need the truth in whether their work in certain degree programs is worth the effort. This thinking seems rather obvious to me. In fact, if an academic degree is not part of an established profession, then, the department offering the degree must be held responsible for why it exists. The faculty must be held responsible as well. It isn't ethical to say to students, "When you graduate you can get personal trainer certification and work in Bob's Gym or you can complete the application for physical therapy."

Think about what the teacher said. In short, he said that the undergraduate exercise science degree is meaningless because there are no professionally-linked career jobs. Then, imagine this from the mouth of a student: "Why does the degree exist if there are no jobs? It doesn't make any sense. Why weren't we made aware of this before spending my

parents' sayings and wasting 4 years of my life? Sure, I understand you have a job, doing research, attending meetings, and making a great salary, but I don't and will not have a job when I graduate next month. If I had known the truth when we talked 4 years ago, I would have gotten a weekend warrior certification and gone to work at Bob's Gym as a trainer. I would not be \$45,000 in debt. I know my parents would be happier. Now, I will have to move back home until I can figure things out. The exercise science major and maybe this department shouldn't exist, and the faculty (especially, the department chair) should be questioned for the lack of professional and ethical accountability."

*The textbook entitled **Introduction to Exercise Physiology** is endorsed by the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) as "the" study guide for the ASEP Board Certification exam (EPC). For information to purchase the book, go to Jones and Bartlett Learning to place an order **Introduction to Exercise Physiology**.*

Apparently, from the point of view of the administration and faculty, they believe that they don't have any responsibility to rethink the graduation guarantees of the exercise science degree. Why? Because the problem has existed now for at least 50+ years and there is no discussion of it whatsoever. But, that will change, especially given the increasingly talked about discontent and dissatisfaction of the business community with the education of college graduates. They realize that the college education is missing the mark. This means the exercise science teachers and department chairs are not transparent enough about what, if anything, they are preparing students for.

The failure of exercise science students to locate jobs after graduation from which they can buy a home, a new car, and raise a family should be a wakeup call. The faculty is either not doing a very good job of explaining what exercise science majors do when they

graduate or what they are producing is not good enough to meet the needs of the graduates, or a combination of both. The point is this: If the graduates cannot access a better life as a result of attending a higher education institution, the academic degree is meaningless and, therefore, a waste of time (3).

Richard Vedder wrote in the *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (4), "Over 317,000 waiters and waitresses have college degrees (over 8,000 of them have doctoral or professional degrees), along with over 80,000 bartenders, and over 18,000 parking lot attendants...and there are 5,057 janitors in the U.S. with PhDs, other doctorates, or professional degrees." I wonder how many of these college graduates went to college with the expectation of working as a bartender, parking lot attendant, waiter, waitress, or as a janitor. I also wonder if their college teachers did everything they could to help them by being honest about the degree program and its likelihood of landing a credible job.

If you are a college exercise science teacher, have you taken the time to think about what you are doing or not doing and why? Perhaps, it isn't too late to be there for the students. Weismann (5) points out in 2010, 48% of working college graduates held jobs which required less than a bachelor's degree. In 2012, twice as many college graduates held minimum wages jobs as in 2006. Certainly, not all of these graduates were exercise science majors. The problem is large than just one department, but this fact does not excuse the inadequate career-placement of exercise science departments and the faculty.

*I find that the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving.*

*-- Oliver Wendell Holmes*

I believe it is just a matter of time that students will start holding departments and academic institutions legally accountable for the meaningless academic degrees. In fact, "A former student sued Monroe College claiming that she had not been able to obtain gainful employment because the college provided inadequate career-placement services. The student...essentially seeks restitution of the money she paid to the college and a modest sum for emotional distress" (6).

While it has been common for the courts to look the other way, it is likely to get harder to do over the next several decades. There is always the concern or the question, as Lake (6) points out, "Did the student sabotage his or her job search or fail to show proper initiative." Also, while it true that academic institutions do not provide legal assurance of employment, shouldn't the institutions, academic departments, and faculty be responsible for properly informing students of the specifics of financially meaningful job opportunities or the fact that the so-called value of, for example, the exercise science degree is that you can always apply to graduate school or to physical therapy.

Of course the student can apply to physical therapy just anyone from a dozen or more degree programs can apply to physical therapy. Is that the big selling point for the exercise science degree? For certain, the chair and the faculty believe the connection with physical

therapy is good because they understand all too well that there are no exercise science jobs for their students. Also, the majority of the jobs that exercise science students get after college could have been obtained with a personal trainer certification.

*The world that we have made, as a result of the level of thinking we have done thus far, creates problems that we cannot solve at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.*

*-- Albert Einstein*

The teachers are not just failing their students -- they are also living in the past. Their failure to update the academic degree, curriculum, and degree title along with a profession-specific accreditation and professional development guidelines to bring the degree program into the 21st century is wrong. The ASEP leadership believes that the exercise science students are owed a huge debt. That is why they

moved on from the 20th century thinking to create the first-ever professional organization of exercise physiologists – the American Society of Exercise Physiologists. They believed then and still do today that the exercise physiology-related degree titles need to be updated to one title, Exercise Physiology, from which the college graduates will be recognized as credible healthcare professionals.

The ASEP Board Certified Exercise Physiologists are the healthcare professionals who are qualified to prescribe exercise medicine to prevent and manage acute and chronic diseases. They understand that regular low- to moderate-intensity exercise helps to reduce morbidity and lowers mortality. Their scientific knowledge, hands-on laboratory skills, and the professional healthcare initiatives come from a unified curriculum developed for the profession of exercise physiology. Their work is regulated by the ASEP Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Practice. Members of the new profession are trained to work with high risk clients who experience acute exercise-related complications. The role of ASEP is significant in this transformation from just sports to healthcare.

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