

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

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## Challenges of Teaching Exercise Physiology Professionalism

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*Man is what he believes.*

*-- Anton Chekhov*

**S**ince 1997, the ASEP organization has worked relentlessly in promoting the criteria essential to a profession (i.e., a professional organization, code of ethics, accreditation guidelines, board certification, and standards of practice). Strangely enough, the work of the ASEP exercise physiologists has yet to influence the majority of the academic exercise physiologists. There is still a major void between the doctorate-prepared exercise physiologists and all other exercise physiologists. Yet, paradoxically, the same work has encouraged many non-exercise physiologists with degrees in exercise science, kinesiology, human performance, and similar academic experiences in college to ask for help from the ASEP organization. They are living (i.e., doing what they can to survive) in a world that is entirely different from the academics who have a great career and who are financially doing rather well.

The academic exercise physiologists' transition from physical education decades ago has resulted in significant achievements "for them." Their research, in particular, has helped them to achieve a certain "professional" status, which has no doubt helped to place exercise physiology on the map among other research disciplines and professions. Clearly,

the research has resulted in considerable respect for the academics and they understand this point very well. Publishing a research paper is the equivalent of a pay raise for many academics, especially in terms of recognition, academic rank, and, yes, an actual increase in the professor's annual pay. It is an awesome situation and experience. As a result, that is why the undergraduates who are looking ahead are considering getting the PhD degree or they are completing an application for PT or nursing school. Achieving professional status has led to the movement of students away from their undergraduate educational experience to seek out the collective identity of other professionals.

As a result of the failure of the academic exercise physiologists to come together to promote the "professional" efforts of ASEP on behalf of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession, their emphasis on research and themselves has led to the creation of greater diversity and less unity. Exercise physiology today is actually no different from the "physiology of exercise" course of the physical education degree 60 and 70 years ago. The lack of insight, understanding, and appreciation

*It's a funny thing about life; if you refuse to accept anything but the best, you very often get it.*

*-- W. Somerset Maugham*

for achieving professional status is staggering, but not so complicated that it cannot be corrected with a vision of something better. Even among those who get the necessity of an organization like ASEP become disillusioned after a year or so and give up. Their state of mind becomes shaped by the lack of effort and thinking that defines the easier path to take even though it is the wrong path with continued uncertainty and failure for non-doctorate exercise physiologists.

### **A Profession vs. A Discipline!**

The differences in academic training requirements, certifications, organizations, specializations, and acquired rhetoric have by default set the stage for opposing points of view. Exercise physiology as a "profession" versus a "discipline" lacks a specific identify beyond publishing yet another research paper. Hence, persons who identify themselves as exercise physiologists embrace each other and their researchers' sense of a collective identity. Meantime, all exercise physiologists who are interested in the practice of exercise medicine find themselves in an identity crisis. They feel that if the academic community

of exercise physiologists would support ASEP, the challenges of professionalism and recognition would help create a shared understanding of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession with unique responsibilities, skills, and career opportunities.

Unfortunately, given the power of generic organizations to confuse and conflict with profession-specific organizational points of view and expectations, there is an absence of clear moral principle to act and a rational discussion to clarify the differences. The

countervailing philosophical differences between the two organizational types result in ambiguous and frequently demeaning behavior when there should be justification for working together to change the culture of exercise physiology. This leads me to conclude that college teachers should emphasize and develop the importance of ethical thinking and professional responsibility. With an increased awareness and understanding the students' capacity to debate and reflect on differing points of view, particularly in regards to the influence of organizational thinking, changing market factors, client and/or patient exercise and health requirements, and focused career paths and opportunities.

*Things do not change; we change.*  
-- Henry David Thoreau

### **Professionalism: A Work In Progress**

The ASEP work towards professionalism is a work in progress, just as it is in most professions. Continuing professional development is always the item on the agenda after everything else considered important has been addressed. Seldom does it seem critical to discuss. Yet, it is essential that exercise physiologists work together to achieve common client healthcare goals, career expectations, and exercise physiology professionalism to serve society with great competence. Professionalism, in particular, creates power that is linked to a specific knowledge of exercise medicine and moral authority of the exercise physiologist that is trusted by the public. Recognition as a profession begins when each member accepts his or her commitment to the profession-specific organization and its professional commitment to the client's best interest.

In the education system, like the healthcare system and its interaction between the patient's best interest and the medical profession, there is the soaring cost of tuition that makes it reasonable to expect a greater accountability from the exercise physiology faculty.

The chairperson responsible for an academic department, as well as the students' welfare, needs to be reassured that the academic exercise physiologists are working for the advantage of everyone, and that the academic degree is designed and managed to promote credible career opportunities. The hope of ASEP leaders is that the academic exercise physiologists will accept their responsibility to perform as professionals and to do what they can to create a sense of shared identity and success as exercise physiology healthcare practitioners. Sharing of responsibility for the students' success is consistent with the ASEP vision for professionalism and accountability.

This means that honoring professionalism as college teachers isn't just doing research and teaching a few courses each semester. It is much more demanding and complex, particularly, the balance between the work of the faculty to improve themselves and their accountability to the students' success. After all, the public believes that the payment for the academic degree is should render the college graduates with more control over their lifestyle. When this privilege of having graduated from college fails to materialize, the assumed good judgment of the academic community and the responsibility to society's best interest can be viewed as a scam. As hard as this view may be for many in the academy to accept, it is correct to point out that teaching is a profession like law and medicine. Just as we live in a world with great expectations from lawyers and physicians (of which we pay handsomely for their services), the same is true of college teachers and their academic renderings to students.

### **Where Is The Leadership?**

College teachers must show some leadership by identifying the needs of the students. This is true not only in the classrooms and laboratories, but also in regards to the students' need to be successful after college. This is why the college administrators should impress upon the faculty the true reason for students seeking a college degree. They should also share in the faculty's responsibility on behalf of the students' future career perspective as healthcare professionals in the healthcare system. This means including the first-ever professionalism and business courses along with the teaching of functional anatomy as the students study cardiopulmonary exercise physiology and exercise medicine courses.

Students need to know more about how to start a healthcare business using exercise medicine as their primary healthcare intervention.

Academic exercise physiologists should show some professional leadership. They and their colleagues as well as the department chair, other faculty, and college administrators should also share responsibility in the professional development of students. Teaching a professionalism course is a major start of which the content must cover all the relevant material. This should include the evolutionary thinking and cultural considerations that go into changing 20th century example of exercise physiology as a research discipline and supporting the 21st century culture of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession. To do so, however, means that academic exercise physiologists must change how they think about exercise physiology, their values and attitudes regarding “just” the emphasis on research, and take responsibility for supporting ASEP as the professional organization of exercise physiologists. They must also improve their relationship and responsibility to the students by showing compassion and caring. Better communication, particularly in terms of career opportunities, and increased sensitivity to the students’ issues (including their families) is akin to true servant leadership. Commitment to professionalism and self-awareness of ethical practice in teaching must be at the heart of accountability.

It was Thomas Henry Huxley who said, “The great end of life is not knowledge but action.” The idea is so simple, yet almost too difficult for some exercise physiologists to grasp much less to act on. Ask yourself, “How else can exercise physiologists find a future in healthcare except to do what is necessary to survive?” The power to control to the extent possible exercise medicine is to recognize the importance of doing so now rather than attempting to do so. Surely, the academic exercise physiologists are aware of the fact that physical therapists are doing what they can to incorporate exercise medicine into their licensure bills.

**Key Point:** *Why aren't exercise physiologists doing what they can to protect the future of exercise physiology on behalf of all exercise physiologists? After all, exercise medicine is at the heart of exercise physiology. It is a gift of unbelievable importance and opportunity to promote health and well-being while preventing many different diseases and disabilities.*

Is it that academic exercise physiologists do not believe that they can move up the ladder of professional development? If they believe this is true, then to a certain extent, it is true. A person's belief system is a power of its own. On the other hand, why not believe that exercise physiologists can promote themselves as healthcare professionals just as others have done in their own profession? Even if there is some doubt, the outcome is likely to be positive given the exercise physiologists' belief that it will benefit exercise physiologists. The truth is simply this: all exercise physiologists have to do is take what has worked with physical therapy or athletic training, and apply the same principles of professionalism to exercise physiology. In doing so, they are virtually guaranteed success. But, first, they must choose to create the future of exercise physiology in their minds and, then, through their actions. It is as Edmund Spenser said, "It is the mind that maketh good or ill, That maketh wretch or happy, rich or poor."

*Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.*

*-- Theodore Roosevelt*

### **Exercise Physiologists ...Working Together!**

If exercise physiologists at all levels of work and degree programs will take control of their own communication among themselves, then, they will produce outstanding results so powerful that the outcome will summon up the best in all of them. There is no more powerful force than belief. Believe you have it and you have it. It is the power of beliefs that define the magic of change. As an example, it is my belief that board certified exercise physiologists are "the" healthcare professionals to administer exercise medicine. This belief isn't wishful thinking. It is derived from understanding the scientific evidence-based infrastructure of the exercise physiologists' knowledge and its use as an exercise drug to promote increased quality of mind-body health and prevent numerous hypokinetic diseases (such as coronary artery disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and some forms of cancer).

Sure, there are obstacles to this thinking. Most of them come from colleagues who are afraid to address the possibility of failure. Their problem is that they fail to understand failure is part of learning as long you continue to update your efforts and beliefs. There

isn't anything wrong with failure, yet the fear of failing keeps most people from even trying. The bottom line is this: stop concerning yourself with failure or how many times you have failed. No one and no collective body of people ever achieved greatness without failing many times. It part of the learning (change) process. Most importantly, every failed attempt allows for improvement towards one's goals. It is life. So, don't be afraid to try just because you might fail at creating a professionalism talk or an academic course. Go for it. Make a commitment to think as an ASEP exercise physiologists and you will be glad that you did. If you are a college teacher, why not ask your department chair to discuss ASEP accreditation?

### **Final Thoughts**

It has been said in many different ways that power comes from people working together. Imagine the power of a collective body of exercise physiologists working together to support the professionalization of exercise physiology. Imagine the new 21st century exercise physiology profession talked about and supported by administrators, students, and society. No doubt the students of exercise physiology would graduate into credible career opportunities. It is time to come together with a synergistic force of a powerful philosophic and professional force to generate the success that all exercise physiologists deserve. The time to start is now – today! Why not learn the power of belief? Why not join in the effort to take charge of exercise physiology? Perhaps, a beginning point is read, consider, and support the following statements:

### **Statement of Professionalism**

As members of the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists* (ASEP), we belong to a profession devoted to serving the interests of our clients and the public good. In our roles as healthcare professionals, we aspire to a professional standard of conduct. As exercise physiologists, with adherence to a professional standard of practice, we earn a reputation for respect and trustworthiness among our clients, in the healthcare community, and with the public.

## **Professionalism**

Professionalism includes integrity, honesty, and willing compliance with the ASEP code of ethics. ASEP exercise physiologists understand the duty to observe the profession's ethical standards to serve the best interests of client's health and wellness, fitness, rehabilitation, and athletic concerns. We, the members of the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists*, solemnly commit ourselves to:

1. Promote the integrity, dignity, and independent judgment of the application of exercise physiology.
2. Protect the privacy and confidentiality of all clients.
3. Conduct our practice in a professional, fair and respectful manner.
4. Commit ourselves to a safe and thorough knowledge and application of exercise physiology.
5. Follow civilities that encourage diligence and trust.
6. Adopt and incorporate into our practice scientifically founded facts and concepts.
7. Educate and perform our practice to benefit the well-being of our clients.
8. Avoid conflicts of interests or any activity that is demeaning to the exercise physiologist.
9. Be mindful that the practice of exercise physiology is a profession.
10. Endeavor to make the practice of exercise physiology a noble profession.