

Professionalization of Exercise Physiology^{online}

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Professional Development of the Exercise Physiology Faculty

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We need to use our minds, hearts, and imagination to generate images of the future, use our voice, hands, and feet to create our destiny.

-- Martha Rogers

The professional development of the faculty and their students in dozens of different healthcare professions has been the focus of considerable attention for decades now. From physical therapy to athletic training to dietetics, the faculty has described the nature of professionalism and the educational strategies for inculcating their students with attitudes of professionalism. Whether it is a lecture on professionalism or professionalization, or whether it is someone from dietetics or athletic training, defining the academic pursuit of professional development is imperative to the right attitudes, values, and behaviors of a professional.

Talking about or writing about professionalism in exercise physiology is not easy. Exercise physiologists, particularly those with the doctorate degree, do not think twice about writing an article on professionalism. Thus, it is more than reasonable to conclude that they are not even aware that exercise physiology is a profession in search of professionalism. Why is that? Without question, exercise physiologists are just as smart, hard working, and creative as the faculty of other healthcare professions. While there are numerous reasons for their lack of interest in professionalism, one reason that doctorate level exercise physiologists do not

talk, support, or write about professionalism is because they have a limited understanding of the professional socialization process.

Exercise physiology faculty members have not taken the time to plan for their professional development much less that of their students. It isn't any more complicated than that. Simply said, they don't get the importance of exercise physiology students developing professionally and that the students' education is intimately linked to professional socialization. This failure not only continues to threaten the timely growth of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession, it allows the established professions to take advantage of the students of exercise physiology and the decades of scientific research that is clearly created by exercise physiologists more so than other researchers. But, this inconsistency between doing good research and the failure to support the ASEP professionalism efforts in exercise physiology encourages the view that all exercise physiologists (except of course the doctorate prepared) are fitness instructors or personal trainers.

While it is true that an exercise physiologist, even an ASEP board certified exercise physiologist can function as an instructor or trainer, the critical point that needs to be addressed is that he/she is first a healthcare professional. The converse is not true of the personal trainer or instructor. There is no way that the ACSM personal trainer is the equivalent of the ASEP board certified exercise physiologist. Such thinking not only undermines the exercise physiologist's college education, but also demonstrates the lack of respect for professionals everywhere who understand the difference between the two. Furthermore, it breeds numerous misconceptions among students toward "what is a profession" and "who is a professional." Since the key to professionalism lies with the exercise physiology faculty, shouldn't they be held accountable for their failure to define and foster a professional student-teacher relationship that honors their duty to serve the needs of students and the profession?

The foundation of the faculty's professional relationship with students is not merely to teach the various exercise physiology courses, but to place the welfare of the students ahead of their own interests [1]. But, unfortunately, that

is exactly part of the problem, isn't it? Can you imagine speaking with an exercise physiology faculty member who actually cares about students beyond his/her immediate attempt to define course content? Not likely, the altruistic mindset of the faculty to elevate exercise physiology to a profession simply doesn't exist. Commitment to students as a doctor is committed to his/her patients simply doesn't exist. If it did, then, a set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that define the best way to serve the interests and needs of the students of exercise physiology would exist before one's own interest [2]. And yet, what is "one's own interest?" Well, that is easy to comment on. The doctorate prepared exercise physiologist believes in little more than research, publishing, and attending national meetings. It is what was drilled into their brains in doctorate school. Moreover, after graduation they intend to apply for a college position where promotion and tenure are directly related to publications. A commitment to put the student first is not part of that process, not even for most administrators.

Aside from the faculty member's responsibility to his/her own conditions of work, he/she is also morally responsible to students. Failure to address this point is an act of deprofessionalization which results in the deprofessionalization of exercise physiology. If you are not familiar with this term, it means the process by which academic exercise physiologists diminish their control over professional affairs and the behavior of the membership. The loss of the monopoly of the profession to have exclusive rights to do certain kinds of work and the loss of control over the expert scientific knowledge that, before deprofessionalization, was not available to the general public or other healthcare practitioners renders exercise physiology students to meaningless, non-professional job opportunities.

Yes, there is a moral component to college/university teaching that has to do with the teacher's responsibility and service to students. Presently, academic exercise physiologists are not honoring their moral responsibility to serve the needs of students. If they were responsible, then, despite the obvious external pressures to the contrary, they would support the ASEP effort to promote the professionalization of exercise physiology. Instead, what continues to happen is

that deprofessionalization has kept the academic exercise physiologist tied to a union-like commitment to research, on the one hand, and personal development on the other. And yet, from the ASEP perspective, exercise physiology is a profession. Its members share a special scientific body of knowledge, ASEP standards of education and practice, the ASEP professional society, and an ethical code of conduct [3].

The ASEP leaders are interested in students graduating from accredited exercise physiology programs who are board certified exercise physiologists. They expect the EPC to reflect such skills as self-directed professionalism, critical thinking, and the ability to balance personal interests with their responsibilities at work. At the risk of simplification, having made such bold statements, is it likely that the academic exercise physiologist is going to change? Before offering an answer, one could say, "I am reluctant to blame the college professor. They teach their classes. It is up to the students to find their way after graduation." If so, how is it that the doctorate level physical therapists do research while still being held responsible for promoting professionalism in physical therapy? They get it. The bottom line is this: exercise physiologists do not get it, and that is the problem.

Exercise physiology meets at least four of the five attributes of a profession [4]. There can't be any question that it has a systematic body of knowledge. Similarly, there can't be any question that the exercise physiologist's authority is recognized by clients, and there is (in general) a broad community sanction of this authority. Third, the ASEP members and society recognize that the ASEP code of ethics is a regulatory code for professional conduct. What is a concern is the failure of the academic exercise physiologists to support the professional culture and scope of practice as presently written and sustained by the members of the ASEP professional society. However, not all is lost to the present condition of the fifth consideration. Change is a process, as is professional development. Time, as in decades, is required to achieve meaningful change.

In terms of simplicity, the fact that ASEP is here to stay, is consistent with the work of other healthcare professionals, and is currently a unifying paradigm

argues success already. Few exercise physiologists within the academic setting can argue that they have accomplished more. But aside from the obvious, the challenge is to develop exercise physiology educational strategies that will address the students' needs both in the classroom and in the public sector. Students need the support of all exercise physiologists to achieve a measurable difference in job opportunities. They need success on their side just as the students of dietetics and physical therapists enjoy after graduation. Hence, it is pastime to get rid of the laundry list of potential jobs that for most part are meaningless to students with \$40,000 to \$80,000 in tuition loans. It is time to stop telling students the degree "prepares you for graduate school." Parents do not help pay their children's tuition fees without the expectation of their children getting a credible job when they graduate from college.

This raises the question, "Why would any self-respecting academic exercise physiologist continue to participate in the academic fraud of exercise science or some similar academic degree?" All exercise physiology educators have close friends and family members that they would do whatever to make sure they are correctly advised as to a college major. That is exactly the level of care students deserve from every exercise physiologist who is a college/university teacher. Parents and their children want to believe that the professors care and that they understand the financial strain and emotional anxiety that misinformation causes.

In other words, they want exactly the same things the professors want for their children. They want a selfless professional servant who is willing to provide a professional service from a pure sense of altruism. Thus, aside from the academic necessities of doing research and publishing, of which in this case represents the academic exercise physiologists' only area of interest, actually deprofessionalizes exercise physiology. Obviously, what is urgently needed isn't complicated. The bottom line is that ASEP needs more academic exercise physiologists who are willing to see themselves as part of a 21st century calling that compels them to provide the highest quality of care for each and every student.

The difference between exercise physiologists as healthcare professionals and a nonprofessional occupation (e.g., instructors and trainers) lies in the element of superior skill which is supported by an organized, internally consistent body of scientific knowledge that is acquired in a highly focused academic major. As healthcare professionals, the EPC commits to a lifelong study and contemplation of exercise physiology concepts, ideas, and possibilities. Thus, it is logical that the EPC is held accountable to the manner in which the ASEP leadership recruits, nurtures, and secures the ideals and mission of the profession. It is in this context that the ASEP leaders believe that the foundation of any true profession is based on its social value, particularly the healthcare of the public. The EPC's social value is overwhelmingly dependent on the effective use of exercise as medicine.

Exercise physiologists have the scientific knowledge of the power of exercise. It is a simple matter of whether they are willing to use it to accomplish the ASEP mission. Moreover, the question is: Are they willing to provide the profession of exercise physiology the necessary identity to support credible career opportunities for the students of exercise physiology? Perhaps, in the end, it is also a matter of knowing that if the academic exercise physiologists fail to utilize effectively the scientific knowledge they have and they reject the ASEP efforts of professionalism and professional development before them, exercise physiologists will be diminished to the level of instructors and trainers. This it seems isn't an outcome that is desirable or logical and, therefore, the only recourse is to commit to something other than the sports medicine paradigm. Yet, sports medicine has advanced to a position of such supremacy that patience for new thinking has all but vanished.

Knowledge, skill, perseverance, and competence are key ingredients to the growth of a profession. Compassion is also important. Being able to connect is special, especially when so many academic exercise physiologists are not able to do so.

1. Where is the empathy for the students (and their parents)?
2. Where is the caring for students?
3. Where is the kindness that is inspiring, influential, and reliable?

4. Where are the college “professors” who are the essence of something better?
5. Where are the advocates and the moral influence of exercise physiology of tomorrow?
6. Where are the teachers who are willing to work on behalf of their students?
7. Where is the integrity required of honest professionals?
8. Where is the humble exercise physiologist who is more than willing to be accountable?
9. Where is the moral courage to and the vigilance to promote professionalism?
10. Where is the defense of the ASEP leadership’s role in the professional development of exercise physiology?
11. Where are the “professors” who are teaching and setting the example that exercise physiologists must take personal responsibility for their own profession, its image, and influence on society?

With respect to the questions and the goal of the “professors” to survive the promotion and/or tenure process, it is also important to consider what their students lose once the answers to the abovementioned questions are understood. For example, a faculty person might want to support the ASEP organization but may fear that doing so might mean a geographic move. Or he or she may worry that associating with the ASEP leadership will elicit the envy of his or her peers who are lacking in moral courage [5]. When success is terrifying, perhaps, it is unrealistic to expect faculty to take the initiative on their own time. Maybe it is more effective to model the need for professional development as a moral dimension. After all, educating students is a deliberate effort to develop values (and more) – right?

What is clear is the understanding that the professional development of the exercise physiology faculty must take place at work. The rewards, especially for students, are great enough to make the investment. Also, doing so sends a

powerful message from the chair and his/her commitment to faculty development. Faculty professional development programs lead to healthy faculty and healthy departments and schools that, in turn, lead to a stimulating and creative atmosphere; one that generates intellectual curiosity, tenacity, and caring. Best of all, it is good to know that the high-quality professional development for every academic exercise physiologist [6] will be recognized as an urgent need and, therefore, will become essential to providing the right amount of time for faculty to participate in professional activities to effectively compete for students as well as to survive and thrive as a healthcare profession.

The future depends on what we do in the present.

-- Mahatma Gandhi

Please Lord, it is important not to let the message in this brief article fall upon deaf ears. Many young adults, students and others, place their trust and future in the “professors.” Thus, in closing, it is time to think anew, to move aside the old ideas of yesterday’s thinking to allow space for a fresh beginning. Please appreciate that putting aside the work of so many great exercise physiologists doesn’t mean that what they have done is bad or wrong, but rather to give chance to a fresh start for all 21st century students of exercise physiology. By “fresh start,” it is meant that, individually and collectively, exercise physiologists stand up and share with colleagues their awareness of and commitment to the burdens of judgment that go with the change process.

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