

## **The Development of Professionalism in Exercise Physiology**

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There is no worse mistake in public leadership than to hold out false hopes soon to be swept away.

-- Winston S. Churchill  
*The Hinge of Fate*

**P**rofessionalism and professional development should be a priority in exercise physiology education at all levels. But, the reality is that the topics seldom ever appear on conference programs and in exercise physiology journals. Most U.S. schools are primarily one of 40 different undergraduate degree programs, including but not limited to, kinesiology, sports science, exercise science, human performance, and so on (1). The academic exercise physiologists at these schools come across as being not interested in understanding the core values of professionalism in future practitioners.

To compensate for the lack of academic accreditation at the undergraduate level, new certifications were created to take its place. This has happened so often in recent years that it is almost funny, if it were not so serious. Rather than do what is right to fix the decades of problems, our colleagues continue to make a mockery of the undergraduate programs by now adding personal trainer certifications to their list. This giant sea of certifications is not benign (2).

That said, it is reasonable to conclude that the faculty of these schools have not taken the time to understand the mess they have created. Simply stated, they do not get that exercise science, kinesiology, or sports sciences or whatever the name of the degree might be is without question a waste of time (3). Why, because students graduate from these programs to find themselves unable to locate a credible and financially sound healthcare career.

After years of paying tuition dollars, listening to their instructors, taking tests, and doing everything they thought was necessary to be successful after graduation, they find themselves asking for help from their parents to financially survive (4). They realize that the idea of getting a degree is in itself foolish if the degree program isn't linked to viable career opportunities. The college degree should make a difference in the lives of all college graduates. Yet, the emphasis on athletics and limited science at the expense of building a credible degree program takes a back seat to all other college majors.

We do not accept things as they are, but rather anticipate things as they can be.

– Warren Bennis

Sure, exercise science college graduates can always apply to nursing or physical therapy! But, however obvious and necessary for the majority of the graduates to survive, shouldn't the undergraduate degree be worth something more? That's the question, isn't it? And yet, this problem is not new whatsoever. It is simply a carry over from the transition decades ago from physical education. That's the problem, isn't it? Exercise science is not a sound college investment. (5). Exercise physiology must come into its own with its own thinking, its own philosophy, its own ethical principles, and its own professionalism. Then, and only then, students will graduate and be able to hold their heads high.

Until then, it is absolutely wrong that exercise science students can graduate to call themselves exercise physiologists (6). Regardless of what their teachers tell them, it makes no sense whatsoever. The current thinking, which is a product of decades of failed rhetoric (7), must be recognized for what it is. The academic exercise physiologists must pull their heads out of the sand and start talking,

writing, and living professionalism in exercise physiology. They must start studying what is and what isn't professionalism. They must learn the significance of professional development.

**Professionalism must be taught!** Exercise physiologists, particularly those who teach in colleges and universities, should start thinking about the elements of professionalism and what they mean to all exercise physiologists who want to be recognized for what they believe they are (8). What is altruism? What does accountability have to do with exercise physiology? Why talk about excellence, duty, honor, and integrity or respect for others? Because none can be left to chance and yet, that is exactly what has happened. Exercise physiologists have given over who they are and what they do to sports medicine, exercise science, kinesiologists, and others. But, always keep in mind that change is possible. In fact, it is inevitable!

Skeptics who question the validity and relevance of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) in 21st century demonstrate the failure to understand and practice the most essential part of professionalism -- the art of persuasion (7).

I propose that exercise physiology professionalism, rather than being left to one of the dozens of non-exercise physiology majors, should be modeled after "what is" exercise physiology. Like physical therapy that is modeled by physical therapists, so should exercise physiology be defined by exercise physiologists and not by those who identify themselves as something different. Clearly, professionalism in exercise physiology and the anatomy of change (9) cannot be engaged, talked about, or developed without some sound critical thinking.

Thinking critically includes but is not limited to the ASEP perspective (10) on the necessity of goals and objectives (11), national certification, accreditation, and professional practice standards (12). In short, ASEP is all about "Who are we?" "What is our professional practice?" "Why is the exercise physiology code of ethics and standards of practice so important?" "What are our strengths when we are part of our own major and department?" "Who do we serve?"

Answers to these questions will bring agreement and new thinking to the 21st century dimensions of “what is” and “what should be” the profession of exercise physiology. It cannot be assumed that students develop professionally as exercise physiologists with an academic degree in something other than exercise physiology. No faculty member should try and convince students otherwise. In fact, it is wrong to try and do so. There is simply too much tradition and thinking that serves the core of what is and what isn't professionalism and/or professional development (13).

**Key Point:** To those devoted to the ASEP organization and the Americanization of exercise physiology, the objective is to elevate all exercise physiologists to a higher level of professional respect and financial stability (13).

Students need first of all the opportunity to major in an actual exercise physiology major. Then, it is clear that they need to address the pathology of their teachers having failed to change. Third, as students of exercise physiology they need to deal with the language and essence of what is exercise physiology and who is an exercise physiologist. Fourth, as future exercise physiologists, it is absolutely crucial to understand the politically and otherwise the challenges, both ethically and straight forward the challenges of adapting to a context-specific exercise physiology way of thinking (14).

However skeptical, growing into something different from what history seems to dictate as the way of things is a habit that must be learned, practiced, and executed. Hence, the implications should be obvious. If the underlying assumptions of what others think are different from your thinking, then do something about it. Where appropriate, express your compassion for exercise physiology (15). Communicate to everyone that you are different from the kinesiology major, and especially do this: Tell everyone that you are not a personal trainer.

If you are a student, ask your college teachers the following questions: Do you have a doctorate degree in exercise physiology? Are you a member of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists? Do you acknowledge the ASEP Code of Ethics and Standard of Practice? On one level, one could say, “Are you

for real?” On another level, “Thank God there is finally a student with an understanding of the depth and breadth of an academic degree.” ***Indeed, medical students graduate from medical school while nurses graduate with a degree in nursing. It is the same with physical therapists, and without question it is the same with psychology majors. Why then is it argued that exercise science or kinesiology majors can graduate as exercise physiologists?***

Obviously, to be an exercise physiologist, a person must graduate with an exercise physiology degree (or sit for the ASEP board certification to earn the professional title). In time, students who look to major in exercise physiology will actually have a major in exercise physiology. And, when that happens, they will be critical pieces in the unlocking of historical thinking to break free to a far better education and future opportunities. This thinking is not a negative critique of non-exercise physiology majors, it is simply an observation contrary to that which is either anecdotal or conjecture. Truth on the other hand can't be a myth or speculation. It is founded on knowledge and responsible thinking (16).

Moreover, it is critically important that this message is shared with students. Their sense of reality and objectivity comes best from knowing the truth. They need to understand that the failure of physical educators and kinesiologists and, yes, so-called exercise scientist to think in terms of “professionalism and professional development” have resulted in major problems for college graduates. Their parents have suffered, too. All others who embraced the dream of a college degree while majoring in exercise science have suffered (17).

Majoring in exercise science is why the vast majority of college graduates do not locate credible jobs in the public sector. ***Credible healthcare jobs, in particular, have evolved as professions. Exercise science is not a profession.*** If this thinking is hard to believe, click 20 or even 10 Departments of Exercise Science on the Internet and read the information about the degree program. The content is not about credible career opportunities, but rather making application to graduate school (and most often, in academic areas that are well-established as healthcare professions).

The truth is, there's nothing new about the failure of these programs in helping to secure credible careers for the majors. There are 100s of articles in **PEPonline** (18) that describe the same outcome. Even so, it is clear that little has changed since the first articles appeared in 1998. And yet, the world continues to change while the faculty of these programs has remained unchanged. In short, the faculty has aligned itself with yesterday's thinking that has gone nowhere (19). It is the most classic case of being just plain dumb. College teachers are expected to grow in their thinking. Also, they are expected to look after their students.

Here's what's interesting: The faculty of these programs could start thinking differently (20). If they are exercise physiologists, they could join the American Society of Exercise Physiologists and support the development of the profession of exercise physiology. They could help promote the story of ASEP as the *Society of exercise physiologists* who should graduate from accredited exercise physiology academic programs. Without a doubt, they could promote the ASEP board certification, code of ethics, and standards of professional practice. They could, but will they? The ASEP leadership believes there is hope of change (21).

From one faculty member to others, there is nothing wrong with pursuing a vision for greatness. In fact, armed with the ASEP vision, the ASEP leaders have continued since 1997 the brutal challenge of towering beyond their past ways of thinking (22). Everyday, they continue to deal with their reality, particularly the unfortunate loss of friends along the way of dreaming bigger dreams for their students. Yes, armed with a vision of truth, the ASEP leaders have helped to move exercise physiology somewhat closer to the concepts of professionalism and professional development (23).

**ONE PERSON** who is truly passionate about his or her mission **CAN MAKE a difference.**

-- Dove of Oneness

Just like physical therapy that has been evolving since the early 1920s and other well-known healthcare professions, it might take 100 years for the exercise physiology faculty to get the ASEP perspective, but the rest assured that the ASEP leaders will persist if that is what it takes. Understandably, change is a

process that takes decades to evolve. Like all other types of change, it is often deceptively simple and straightforward. To be clear, change is not simple or easy. Quite the contrary, change is profoundly complicated. The ASEP change is all about professionalism in exercise physiology and professional development of exercise physiologists.

This thinking requires guts (24), and it is the essential difference between continuing as exercise physiologists have for decades and changing. This discerning standard of thinking goes far beyond where exercise physiologists are today. It is a standard of greatness and passion for something better for all students of exercise-driven academic majors. Imagine this: academic exercise physiologists who understand the need for professionalism in exercise physiology! Thus, despite thinking of exercise physiology from purely an athletic point of view, imagine exercise physiologists who understand that they are healthcare professionals with the responsibility of prescribing exercise as medicine to the public sector (25).

It is pastime to focus on what exercise physiologists do better than all other healthcare professionals. It is pastime to think specifically about their path to greatness. It is pastime to master their thinking. Nowhere is this more evident than in the comparison organizations' mindless pursuit of growth. Clearly, they are obsessed with their growth regardless of how it influences the members. It is pastime to rein in the mess and create order out of chaos. It is pastime to deal with the monopolies by getting rid of their protective cocoon of past thinking. Indeed, it is pastime to say "No, thank you" to big organizations.

The fact that ASEP is "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" is highly relevant to the students of exercise physiology and all exercise physiologists. Thus, here's the bottom line, once exercise physiologists figure out that they know ASEP is their professional organization of exercise physiologists, have the discipline to join ASEP and promote it as their Society of exercise physiologists and, equally important, have the courage to stop doing the wrong things, then, that will be the breakthrough! Unstoppable momentum from then on and, not surprisingly, the

transformation begins from within. **Greatness doesn't depend on size or money.**  
**The power of change is truth, infectious enthusiasm, and meaningful work.**

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