

Professionalization of Exercise Physiology^{online}

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Victims of a Failed Rhetoric

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“Skeptics who question the validity and relevance of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists in 21st century demonstrate the failure to understand and practice the most essential part of professionalism -- the art of persuasion.” --
Tommy Boone

Faculty members who question the relevance of exercise physiology as defined by the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists* (ASEP) are victims of a failed thinking. That thinking is the failure to persuade other exercise physiologists to incorporate professionalism into their view of exercise physiology. Too many faculty members have not taken the time to understand the importance of having their own professional organization much less their own code of ethics and standards of practice. They are victims of a rhetoric that is no longer valid for exercise physiology. In a nutshell, they are not persuaded that professional development is as important as research.

Unfortunately, the problem is multi-faceted. There are no simple answers. What is obvious is simply this: To continue turning a blind-eye to the question of professional development is to continue as a victim of failed rhetoric. If the faculty is to get past the urgency to do research without addressing the importance of professional development, they must demonstrate the willingness to examine and explore exercise physiology. Integrating professionalism into the curriculum and laboratory experiences of exercise physiology is critical to getting past the failed rhetoric of yesterday's thinking.

Critical, indeed, because there are too many exercise physiologists in academic settings who are byproducts of decades of countless non-exercise physiology thinkers. They believe that exercise physiology is entirely about the acute and chronic adaptations to regular exercise! That is why the typical exercise science curriculum is centered completely on the “one” exercise physiology course that describes the acute responses to exercise and the adaptations to training. There is no actual curriculum as such for exercise physiology, except in very few academic institutions. Instead, what is common, that is, what is so typical is the chasm between exercise science and exercise physiology. The two are entirely different. One is a generic curriculum that has no declared career in

the public sector. The other is a curriculum that demonstrates powerful signs of professional vigor and healthcare opportunities.

The curriculum of most professional healthcare programs reinforces the learning and hands-on practice of professional issues and concerns. With the founding of ASEP, the introduction and discussion of “professional development” have been met by skepticism. Exercise physiologists need to be persuaded that professionalism is an essential part of their education just as research is an integral part of a profession. Unfortunately, most exercise physiologists probably believe that anyone who is doing research is automatically a member of a profession. Of course this is untrue. Research is research. Research itself does not constitute a profession. Yet, many exercise physiologists really believe they are achieving professionalism by publishing their research. In fact, it is somewhat understandable except that they are victims of their own failure to understand the language of professionalism and the tradition of persuasion.

Unfortunately, this is the key to the less than a fresh view of exercise physiology and career opportunities. Faculty think in terms of research. Students think about graduation. Those who work in cardiac rehabilitation think only about clinical exercise physiology. Until the founding of ASEP, there was only the notion that exercise physiologists who do research are either “researchers” or “physiologists” and not exercise physiologists. It is an example of how the physical educator / exercise physiologist has always wanted to be known by another title or, at least, that appears to be the case. The problem is that such misplaced thinking only obscures the challenges of professional development. It also sets the stage for failure in developing a common language of exercise physiology.

Frankly, it is amazing that critics of the ASEP organization just don’t get it. They continue down the same old path of something other than exercise physiology. It is the complexity of what constitutes exercise and its benefits that we share in common. To study physiology, physics, pathology, cardiology, anatomy, nutrition, psychology, and other shared knowledge from many different academic disciplines is to begin the exciting understanding of the human body that is the basis for exercise physiology. What we have not shared is the burden of understanding the professionalization of exercise physiology, just as nurses, physical therapists, medical doctors, lawyers, and members of other professions have done for decades. It is imperative that we create academic courses that confront the whole nature of what is a profession, what is professionalism, and the multiple inspections and study of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession.

The struggle to change the face of exercise physiology from a technician oriented discipline to a healthcare professional that is based on scientific principles is the primary goal of the ASEP leadership. Those who question whether it is possible or worth the effort should step aside. The question of professionalism is too important not to attain. Indeed, when exercise physiologists separated from sports medicine, there was no thought of turning back. ASEP members belong to and practice a profession. Their professionalism is demonstrated in the ASEP code of ethics, standards of practice, and board certification and, yet there are still major difficulties. The major obstacle to moving exercise physiology from an occupation to a profession lies with the lack of

professional unity. Exercise physiologists must get past their history of rhetorical failures and notions that they are exercise scientists or physiologists. Neither view is helping the students nor the public's perception of their work.

The *American Society of Exercise Physiologists* is the key to the professional development of exercise physiology. It is [the] professional organization of exercise physiologists. It is the first-ever major step in defining our profession – by finding out what constitutes a profession, and then applying what has been learned to make it work. For example, learning about exercise physiology as an evolving profession begins with an interest in knowing the characteristics of a profession. Being aware of what determines a profession comes from a sense of purpose or direction. Since the original direction has been influenced by a failed rhetoric, many exercise physiologists have not been motivated by ideals of professionalism. Therefore, from their perspective, talking about professionalism is of little value if not a waste of time. Engaging in research (not necessarily publishing research) seems to encourage the idea that the exercise physiologist who thinks about or does research knows everything.

“He who thinks he knows everything often knows nothing.” -- Peter Urs Bender

Exercise physiologists are clearly victims of a failed rhetoric. The problems posed by the collective professional anemia are many. They can be corrected, however. It is a matter of learning how to find the right path; a path that begins with caring, courage, and conviction [1]. It is also a matter of believing in the future of exercise physiology. Exercise physiologists must not let anyone say otherwise, regardless of talent, position, or training. They must also take the time to study what it means to be a member of a profession. It is [the] way to live in harmony with our core values and principles. There are no short cuts in the development of a profession. This may come as a shock to the academically immature or to those who are enslaved by the emotions of past thinking. And, yet it is common knowledge that a new way of thinking about exercise physiology cannot be embraced until the old paradigm is let go. Likewise, until academic exercise physiologists get rid of unwarranted assumptions about ASEP, they cannot expect to bring about change as fast as otherwise is possible.

Exercise physiology is a healthcare profession. It is also a vision built on a solid academic foundation, not a frustrated lab technician view of possibilities. And, to be absolutely honest, the passion for change is exactly what separates ASEP from other organizations. There is nothing vague or lacking in vitality about the ASEP code of ethics or the standards of practice. It takes very little time to understand the intent of who is in charge, what is the message, and when and how it will be applied. Others might think otherwise, but it is absolutely imperative for the public sector to understand that a credible education is important to practice healthcare. Accountability is important. Commitment to a caring relationship with clients is important. The ASEP leadership understands this view.

“If your heart is in it, the work is an act of love.” -- Tommy Boone

References

1. Boone, T. (2004). The “3-Cs” of Leadership: Courage, Caring, and Commitment. *Professionalization of Exercise Physiologyonline*. 7:5 [Online]. <http://www.css.edu/users/tboone2/asep/3CsOfLeadership.html>