Journal of Professional Exercise Physiology

ISSN 1550-963X

Vol 8 No 11 November 2010

The Economy and a Drop in College Applications

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> I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones.
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> -- John Cage

The Chronicle of Higher Education [1] on October 20, 2010 published that "…29 percent of colleges reported a drop in the number of applications they received, the highest share reporting a decline since 1996." So, why is this bit of information important? While it should be obvious, here are several points to consider. First, it is likely a function in part of the recession. With less money to go around, more students are thinking more about two-year colleges and public institutions. Anything to control the overall cost is critical to the conditions associated with an economic downturn. Second, there is feeling of diminishing returns. This is especially the feeling when it comes to majoring in certain academic areas in which there is relatively little meaningful financial return on the tuition dollars invested. In other words, overinvesting in an area of study with little opportunity to access a financially rewarding career makes very little sense.

> There is evidence that federal loans have contributed to the rise of tuition. Tuition and fees at public and private four-year institutions have risen 38 percent in the past 10 years. In the past 22 years the cost of a four-year public college education has increased by 202 percent.
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> -- Krista Kafer
> *The Heritage Foundation*, April 26, 2004

If you find this thinking hard to believe, according to Vedder [2], over 300,000 college graduates are working as waiters and waitresses and over 8,000 of them have a doctoral or professional degree. There are over 80,000 bartenders and over 18,000 parking lot attendants with college degrees. From my point of view, this is a waste of money, time, and an education. There are simply too many college degrees that are not career-driven. Students cannot graduate and find a financially credible job in the public sector with just any academic degree. Many of the degree programs are little more than what they were 40 or 60 years ago. The curriculum is the same whether it is called exercise science or kinesiology or even physical education. Moreover, while not wanting to be too critical, it is absolutely necessary to argue the point that to a great degree these programs are less than the quality they should be.

> Lack of good leadership has been a thing of concern in any organization to the society.
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> -- Umbur Demekaa

The problem is the failure of the academic leadership at the department level to upgrade the academic majors. Most faculty members are still thinking as the previous faculty had done some decades ago when the world was much different. Why it hasn't occurred to them that there is a real disconnect between exercise science and the reality of a serious job remains to some extent a mystery. For certain, what is known and obvious about exercise science is incompatible with a sustainable financial base. The information on the department Internet websites is little more than pure propaganda. It is written to confuse the market realities of the graduates and their parents. That is why students find themselves after four or more years of college and thousands of dollars in debt taking menial jobs or no job at all. This kind of return on an investment that is supposed to yield financial benefits is problematic for many reasons. Given the scarce resources, there are other ways to build the self-esteem of students at a much lower cost.

Higher education and exercise science (and similar degree programs) must change. Part of the change is to stop presenting the academic major as something it isn't. Transparency is the key along with simple truth driven by clarity and not

confusing and misleading statements. In short, how can physical educators, the exercise science faculty, and others learn how to unlearn what they have embraced for decades? How can they create an academic major that meets the needs of the students? Why can't they recognize that preparing for today's society is entirely different from graduating from college decades ago? The big picture is no more complicated than this: Exercise physiologists (in particular) must become deeply attentive to the worst violation of teaching, that is, failing their students by not creating a major that has a strong cutting edge in today's economy.

Answers to these questions are directly a function of getting past thinking that the college environment is first responsible to the faculty member and his/her research and, then, only then, to the students' needs. The economy and the drop in college applications must be met head on with a profound biased towards enabling students. As Jean Houston [3] said, "We find ourselves at the end of one era and not yet at the beginning of a new one. We are caught in a parenthesis between the reluctance to leave what was, and the terror before what is yet to be."

Members of the profession are responsible for ensuring safe and effective practice. The exercise physiology standards address the practice and use of "exercise as medicine" in healthcare.

Exercise physiologists must get over their reluctance of entering a new era. They can do this by designing their thinking in accordance with a society that is always changing. Thus, the practice of "what is exercise physiology" and "who is an exercise physiologist" must be an ongoing process that anticipates and prepares the students for a different future than one of decades ago.

The exercise physiology related degree programs must stop mirroring what was true in the past. Those responsible must expand their thinking to include the future dimension of a college education. What are the long-range goals of a college degree? What is the practice of exercise physiology? Why is a practice important? How can exercise physiologists become a vital part of the overall healthcare professions? What attitudes must exercise physiologists develop to

move in the right direction to shape the profession? Why is it important to be lifelong learners? What must exercise physiologists do to promote board certified exercise physiologists as healthcare entrepreneurs?

Imagine the benefits of students attending an educational program that is thoroughly hands-on and interactive. Imagine the benefits patients derive from exercise physiologists with highly developed interpersonal skills. Imagine the significance of developing the students' ethical and moral behavior along with the problem-solving skills to evaluate the cardiovascular system. Imagine the feeling that associates with no longer being called an exercise specialist, but rather an exercise physiologist. Imagine every student in the exercise physiology major is also a member of the ASEP organization. This thinking is a vision. It is not an idle daydream, but an exercise of normal intelligence with a developed passion to challenge status quo for something better.

We have the knowledge to create what we want to be. All we must do is engage in meaningful discussions, educate our colleagues, and help however we can to transition from yesterday's thinking to the needs of today and tomorrow. Our students need our direction and guidance. That way they, too, will benefit from college and the dramatic difference as well as the ultimate practical value that it provides. This is no small expectation. As far as we know, like other professionals knowledge of the change process, we aren't just replacing old values with new ones, but changing deep within how we think about exercise physiology.

> A great leader's courage to fulfill his vision comes from passion, not position.
>
> -- John Maxwell

Today, more than ever before in our history, students need the help of every college teacher. Not only must they be knowledgeable, but they must have the capacity to innovate and manage the challenges and contradictory complexities of the client's concerns. All of this and more requires courage to develop the best education for students who must continually deal with the rethinking of the goals and objectives of healthcare as well as the fundamental ways of surviving as a healthcare practitioner. All of this speaks to the timely importance of adapting to

changes in the 21st century, and the extent to which can be the difference between success and failure.

We live a time that new thinking is imperative. So let's begin our work together to affirm the importance of the profession of exercise physiology. The integration of exercise and other healthcare modalities will take us to the next level while reducing the problems of poor job opportunities. It isn't complicated to get this thinking. So, why don't we get on with it? Our power lies in getting to the bottom line as quickly as possible, both in a better education and career options. Remember, like other healthcare professions, the key concept that drives this transformative process is the American Society of Exercise Physiologists. What is now needed is an active support of the organization by its membership. We must learn to come together, to focus on what is important, to choose a collaborative approach to solving our problems while being open to new ideas and possibilities.

> Education is not the filling of a bucket. It is the lighting of a fire.
>
> -- William Butler Yeats

How many of you have thought about the very things written in this paper? How many students have called you up or emailed you about their problems in locating jobs after college? What do you say? Most teachers say, "Go back to school." When parents hear of such statements, they ask themselves: "What is the value of the undergraduate education?" Certainly, it couldn't be just so my son/daughter would end up in graduate school. What about all of that money spent on the undergraduate degree? It is no wonder parents are amazed if not depressed over the insensitivity of the college faculty. What is ironic is that the professor isn't likely to take it as lightly when his son/daughter finds him or herself in the same mess.

This is the point, isn't it? A college degree should not be a lemon like that of a defective car recently purchased. Regardless of what you do with it, another breakdown is just around the corner. Has a college degree become a lemon? Is it defective? The only correct answer is "yes." It is the defective academic degree that places the student's livelihood in question, and it is time to challenge the

assumptions that associate with it. Exercise science is an educational flop; it has consistently been part of a rising tide of academic mediocrity. Students should stop considering it as an academic major. It is nothing less than an absolute failure with few if any revolutionary ideas and methods for success beyond college.

Dickinson and colleagues [4] said it best, "Our leaders must look unflinchingly and honestly at the realities of the 21st century and what it means for 'education.'" New forms of thinking and relating to the public sector are central to the concepts that undergird professionalism in exercise physiology. Now is the time to investigate the depth of our ideas and passion for what we believe we are and what we can do to help society. Now is the time to think about our own professional independence and self-interest so that we can transform ourselves into a creative player in healthcare. It is within this key thought that we deal with our challenges to maximize our long-term gains. In short, only those of us who learn from our mistakes will be provided the opportunity to not repeat them. The essence of this new way of thinking requires commitment, boldness, and immense patience to help develop a network of educators who are willing to transform exercise physiology.

> A man who does not think for himself does not think at all.
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> -- Oscar Wilde

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