

The Professionalization of Exercise Physiology

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“Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.”
-- Goethe

Wilensky [1] described four attributes that differentiate a profession from an occupation: (1) the creation of full-time occupation; (2) the establishment of training (e.g., a college degree); (3) the formation of a professional association; and (4) the establishment of a code of ethics. Of course, it is common knowledge that members of a profession understand their responsibility to the public. Members are self-regulated, dedicated to the profession, and exercise a demonstrated autonomy of professional judgment.

Given Wilensky’s remarks regarding a profession, exercise physiology qualifies as a profession. Exercise physiologists are full-time professionals, primarily because they attend college to earn a credible degree to locate a full-time job in the public sector. Is there room for improvement? You bet there is, especially for academic programs that are historically related to exercise physiology (such as exercise science, kinesiology, and human performance to mention three of 40 or so). The fact is this: These programs are “related” only. They are not exercise physiology, and the students cannot graduate as exercise physiologists.

Although exercise physiologists are well-known within the academic institutions, non-doctorate exercise physiologists (individuals with a degree in exercise physiology or a similar degree but who have earned the ASEP board certification) remain small. The founding of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists has helped to some degree with the emphasis on academic program accreditation. Yet, it is clear that much

work remains to be done. Thus, the practice of exercise physiology is still maturing (as is true of most professions as well).

However distressing this point may be to exercise physiologists, this thinking is no different from other professions. Most members were also well-established in various education programs before their respective professional organizations were founded. Therefore, the professionalization of exercise physiology is essentially the same as the professions that have been around for 90 or more years. Fortunately, the cultivation of the exercise physiology scientific knowledge within the academic institutions has helped tremendously with the linking of the academic programs to the practice of exercise physiology. The ASEP leaders understand this point, just as Wilensky's [1] stated decades ago when describing the common struggles of professionalization:

“...struggles include definition of essential and core professional tasks and knowledge base, development of internal conflict among practitioners of varying backgrounds, and competition with outsiders who do similar work.”

Exercisepreneur

There is nothing about the professionalization model that is easy or an idea that is to take place overnight. A major change of any kind takes time, patience, and discipline. It is a process that is cultivated by the right mindset; one that reflects the intent and desire for recognition, competence, and credibility within an occupation. The effort that reflects both intent and desire can be traced back to the work of the ASEP organization. The leadership developed the first-ever:

- Code of Ethics for exercise physiologists
- National Board Certification for exercise physiologists
- Academic accreditation for exercise physiologists, and
- Standards of professional practice for exercise physiologists

The ASEP leaders understand that if exercise physiologists let others define “what is exercise physiology” and “who is an exercise physiologist” in ways that are limiting, the future of the exercise physiologist’s will continue to be limited. They believe that continuing to limit exercise physiologists is wrong. That is why they believe the term

“exercisepreneur” (a compound of ‘exercise’ and ‘entrepreneur’) is the right path for the profession of exercise physiology.

Susan L. Reid [2] said, “The word preneur is a derivative of the Old French, ‘entreprendre.’ It means to take, that is, a preneur is one who organizes, manages, and takes the risks of owning a small business or enterprise. A preneur is someone who has a vision and wants to take that vision out into the world and see it come to fruition. A preneur is someone who wants to make a difference in the world and is willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

This unexpected way of thinking about exercise physiology goes beyond either the academics engaged in research or the non-doctorates pursuing physical therapy and nursing. Strangely enough, the neglected core of exercise physiology is “exercise as medicine.” That is why the ASEP leaders have argued that the rethinking of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession is extremely important. Thinking about exercise physiology as an occupation of fitness instructors and personal trainers is a dead end street. Exercise physiology is a healthcare profession, not an occupation of weekend warriors. It is driven by competency that is unique to the collective development of like-minded professionals, friends, and even lifelong companions.

Against this backdrop, the newly invented catchword of “exercisepreneur” is not without challenges. Non-doctorate exercise physiologists (i.e., those with an interest in the entrepreneurial approach to the practice of exercise physiology) are driven to find answers regarding setting up their own healthcare business, gaining access to particular markets, and developing the right methods of promoting their particular entrepreneurial and scientific-based business [3].

Academic Accountability

Closer to home however are the immediate problems within academia. Students need more exposure to the academic community of exercise physiologists who are ASEP supporters. Essentially all of the academic programs need greater standardization of the exercise physiology degree title and curricula. The universities and the faculty should be held accountable for redesigning the professional courses and for recruiting more qualified academic exercise physiologists who believe that exercise physiology is

a healthcare profession. Exercise physiologists should support the ASEP initiatives, particularly, accreditation, Board Certification, and attempts to establish national practice standards.

It is difficult to see that more hasn't been done, but the reality is that what the ASEP organization has accomplished since 1997 has to be encouraging even to the most severe critics. Professionalization is a mix of complex interactions between academic expectations, increased reliance on existing promotional campaigns that aim to develop more fitness specialist and personal trainers, high-profile agendas by organizations that have been around for 50 or more years, and educational practices among recognized healthcare practitioners.

It is pastime that exercise physiologists get the message that the formal educational qualifications as healthcare professionals go beyond the non-professionally-specific certifications of sports medicine. Then, too, it is simply a waste of the students' time if exercise physiologists do not accept the professionalization route. Physical therapists and others are writing into their licensure bills that they are the "king" of the exercise prescription. If this thinking becomes accepted, academic exercise physiologists should be held accountable for their lack of interest, capacity, and competence to perform on behalf of the students of exercise physiology.

From the ASEP perspective, an important part of professionalization is all about the students' welfare. Under no circumstances does it make sense to simply get educated these days at the debilitating debt that defines college tuition. Overall, U.S. student debt is more than \$1 trillion. That total is more than all the outstanding charges on all the credit cards throughout the United States (\$693 billion) or all U.S. auto loans (\$730 billion). Student debt can be garnished from wages and Social Security [4]. Students who default often ruin their credit, finding themselves unable to buy homes or even to secure more student loans to either finish school or find a major that will help them to locate a credible job.

At the most basic, what is expected from a college education is logically a credible career opportunity or otherwise it is a highly expensive vacation away from home and real work opportunities. Students and their parents should ask questions such as: Does it make sense to major in an academic degree that is little more than a requirement for

graduate school? Are there reasonable job prospects in exercise science, kinesiology, or sports sciences? Are college graduates with \$40,000 to \$100,000 in tuition loans really interested in working for \$12 an hour without healthcare benefits? What are the prospects for buying a new car, a home, or getting married and/or having children? Choosing an academic major is arguably the most important decision college students will make in their entire program of education.

College graduates need social and professional mobility. Thus, the very logic of the professionalization of exercise physiology as well as the inevitable reevaluation of exercise physiology as a discipline of academic researchers interested in the acute and chronic adaptations to exercise needs serious evaluation. This thinking is not only understandable, but imperative to the change process that is necessary to help college students. In short, the gap in the transitional elements of exercise physiology from exercise science and ultimately from physical education needs closure.

Without these realizations, the obvious discordance between the past and present way of thinking will only further empower the academic exercise physiologists at the expense of their students' financial and emotional welfare. Thus, perhaps now, it can be understood that the assessment and update of undergraduate degree programs along with the professionalization of exercise physiology are both imperative and highly correlated with the success of college graduates and the dignity of academic exercise physiologists.

References

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