

# Professionalization of Exercise Physiology<sup>online</sup>

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## **There is Hope for Exercise Physiologists**

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Watch your thoughts, for they become words.  
Watch your words, for they become actions.  
Watch your actions, for they become habits.  
Watch your habits, for they become character.  
Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.

-- Author Unknown

**T**he relation between several dozen other academic degree titles and the identity crises experienced in exercise physiology is self-evident. No other profession has experienced this problem on such a mass scale that exercise physiologists have. To live everyday having to explain to my friends, colleagues, and extended family members that I am not an athletic coach, gym teacher, fitness instructor, personal trainer, strength specialist, or physical educator has gotten tiring. This continuous need to share the message of what I am as a college teacher and as an exercise physiologist has become an endless undertaking. In fact, it has become a rather laborious task to capture the attention of others in hope of clearing their old thoughts for new ones.

When will the world (if not the majority of exercise physiology educators) wake up to the correct understanding of what is exercise physiology? Similarly, why are my colleagues so obstinately attached to sports medicine? When will

they wake up from their decades of slumber and darkness? Certainly, calling something by the right name is important. How could anyone dispute the point? For this reason it is important to understand the quote at the beginning of this article.

First, “watch your thoughts, for they become words.” This means that exercise physiologists must think alike (meaning, agree on what is exercise physiology) if they are to use words to accurately express what they are. Second, “watch your words, for they become actions.” In other words, once we have agreed on “what is exercise physiology,” then, we must agree on “who is an exercise physiologist.” The ASEP leadership has done both, but the tedious work on behalf of the academic exercise physiologists remain undone. Failing to reach an agreement on the ASEP definitions (i.e., words), the exercise physiologist’s “actions” are less than confirmed, even denied if not unknown to the public sector. No wonder, therefore, society sees the author as something other than an exercise physiologist.

Third, “watch your actions, for they become habits.” Since the exercise physiologists “actions” are generalized without a professional distinctness, his/her “habits” are precisely less than what they should be. Thus, the sweetness of a college degree fails to provide the original expectation of success. Confused, the exercise physiologist doesn’t understand that his/her habits (i.e., work conditions) are such that no one really knows about an exercise physiology professional practice document.

In fact, why not try this little experiment? Open your eyes and look around you. Think for a moment. Do you see exercise physiologists engaging and educating their clients and/or patients in the anatomy and physiology of exercise? No, the last time they read anything about “physiology” was when they completed their master’s thesis. Why, because the public sector (once again, the employers in particular) isn’t educated to what exercise physiologists should be doing and, unfortunately, many exercise physiologists aren’t aware either.

Fourth, “watch your habits, for they become character.” In simple terms, if the exercise physiologist’s work habits are not consistent with what he/she was

actually educated to do, then, his/her character is likely to be indistinguishable from the fitness instructor or exercise specialist. The true self and substance of which the exercise physiologists actually is or should be have slowly taken on a different character; one that is less accurate, confusing, and is clearly a mistake. The mistake is so great that it justifies a serious contemplation of failed leadership for decades. The overriding conclusion can only be described as bordering on something so unethical as to render those who could have boldly asserted themselves but didn't to an island of uninterrupted and inexplicable misery.

Fifth, "watch your character, for it becomes your destiny." The misery that has been caused by failed leadership without a vision for exercise physiology has a peculiar smell of having sold out to the incessant political greed of men and women with the propensity for desiring great power and position. The improper sense of it all, that is, having failed to develop an accurate identity for exercise physiologists early on rather than later has not simply allowed for but literally encouraged the global mixing of exercise physiologists with personal trainers and instructors. Thus, failing to watch their character, the destiny of those who report to be exercise physiologists remain in question notwithstanding the distinction of board certified exercise physiologists.

The only question, therefore, which remains is, by what magic marker did the original exercise physiologists, that is those who transitioned from physical education, become disjoined from the reality of philosophy, cultural implications and perceptions and, in the simplest sense, the assumptions that undergird the professionalism that should have existed between exercise physiology and, for example, physical therapy? To begin with, if the reader finds this question interesting and not too unintelligible, why not write a brief article for PEPonline?

The whole of this article leads to a conclusion, which is of great importance in the present affairs of exercise physiology, that however uncomfortable or likely that the reader would rather dismiss the proposition that the lack of papers and talks about professionalism in exercise physiology for the past 40 or more years has led to a self-evident understanding and impression that much work remains to be done, both personally and professionally. While it will be decades before the

labels and misunderstandings about exercise physiology will be cleared up, the purposes of identification being accurate aren't new. Exercise physiologists can't possibly make it in the public sector without the relation with and observability of professionalism.

The strength of this argument is clear, and it lies in the fact that no other healthcare profession has risen to the top without their supporting and working for their own professional organization. Critics of this thinking are either disturbed or, in simple terms, they work for an altogether different agenda, both of which straightforwardly work against straight thinking for exercise physiology. It does seem strange, all the same to even say that it is plausible to think exercise physiologist do not need a serious coming together of circumstances to make it.

For certain, exercise physiologists must believe that they can make a difference, that they can define themselves, and that they must create their own words and their own destiny. Exercise physiologists must teach themselves about professionalism, the necessity for taking charge of who they are and what they do, and to express themselves as credible healthcare professionals. There is hope! Exercise physiologists have it within themselves the power to unlock the past and present inertia of sports medicine, which has locked them into diminished roles. There is hope! They can imagine and anticipate the future, rather than continuing on the same old path. All they need to do is reach deep within and be willing to make the right decisions. There is hope!

**Exercise physiology is a profession.** Everything about it is consistent with *The Harvard Educational Review* [1] in 1953, in which M. L. Cogan offered this definition: "A profession is a vocation...founded upon an understanding of the theoretical structure of some department of learning or science, and upon the abilities accompanying such understanding...applied to the vital practical affairs of man....The profession...considers its first ethical imperative to be altruistic to the client." And yet, prior to 1997 with the founding of the ASEP organization, there has been little to no emphasis on professionalism. The academic exercise physiologists did not have a class in professionalism or professional development. Why, because the so-called accumulated wisdom was then and still is all about

research. By comparison, since the 1980s, while leaders within academic medicine have been committed themselves to advancing professionalism [2], so-called exercise physiology leaders (i.e., book authors) after 30 plus years still haven't gotten the message.

Exercise physiologists, just like other healthcare professionals, must have the academic opportunity to be introduced to a curriculum that teaches the importance of a code of ethics, empathy, professionalism, credibility, professional development, and acceptable communication and hands-on skills. The ASEP leaders believe these topics are an integral part of an exercise physiologist's education. This thinking should come as no surprise in light of the dramatic technical and scientific advances in exercise physiology. However, until the academic exercise physiologists get their heads out of the sand, the convergence of these factors will be slow to materialize. There is hope, however!

Education to promote professionalism is taking place within the ASEP infrastructure in a small number of academic institutions. The leaders understand that the idea of a core set of values and virtues that undergird the nature of professionalism must be taught, and one way to do that is through presentations at the national meetings along with their commitment to scientific and clinical excellence. They get that integrity is essential to scientific excellence and the maintenance of public trust. It has a direct bearing on peer review, the handling of conflicts of interest, and the protection of clients, patients, and human subjects [3].

There is hope, but exercise physiology educators must be concerned with professional competencies in addition to the emphasis on scientific facts. For example, they must understand the importance of maintaining professional competence, being honest with clients and patients, respecting confidentiality, and avoiding inappropriate relations with either, advancing the science of their work, improving the quality of their care and practice, and maintaining trust by avoiding conflicts of interest.

Remember, in a nutshell, "thinking" and "professionalism" are all about "words, actions, habits, character, and destiny." Following this line of thinking, a

certain state of mind thrives and which, by virtue of its effort and authority, comes to transform if not create its own work – its destiny! This conception of exercise physiology professionalism casts a very different light on the elements that define “what is exercise physiology” and “who is an exercise physiologist.” Yes, there is hope!

#### References

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