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Exercise Physiology Professionalism Is In Its Infancy

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Professionalism lies at the heart of a good exercise physiologist.

It is logical that exercise physiology professionalism is expected to underpin the public's trust in exercise physiologists. This is true because professionalism is essential for all healthcare professionals and exercise physiology is a healthcare profession. Yet, professionalism in exercise physiology is seldom ever talked about much less researched or published. The lack of interest in professionalism and the students' welfare in and after college is as bad as medical doctors who disregard medical professionalism by failing to help maintain the health and well-being of their patients.

Just as it is necessary for medical doctors to be responsible to the needs of their patients, being responsive to the students' career needs is central to the professionalism of academic exercise physiologists. Naturally, it is likely that college teachers believe they are doing everything for the students. After all, they are already giving up ~6 hrs a week of their research time to teaching classes. Hence, if students are having trouble locating jobs after college, it is their fault. Well, if that is how you feel, then, ask yourself this question: "Is the typical exercise physiology teacher 'research-centered' or 'teacher-centered?'" Here, I should say that if the unspoken reality of academic exercise physiology is all about research and publishing and little else, it should be obvious that teaching is not considered a high priority.

Exercise physiology is a vocation in which an exercise physiologist's specialized knowledge and laboratory skills are put in the service of safely prescribing exercise medicine to restore and promote health and well-being.

The ASEP leaders' point of view for ~20 years is that academic exercise physiologists should redefined their work from just a research emphasis to a combination of research and student-centered professionalism. This thinking is not that crazy at all. In fact, it is what parents think is true already. That is why they send their sons and daughters to college. It is why they either pay thousands of dollars for the college tuition fees or help in providing the dollars they can give towards college costs. Unfortunately, parents are not aware of the dynamics that drive day-to-day faculty discussions. They are not aware that the faculty believes exercise physiology exists for just those who work in academia?

Granted, Exercise Physiology is a healthcare profession still in its infancy when compared to physical therapy, and obviously it has much room to grow. But who is helping it grow? Are you doing everything you can to see that Exercise Physiology professionals are more than personal trainers or exercise specialists? We all must take an active part to promote professionalism and it begins by looking in the mirror.

Of course the only logical response to such thinking is "No, it doesn't." In fact, if the answer is "yes" -- then, by necessity every student would have to major in something other than exercise physiology. There is also the idea that it is okay that the faculty thinks of exercise physiology as an academic discipline of researchers and little else? Here again, from the ASEP perspective, exercise physiology is an academic degree with interests in athletics and training on one hand and mental and physical fitness, health, and well-being on the other. It is an area of study and work for exercise physiologists of all academic levels.

Exercise physiology is also a vocation in which the exercise physiologist's knowledge, hands-on laboratory skills, and judgment are put in the service of protecting and restoring human well-being by safely prescribing exercise medicine. Exercise physiologists are the logical 21st century healthcare professionals to administer exercise medicine in the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases and disabilities. Thus, the consensus of academic exercise physiologists should be a more rigorous concept of validating exercise physiology as a client and/or patient-centered healthcare profession.

Teaching professionalism in exercise physiology is not only a daunting challenge, but also an opportunity to engage our occupation and teach how exercise physiologists make a living while controlling their own work.

The ASEP exercise physiologists believe it is pastime to emphasize the importance of a unified force to move academic exercise physiologists' state of mind regarding professionalism from its infancy to maturity. This statement is not the opportunity to speak badly of college teachers. It is the effort of a few exercise physiologists to influence many non-ASEP exercise physiologists of the need to leap forward in the promotion of a student-centered professionalism.

ASEP has developed and implemented professional “academic” guidelines to promote professional development for individual academic programs. This approach represents a major change in both the scope and degree of monitoring of exercise physiologists' accountability. Academic exercise physiologists are challenged by ASEP to accept responsibility for promoting professionalism and self-regulation that will lead to improved client and patient care when prescribing exercise medicine. Accreditation helps to reduce unnecessary variation within and between academic programs. Moreover, given the collaborative improvement in academic programs and faculty responsibility to the undergraduate students (in particular), the quality of their educational care will be significantly improved.

While the challenge of achieving the proposed new configuration of accredited academic exercise physiology programs is daunting, given that it will run counter to the existing status quo, it is absolutely imperative that it is done. Professional standards are symbolic of the academic common-sense efforts to increase self-regulation that benefits the members of the profession. This is important for a number of reasons. For example, it helps students and their parents select academic programs that will provide the educational preparation and hands-owns experiences to be successful as a healthcare professional.

Accreditation also helps to ensure that the curriculum is credible and conforms to the expectations of the ASEP scientific knowledge and practice of the profession. Unaccredited programs can leave the exercise physiology students with a degree that is worthless for getting a job after college. Also, it is logical that such programs make it difficult for students to obtain ASEP certification due to the lack of educational standards.

The unprofessional relationship of the exercise physiologists with an interest in sports nutrition and the sports supplement industry is a major challenge to exercise physiology professionalism.

Thus, the following question needs an answer so that everyone will know what is what. "Is the practice of exercise physiology a science, a trade, a business, or a combination of one or more?" As far as I believe and as I have stated 100s of time in the PEPonline and JPEP electronic journals, exercise physiology is a healthcare profession based on scientific knowledge and specialized hands-on experiences. As

a profession, exercise physiology is based on selfless and compassionate service for all clients and patients. After all, client- and patient-centered professionalism is crucial to safely and appropriately prescribing exercise medicine.

The problem, however, is that at present there are no academic courses that address professionalism in exercise physiology. It appears that academic exercise physiologists are not interested in teaching a course on the professional development

Exercise physiology professionalism should be promoted, developed, and taught in the academic curriculum at the undergraduate and postgraduate training levels.

of exercise physiology. They don't want restrictions of any kind, particularly regarding their financial relationship with sports supplement companies. Far too often academic exercise physiologists interested in sports nutrition and the grants they get to promote supplements to unfairly enhance athletic performance are increasing. As they say, "Money talks." Throw some major bucks towards academics and they will stop in their tracks. The mission entrusted to college teachers has changed from a highly ethical, academic-oriented student caring approach to

education to "what's in for me" mentality.

It is true that academic institutions have problems that society and many college teachers are not aware of at this moment in history. These problems are not going to simply disappear. They have been with us for decades and they are only getting worse without exercise physiology leadership. For now, I see them as opportunities to change, grow, and become more effective as college teachers. I see the challenges of our age as a chance for exercise physiologists to envision once again what it truly means to take the step towards something better. And so, as a member of ASEP, I need to ask: "Is sports medicine or exercise science the equivalent of an academic degree in exercise physiology?" If the answer is "no" – then, why are exercise physiologists on their knees before the non-exercise physiologists?
