

The Gap Between Academic Preparation and Real World Application in the Field of Exercise Science



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Opinion

Are we Asking the Right Questions?

A few years ago, a colleague of mine wrote an opinion piece on the fact he believed we are not developing specialists in exercise science, only generalists. Therefore, a decline in the advancement of the field has begun signaling a less than productive period for the area of study. For a while now, I have pondered this point of view and I cannot disagree with it on one level. Having our undergraduate and graduate students dive as deep into the cardiovascular physiology or biomechanics as they can is a wonderful opportunity for those students (and faculty) to grow intellectually and hopefully expand the current body of knowledge as some like to say.

On the other hand, an absolute pioneer and leader of the vanguard currently sweeping human fitness performance has said that exercise science has no tangible place in the application of training and athlete development. At first, I was offended by this notion. What is he talking about? I have been in the exercise science in one form or fashion for almost thirty years and find the information I have acquired extremely useful in athlete development, coach development and student development. Just as I had done with my colleague's words, I suppressed my ego and let things percolate. My opinion that eventually developed was of agreement. He was correct. The current structure of most exercise science programs does not look to guide the student's in the development of applicable skills to move human performance forward. We are specializing in not specializing and that is causing a stagnation in a form of isolation. We have limited ourselves. Limited to exercise physiology, biomechanics, kinesiology and other specialized classes that, more often than not, are silos - boxes to be checked for a student to qualify for graduation. We are not developing students that see the human machine as it is, integrated.

To view the human body as anything less than an integration of dynamic and reciprocal systems is disrespectful to the machine itself. Ignoring this relationship only limits outcome at every level, therefore undermining any potential performance. An outcome of a lab assessment for cardiovascular endurance is meaningless if it cannot be applied outside of that lab. Additionally, if that athlete approaches their movement as a skill, if they focus on breathing techniques, assessed and addressed any mobility issues, attended to their hydration, nutrition, footwear, clothing, visualization, concentration - the list of questions can go on and on. This articulates a point, are we asking the right questions or are we merely focused on an outcome, not the process.

The world of academia often does not lend itself to live application. All too much is the criteria for success predicated on publications. Just as success in real-world application is determined by financial gain. Do we know as much as we think we know? Absolutely not. Are we as good at developing human performance as we think we are? Absolutely not. If we were, we would not be amazed at the accomplishments of athletes daily. In my opinion we must build a general understanding of integrated processes that influence performance before we can entertain the outcome. If we can do this, we will provide the opportunity for a bridge to be built between academic preparation and real-world application. Which, right now, do not have a good relationship. Or allow those so inclined to drill further into a subject they are passionate about. The right questions from the right perspective must be asked if we are to move forward in a meaningful and purposeful way. After all, knowledge without application is useless, is it not. Application without knowledge is dangerous, is it not.

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