



The Fortieth
Amy Morris Homans
Commemorative Lecture
2006

**Kinesiology—A “Homeless” Field:
Addressing Organization
and Leadership Needs**

by

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Kinesiology—A “Homeless” Field: Addressing Organization and Leadership Needs

Roberta E. Rikli

Motivated by her belief in the contributions of physical activity to the “good life” for all people, Amy Morris Homans was influential in the development of physical education as a viable and respected academic field of study in higher education. Over the past 100 years, however, as the field faced pressures to become more scientific, it has become increasingly decentralized into subdisciplinary units, thus, losing much of its unified mission and focus as an integrated field of study in academia. This fragmentation, along with the lack of an “umbrella” professional association or organizational home for the field (now most commonly called kinesiology) has hampered the field’s ability to gain national recognition as a disciplinary field of study, its effectiveness as a political voice, and its ability to conduct the kind of cross-disciplinary research needed to best address important questions and issues in the field. Such overspecialization, together with a lack of a common name and common purpose, has raised concern about the field’s identify and importance in higher education, with program cuts continuing to be the unfortunate result at a number of major universities. This paper addresses the importance of reconnecting the field and suggests a possible strategy for developing a new umbrella professional association dedicated to the unification and advancement of the field.

It is a distinct honor to present the Fortieth Amy Morris Homans’ Commemorative Lecture. Unlike previous lecturers, however, I must confess that I could find no “personal” connection whatsoever to this influential person in our field as it seemed almost everyone before me had been able to do. Several previous lecturers were fortunate to have had mentors who had studied under Homans, some had attended college on an Amy Morris Homans scholarship, and others had other unique connections—one was in the audience on the day the first Amy Morris Homans lecture was given. One had the same birthday as Homans. Another was born on the same day Homans died and on and on....

Although my personal connection with Ms. Homans appears to be non-existent, I am pleased to say that I do have *much* in common with her professional philosophy. There are two elements of her thinking that I particularly identify with and

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that will provide the main context for this paper. The first is her unwavering belief in the *importance of physical activity in our society*, a belief that led to a lifetime of extraordinary accomplishments in the development of physical education as an academic field of study. The second is her philosophy that the field is best served by having *visionary leaders who can look into the future and make the adjustments needed to best serve an ever-changing society*.

Of course, there were other significant accomplishments that Homans left as a legacy, but I wish to address the implications of these important points within the context of the current status of our field. Specifically, I intend to discuss the ways that our field has changed and evolved in the last century to the point where it no longer has a unified mission and focus. For many professionals, as well as the public, it is not clear how this field of study is defined, nor where it belongs with respect to an organizational home. The increased fragmentation over the years and lack of a unified mission has hampered the field's ability to address important social issues, as well as its success in gaining the level of prominence it could have and ought to have in academia today. In this paper, I will discuss the importance of reconceptualizing and reconnecting our field and will propose a strategy for establishing a national "umbrella" association devoted to the promotion of the field.

Ms. Homans' Accomplishments: A Brief Review

Amy Morris Homans, born in 1848, was not trained in physical education, but as a seminary graduate who traveled to the South after the Civil War to assist with reconstruction efforts in education. During her work in the South, she quickly became recognized as an educational leader and innovator, with her innovative efforts including the incorporation of physical activity into the curriculum as an important part of the liberal education and overall development of students. Because physical training had been such a large part of Ms. Homans' visionary approach to education, she subsequently was invited in 1889 to become the first director of the newly formed Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, founded by the well-known Boston philanthropist, Mary Hemenway, who also believed in the importance of physical training for a person's optimum development. The purpose of the Boston Normal School was to provide an ongoing supply of well-educated physical education teachers—teachers who had rigorous training in the sciences, in liberal arts, and in the "proper way" to conduct oneself personally and professionally (Spears, 1978).

In 1909, the Normal School of Gymnastics became part of Wellesley College and through Ms. Homans' leadership transitioned into one of the first physical education programs to acquire full-fledged academic status as a Department of Hygiene and Physical Education, certainly a major milestone in the development of physical education as an academic field of study. Ms. Homans' accomplishments, however, did not stop there, but continued throughout her lifetime as she went on to establish the first Graduate Department of Hygiene and Physical Education at Wellesley College, to organize national conferences to promote physical activity, and to establish two different national professional organizations, one of which was the Association of Directors of Physical Education for Women, a forerunner of the

National Association for Kinesiology and Physical Education in Higher Education (NAKPEHE), sponsor of the Amy Morris Homans lectures. In recognition of her many accomplishments, Ms. Homans received the first honorary doctoral degree to be conferred upon a woman in physical education and was recipient of the first national Honor Award given by the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education (forerunner of the current American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance—AAHPERD).

Throughout her professional life, Ms. Homans had the highest of expectations for herself and for her students. She always was impeccably dressed and flawlessly well-mannered and insisted on the same for her students, often inviting them to social functions so that they could learn the personal and social skills they needed to be successful and influential as future faculty members and future citizens. She had the foresight to know how important it would be to the future of this emerging field to have exceptionally qualified professionals who were well-respected and could “hold their own” among other academicians and leaders in society. Most importantly, she was a woman *ahead of her time* who saw the tremendous potential for physical education as a academic field of study and saw physical activity participation of all types—gymnastics, dancing, games, and sports—as an important contributor to the “good life” for all people, including women, which also was revolutionary at the time since up to then it was not considered “lady-like” for women to overexert or, heaven forbid, perspire. In fact, for women in particular, she saw the physical education professional as a vehicle to strengthen and benefit their personal lives and as a way of raising their professional and academic status in society. By 1936 more than 200 Wellesley graduates held faculty or directorship positions in colleges and universities across the country (Spears, 1978), thus, significantly increasing the presence and influence of women in American higher education.

Clearly, Ms. Homans was a woman of influence in the development of our profession, one who early on could see the importance of physical activity to society. Toward the end of her life, at the age of 80 during a luncheon speech to Wellesley alumni, she described the motivation behind her vision saying that

. . . [I] saw the need for something which would lift the life of the masses to a higher level of health and vigor, to a more sane and wholesome outlook, a more rational, self controlled way of living.... (quoted in Spears, 1978, p. 51).

Ms. Homans’ Vision 100 Years Later: Is Physical Activity Still the Main Focus of Our Field?

Who among us would not agree that 100 years later, as society now faces what may be some of its greatest health-related social challenges of all time, many of which are *inactivity*-induced, that physical activity is just as important to society as it was in Homans’ day? And who would not agree that Ms. Homans’ vision at the turn of 20th century of “physical activity for the masses” would not be an equally fitting, important, and appropriate mission for the field of physical education/kinesiology as we begin the 21st century?

Unfortunately, as the field of physical education (now more commonly referred to as kinesiology¹) has further developed over the years, particularly after the 1960s when it became divided into subdisciplinary areas of study (e.g., exercise physiology, biomechanics, sport psychology, etc.), its mission and focus have become less clear and a source of much discussion and debate. Numerous keynote speeches have been given and scores of papers written addressing such questions as: Who are we? What is our focus? Are we a discipline, a profession, or a field? What should be our main subject matter—exercise, sports, fitness, physical activity, or human movement? And what should we call this discipline, profession, or field?

In reviewing Amy Morris Homans lectures over the past 40 years, one finds that nearly all of them in one way or another have addressed issues related to the purpose and focus of our field. Similar concerns also have been the topic of numerous other lectures and papers, such as the Delphine Hanna and Dudley Sargeant commemorative lectures, and have been the focus of a number of meetings, conferences, workshops, and entire editions of journal publications, such as the December issue of *Quest* (1990).

The Emergence of Subdisciplines— A Mixed Blessing for the Field

Prior to the 1960s, the main focus of our field was much clearer. The name of the field was physical education and the main purpose was to train physical education teachers to teach physical education in the public schools. Then came the now-famous James B. Conant report (Conant, 1963) suggesting that physical education did not have a sufficient scientific base to justify it as an academic field of study in higher education. This broadly-published report evaluating programs in higher education was an embarrassment to our field. Fortunately, a number of leaders at the time, including Franklin Henry (1964), responded immediately indicating that we did have a scientific body of knowledge and that it was located in various subdisciplinary areas of study such as exercise physiology, biomechanics, sport psychology, motor learning and development, sport sociology, and history and philosophy.

Henry's seminal paper and other related efforts such as the Big 10 Body of Knowledge Project (Zeiglar & McCristal, 1967) had much influence on increasing the attention to research in the field, enhancing scholarly productivity, and further establishing our scientific base. Without a doubt, this "subdisciplinary movement" improved the status of physical education as an academic field of study and may have, at the time, saved it from extinction as an academic unit in colleges and universities.

As has been widely discussed, however, there also has been a serious downside to subdividing the field into what have become relatively isolated areas of study. The increased specialization, with the various subdisciplines forming their own separate professional associations and holding their own separate meetings and conferences, has resulted in fragmatism and reduced communication within the field. This also has reduced attention to the overall mission and "big picture" purpose of the field and has caused the field, in many ways, to lose much of its identity and recognized place in higher education as well as its effectiveness as a political voice (to be addressed further in subsequent sections of this paper).

As the field of physical education/kinesiology has become more and more specialized over the years, concerns also have arisen about our ability to deal effectively with some of our most prominent and important questions. Whether the goal is to increase performance in elite athletes, to improve mobility in older adults, or to learn more about obesity and physical inactivity in children, most questions of significance are best addressed through cross-disciplinary approaches involving input from a combination of the biological, behavioral, and social sciences. Judging from the published literature in the field, however, it appears that most faculty continue to work in their separate subdisciplinary units/labs addressing subdisciplinary issues, with very few working collaboratively across the subdisciplines. Similarly, few kinesiology faculty, it seems, are paying attention to the “big picture” overall purpose and mission of the field, especially to its initial purpose of promoting “physical activity for the good of the masses.” Hence, there is concern that kinesiology as an academic field of study has not received the national recognition and respect that it could, and that it is not as effective as it ought to be in addressing important academic and social issues, including the highly publicized physical *inactivity* epidemic that is being associated with some of the most serious health and social challenges of all time. Related to this is the reality that kinesiology programs in a number of universities have experienced program reductions or even complete elimination in a number of cases (Ellis, 1998; Perlman, 2003; Wilmore, 1998).

Kinesiology’s Centrality to Institutional Mission and Goals

As kinesiology programs in a number of well-known universities over the years became overly specialized and fractionated, often with disagreement and dissent about program direction and mission, the unfortunate consequence, as many of us know all too well, has been that of serious downsizing and even complete elimination of many formerly prestigious programs. Over the past couple of decades, more than a dozen kinesiology programs on the west coast alone have been eliminated, seriously downsized, threatened, or dismantled, with various parts of the program merged with other units.² Most recently, in June 2003, it was announced that all aspects of the long-standing B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. programs in physical education/exercise physiology at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln would be eliminated, along with nine tenure track positions in the department (Perlman, 2003). Although the primary reason for program reduction/elimination has varied across different universities, a common theme has been the “lack of a central and important focus” as perceived by university administrators, usually combined with other factors such as budget stresses, reduced numbers of students, and/or dissent within the faculty (Ellis, 1998; personal communications with faculty and administrators from discontinued programs, 2006).

Fortunately, there also are examples of kinesiology programs that have fared well during serious budget-cutting times at their universities, even thrived during various adverse conditions. For an excellent review of factors contributing to program failure in some institutions, as well as to success in others, see the collection of Academy Papers published in *Quest* (1998).

Ironically, unless our field as a whole is successful in presenting a more coherent, unified front, with a more clearly articulated purpose, what once may

have saved our field—our move to a subdisciplinary emphasis—may now, as this subdisciplinary emphasis has led to serious fragmentation, be the very thing that is jeopardizing the field’s continued viability as a unified body of knowledge. Below are excerpts from just a few of many papers and reports over past years that point out the need to *clarify our focus* and *regain our unity*, a goal that continues to elude the field and one that is going to require a new type of visionary leadership to bring it to fruition.

Exactly 20 years ago in a former Homans Lecture, Barbara Forker (1986) made the following observation about leadership concerns in the field:

. . . as fields become more specialized . . . Where are the integrative thinkers who will furnish the glue to put us back together again, who are able to see the whole . . . We in physical education are a perfect example whereby diversification has robbed us of the modern Miss Homans. . . Physical education can boast of many very intelligent, knowledgeable, prolific, forward-thinking individuals. But we categorize them as exercise physiologists, biomechanists, sport psychologists, and so forth. Our leadership comes from a vertical plane with a narrow scope. While these contributions are extremely important, we also need leaders who have visions of the larger picture and can bond the field together. (p. 92).

A few years later, in a special edition of *Quest* devoted to examining the status of the field, Karl Newell, among others, wrote extensively about the “chaos” and the lack of “focus” in our field, with the following being just a couple of excerpts from his comments:

. . . physical education in higher education is in a state of chaos . . . and this chaos exists at a time when societal interest in physical activity is at an all time high. (Newell, 1990a, p. 228)

* * *

In promoting the . . . disciplinary approach to the study of physical activity, it is apparent that the field has tended to act like a collection of cognate disciplines, rather than an emerging new field. (Newell, 1990b, p. 250)

* * *

The academic physical education community has failed to react (even inappropriately) to the many opportunities that exist for physical activity in society. (Newell, 1990a, p. 236)

Nearly a decade later, in discussing the demise of the Kinesiology Department at UCLA, Tara Scanlan (1998) observed that

We had started with a unique mission and clear plan. Over time, we strayed dramatically from that mission, becoming increasingly narrow in focus and ultimately losing our balance across the content areas . . . We proceeded to hire absolutely excellent physiologists and neuroscientists . . . who had little or no expertise or interest in movement . . . In turn, some faculty likely wanted to identify more closely with the parent disciplines. Instead of leaving kinesiology to do so, they transformed kinesiology into something else. In the early 1990’s, we abolished ourselves to become the Department of Physiological Science. All faculty in biomechanics, motor learning and control, and sport

psychology have now left. An emphasis on human movement no longer exists. (p. 129-130)

Further, the fragmentation of our field into specialized subdisciplines with little agreement as to its central or unique focus has caused our most noted historian, Roberta Park (1998), to conclude that the field has “inflicted upon itself some very serious wounds,” indicating that:

During the last 3 decades, our field has become a “house divided.” It is time to recapture something akin to the shared vision that motivated early leaders of our profession. (p. 213)

Park (1998) points out that fragmentation within our field has also been accompanied by fragmentation in our major professional association—the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD), thus, limiting its effectiveness as a political voice for the field. The dissatisfaction with AAHPERD’s willingness to adequately accommodate the field’s research interests has caused numerous individuals, especially those interested in scholarship and research, to transfer their membership to the various subdisciplinary societies founded during the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the diffuse kinds of “advocacy goals” of AAHPERD’s various associations, according to Park, suggest that there is little “sense of corporate identity” in the current organization, something that ought to be a hallmark of any profession (p. 215).

The ongoing pleas for the field to become more unified continue until the current time, as evidenced in recent papers by Charles (2005), Hall (2003), and by Overdorf (2005) who points out that “...Our profession remains clearly fragmented...at the same time the need for multidisciplinary research to address societal problems has never been greater.” (pp. 244-245).

So Why Another Paper Addressing These Concerns?—Isn’t it Time for an Action Plan?

By now, the question surely is being asked—why this lengthy review of past commentaries and repeated statements on the lack of unity in our field—and, most of all, why would I choose to address this same topic *again* in the Fortieth Amy Morris Homans Lecture? Is there really a need for another paper on this topic? Indeed there are some very urgent reasons why we need to *stop talking* about the need to clarify our focus and *start strategizing* about how this might take place. As such, this paper is intended to help facilitate us moving from talk to action with respect to articulating and implementing a clearer focus and mission.

As a side note, I might add that following my oral presentation of this paper, one attendee (who happened to be from the east coast) asked if I *really* thought that our field could be in jeopardy if we didn’t make changes. My response was that when you are from the west coast you sometimes feel like the field as a doctoral area of study is *already* mostly gone. At Cal State Fullerton we have one of the largest (over 1,000 majors) and we think strongest (naturally) kinesiology programs in the country for a “comprehensive-level” institution. Yet, we worry about our long-term sustainability due to there being no doctoral programs remaining in California and few in most

nearby states from which to draw Ph.D. faculty or to which to send our master's students who would like to pursue doctoral work in the general geographic vicinity—and who might then return and teach in our programs. Although, especially in California it seems, there continues to be a great interest in the study of physical activity and exercise in many of the state's most prestigious doctoral institutions, this study is *not* taking place in kinesiology departments but in departments such as psychology, biology, physiology, public health, and social ecology. The field of kinesiology, as an academic discipline in doctoral institutions in California, no longer exists, nor does it exist in a number of surrounding states, at least not to the degree that it once did. This is certainly unfortunate, but perhaps not an unrelated phenomena, when considering that California, along with Washington and Oregon, at one time had some of the top doctoral programs in our field—programs that were on the “cutting edge” in pursuing academic excellence, including leading the trend toward subdisciplinary specialization (or over-specialization, as some would now describe it). In moving further east, as part of what some have referred to as the “California virus,” the kinesiology program at the University of Colorado has been dropped in favor of a department of integrated physiology (similar to what happened at UCLA and USC), and as mentioned previously, all physical education/exercise science programs at the University of Nebraska have now been dropped. So, yes, I do believe that kinesiology as a recognized field of study is in jeopardy and risks further reductions and program eliminations in other parts of the country, especially in bad budget times, if we do not become reconnected with a common identity (name) and a strong unified purpose—a purpose that is viewed as *important* to society and *important* to university provosts, presidents, and chancellors. But I also believe, along with others, that with society's increased interest in health and well-being that kinesiology has its greatest opportunity ever, *if* it can become focused and unified, to develop into a highly valued, stable, and uniquely relevant field of study in higher education.

The Need for Strategies to Reconnect and Refocus the Field

Interestingly, despite the vast amount of commentary and attention give to the issues of over-specialization in our field, to our current lack of unity, and to the need for bringing the field back together again, there is little evidence in the literature of a proposed strategy or a recommended plan of action to accomplish this goal. In the remainder of this paper I will present a few additional examples as to why it is important that our field become reconnected and will suggest a strategy as to how this might happen.

A Critical Crossroads—An Opportunity for Increased Academic Centrality

With the increasing pressure for universities to become less known as “ivory tower” institutions and more known for their responsiveness to society's needs, the field of kinesiology has an extraordinary opportunity to become a central contributor to universities' mission and goals. With inactivity-related health problems and

rising health care costs among society's greatest concerns, the field of kinesiology could well be at the forefront in addressing these issues.

In reflecting on future directions for the field and lessons learned from UCLA's experience (after losing its Kinesiology Department), Scanlan (1998) suggests:

If we can move forward from here, I submit that times have never been better for our field . . . we need a clear mission that reflects a unique focus within the institution. . . As we all know, the times and institutions are changing rapidly. For us they are changing for the better—if we capitalize on opportunities and align our mission with those of our respective institutions. (p. 130-131)

As alluded to by Scanlan and others, our field is especially well-suited to meeting institutions' increasing emphasis on *inter- and multidisciplinary research* and on *being responsive to social needs*. Because kinesiology is cross-disciplinary in nature and because our overriding purpose deals with socially relevant issues, aligning ourselves with institutional priorities should be far more natural for us than it might be for other academic units. For the first time in history, it is possible that our field, which for so long has experienced a "marginal" reputation in academia, could now find itself at the forefront among university programs as institutions are striving to better demonstrate their relevance to society—at the forefront, that is, if the field can present a unified identity and focus.

Potential Barrier to the Field's Stability— The Lack of a Common Name

Certainly, a clear barrier to our field's ability to establish its identity and importance in academia, and thus a threat to program stability, has been its lack of a common name or "umbrella" term to define the field. Over the years, dozens of different names have been used to describe physical activity-based programs and departments, with some of the more common ones being physical education, exercise science, sports science, human kinetics, human performance, movement science, and kinesiology—with kinesiology the name which over the past decade has surfaced as the most prominent, especially in doctoral-granting institutions (Thomas, et al., 2004), but which by no means has yet gained universal recognition.

The lack of a standard degree/department name across most institutions of higher education continues to be extremely problematic. In discussing risks to the stability of academic departments in our field, Morgan (1998) suggests that "adopting multiple labels has led to the unintended effect of creating a diffuse, polymorphic, poorly focused, and essentially invisible field of academic specialization." (p. 158) Similarly, Ellis (1998) agrees that our "plethora of names obscures the nature of our collective contribution" and curtails any positive generalizations that might occur from successes in similar programs at other universities (p. 124). As alluded to by Ellis and others, in bad budget times it surely must be easier for a provost to eliminate an academic department that appears to be isolated in terms of its purpose and identity, as compared to some other department that has a strong mission and strong identity with counterparts at other universities.

Kinesiology: An “Invisible” Field—Its Lack of an Organized Structure (A Professional Home)

The “invisibility” of our field is never more apparent than when searching the Web to learn more about it. When I tried a Google search of kinesiology (the most common name for our field) in early 2006, URL addresses appearing on the first page included three listings for a manual muscle testing organization, addresses for three academic departments of kinesiology, a free on-line exercise and weight training program, and the site for one journal in the field. This is in stark contrast to Google searches for more established fields such as psychology, sociology, or anthropology, as well as for newer fields such as gerontology. Google listings for these (and every other field I tried) immediately takes one to an umbrella professional association (e.g., the American Psychological Association—APA, the American Sociological Association—ASA, or the Gerontology Society of America—GSA) where there is an elaborate, extensive website describing the association and its various subcomponents and describing the field it represents, with a clear mission statement about the scientific and professional goals of the organization. Such sites also describe a long list of integrative services provided by the umbrella association, such as a home office and support staff (typically located in or close to Washington, D.C., the political center of the country), a list of association journals, a code of ethics, a calendar of association-sponsored meetings and conferences, and typically a listing of subdisciplinary/professional groups, all of which are united under the umbrella association, but each with its own subpurpose and own goals that support the greater mission of the field. Table 1 provides examples of academic fields of study in higher education, along with their accompanying professional association. Unlike other fields, instead of having one major professional association representing its academic field, kinesiology has numerous associations and societies, with no common name or identity.

Certainly, with the Internet (Web) becoming the information source of choice for an increasing number of people, not having a presence on the Web ought to be a scary thought for us and could be quite problematic. It ought to be of considerable worry, for example, that a university provost or others with a vested interest in learning more about our field would have such difficulty in locating information about us.

As a case in point, not having a common name or universal recognition as a field of study has been a concern of the National Research Council (NRC) during our “so far” unsuccessful efforts to have doctoral programs in kinesiology approved for inclusion in NRC’s evaluation of doctoral programs, something which has been a goal of the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education (AAKPE) for some time (Thomas, et al., 2004). Being included among the disciplines evaluated by the NRC certainly adds a type of recognition and prestige to the field. Or, perhaps more accurately, *not* being included in NRC’s list of doctoral programs could be viewed as limiting a field’s academic credibility.

Kinesiology: A Field of “Nomad” Societies

Not only is the field of kinesiology as a whole largely invisible as a structured, organized field of study, so are most of the subdisciplinary components of the field. With most subdisciplinary organizations generally “headquartered” in temporary

Table 1 Common Academic Fields of Study in Higher Education with Accompanying Professional Associations

| Academic Field of Study | Corresponding Professional Associations |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Psychology | APA—American Psychological Association |
| Sociology | ASA—American Sociological Association |
| Anthropology | AAA—American Anthropological Association |
| Education | AERA—American Educational Research Association |
| Political Science | APSA—American Political Science Association |
| Chemistry | ACA—American Chemical Society |
| Gerontology | GSA—Gerontology Society of America |
| Kinesiology* | AAASP—Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology ACSM—American College of Sports Medicine ASB—American Society of Biomechanics ASEP—American Society of Exercise Physiologists NASSS—North American Society for the Sociology of Sport NASPSPA—North American Society for the Psychology of Sport & Physical Activity NASSH—North American Society for Sports History PSSS—Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport (recently renamed the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport: IAPS) |

*Unlike other fields, kinesiology has no “umbrella” association that connects its various sub-disciplinary units. Some have suggested that NAKPEHE (the National Association for Kinesiology and Physical Education in Higher Education) could become the organizing body for the field, but currently this association, which traditionally has focused on leadership issues in the field of higher education, is not attracting many of the field’s leading researchers to its membership. Similarly, AAHPERD (the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance), because of its primary focus on professional preparation, is not seen as a relevant organization for most researchers in the field.

locations across the country, typically in university departments wherever the current president resides, it would be very difficult for outsiders to ever locate most of these academic structures in our field.

Figure 1 suggests that if we do have a field of kinesiology, it surely must be “a field of nomads” with no common name and with no central home, with most of the various academic organizations moving about the country from place to place, as new officers are elected. Exceptions to this would be the subfield of sports medicine, which is represented by a large, well-developed professional organization—the American College of Sports Medicine, with headquarters in Indianapolis, as well as the subfield of pedagogy/physical education which is well-represented within the AAHPERD organization, located in Reston, Virginia.

Kinesiology . . . A field of ‘nomads’ (no central home; no common name)

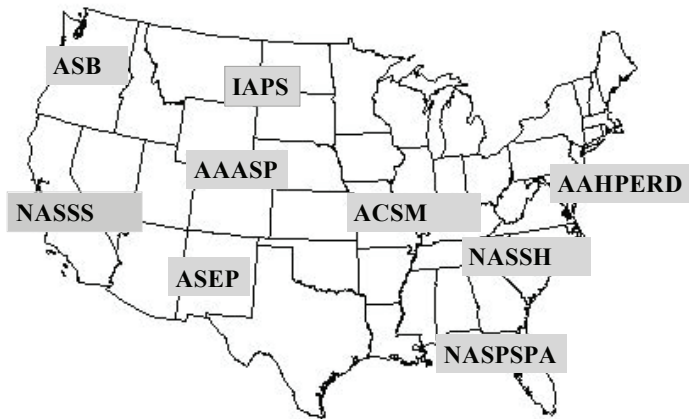


Figure 1—An illustration of the “nomadic” nature of the field of kinesiology, with most of its professional associations located across the United States typically at the university where one of the current officers (usually the president) is employed. Exceptions include the ACSM and AAHPERD organizations, which have permanent professional offices. The academic fields of study and their representative associations are: *Exercise Physiology*—American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP); *Sport Sociology*—North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS); *Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior*—North American Society for Psychology of Sport & Physical Activity (NASPSPA); *Sports History*—North American Society for Sports History (NASSH); *Sports Medicine*—American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM); *Biomechanics*—American Society of Biomechanics (ASB); *Applied Sport Psychology*—Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP); and *Philosophy of Sport*—International Association for the Philosophy of Sport (IAPS). The American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) attracts researchers from pedagogy and from measurement and evaluation, but few top scholars from the other subdisciplinary areas.

Staying True to Our Mission— Recognizing the Field’s Unique Contributions

Interestingly, another potential barrier to our field’s recognition and importance within universities may now be its *overemphasis* at some institutions on research and scholarship at the expense of teaching, professional preparation, and service. Ellis (1998) and others have pointed out the danger that has arisen when “. . . research-oriented departments, in the rush to appear academic, have withdrawn from activities that their external constituencies believe are very important (p. 124).” As our field is striving to become more respected in terms of its theoretical research, we should not lose sight of the reality that many consider our unique and important role in universities to also be that of providing enjoyable physical activity, exercise, and sport opportunities for students, faculty, and staff. In other words, the ultimate importance of kinesiology departments in many universities may lie in the *balance* of programs they provide—their research, as well as the service programs provided for students, faculty, staff, and the community, and in the

wide array of professional preparation programs offered for those seeking careers in areas such as teaching, coaching, fitness, and rehabilitation. History has shown, even in Research I institutions, that departments with a broad and well-balanced scope of teaching, research, and service programs tend to be stronger and more stable than those with a more limited focus (Quest, 1998).

The uniqueness of the field of kinesiology is especially well defined in the introductory chapter of a recently published *Introduction to Kinesiology* textbook (Hoffman and Harris, 2005). Kinesiology is described as *the field of study that focuses on physical activity*, with its information base coming from three different sources—*experiential knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and professional practice*. It is important to recognize that the academic field of kinesiology, unlike many other academic disciplines, is based on more than theoretical knowledge. The field also consists of knowledge that comes from “experiencing” physical activity (such as that learned from actually performing a tennis serve or from running a marathon), as well as knowledge from professional practice, such as that discovered during the process of teaching, coaching, or in working with older adults to improve their functional mobility, as examples.

Physical Activity as the Focus of Kinesiology’s Core Curriculum

Most (although not all) leaders in the field would probably agree that kinesiology is about the study of physical activity, with all other areas of study (e.g., exercise, sport, and recreational activity) falling under this umbrella (Hoffman & Harris, 2005). Considering physical activity as the “core” subject matter of our field is consistent with the field’s original purpose and with addressing society’s needs, but is not consistent with the way much of the field has evolved since the 1960s, nor with the core curriculum in many kinesiology departments.

Dividing the field into subdisciplines as they were defined in the 1960s has resulted in an overly narrow and limited focus within the field, with the core curriculum in many departments being more centered on *sport* or *exercise* than on the bigger picture of physical activity. Although sport and exercise are important aspects of the overall field of physical activity, organizing kinesiology’s core curriculum around these activity components, especially sport, would be difficult to justify in terms of academic significance. Whereas it is easy to justify the academic importance of a field that focuses on physical activity and its influence on the health and well-being of all people, it is unlikely that a field with sport and athletic performance as its main focus would be defensible in most universities.

Instead of offering core courses in *sport* psychology or *sport* sociology, departments that are broad-thinking in their mission and responsive to social needs more appropriately would include, as part of their required core, courses on the psychological and socio-cultural aspects of *physical activity*, with sport and exercise being a large part of the focus, but not the only focus. A *physical activity*-based curriculum would surely include discussions of the “cutting edge” physical activity research from other academic units, such as the interdisciplinary “active living” body of research that is emerging from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, geography, urban planning, and public policy, research which most likely would *not* be included as part of a psychology or sociology course focusing only on sport (Stokols et al., 2005). To be sure, *sport* psychology and *sport*

sociology are very important parts of the kinesiology curriculum, but courses on these narrower topics might best be conceived as electives for those with an interest in sports studies, rather than as part of the required core curriculum.

Does it Matter That Physical Activity is Becoming the Focus of Other Fields?

Interestingly, with society's growing awareness of the importance of physical activity and the serious consequences of inactive lifestyles, academicians from practically every field (biology, anthropology, psychology, physiology, sociology, engineering, economics, public health, geography, social ecology, political science, and public policy) are now engaged in studying physical activity. As external funding has become increasingly available to study health and social issues related to physical inactivity, a number of other disciplines are now including "physical activity" as a prominent focus of study in their fields. In biology, for example, exercise physiologists are now being actively recruited to staff new focus areas in "exercise biology." Also, of special interest to kinesiologists, perhaps, ought to be the ever-increasing focus of public health departments on the topic of physical activity participation. Based on federal grant awards and published research, the field of public health has shown much more initiative in studying issues related to the "physical inactivity epidemic" than has the field of kinesiology.

As kinesiologists, should we be concerned about what it could mean to our field, to our degree programs, and to our departments, if kinesiologists are no longer recognized as the primary authorities in physical activity? This does raise interesting questions. If physical activity is no longer considered our main domain of study, then what *is* our main focus? Do we even have one? Or do we just have isolated areas of study on various topics such as sport, exercise, strength training, motor development and injury prevention, with no sense of unity?

Does It Matter If Kinesiology Has No Unified Focus?

Stephen Portch, chancellor of the Georgia state-wide system of universities and colleges and a well-known leader in higher education, says that not having a focus, not speaking with one voice, does matter—that not having a clear mission or agreed-on focus is detrimental to any enterprise, including academic programs. In a recent keynote speech to a kinesiology/physical education audience, Portch (1999) commented that, as an outsider looking in (even a well-informed outsider, as he considered himself to be), it is not at all apparent what the vision or strategy currently is for our field. He noted that interesting work appears to be happening in isolated areas, but that there is no common focus or vision for this work. This, of course, is a very dangerous position to be in when universities engage in self-studies and a reconsideration of program priorities. Portch went on to suggest that the challenge of identifying a "recognized focus" for our work and "ensuring a long-range promising future for our field" ought to be especially easy to do at this time, considering how current demographics and societal needs are working so strongly in our favor. According to Portch, the large population of "aging baby boomers determined to stay active and healthy, yet not quite clear on how to do either effectively," and the overpopulation of "cyber potatoes (as opposed to couch

potatoes)” are just two examples of many areas where society has critical needs that could be addressed by the field of kinesiology (Portch, 1999, p. 96).

It seems almost ironic that outsiders are all but begging kinesiology to clarify its focus to make it that of “enhancing quality of life through physical activity.” Yet, in many of our departments, labs, and in our subdisciplinary professional organizations, we continue to show remarkably little cross-disciplinary collaboration and little attention to the “big picture” issues important to society.

Kinesiology as a Field—Its Lack of Recognition in Academia and the Community

As I interact with other deans and administrators across a wide variety of disciplines in different universities in the state and nationally, it is increasingly clear how not having a recognizable name and unified mission is detrimental to the understanding of our field’s purpose and its importance. The lack of an understood mission surely must be a contributing factor, for example, when kinesiology departments are unwillingly downsized and sometimes relocated to other units on campus, as has been the case at a number of universities over the past years. A recent example of such is at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas where a once-intact kinesiology program has now been dismantled with various program components moved into three different colleges/schools on campus.

Equally troublesome, perhaps, is that kinesiology’s purpose and importance is not well recognized by the greater community and by society in general. Again, in my current position as dean of a college of health and human development, I have been invited in recent months to serve on a number of state and local community boards and advisory councils to plan ways of addressing obesity and other physical inactivity-related issues. Whereas leaders from other academic and professional fields (including health and recreation) are very prominent in these advisory groups, it is much less common, I have observed, to have representatives from kinesiology. It appears that most of our community leaders do not think of “kinesiologists” at all when they think about who should be at the table when discussing physical activity or physical *in*activity-related issues. As just one example, the relatively large advisory council for a Robert Wood Johnson Active Living by Design project in Southern California includes a number of representatives from local government, business, and other agencies, along with university faculty from departments in anthropology, child development, health science, marketing, and social ecology, but with no representation from kinesiology.

In short, I join other recent NAKPEHE lecturers (e.g., Burt, 1998; Charles, 2005; Hall, 2003; Overdorf, 2005) in suggesting that kinesiology as a field must be more prominent and more socially responsive in addressing the numerous issues related to the level of sedentarism in our society. Just as universities have as their purpose being responsive to social needs, so should departments of kinesiology.

Society’s Needs—Effectiveness of the Field in Addressing Complex Issues

As most are well aware, the sedentary lifestyle of most Americans continues to be of major social concern. Unfortunately, however, there is concern that the

field of kinesiology has not taken much of a “lead role” in addressing society’s escalating concern over the low level of physical activity in human beings and the related health and social problems. In some ways, it might be considered more than curiosity how we can have an entire field dedicated to the study and promotion of healthy active lifestyles, and yet still find ourselves facing some of the greatest inactivity-related health threats of all time, with rising obesity rates being one of the most serious. According to Dr. Julie Gerberding, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),

If you looked at any epidemic—whether it’s influenza or plague from the Middle Ages—they are not as serious as the epidemic of obesity in terms of the health impact on our country and our society. (Speech delivered February 20, 2004, quoted in “F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies are Failing in America,” Issue Report: Trust for America’s Health, October 2004, www.healthyamericans.org)

Statistics show that obesity rates continue to grow, especially in children, youth, and in men, with 65% of the adult population and one-third of children being overweight or obese (Hedley et al., 2004; Ogden et al., 2006). Interestingly, obesity rates in adult women appear to have leveled off over the past few years (Ogden et al., 2006). Reduced physical activity and obesity, in turn, are accompanied by a whole host of other health problems, including hypertension, cardiovascular disease, cancer, psychological problems, and especially diabetes which threatens the lives of one in three children born in 2000 (Narayan et al., 2003).

Of additional concern is the “interconnectedness” of the various problems related to inactivity. The epidemics of inactivity, obesity, depression, and stress are described as being “syndemic” or interwoven, with physical activity considered to be the “lead domino” in its ability to influence the others (Jackson, 2005).

Clearly, physical inactivity and inactivity-related health and social problems are of major concern to our nation and to our local communities. The main point of this discussion, however, is to point out what implications this has for the field of kinesiology and what role we should be playing in addressing these issues. This has implications for what we should be doing both at the national level in our professional organizations and at the local level in our departments—and obviously points out the need for a new type of visionary leadership.

Developing Broad-Thinking Visionary Leaders: A Chicken and Egg Issue

If kinesiology as a field is going to become more responsive and more prominent in assuming a leadership role in addressing societal issues, it will require a new type of faculty leadership and a paradigm shift in how we look at our curriculum, our scholarship, and the role of faculty relative to community service. Instead of narrowly defining our core curriculum in terms of traditional subdisciplinary areas and narrowly defining faculty scholarship expectations in terms of their contributions to the academic discipline, both will need to be more broadly defined and more responsive to societal and institutional needs.

Much has been said about the need to reduce pragmatism in the field, about the need for new types of visionary leaders, and even about the need for a new

type of faculty in kinesiology departments—faculty who can work across subdisciplines to better address the issues of most importance to the field, to society, and to institutions.

Gary Krahenbuhl, a well-recognized leader in the field with a breadth of experience that includes serving as a department chair, dean, university provost, and as president of the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education (AAKPE), has written extensively about the need for faculty to become more engaged in “big picture” issues. He points out that “...until now the prevailing view has been that contributing to one’s discipline was the primary way faculty members established their worth...[but]...Support for that view is fading.” (Krahenbuhl, 2003, p. 25)

Unfortunately, at the present time there is little mechanism for assisting faculty in the field of kinesiology to transition from their narrowly defined disciplinary focus to that of working together across subdisciplines to study the larger, more complex issues in our field. Most faculty are doing exactly what they were trained to do—they conduct research in their subdisciplines, they present scholarly papers at subdisciplinary conferences, and they interact primarily with others in their individual fields in developing future research questions and agendas—research that will continue to be published in specialized journals and read by others within the same discipline.

Although many continue to extol the importance of developing faculty leaders who are more “broad-thinking” and able to work in cross-disciplinary teams to address society’s increasingly complex issues, there has been little suggestion as to how this is going to happen. William Sparks in a recent Hanna Lecture (2001) in which he addressed the importance of visionary leadership in our field remarked that he hoped “. . . we have individual leaders who have *prepared themselves* (italics added) to assume this role” (p. 509). I believe, however, it is time we move beyond the stage of hoping that our future faculty will somehow *prepare themselves* to become broad-thinking visionary leaders. Instead, it is time we develop a plan or a strategy for how we can go about reconnecting the field and developing opportunities for cross-disciplinary exchange, thus facilitating the growth and development of broad-thinking visionary faculty leaders.

Creating a Professional Structure (a Home) for Kinesiology: An Essential Step in Reconnecting and Defining the Field

As discussed earlier, a major omission in our field compared to other academic fields of study is a parent, umbrella association with an organizational structure that helps to keep the field connected, focused, and addressing goals that relate to a common mission. The components of most professional associations (e.g., APA, ASA, GSA, etc.) are similar from one to the other and are critical to the overall success of the fields they represent. Common to most every professional association are the following characteristics:

Each association:

- has a clearly stated mission statement, indicating that its purpose is to advance both scientific and professional goals;

- has an association office with support staff, usually located for political reasons in (or close to) Washington, D.C.;
- serves as an umbrella for a number of subdisciplinary or professional units in the field;
- has an approved “code of ethics” to provide guidelines for its members;
- maintains a list of sponsored journals in the field;
- serves as a political voice for the field in attempting to influence change; and
- holds national meetings, conferences, and workshops where “big picture” issues and priorities are discussed and cutting edge research is presented.

For reasons already mentioned, AAHPERD, the organization that once served as an umbrella association for the field, is no longer considered an appropriate home for the field of kinesiology as it has evolved over the years. Per its own website (www.aahperd.org), AAHPERD’s mission contains no mention of research or science, certainly a major omission for an academic field of study. Most of those familiar with AAHPERD recognize its inability to attract many of the top researchers and scholars to the organization, with scholars in measurement and evaluation and in pedagogy being noted exceptions. Presumably, because of AAHPERD’s strong focus on K-12 education, many excellent pedagogy researchers have continued to be active in the organization. AAHPERD also has not responded in any way to the fact that “kinesiology” has emerged as the preferred name for this academic field of study dedicated to studying physical activity (Thomas et al., 2004).

There has been some suggestion that NAKPEHE ought to become the “umbrella” organization for the field. However, per its website (www.nakpehe.org), its purpose and structure as currently conceived would not be conducive to representing the entire field of researchers, scholars, teachers, and practitioners. Its purpose is “to provide a forum for professionals in higher education to discuss issues related to higher education”—a mission which is too narrow for the kinesiology field as a whole

Therefore, with AAHPERD (or any other existing organization) not being a viable professional home for the field as it has developed over the years (one with both a scientific and professional focus), we are left with only one choice—that of developing a new professional home. This is our *only* choice if we are to move forward in responding to the nearly 40 years of pleas about the importance of becoming less fragmented, better connected, and clearly focused on addressing the complex challenges and opportunities before our field.

Developing an umbrella professional association to represent the field, one that can convey a unified mission and purpose, surely must be an essential first step in redefining and reconnecting the field. Without such an organization and its accompanying components and services (a home office and staff, elected officials, journal publications, conference planning, committee structures, etc.), there is little opportunity or mechanism for facilitating cross-disciplinary discussion, for promoting the development of broad-thinking leaders, or for establishing research, program, and public policy priorities for the field.

A Possible Strategy for Establishing an Organizational Structure and Identity for Kinesiology

Certainly, any plan to develop a new umbrella association for our field (or any other strategy for reuniting the field) ought to come from a committee of leaders representing various constituencies in existing professional structures and subdisciplines.

However, since there is no such committee or initiative in place (that I know of), I want to end this paper by “going out on a limb” to describe a possible scenario—a series of steps that might be one way to initiate the development of a national association for the field of kinesiology—an association that logically might be called the *American Kinesiology Association (AKA)*.

A “Crystal Ball” Scenario

Stage 1. A small group of professionals who have been strong advocates of reuniting the field would meet to discuss the development of a unifying professional organization. These individuals most likely would be members of AAKPE and/or NAKPEHE, the only subassociations with a cross-disciplinary mission and with kinesiology in their titles.

Stage 2. Assuming that the initial discussions (via conference calls, emails, or in-person meetings) go as anticipated with the consensus being that the field would be best served by having an “umbrella professional organization,” with an accompanying “umbrella name and identity” (the same as nearly every other field in higher education), then a brief proposal will be prepared to share with key leaders within the subdisciplinary organizations and within AAHPRED. The proposal might include a tentative mission statement such as:

“The purpose of the *American Kinesiology Association* is to advance kinesiology as an academic field of study and to support professional preparation and service programs that promote physical activity and well-being for people of all ages.”

Stage 3. Assuming there is continuing interest in this general notion (which one would expect to be the case, considering that leaders from many organizations have spoken and written extensively about the need for better communication across subdisciplines and the need to reconnect the research and the professional aspects of the field), then a planning team will be identified to move forward with developing this umbrella association—the AKA. This planning would result in (according to my crystal ball) the scheduling of a large joint conference, say in 2010, with all physical activity-related societies and associations present, possibly in lieu of their normally scheduled separate conferences for that year.

The conference would feature top researchers and scholars from each subdisciplinary unit as keynote speakers. The purpose of the conference will be to summarize major advancements in the field over the past couple of decades and to discuss current challenges, opportunities, and future directions that could best be addressed through this type of collaboration. A possible theme for the conference

might be: *“Inauguration of the American Kinesiology Association: Reuniting the Field to Better Serve Society.”*

Stage 4. In the best of all worlds (again in my own daydreaming state), the scenario described so far would somehow turn into a situation where AAHPERD would invite the AKA to share its space in Reston, Virginia (a nice environment close to the political center of the country) and through a bit of negotiation would provide staff and convention planning services to the emerging AKA group. Eventually, it would become clear that the field of kinesiology, which is dedicated to “physical activity for all” (the same as in Homans’ day), would best be served by having all of its activity-related associations, societies, and councils under the same umbrella, but with each also being able to maintain its own unique goals and functions. Dance and recreation associations and councils, it could be argued, would fit equally well under the kinesiology (physical activity) umbrella as do all of the other activity-oriented groups, such as those interested in exercise, sports, or K-12 physical education. In fact, Joel Meier, former AAPHERD president and former president of the American Association of Leisure and Recreation (AALR), recently suggested that while it once was assumed that recreation and physical education needed to be separate entities to flourish, that this no longer is the case and that both could benefit by a more synergistic, cooperative relationship (Meier, 2003).

With all activity-related subgroups under one umbrella, the AKA would have the potential to become the same kind of large, prestigious, and recognizable national association as other more established organizations such as the APA. Although the AKA would fall short of housing as many “subdivisions” as the APA, which has 53 at last count, it certainly could boast of a comprehensive and well-balanced membership representing researchers, teachers, coaches, fitness leaders, rehabilitation specialists, and numerous other types of activity professionals.

If one were to carry this dream even further, there eventually might even be a mechanism for offering an affiliation with other well-established activity-related associations, such as the National Strength and Conditioning Association, the American College of Sports Medicine, and the American Council on Exercise, as examples, with the purpose of such an affiliation being to increase the political voice of all groups on issues related to the promotion of physical activity.

In closing, my crystal ball indicates that the proposed 2010 national convention of the American Kinesiology Association will be an occasion to remember! It will be a grand celebration—a huge party, with everyone there—the physical educators, the exercise physiologists, the philosophers, the historians, the sport psychologists, the biomechanists, the sport sociologists, the motor behavior specialists, the girl’s and women’s sports group, the adaptive physical education specialists, the academy members, and on and on....

The field will have come full circle and Ms. Homans would be pleased—it will have emerged from the *American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education*, an organization mainly for professionals and practitioners—to the *American Kinesiology Association*, an organization for researchers, professionals, and practitioners.

And we all will be so proud of this field—and so proud to know that all of us in our own special ways within our own subspecializations are contributing to a *unified, recognized, and vitally important academic field of study* dedicated to, in Homans’ words:

... lifting the life of the masses to a higher level of health and vigor, to a more sane and wholesome outlook, a more rational, self controlled way of living.

(quoted in Spears, 1978, p. 51)

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to thank Jeffery Kottler, James R. Morrow, Jr., and Diane Ross for their helpful feedback on this paper.

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Endnotes

¹Kinesiology, meaning the study of movement, is the name most commonly used to reflect university departments and degree programs that focus on the study of physical activity (Thomas et al., 2004). The name kinesiology was recommended by Rosalind Cassidy nearly 40 years ago in her 1969 Amy Morris Homans lecture where she pointed out the importance of having one “umbrella” name to reflect this emerging academic area of study, with its various subdisciplinary components. Kinesiology, according to Cassidy and many others since that time, is an appropriate name for this academic field of study; whereas physical education (the field’s former name) is a more appropriate term for the educational subcomponent of the field, including K-12 educational programs.

²Kinesiology/exercise science departments on the west coast of the United States that have been eliminated over the past couple of decades include those at the University of California, Los Angeles; University of Southern California; University of Oregon; University of Washington; Washington State University; University of California, Davis; University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Santa Barbara; and University of Arizona (Quest, 1998). More recently, a number of non-doctoral kinesiology programs also have been affected including those at the University of Nevada, Reno (program eliminated), at San Francisco State University (program downsized following threats of elimination), and at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where the Department of Kinesiology was downsized with key components merged with other units on campus.