Kinesiology: Challenges of Multiple Agendas

Karl M. Newell

This paper addresses the challenge of how the field of kinesiology can exploit the advantages of multiple agendas while minimizing the disadvantages. Agendas here are the scholarly themes that help organize the field of study explicitly or implicitly and that give emphases to it with respect to its content and impact in society. The issue of multiple agendas is discussed with respect to the core knowledge dimensions of physical activity: namely, lifespan development, interdisciplinary knowledge, and the professions of physical activity. The selection of programmatic emphases within dimensions and their interpretation are critical to determining the relative degrees of coherence and fragmentation of a department and the field of study at large.

The encompassing nature of human physical activity lends itself naturally to kinesiology holding multiple academic agendas. Indeed, it is hard to think of a scholarly discipline or field of study that has more agendas in academe than kinesiology. This relative situation may well always have existed since the inception of academic domains in higher education, but the significance of this topic is particularly timely today because it appears as if the number of declared agendas of the field of study continues to grow. In this paper I discuss the challenges to kinesiology that come with the growth of multiple agendas to the field of study. At the outset, it should be noted that I like others hold the assumption that there are multiple agendas to kinesiology (cf. Bouchard, McPherson, & Taylor, 1992; Hoffman, 2005; Kretchmar, 2005) leaving the central issue for consideration as to how the field of study exploits this situation rather than a debate about whether such a situation actually exists or is desirable.

The term agenda in this paper is used in a general and broad way to represent scholarly foci or emphases in teaching, research, or service programs. Expressed another way, they are the themes that help organize the field of study explicitly or implicitly and give emphases to it with respect to its content and impact in society. As we will see, the many agendas of kinesiology are not without controversy with respect to their place and significance and, of course, the degree to which each is promoted is strongly dependent on the local constraints on the respective department of kinesiology whether within or outside of the university.

The author (AAKPE Fellow #319) is with the Dept of Kinesiology, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802. E-mail: Kmn1@psu.edu
The centerpiece of this paper is a consideration of the knowledge categories that help create and organize the multiple agendas of physical activity. This serves as a preface to a discussion as to how their selection or omission into teaching, research, and service programs creates the relative degrees of coherence or fragmentation in both individual departments and the field of study at large. The emphasis here is the potential for coherence rather than the negative outcomes of the flip side that is usually emphasized under the complementary notion of fragmentation—a topic that has been the focus of much discussion (e.g., Hoffman, 1985; Thomas, 1987).

The final section of the paper discusses a number of key factors in the field of study beyond the issues of knowledge types that also contribute to the success or failure of implementing multiple agendas in kinesiology. This list of considerations is not exhaustive but rather emphasizes factors that have a strong influence in creating and providing boundary conditions to the academic structure of multiple agendas. To anticipate, the background and guiding question throughout this paper is: How do we exploit the advantages of multiple agendas while minimizing the disadvantages?

Kinesiology Worldwide in 2006—A Brief Snapshot View

To help place our discussion of the multiple agendas of kinesiology into perspective it is useful to begin by considering albeit very briefly the status of kinesiology programs worldwide. To my knowledge, there have been no formal reviews, comparisons, or rankings of kinesiology programs on a worldwide basis but, nevertheless, the creation of this background perspective is possible and useful to develop. I believe that if one takes a reasonably long time scale of consideration, say the last 50 years, or even the last 20 years, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that there has been considerable progress in kinesiology in the United States and many other countries. Indeed, currently on a worldwide basis there appears to be a resurgence of interest in kinesiology in higher education, in part due to the broad interest in cultures and societies worldwide for a healthy lifestyle.

Perhaps the major front on which progress has occurred is that of the related enterprises of research and graduate education. Fifty years ago there was very little activity in these areas even in the United States where graduate programs in kinesiology had begun to emerge in a number of universities. The considerable growth since then of research and graduate study in kinesiology programs was built on the expansion of higher education in the United States post-World War II and the significant role that physical activity played in general education during this period. This expansion and the unique opportunities that it afforded led in the 1960s and 1970s to an upsurge of students of physical education worldwide enrolling in graduate programs in the United States. Many of these graduates have now gone back to their home countries and played a pivotal role in the development of their own research and graduate education programs in kinesiology.

It is these developments that provide the central lines of progress in kinesiology in universities worldwide. This progress is uniformly based on the development of disciplinary and interdisciplinary aspects of declarative knowledge of physical activity. Through these theoretical developments, the field of study has moved...
the emphasis from what was predominantly the doing or knowing how of physical activity in the form of physical training through to physical education to the knowing that and about of physical activity. Although these changes are generally viewed as reflecting progress in kinesiology they have also created various forms of tension between the increasing number of potential and sometimes competing agendas of the field of study.

The above positive statement about the status of our field worldwide is not meant to indicate that there are not both global and local problems in kinesiology. There are always challenges and problems and as the time-honored phrase has it, change is the only constant that one might expect in higher education. The overarching point for our purposes should be that the positive developments and changes in our field of study seem to put kinesiology today in its strongest position yet in higher education.

The Agendas of Kinesiology

Table 1 lists many of the agendas of the field of study. The list is not claimed to be exhaustive but certainly captures most of the more common agendas that departments and the field of study at large hold and promote (see also Newell, 1989). These would be the labels, for example, that one observes with regularity in department of kinesiology website promotions.

The contents of the table are not structured in terms of general dimensions of the field of study. The knowledge structure of kinesiology is the focus of the next section of the paper. Nevertheless, one can see that the contents of Table 1 hold and in other cases reflect some obvious organizing principles of the field of study.

The most general point to take home from Table 1 is simply the large number of academic agendas listed. Indeed, some of our largest departments of kinesiology in the United States claim to fulfill many or most of these agendas. Seeing

Table 1  A List of the Most Common Agendas in the Kinesiology-Type Programs

- Education, sport, health
- Multiple professional outlets
  - Education, therapy, fitness, rehabilitation, sport, movement
- Broad range of cognate discipline research emphases
  - Exercise physiology, psychology of sport, motor development, etc
- Range of physical activity categories
  - Exercise, sport, activities of daily living (ADLs)
- Contexts: schools, sports, rehabilitation
- Population groups—all segments of the lifespan
- Undergraduate, graduate programs
- Teaching, research
these agendas listed provides face validity to the claim of multiple agendas in the field of study and should immediately raise doubts about the potential of a single department or even the field at large to successfully or even adequately fulfill these agendas. The challenge, however, is not merely the increasing number of agendas but also that several of these agenda are in principle mutually exclusive, given the constraints of creating a quality department.

Table 1 includes the umbrella organizing agendas for kinesiology of health, education, and sport. The relative influence of these central constructs of the field of study has changed over the last 100 years. Currently, it would appear that the health metaphor is the major driving force for the field of study, particularly in the departments that have graduate programs and an aspiring research agenda. Nevertheless, many departments embrace all three of these organizing metaphors for the field either implicitly or explicitly.

The agendas listed also include the types of physical activities, the cognate disciplines that drive research and graduate education, and the general classes of professional outlet for physical activity. These are agendas that all relate to the content of teaching, research, and service programs. Finally, there is the level of degree program, undergraduate and graduate. The relative number of these programs in the United States is still an order of magnitude different at about 60 doctoral programs to about 600 undergraduate programs. This order of magnitude difference to the presence in departments of undergraduate and doctoral degree programs itself contributes substantially to the breadth of agendas in the field of study.

Knowledge Dimensions of Kinesiology

Although there are multiple agendas to kinesiology, I believe the study of physical activity can usefully be considered and even accounted for on four dimensions (see Figure 1). These dimensions are physical activity itself, the interdisciplinary knowledge base, lifespan development, and the professions of physical activity. These dimensions of study are not independent but they are sufficiently emphasized so as to provide major and relatively distinct influences to the knowledge base of the field of study.

Physical Activity

Historically and contemporarily it has been viewed by most in kinesiology that physical activity is the centerpiece of the field of study. Physical activity is the overarching metaphor or construct if you will that organizes the teaching, research, and service programs. It is the primary dimension that distinguishes kinesiology from other disciplines and fields of study in higher education. In short, it is the raison d’être for having a distinct administrative degree granting unit for the field of study in higher education.

There have been several attempts over the years to define and categorize physical activities (e.g., Robb, 1972). Table 2 shows my working schematic of the major categories of physical activity. These activity categories are clustered into particular subsets that include the primitive movements of infants, the fundamental movement skills, the schools of movement education, activities of daily living and the more well-known physical activities in context of dance, exercise, music, play,
Figure 1—A schematic of the primary dimensions that organize the body of knowledge of kinesiology.

Table 2  A List of the Major Categories of Human Physical Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Activity Embedded in Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dance, Exercise, Music, Play, Sport, Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities of Daily Living (ADLs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture, Locomotion, Manipulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous Movements, Reflexes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sport, and work. These activity categories are not mutually exclusive but they are sufficiently distinct to warrant category status.

All movement in physical activity is conducted in a context. Even a vacuum if it existed could be a context for physical activity. Nevertheless, the categories higher in the order of Table 2 tend to be considered more context bound, although we know from the growing impact of the study of motor development that even the movements of neonates and infants are context dependent.

The priorities of the overarching metaphors for the field of study (education, health, recreation, sport) tend to set the relative importance for the study of the different physical activity categories. For example, the recent resurgence of interest in
the health metaphor for the field of study has led to the increasing study of the fundamental physical activities of posture, locomotion, and manipulation, in addition to a strong interest in the activities of daily living (ADLs). A good example of this changing priority of activity category comes as a result of the emerging emphasis on aging and physical activity. There also appears to be a declining interest in research in sport in part because of the lack of funding opportunities in this area.

The field of kinesiology does not present a broad-based agenda for physical activity even in undergraduate programs. For example, the theory and practice of the schools of movement education (educational gymnastics, Feldenkrais, Alexander, and so on) are rarely incorporated in any capacity into physical activity degree programs. Dance, the movement form par excellence, has in most cases and for some time separated itself (or been separated) from departments of kinesiology. Music is, of course, a distinct though related field of study.

In spite of the wide range of physical activities and the contexts or spheres of engagement (Hoffman, 2005) the practice and performance of physical activity is increasingly being de-emphasized if not eliminated from physical activity programs in higher education. Even in undergraduate emphases of teacher training the role of the practice and performance of physical activity is considerably reduced from its position of, say 50 years ago. The rationale for this decline in the practical consideration of physical activity is often based on the growing priority of theoretical aspects of scholarship in what appears to be an ever declining number of hours of study in a degree program. The place of physical activity in general education has also declined in the last 50 years although the obesity epidemic has helped promote the important role of physical activity and the resurgence in some cases of our place in school systems and higher education. Nevertheless, even in general education the competing demands of the role of knowing how and that are still at play.

In summary, it is as if most in kinesiology agree that physical activity is the centerpiece of the field of study but we have not found a way to give the practice and performance thereof a legitimate and deserving place in the scholarship of physical activity in higher education. Although not the only influence, the growth of scholarly interest in the theory of movement and physical activity has undoubtedly contributed to the demise of most if not all forms of the practice of physical activity. At its most extreme interpretation a performance model of physical activity (Kleinman, 1989) has not gained a foothold in kinesiology in the United States. One suspects too that the reduced emphasis of practice only leads to the perpetuation of further losses of interest in this central aspect to the study of physical activity and the continued reduction in the practice of physical activity in teaching, research, and service programs.

Professional Programs

Fifty years ago the primary and in many cases only professional focus of physical education programs in higher education was teacher training and school age education of and through the physical. This focus is still an emphasis in many of our undergraduate programs but it is no longer the only or even primary emphasis and in some departments it is not an emphasis at all. The field has broadened its professional agenda to include an education for a variety of modes of change agent in physical activity beyond the specific profession of the instruction school-based
physical education metaphor, including professional endeavors in recreation, health education, rehabilitation, and therapy.

In many departments of kinesiology today the undergraduate education and training is not geared to a specific professional certification within the degree program, such as physical education, but rather is broad-based and generally professionally oriented to the themes of instruction and physical activity, fitness and activity and, in some cases, rehabilitation or therapy and activity. The predominant professional aspiration of undergraduate students in our field of study is to be a physical therapist—a training that will be completed in most cases in a university program other than that of kinesiology, in a physical or occupational therapy department. In summary, we have an emerging preponderance of what I label here as “professionally oriented” programs rather than legitimate “professional” programs that are organized around an explicit certification and professional practices, such as teacher training.

It follows then that on the professional front our programs are increasingly seen as pre-professional in the sense that kinesiology is providing a broad education on the central theme of physical activity as a pre-training to subsequent and more specific education on the professional outlets of choice. This subsequent training may be within a university such as physical therapy certification or it can be outside in a business organization such rehabilitation and certification of some kind in a hospital training program. In short, the last 50 years have witnessed a broadening of the professional agenda in physical activity programs and this has contributed in part to the challenges of the multiple agendas that are the theme of this commentary on the field of study.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the growth of the interdisciplinary knowledge base of kinesiology and the enhanced research capacity of our field has also opened up new avenues of employment for our graduate students beyond those opportunities in higher education. Our graduate students are finding employment for their research skills in the different knowledge bases of physical activity that can be encompassed in a range of industries that link to the physical activity and health or work agendas. This development in turn has reciprocal effects on increasing the breadth of the agendas of graduate programs.

Cognate-Discipline Approach

The development of the cognate-discipline approach to the study of physical activity has dominated the interpretation of departments of kinesiology to the proposition that there is a discipline of physical activity (Henry, 1964). The initial strategy was that of linking a subset of physical activity (such as exercise or sport) to an existing cognate discipline (such as physiology or psychology) as witnessed in the labels of the emerging emphases of exercise physiology, sports psychology, biomechanics of sport, and so on. This programmatic strategy had in particular a strong influence on the orientation of graduate programs and research agendas in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Brooks, 1981; Estes & Mechikoff, 1999; Massengale & Swanson, 1997), and this organizing perspective to scholarship continues to have a lasting influence on the field of study today.

The emergence and strengthening of this orientation to the study of physical activity led to a vociferous and long-held debate about “profession versus
discipline” and what can only be described as the “battle” in some departments for the core knowledge of kinesiology (Fraileigh, 1985; Locke, 1977; Lawson & Morford, 1979). Indeed, by elaboration one might interpret the programmatic changes that were taking place in kinesiology in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of a paradigm transition (Kuhn, 1962). Nevertheless, the actual influence of this transition to a cognate-discipline approach varied considerably across departments of kinesiology in the United States having the most immediate and greatest magnitude of impact in departments with graduate programs and research agendas.

One major outcome of this disciplinary influence was that in some departments of kinesiology the professional training of teachers became just one emphasis of study at the undergraduate level and in others it was eliminated altogether. The decisions made by individual departments on this important issue appear on reflection to be sometimes due to a principled approach to a vision for the unit while in other cases individual faculty or subdomain cognate disciplinary politics prevailed. The net result, among others, is both a broadening and narrowing of agendas to the academic core of kinesiology when considered on a nationwide department by department basis, and regrettably a loss of some departments of kinesiology altogether.

There have been several other and related changes as a consequence of the cognate disciplinary revolution in kinesiology. The impact of these factors varies by department and includes: (a) the increased hiring of faculty in departments of kinesiology who have no formal training as a teacher of physical education or even a degree in kinesiology; (b) the increased emphasis on research and the need to obtain external grants for the support of that research; and (c) a tendency for a number of faculty in kinesiology to collaborate with faculty from other fields of study or even to go beyond this and move their appointment out of kinesiology to a cognate discipline. The strengthening of the research agenda in the field of study has, therefore, brought with it the expected tensions that arise from the addition of scholarly agendas to the field of study, particularly when they are developed in a way that makes them largely redundant with the department of a cognate discipline.

There is little doubt that the research agenda in kinesiology has been enhanced over the last 50 years. This can be documented through an assessment of research productivity and enhanced quality and quantity of the research grant and publication enterprise (see, for example, American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education (AAKPE) presentation to National Research Council [NRC], January 2006). Indeed, the recent invitation by the NRC for kinesiology to be, for the first time, a part of the current 2006 review of doctoral programs in the United States is another and very recent indication of this progress, particularly as it is judged by national research criteria for higher education. As a non-significant aside, it is important to also note that this is the only example in recent times, and perhaps ever, that AAKPE has provided political leadership for our field of study on an issue of importance.

In spite of this substantial progress with respect to the development of disciplinary declarative knowledge about physical activity there are current signs that the activity-cognate discipline agenda for organizing the future development of research and graduate study may not be the best way to fashion the field of study. The cognate-discipline approach has several limitations and is showing signs of giving way to a broader based interdisciplinary way to organize the body of knowledge
The kinds of questions that are central to kinesiology are more likely to be interdisciplinary and this has the advantage of further distinguishing the field of study from the established cognate disciplines.

One limitation of the cognate-discipline approach, at least as it has been interpreted by some faculty in kinesiology, is that it has helped foster research orientations that are more focused to the issues and questions of the cognate discipline than they are to the field of physical activity. This distinction can sometimes be a fine line to draw but some of the benefits that arise to the individual faculty member from this approach may translate out to tensions if not problems for the department at large. Furthermore, this orientation has probably helped to hold back the scholarly progress on the development of a theory of physical activity.

There is a growing interest in broader based interdisciplinary groupings to the subject matter of physical activity in both teaching and research programs. One can see this in the various linkages of biomechanics, motor control and development, the broader biological base to exercise physiology than just physiology, the psychological and physiological study of aging and physical activity, and many other areas. These developments will also lead eventually to the development of domain area labels that are not that of the traditional cognate-discipline approach. The merging of previously separate physical activity cognate areas in a department’s organization can also be promoted by the reduction of department resources to sustain areas of study but within fewer though broader subdomains.

The final interdisciplinary change to be mentioned here is that of enhanced efforts to integrate more than heretofore theory and practice in different aspects of the scholarly knowledge base. The traditional emphasis, evident at the height of the 1970s discipline-profession debate, on the development of the discipline tended to build on the idea captured in the Figure 2 schematic of Best (1978) whereby

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2**—A schematic of the relation between theoretical, procedural, and practitioner knowledge in physical activity (adapted from Best, 1978)
theoretical knowledge is primary and uninfluenced by procedural and practical knowledge. In my view (Newell, 1989, 1990a), the priorities established with the arrows in this schematic were never as strong as indicated by Best, with both procedural and practical knowledge playing more of a role in theory development of all kinds than is often articulated. Comprehensive integration of theory and practice is a long way from being the norm in department teaching, research, and service programs but there seems to me more openness today to the benefits and appropriateness of this approach than was the case 30-40 years ago.

Lifespan Development

Kinesiology is fundamentally about human physical activity, although some of our subdomains endorse and are consistent with the broader perspectives of biological motion. The study of the individual in physical activity can be an encompassing agenda and difficult to implement in research programs. And, as a consequence, different professional and/or cognate-discipline agendas have tended to emphasize particular age group segments and normative events of the lifespan. The net result is that the role of physical activity over the lifespan of the individual is not considered as directly or as much as it should be.

The approach of kinesiology to development has largely been cross-sectional with the scholarly emphasis at either end of the lifespan continuum: namely, young children and the elderly. There has been a growing interest in and impact from the study of motor development and the graying of America has led many of our cognate disciplines to consider aging and physical activity (cf. Spirduso, 1995). Nevertheless, the individual lifespan trajectories of the change over time in the different physical activity measurements have not received a central position.

In my judgment, an emphasis on the individual trajectory over the lifespan would hold the additional benefit of bringing to the fore the role of individual differences in physical activity and human development. In short, it would help to bring back the person to the field of study and open the door to some untapped interdisciplinarity integrations by the formerly independent cognate groups of study. The study of the person exposes the need to consider a range of constructs of physical activity that are typically pursued independently or not at all. To paraphrase an old physical education adage (Williams, 1959), we need to know more about physical activity in development and development in and through physical activity.

Summary

Kinesiology is a collective field of study organized around the umbrella construct of physical activity. Thus, in spite of the usual language on this issue kinesiology is not formally a discipline in the classic sense of the word. As a consequence it naturally houses the potential for many scholarly agendas in higher education given the breadth of scholarly knowledge that relates to physical activity. This breadth of subject matter affords opportunities for the field of study that would not be present with a narrow scholarly base, but the price of these opportunities is the difficult problem of successfully implementing multiple agendas. Kinesiology is not alone with this dilemma—consider the field of nutrition, as just one example.

There are many faculty in kinesiology that emphasize the problems that this
breadth generates such as the focus here of multiple agendas. Nevertheless, the problems need to be considered in the context of the opportunities that multiple agendas provide. In short, it needs to be recognized that there are many advantages in teaching, research, and service to these multiple agendas. Furthermore, and as an aside, many fields of study in higher education would love to have our problems if they could also have the upsides that we enjoy from multiple agendas.

Boundaries to the Knowledge Domain of Kinesiology

Given the encompassing nature of physical activity it follows that the scholarship of physical activity resides in a high dimensional knowledge space (cf. Best, 1978; Estes & Mechikoff, 1999; Newell, 1989). Even a brief consideration of the knowledge domains that fall under the dimensions of kinesiology discussed above leads to the perspective that the sheer breadth of knowledge of our field of study provides extraordinary challenges of vision and implementation at the department level if coherence to multiple agendas is to be realized with mutual enhancement. The selection of the type of degree programs, scholarly content, and faculty expertise and so on creates the relative degree of coherence/fragmentation to the multiple agendas at the unit level.

If physical activity is the centerpiece of kinesiology then having scholarly content in teaching, research, and service programs that is constrained by this construct is essential. This requires a premium on the selection of what is the relevant interdisciplinary knowledge base and foci. The cognate-discipline activity organization has opened the door to the emphases being replicas of segments of the cognate discipline with physical activity used merely as an example or dependent variable. This approach not only fails to do justice to the potential richness of the scholarship of physical activity but can make the multiple agendas of these areas of emphasis more relevant to the cognate discipline than to the study of physical activity, with all the resulting scholarly and political tensions at the individual faculty and unit level.

The uniqueness of the field of study can also be challenged by the incompatibility of individual faculty and unit goals, thus by definition creating additional agendas for the department than would be present otherwise. The same problems can arise, however, from the selection of the knowledge content on the other dimensions of the field of study, namely, lifespan development and the professions of physical activity. Indeed, translating this line of analysis to the total knowledge space of the field of study only makes it transparent that the selection of multiple agendas that are academically distant or incongruent with each other has a way of determining the relative degree of coherence or fragmentation to the department and, more broadly, the field of study.

The schematic in Figure 3 is constructed to provide a visual image of the relative degrees of cohesion on the three dimensions of interdisciplinary knowledge, lifespan development, and professions of physical activity. The black dots in the figures can be taken to represent the knowledge content of the individual themes (or faculty) that a department might choose to emphasize. The schematic provides an intuitive image of how the selection of content as expressed through subthemes and faculty
Figure 3—Schematic showing different degrees of content coherence in a department of kinesiology. The black dots in the figures can be taken to represent the knowledge content of the individual themes (or faculty) that a department might choose to emphasize.
leads naturally to relative degrees of cohesion or fragmentation. Thus, the vision of a department and the field of study at large is critical in creating the appropriate agendas and the likelihood of their cohesive and successful implementation.

In Newell (1989) I reviewed a number of strategies through which the knowledge types and dimensions of physical activity could be integrated. These included: (a) the cultural practices approach of Ingha and Lawson (1985); (b) the concept approach to physical activity; and (c) the performance model approach. My sense is that elements of all these approaches can be found informally in a number of department curricular and research agendas but that they have not been implemented in a strong and consistent fashion in the field of study. The current emphasis on interdisciplinarity is largely limited to the category of declarative knowledge in the larger research-oriented departments, except as it applies generally as background knowledge for pre-professional training.

In my judgment, the problem of knowledge integration in the field of study has not been solved but rather departments make local decisions to provide pragmatic solutions to the emphases and compatibility of their teaching, research, and service programs. The gap between knowing and doing as captured on either side of the knowledge line drawn in Figure 4 is probably as strong today as it was in the 1960s and 1970s. It is rather that faculty representing the more extreme contrasts of knowledge types of physical activity has learned to varying degrees to co-exist in a department without there necessarily being meaningful or even substantial integration.

---

**Figure 4**—A schematic of the fundamental knowledge types of physical activity knowledge (adapted from Newell, 1990a).
Limitations and Challenges to an Agenda of Multiple Agendas

The selection and organization of multiple agendas are critical elements in determining the degree to which a department of kinesiology successfully exploits the upside of multiple agendas as opposed to being overcome by the reality of potential downsides. No matter what the vision of the department regarding the goals of the teaching, research, and service programs there are several key issues that persistently mediate the coherence of multiple agenda and success of kinesiology, both locally and globally. In this section, I briefly comment on a number of these core issues and their place in influencing the challenges of multiple agendas.

The Centrality of Physical Activity

The multiple dimensions to the field of study of physical activity open the door to downplaying the role of the centerpiece of the field of study: namely, physical activity. Indeed, the emphasis on the cognate-discipline in some agendas of the field of study has drawn physical activity to be merely the dependent variable, and worse—in some cases only a covariate. Moreover, the practice of physical activity has also been downplayed in kinesiology even in practical or professionally oriented programs.

Physical activity is the defining and central construct of the field of study and can be studied as we have discussed above within three dimensions of knowledge. Physical activity is the construct that organizes and provides coherence to the different orientations of the body of knowledge. In viewing physical activity as the emergent form of the confluence of organismic, environmental, and task constraints (see Figure 5) one can begin to open the integrative study of the dynamic nature of human movement and physical activity (Newell, 1986).

Enhance the Study of the Individual in Physical Activity

Kinesiology gives an uneven status to the study of the individual in physical activity. The cognate-discipline activity orientations have given the individual a different place in the respective subfield of study. And, in a number of research agendas of physical activity the individual is not on the agenda at all.

A renewed focus on the individual in physical activity from all of the knowledge orientations would facilitate: (a) closing the gap between the theory and practice of physical activity; and (b) the integration of the cognate-discipline activity emphases. The study of individual differences in the different scholarly agendas introduces some difficult challenges but it holds the potential for various forms of integration in the theory of physical activity and the enhancement of the practice of physical activity for the individual and society.

Enhance Lifespan Emphasis

A renewed emphasis on the individual would also open the door to the enhancement of the related emphasis on the lifespan trajectory of individuals in physical activity.
activity. Longitudinal study is time consuming and expensive but is the centerpiece of understanding the change over time that comes from development through the lifespan. Our few efforts toward the longitudinal study of physical activity have been limited to infant motor development and the physical dimensions of aging. We need large scale interdisciplinary research studies of physical activity across the lifespan and teaching programs that give more emphasis to the lifespan view.

**Minimize Disconnect of Undergraduate and Graduate Programs**

The challenge of providing breadth in undergraduate programs simultaneously with depth in graduate programs is a core source of tension in exploiting the positives of multiple agendas. There is a tendency nationwide for the old profession-discipline debate to rear its ugly head in considerations across these programs levels. It is common for the undergraduate programs to be more professionally oriented and the graduate programs to be more disciplinary oriented—even in the same department. This distinction can and often does lead to a disconnect between undergraduate and graduate programs that is manifest in so many ways, including: (a) faculty, program goals, and agendas; (b) the balance of teaching and research on the individual and program levels; and (c) the vision for the department.

![Figure 5—A schematic of the constraints to action (modified from Newell, 1986).](image)
The larger programs of kinesiology in the United States have in many cases a vision that integrates professional and interdisciplinary study of physical activity. This vision is parallel to, for example, departments of psychology that include clinical psychology as a field of study or departments of nutrition that include dietetics as a field of study. It is a continued challenge to integrate the professional and interdisciplinary study of physical activity at all levels of the field of study.

A Single Physical Activity Program of Study?

Departments of kinesiology emerged from departments of physical education that had for a long time their focus as the training of teachers of physical activity. The interdisciplinary knowledge of physical activity was taught primarily to the extent that it was relevant to teacher training. Many of these departments originated in colleges of education and as the knowledge base of physical education was broadened the fields of health education and recreation were spawned, often leading to a standing college of health, physical education and recreation. This is the basis, or some version of it, of many departments of kinesiology worldwide.

There is, however, another route to kinesiology that comes from the health professions of physical therapy and occupational therapy. These departments are most usually housed in colleges of medicine or health professions (and various associated labels). Traditionally, there has been little contact between the education and therapy routes to kinesiology but this is changing in a variety of important ways and I will only mention two here. First, the majority of students in undergraduate programs of kinesiology have physical therapy as their professional goal reflecting the pre-professional nature of kinesiology. Second, the departments of therapy also have a goal of increasing their presence in the interdisciplinary knowledge of movement and action leading to significant overlap and redundancies between the routes to kinesiology. This leads to increasing integration between the scholarly foci of faculty of kinesiology and therapy programs even if programmatic integration is not yet present at the administration level.

Thus, it seems reasonable to ask if there should be a single field of study of kinesiology that encompasses the different professional outlets for the body of knowledge of physical activity? And, if the forming of a single field of study is viewed as too radical or problematic, could there at least be more dialogue at the administrative and programmatic levels of these programs? In many universities there are significant redundancies in the movement sciences across these program orientations to physical activity that could be harnessed more usefully to the betterment of both emphases to the study of physical activity (see, as an early example, Rothstein, 1991).

An Umbrella Association or the Field of Study?

The creation of multiple scholarly agendas over the last 50 years has led to the generation of multiple scholarly societies of physical activity that each focus on a particular agenda or small subset of the potential agendas of physical activity (Newell, 1989). These societies have helped provide impact and recognition for
Kinesiology: Challenges of Multiple Agendas

the individual agendas and as a result the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD), the traditional umbrella association for the field of study, has lost its position as the overarching society for physical activity. It is widely recognized that there is no umbrella scholarly society for the field of study and this is often interpreted as a problem.

Indeed, in this regard Rikli (2006) has proposed that kinesiology is a homeless field of study and needs the representation and promotion that a large umbrella society would provide. My own view, however, is that the field of study is far from homeless. Indeed, most of the scholars in our field can or do have multiple involvements with a range of societies including those that are spearheaded by faculty from kinesiology and those that are primarily driven by the agendas of other fields of study. Indeed, to follow the Rikli analogy, one might say that many faculty in kinesiology have multiple homes in that they have more society meetings than they can usefully attend, and have time or money to support.

The pressing issue is whether kinesiology would benefit from an umbrella organization that represents all of the agendas of the field of study. My sense is that many faculty in kinesiology think that such an organization would be a positive influence. The problem, however, is not merely the creation of such an organization but doing it in such a way that the faculty of physical activity broadly defined actively engage and support it. I predict that faculty at large will not join this collective organization on mere altruistic grounds to support the field of study. The central and deciding feature for success in creating a new society will be the perception and realization by the faculty of functional benefits for the individual from such an umbrella organization.

Impact of Declining Resources

It should be noted that the planning and implementation of multiple agendas is taking place against a background of declining resources for most departments of kinesiology. This observation is not based on an analysis of actual department budgets and resources more generally but just the general pick up of comments that I have made over the years. Part of this pressure on departments comes from the institutions themselves that increasingly expect academic units to do more and more with less and less.

One central example of declining resources is the reduction in faculty FTE in many kinesiology departments from the size that was evident 30-40 years ago. The size of a department is a critical factor in determining the number of agendas that can successfully be implemented. Furthermore, while coherence may be easier to obtain in a small department it will inevitably be within a narrower segment of the potential knowledge base of the field. On the other hand, disparate multiple agendas may be more debilitating the smaller the department.

Thus, the challenges of multiple agendas come not just from the coherence of the vision for the department but also the availability of resources. Budget cuts over the years have by and large taken the fat out of department resources leaving further cuts to be clearly into the muscle and bone of the reality of actual multiple agendas. Departments cannot continue to do more and more with less and less and we need to be sure not to over claim the impact and viability of multiple agendas through academic smoke and mirrors.
Multiple Agendas at the College Level?

One of the unanalyzed influences on the structure and function of kinesiology as a field of study is the fact that our departments around the country are to be found in a variety of college formulations. Kinesiology can be found in colleges of health, physical education and recreation, education, agriculture, health, human development, arts and sciences. This range of academic home colleges for kinesiology itself places challenges on the field of study at large. These challenges are not all negative. Indeed, the different college structures have potentially different positive influences on the respective department and the field at large. However, the diverse ways in which individual units respond to local demands builds to a collective influence on the multiple agendas of the field of study. My sense is that both the positive and negative impact of college structures on the evolution of our field of study has been undervalued.

Are Our Problems Unique?

There is a tendency in self-evaluation of our field of study to think that the problems, including those pertaining to multiple agendas, are unique to kinesiology. Even, a cursory glance around the other academic units of one’s university should surely dispel this myth. Indeed, I would propose that the challenges as outlined above can be found to varying extents in most academic departments, particularly interdisciplinary units. We need to move away from a long held and still lingering view that the structure of our field of study is unique and requires special treatment.

Closing Comments

The challenges of multiple agendas in kinesiology need to be considered in light of both the strengths and weaknesses of the field of study. The strong nationwide student demand for our programs provides a stable base from which to build uniqueness, quality, and centrality through coherent teaching, research, and service programs. The challenge of providing breadth in undergraduate programs simultaneously with depth in graduate programs is a core source of tension in exploiting the positives of multiple agendas. How a department creates coherence on this core issue will go a long way to determining whether the advantages of multiple agendas can be exploited and outweigh the reality of the potential disadvantages. Finally, it needs to be remembered that it is much harder to create a department that successfully exploits over the long term the benefits of multiple agendas than one that continually suffers the problems in the short and long terms.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Gil Reeve for inviting me to give the opening talk of the AAKPE annual meeting at Tucson, September 2006 on which this paper is based. Thanks also to Mei Lee and Andy Valantine for technical help. Finally, I would like to thank in particular my former colleagues in kinesiology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and my current colleagues at The Pennsylvania State University for their encouragement and criticisms over the years on these important issues.
References


Endnotes

1. In this paper I will use kinesiology to reflect the broad field of the study of physical activity in higher education (Newell, 1990b), that for the purposes of this discussion includes all of the related subdomains and labels, including physical education, human movement, exercise, and sport.

2. There is now a world ranking of universities for 2005 (The Times Higher Education Supplement, August 2, 2006) but this worldwide analysis has not yet got down to the department level.

3. The Board of Governors of AAHPERD has recently approved a name change to the American Alliance for Health and Physical Activity that will be submitted for consideration by the Alliance Assembly in March 2007. Whether the name change will foster a broader view of the study of physical activity and provide a basis for the organization to be the umbrella society of kinesiology remains to be determined.