Quo Vadis Kinesiology

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I’d like to thank Gil Reeve, the organizer of the Academy program, for asking me to attempt a “wrap up” of the presentations at this the 2006 Academy meeting. This has been a comprehensive program that has encompassed important topics including (again) the name of our field and the implications that has for both the short- and long-term development of our field. Contributors have focused on a breadth of content, including undergraduate and graduate degree programs, as well professional content issues related to degrees in the physical activity sciences and important challenges such as accreditation. All of the presentations at this year’s meeting covered a wide range of important issues that pose a challenge to the individual tasked to provide a comprehensive summary.

My remarks focus primarily on the comments raised by our keynote speaker Karl Newell that address the future of our field (which we at least tentatively have agreed to call kinesiology). This topic continues as the proverbial “300 pound gorilla in the room” simply because we have yet to arrive at a consensus as to what to call our field of study. The presentations on knowledge, content, professional issues, and accreditation were all timely and provided important “updates” of program content direction in our different subfields. Not in any way to undermine those presentations, my comments will focus more on what, in my judgment, is the major constraint facing the Academy and the physical activity sciences, namely the necessity to create a unified body of scientists and professionals organized under an umbrella (big tent) that we call kinesiology. After 75 years of existence, the AAKPE still lacks that one single voice whereby both scholars and professionals can comment or pass judgment on the plethora of health and wellness issues related to sport, physical activity, aging, and a host of topics yet to be addressed. As I write this summary for Quest, I note in the press today (October 10, 2006), the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a statement recommending “less participation in organized sports for young children in their developing years” and urging that “more time be set aside for recreation and free play.” I would submit that experts in our field (kinesiology) are as well qualified or better qualified to comment on the role of sport and participation in play (both organized and voluntary) and recreational activities than pediatricians! Yet we have no organized mouthpiece by which we can speak and make recommendations about such societal issues that impact the well-being of our nation’s youth! This is a serious barrier and constraint to the development of our field. We need an American College of Kinesiology!

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Our Canadian colleague Digby Elliot (2007) outlined elsewhere in this issue how the Canadians developed their own kinesiology field and it is a model that we should have pursued for our own development in order to build a more unified organization to represent all aspects of the physical activities sciences.

Karl Newell’s presentation (2007) which appears elsewhere in this issue echoed in many ways arguments first outlined in his *Quest* papers that appeared 15 years ago (Newell 1990a;1990b;1990c). In his current address, Newell talked about the “multiple agendas” in the study of physical activity and argued, as I think many would agree, that the notion of multiple agendas should be viewed more as a strength than as a problem. Different aspects of our field, from a societal perspective, will inevitably change as societal demands change. In the 60s, 70s, and the 80s, sport and exercise were a major focus for many of us in the field, more so than the current issues of health, obesity (especially childhood obesity), and a range of dyspraxic disabilities. Clearly, physical activity has a major impact on the larger field of health and wellness in both the disciplinary and the professional aspects our field has to offer society at-large. In an earlier paper Roberta Rikli (2006) delivering the Amy Morris Homans Lecture, suggested in contrast to Newell’s viewpoint that kinesiology was a “homeless” field, suggesting that a lack of a single home was a problem! One thing is certain—we as a field of study do not “own” biomechanics, motor control, exercise science, sport management, or sport psychology. In fact, in many instances professional licensure in some of these subfields is denied individuals with graduate degrees in kinesiology. Nevertheless, we collectively, I would submit, “own” more of the physical activity sciences than any other discipline or profession. Thus, while the scope of both our scholarly and professional activities are broad, we remain unable to bring into sharper focus a unified sense of who we are and what we collectively represent. This limits both our political and societal influence to exploiting opportunities confined mostly to the local level, within our own particular state or university context. Nationally, we remain essentially stymied!

The comments offered by Zelaznik and Harper (2007) elsewhere in this issue renew the call for a more comprehensive academic preparation for our students. Their claim is that we focus too much on the applied and professional aspects of our discipline at the cost of ignoring the central goal of an academic preparation, and that is a better understanding of the social, behavioral, anthropological, and philosophical aspects of the human movement sciences. They argue that these ignored aspects of discipline must find their way back into the curriculum so that a baccalaureate education in the physical activities sciences will produce what I would call “regular polygons”—namely, graduates with a well-rounded understanding of physical activity. Professional training and credentialing would come after their undergraduate degree in kinesiology.

Since Franklin Henry’s (1964) “call to arms” and the subsequent conferences organized by the Committee on Inter-institutional Cooperation (1988); the Capstone Knowledge conference at the University of Michigan in 1992; the name change decision made by the Academy and finally last year’s decision by the National Research Council (NRC) to include kinesiology as an area of study in their program evaluation process, we have, in essentially 42 years, grown our academic reputation and Franklin Henry would be proud. Yet agreement on single name and one organization to represent us all eludes us! This is not to say we haven’t tried.
After the conferences and efforts that produced the 1990 *Quest* papers, several members of AAKPE contacted several of the academic associations and societies and invited them to consider supporting and actively participating in some kind of “federal organization” to represent the field of kinesiology at large. This would be achieved by forming a “house of delegates” made up of representatives of each of these societies and similar organizations across the spectrum of our field. This initiative was supported by Rainer Martens of Human Kinetics but the response was decidedly unenthusiastic. There was both inertia and complacency on the part of the various academic societies who seemed to prefer to remain in their comfort zone of organizing annual meetings (useful or fun), which was sufficient to sustain their own individual academic agendas. They saw no compelling need to be concerned about the future of the field at large.

As Newell reminds us, all is not well at this juncture. The number of degree programs nationally is shrinking, the size of faculty in many programs is getting smaller, which in turn compromises the breadth of content offerings, an issue raised by Zelaznik and Harper (2007). There are very few faculties left at our major institutions with faculty complements greater than 20. Twenty to thirty years ago, faculty complements of 20 or more were not unusual nationwide. Student enrollments and interest, however, show strong growth and remain robust. More students supported by fewer faculty isn’t a promising sign for an academic field hoping to grow!

Now that we have gained admittance into the NRC, it is time for us to seriously revisit the challenge of forming a single comprehensive body to represent our field. The day is surely not too far off when folks at the NRC will ask which organization they should contact as they develop and require background information about our field. The embarrassment will be huge when we do not have an answer! I would urge the AAKPE to fill this void and take the lead in bringing this goal to fruition. Creating a “big tent” to accommodate all elements of the physical activity sciences is not a new idea and requires only a fundamental commitment to adopt a succinct name for our field of study and refer to it as kinesiology. We should worry less about the development of the body of knowledge about which we’ve heard many excellent presentations (which appear in this issue) and focus solely on developing a unified voice. Earlier I noted a recent statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics about the value of organized sport versus free play and recreation within the context of child development. These are “our” issues; we are experts on this problem and yet we are simply not asked to comment. It’s like asking for directions from a person who lacks a compass or a map! The agreement by the NRC to admit us into the academy at large is a watershed event that provides perhaps a “last chance” to put aside our individual agendas and come together under the umbrella of kinesiology. How we go about doing this is far less important than a commitment to begin the process! The AAKPE is the best organization to move the agenda forward.

In his keynote address Newell (2007) proposed for the future that we reiterate the centrality of physical activity and not let physical activity become either an independent or a dependent variable, but to stress the uniqueness of physical activity as a field of study irrespective of context and style. A broad based, coherent physical activity agenda supported by an American Academy of Kinesiology can provide leadership to a comprehensive field of kinesiology as well as having the capacity to speak out on issues that can influence the well-being of our nation
at large. As we enter the NRC era the single best way to move our field forward in the 21st century would be for the Academy to take on this challenge. All of the ingredients are in place; we have the leadership, and the NRC committee has provided us a unique moment in time. Let’s not let chance pass us by. Quo vadis is Latin for “wither goest,” a question that, hopefully, we can soon answer with pride and satisfaction.

A few years ago, Derek J. de Solla Price (1986) wrote a little book called *Little Science, Big Science and Beyond*. In this book de Solla Price’s stated goal was to turn the tool of science on science itself to measure, to generalize, and to create hypotheses and derive conclusions as to how a particular field of study developed. I think Franklin Henry would welcome the kind of analysis proposed by de Solla Price for the physical activities sciences. It’s clear that the NRC has been convinced of this also. When they come asking questions about the way we are organized as a comprehensive field of study we need to be ready with an answer.

**References**


