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## Shell Games and Competency: Education vs. Certification

Lon Kilgore takes a look at the machine that produces fitness professionals, and he doesn't like what he sees.

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By Lon Kilgore

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Donavan Winters/CrossFit Journal



The problem with sport, exercise and fitness certifications is that they propose to supplant university education. The problem with sport, exercise and fitness university education is that they can.

Before you applaud or get your shotgun, no one really wins in this scenario—not the trainer, not the trainee.

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### Education's Left Turn

Let's consider the expectation of a university education. Once, a university education conjured thoughts of broad thinking, science, literature, maths, civility, prosperity and opportunity. A university was a transition point in thinking and social status. As the 20th century progressed, the perceived purpose of higher education was placed under significant pressure to convert to an engine of commercial support through production of students competent in science and industry. While the focus became more vocational in nature, the core of education retained a strong content of broad disciplinary instruction, which was considered essential in the provision of well-rounded students to private-sector employers who were becoming more reliant on universities to supply literate, skilled employees.

The link of university education to employment training has grown over the past 40 years, as has the number of institutions of higher learning. We have now reached the point that the modern student expects to leave the university with all the knowledge and skills required to be immediately employable. Both the U.S. and U.K. governments have bought into this relationship as well.

There is a problem with employment preparation and student numbers. In 1973, there were 2,837 institutions of higher education in the U.S., and in 2012 there were 4,495. This growth has come with a price tag and a change in the nature of educational delivery. In 1973, 8 million students were distributed across the institutions for an average of 1,100 students per institution. Since 1998, the number of students in higher education has risen to and has stayed at approximately 15 million. This increased the number of students in each institution to an average of 3,337 students.

Although additional faculty were added, the rate of hire did not keep pace with student-body growth. University administration did not complain about this asymmetry as this new economy of scale—more students per faculty member—contributed to a financial bottom line in the black.

The most economical of teaching methods is the traditional lecture, where one faculty member lectures to potentially hundreds of students. While this is a historically proven methodology for information delivery, it cannot provide a platform for the development of skills requisite for modern fitness employment. This limitation is firmly entrenched into the world of educating sport, exercise

and fitness professionals within the university setting.

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It is an all too common occurrence for graduates in exercise science, health and fitness, kinesiology, human kinetics, physical education or any of the other programs in operation to leave university with no tangible fitness instruction or programming skills. They have only read about or been lectured on the concepts. Because the three-hours-of-lecture-per-week approach to education is financially viable, they might never have spent a single moment on learning the practical aspects of teaching basic fitness skills such as running and lifting or might never have practiced putting them together into a coherent program that accomplishes a fitness goal.



Donovan Winners/CrossFit Journal

***The shell game of fitness education: sitting in a lecture hall is great for learning theory. But what of practical application?***

(Educational issues are highlighted in previous articles "Paradigm Lost" and "An Aerobic Paradox.")

Another strange permutation of the commercialization of education is the concept of offering "popular" majors or creating majors based on "student demand" rather than on actual economic demand. This approach puts students in lecture halls and fills coffers but does little to achieve the desire of modern students to receive an education that either enriches their lives or provides vocational knowledge and skills.

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Sport and exercise majors are among the most popular at universities worldwide. About 4-5 percent of all students in U.S. higher education will choose a fitness-related major (data from the National Center for Education Statistics). It is not uncommon to have several hundred students

in these programs in the U.S. with less than a half dozen faculty teaching them. In the U.K., the 2011 league tables list one university offering a sport-and-fitness degree with 42 students for each faculty member.

The common administration logic for allowing this to occur is that the high student-to-staff ratios in these popular programs "pay" for the operations of unpopular or low-demand majors. An inconvenient truth relative to this administrative funding position is that it compromises the quality of instruction provided to students, and it floods the market with unprepared students believing they have received the underpinning knowledge and skills needed to be successful professionals. Unfortunately, the economy of scale has become more important than the ethics of educational provision.

This gap in educational provision and quality is only one issue affecting who can be considered an exercise professional. Public perception of what is needed to be a coach or fitness professional does not necessarily include a university education. Government perception of what is needed to be a coach or fitness professional does not necessarily include a university education. Further, legal opinion regarding who is a qualified exercise professional does not necessarily include a university education. The only group who consider a university education to be a prerequisite for professionalism is university educators.



***While sport and exercise education is popular in universities around the world, a degree is no guarantee of competency inside the gym.***

### Who's on First?

The demand for CrossFit certificates is a telling statement on the state of the exercise-and-fitness education market. Why would someone pay US\$1,000 for a CrossFit course and certificate if they can buy an online certification requiring 15 minutes of preparation to pass an open-book test for \$49? Answer: perception of value and utility.

The brutal truth is that an educational experience in the form of a seminar, or set of seminars, that provides professional, fact-based knowledge and tangible practical skills can be a more efficient means of entry into exercise and fitness professions than a university education. If there is a rigorous and objective assessment of both knowledge and practical skills included that stands up to external scrutiny, it can be even more efficient.

But a professional certification is an endorsement by a professional body that a certificant possesses the minimum set of requisite knowledge and skills for professional practice. And the field of certification, as a whole, not just in sport and fitness, is rife with problems. Just like higher education and having a degree, having a certification or certificate in most instances does not imply ability to do the job at hand: improve customer fitness in the commercial environment.



#### *All certificates are not created equal.*

College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), or any “non-profit” agency in any professional field; financial incentive drives the provision of qualification (however, the term “surplus” is used instead of “profit”). The motive for marketing and offering a bargain-basement \$49 certification is actually more profit-driven than the most expensive certifications because value added and professional competency are not concerns.

Another screwy little perturbation that creates further confusion is that universities actively seek accreditation of their education programs by the certifying agencies that seek to supplant them in the education and provision of professional qualifications to students. Essentially, an institution providing a bachelor's degree signifying that its students are thoroughly educated and trained in their profession seeks validation from an agency that provides education and qualification to those same students without traditional university education.

The problem is worldwide and has become so muddy that in the U.K., universities often provide a bachelor-of-science degree in a sport, exercise or fitness area and use a curriculum designed to satisfy requirements for British Association of Sport of Exercise Sciences (BASES) accreditation-and-certification standards. But BASES standards are linked to a different certification organization's requirements—the Register of Exercise Professionals (REP). The

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Certification suffers from some of the same problems as university education, foremost among them being economy. It costs money to deliver information and assess competency in a meaningful way. And do not be fooled by anyone: Certification is a for-profit business. Someone gets paid at the end of the day from the certification fees. It doesn't matter whether it is a certification mill, the American

REP accepts educational experiences of virtually any kind in satisfaction of their standards.

And then it gets weirder: The REP's standards are linked to ACSM standards—but they don't recognize someone who possesses ACSM credentials. And then we twist again, as ACSM standards generally require a university education to sit for certification. And even the ACSM now offers professional fitness certifications to those without university education so the organization will not lose revenues. It is absolutely reminiscent of the classic "Who's on First?" gag by Abbott and Costello or M.C. Escher's mind-twisting "Relativity" stairway lithograph.

### Starting at Square 1

Higher education can reclaim its relevance in creating competent fitness professionals. But it will take the support of educational administration because the changes required will eat into the profit mill that exercise degrees have become. It will take a refit of the educational units delivering the instruction. They will need to consider providing instruction to enable students to reliably produce defined professional outcomes: fitness, health, performance, rehabilitation. They will need to deliver the knowledge to achieve those outcomes by creating an accurate, extensive and objective body of evidence. And quite central to the present shortcomings, they must find a way to impart the defined practical skills to apply acquired knowledge.

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It may be that universities need to revisit how they might articulate with employers and certifying agencies to recreate the ages-old apprentice-journeyman-master pathway to expertise.

Certification agencies similarly need to change. The CrossFit example of linking assessments to the ability to

provide tangible results toward fitness and the opportunity for gainful employment requires broader adoption. For exercise-certification agencies to be taken seriously and to contribute to the long-term progress of the exercise professions, a mechanism to marry profit to quality of product has to be created.

CrossFit has been a catalyst for much change in commercial fitness since the early '90s. The grassroots influence of the CrossFit community has moved officially onto university campuses—about a dozen of them—and represents the beginnings of a new stage in the evolution of fitness instruction. This new collaboration between higher education, industry and certifying agency may be prototypical of the future of commercial fitness.

### About the Author

*Professor Lon Kilgore graduated from Lincoln University with a bachelor of science in biology and earned a Ph.D. in anatomy and physiology from Kansas State University. He has competed in weightlifting to the national level since 1972 and coached his first athletes to national-championship event medals in 1974. He has worked in the trenches, as a coach or scientific consultant, with athletes from rank novices to professionals and the Olympic elite, and as a collegiate strength coach. He has been a certifying instructor for U.S.A. Weightlifting for more than a decade and a frequent lecturer at events at the U.S. Olympic Training Center. His illustration, authorship, and co-authorship efforts include the best-selling books "Starting Strength" (first and second editions) and "Practical Programming for Strength Training" (first and second editions), recent releases "Anatomy Without a Scalpel" and "FIT," magazine columns, textbook chapters, and numerous research journal publications. He is presently engaged in the most difficult task of his career: recreating the educational track to becoming a professional fitness practitioner. The second stage of this effort is the creation of a one-year university qualification in fitness practice at the University of the West of Scotland.*