

Leading Through Times of Uncertainty: The Future of Higher Education, Work, and Kinesiology

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Times are always a bit uncertain, and our initial plan for the 2021 American Kinesiology Association (AKA) Annual Workshop was to focus on challenges and opportunities facing higher education on the horizon. We were to address matters such as the pending enrollment cliff (Kline, 2019), which is not so much pending as it is upon us—with particular impact in the Northeast and Midwest United States. We would consider the Fourth Industrial Revolution whereby the digital, physical, psychological, and social features of work and the broader human experience are merging and reconfiguring in disruptive ways (Schwab, 2015). Recent advancements in artificial intelligence, for example, encapsulate the great potential we see for the future of work, with newly found efficiencies also bringing discomfort about their potential for widening societal inequities. We would discuss how to strengthen the standing of kinesiology in an ever-competitive higher education context, how to attract and meet the needs of a more diverse student body, and generally attempt to project what our world might look like a decade or more down the road. We had crystalized this plan in February 2020.

Then March 2020 arrived. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant disruption to higher education and our broader lives that month. Our in-person instruction was abruptly shifted to remote formats, introducing significant stressors related to use of and access to technology, what might be lost without the “hands on” learning of lab and clinical techniques, and the assessment of student academic performance. Students were sent away from their campuses, which for many introduced changes in family expectations and obligations, financial and other burdens associated with abruptly moving, and, in some cases, concerns about safety and well-being. Research programs were suspended, complicating the execution of funded projects and significantly hampering career progress for those seeking to complete graduate degrees, advance toward promotion and tenure, and build upon developing research agendas. The intensified demands associated with this disruption to higher education occurred in concert with significant personal challenges—concern about the welfare of older family members, managing educational and other needs of children now at home full time, protecting one’s own health, and many other issues.

That spring also brought intensified social unrest in the United States tied to anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and political polarization, which experienced a flashpoint with the May 25 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by a police

officer. Protests followed in Minneapolis and expanded to other cities throughout the country. Among others, higher education organizations and scholarly societies expressed their dismay and voiced commitment to addressing racism and inequitable practices within their own organizations and in society. In a statement distributed on Juneteenth of 2020, the AKA expressed that it “resolves to undermine racism, value Black lives and perspectives, and equip kinesiology leaders to promote social justice, equity, and inclusive excellence. We are reflecting on how our communications, workshop programming, and committee activities can be stronger and more sustainable platforms to achieve these goals” (American Kinesiology Association, 2020). Our workshop programming became decidedly more focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice as an expression of this commitment. In our roles as president and president elect of the association, we committed to addressing these topics in meaningful ways during our upcoming meetings.

Whereas we initially thought the 2021 Workshop would address matters on a more distant horizon, the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest of early 2020 significantly accelerated the pace of change and disruption to higher education. Widespread adoption of digital technology in instruction was upon us. Setting aside the quality of usage, which varied considerably, this raised questions about how education would be delivered moving forward. Concerns about drawing in late adopters were no longer relevant—nearly everyone, to some degree, was required to jump into the proverbial deep end of the pool. Also, more serious attention was directed to advancing social justice. Organizations were now on record with their positions, and their commitment would be measured by the *continuing* actions that followed. It would become evident in time whether calls to activism were merely performative or whether they were substantive. We found ourselves fast-forwarded to the distant horizon well ahead of schedule, which made for greater uncertainty about the future but greater clarity as to how we would proceed with our plans to host the annual workshop and preworkshops.

Our annual AKA gathering is intended to allow our members to network, discuss contemporary leadership and other issues as related to kinesiology, and contribute to the AKA mission of promoting and enhancing kinesiology as a unified field of study and advancing the field’s applications. Our gathering in January 2021 was themed, “Leading Through Times of Uncertainty: The Future of Higher Education, Work, and Kinesiology.” Our original plans were updated to focus on the uncertainties we were experiencing during such a unique period in history, with special emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion. We encouraged participants to consider immediate challenges relative to the

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evolving contexts of higher education, work, and kinesiology. As was true for many professional organizations, we “pivoted” to a virtual format for our main workshop, undergraduate and graduate program-focused preworkshops, dean’s forum, and fireside chat with senior leaders. There was robust participation with over 190 attendees from associate-granting through doctoral-granting institutions. As we have done in recent years, we publish in this special issue of *Kinesiology Review* a set of scholarly, peer-reviewed manuscripts that are based on keynote presentations and other sessions at our annual gathering. This special issue allows us to document core themes and recommendations shared at the meetings, enabling us to revisit them in the future and gauge our progress in making kinesiology more just, accessible, and effective within the higher education, work, and societal contexts.

The special issue opens with reflection on the history of kinesiology and the marginalization of cultural, historical, and philosophical knowledge. Wiggins (2021) draws from this discussion to warn that only producing highly specialized scholars of kinesiology within ever splintering subdisciplines will leave us less adaptable to future challenges. He encourages us to make space for those with broad vision and perspectives, enabling us to draw on the full spectrum of talents and knowledges we will need to thrive into the coming decades. This is followed by Russell et al. (2021), who likewise argue that thriving in the future will require commitment to inclusive excellence that, during crises like those we face today, is strategically prioritized, centered on justice, and deliberately advanced by leaders through meaningful behaviors and action steps. Complementing this article, Mahar et al. (2021) share examples of sustained and impactful practices to promote inclusive excellence in three kinesiology units that have been recognized with the AKA Inclusive Excellence Award. Altogether, these articles point to ways that we can help students, and each other, develop the cultural competencies and commitments needed to advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion within kinesiology and broader society.

These broadly focused pieces are followed by three complementary articles that address specific ways to broaden perspectives and cultivate student success. Haibach-Beach et al. (2021) discuss how the development of global competence in future kinesiology professionals can be fostered by building virtual exchange into courses, which is highly accessible and allows formation of meaningful partnerships. Liu et al. (2021) follow with an overview of how a kinesiology unit at a Hispanic-serving institution developed and implemented strategies for successfully recruiting and retaining master’s degree students. They discuss how programming, deliberate partnerships, and mentoring can contribute to a thriving graduate program. Finally, Waldron (2021) offers a deeper dive into mentoring as a pathway to graduate student success. She presents a model outlining an institutional approach to mentorship, emphasizing transparent socialization, mutually shared expectations, and conceiving of the student as a whole individual.

The next two articles focus specifically on the future of work, which is rapidly evolving and necessitates that students leave their academic programs with the foundational knowledge, resilience, and grit necessary to thrive into the future. Duitch (2021) offers an overview of the future of work and its implications for higher education. She argues that educators will need to think more broadly and holistically about their roles to successfully model to students the qualities necessary to thrive in ever-changing workplaces. Wheeler and Van Mullem (2021) follow this overview by presenting high-impact practices within two kinesiology units that are designed to prepare students for this future. These practices

are undergirded by emphasizing idea-based and learner-centered approaches, leveraging strategic partnerships, and recognizing how the practices shape the student learning experience.

This special issue also includes articles addressing the immediate demands and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in practices that might be carried forward. Leary et al. (2021) highlight remote and hybrid teaching strategies employed during the pandemic that can be retained to benefit student learning and preparation for the workforce. Knudson and Bopp (2021) focus on how we measure learning and promote academic integrity in the context of online instruction, sharing lessons learned during the pandemic and encouraging the use of more authentic, holistic assessments as kinesiology departments expand online learning. Aside from these instruction-related demands, kinesiology leaders faced the challenge of rapidly instituting policies tied to the full span of academic work, addressing the well-being of colleagues and students, and maintaining personal well-being and effectiveness. Carpenter et al. (2021) share how kinesiology units within the California State University and Pennsylvania State University systems, respectively, developed collaborative models to build community, share expertise, and form connections that can be used to benefit both student and faculty success into the future.

Many of the articles in this special issue point to practical strategies for promoting inclusive excellence, instructional effectiveness, student success, and faculty effectiveness. A number of these strategies were driven by acute challenges and necessity, even if conceptually grounded. In the final article, Duke et al. (2021) offer a theoretical overview of adaptive, complexity, and transformational leadership approaches. They present these approaches and then consider how they can apply to the future of higher education, work, and kinesiology, respectively, encouraging a commitment to the blending of the art and science of leadership to help kinesiology thrive. This holistic perspective brings us full circle back to Wiggins’ (2021) opening critique of where we have traveled as a field of study and his assertion that thriving into the future will require an inclusive approach that makes space for connecting visioning with focused inquiry and practice.

Uncertainty and change are reliable constants, as we have been reminded over the course of 2020 and 2021. Our unified field of study has adapted well over its history to become highly popular, scientifically and theoretically rich, and impactful. We believe this special issue illustrates that kinesiology has been highly effective and reflective over the course of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and intensified social unrest. As we continue to navigate our current challenges, address the future of higher education and work, and face new challenges into the future, we hope that kinesiology leaders will benefit from the wisdom offered by the authors who contributed to this collection of articles. We also hope that they will avail themselves of continued AKA programming that is directed toward promoting inclusive excellence and a bright future for kinesiology over the coming decades.

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