NAK: Honoring the Past, Celebrating the Present, Embracing the Future

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The essays published in this issue of Kinesiology Review (KR) are based on scholarly presentations delivered at the 92nd annual meeting of the National Academy of Kinesiology (NAK) held in Newport Beach, CA, September 28 to 30, 2023. The theme of the conference was “NAK: Honoring the Past, Celebrating the Present, Embracing the Future.” The NAK has a storied past with a rich history and a promising future. Cardinal (2022, FNAK #475) provides a detailed overview of the evolution of what is now the NAK. Shortly after the beginning of the 20th century, a group of fellows led by Luther Halsey Gulick began to meet informally each fall to discuss issues confronting the field of physical education. At the end of 1930, 29 charter fellows who had been identified adopted the Constitution and by-laws of the American Academy of Physical Education. The purpose of the Academy was:

“To advance knowledge in the field of physical education, to uplift its standards, and uphold its honor,” by electing to Fellowship men and women who have made significant contributions; by making such trust funds as may exist available for research, by encouraging promising students to enter the field; by recognizing work of high merit; by disseminating professional information at home and in foreign countries, and by assisting in the enactment of legislation favorable to physical education. (NAK, n.d.)

Much has transpired since the inception of the American Academy of Physical Education. In 1993, we transitioned from the American Academy of Physical Education to the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education, extending the scope and purpose of the organization to reflect the ways that the field of physical education had grown through the advancement of the subdisciplines. The American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education voted to change the name of the organization to the National Academy of Kinesiology in 2010. The progression of name changes reflects a broader view of the discipline of kinesiology, and as the name has evolved, so has the purpose. The website states the dual purpose of the NAK:

Shall be to encourage and promote the study and educational applications of the art and science of human movement and physical activity and to honor, by election to its membership, persons who have directly or indirectly contributed significantly to the study of and/or application of the art and science of human movement and physical activity. (NAK, n.d.)

This is an exciting time for the NAK. After negotiating the disruptions caused by the global pandemic, we have returned to in-person meetings and lively scholarly discussions. We have inducted 60 new fellows over the past 4 years, so approximately one-third of the active NAK Fellows have been in the organization for 3 years or less. The accomplishments of these new fellows are exceptional, and they are well positioned to carry the NAK torch. It is important that we pass on the traditions and values of the academy, but it is equally important that we evolve strategically to help our field grow and establish a collaborative culture and new traditions that will move us into the future. It is timely to reflect on our history and current status as we approach the anniversary of 100 years of NAK, with the goal of exploring ways that we can shape the future to promote the academy and academic discipline of kinesiology. We are poised to move forward as an organization, but it is important to ensure that we are grounded in the mission, vision, and values on which the academy was founded. Reflecting on how the academy has evolved since its inception can and should guide our path forward. As Adlai Stevenson (n.d.) observed, “We can chart our future clearly and wisely only when we know the path which has led to the present.”

Scholarly Articles

David Wiggins’s (FNAK #483) insightful essay (Wiggins, 2024), based on the Rainer and Julie Martins Lecture he delivered at the meeting begins this issue of KR. He provides a thoughtful overview of our past, our current status, and a vision for the future. He challenges us to transcend “parallel trenches,” engage in active open-mindedness, and emulate characteristics of the octopus by being inquisitive, resourceful, and adaptable while we are mindful of play. He strongly advocates for an integrated view of kinesiology that encompasses all facets and subdisciplines. He offers strategies for undergraduate and graduate programs that foster the development of polymaths who have a thorough knowledge of one area or subdiscipline but also a broad understanding of the breadth and depth of the discipline of kinesiology.

The series of papers that follow are structured around subdisciplines that have emerged within the field of kinesiology since Franklin Henry (1964; FNAK #94) advocated for establishing physical education as an academic discipline. Distinguished scholars across various fields including physical education and sport pedagogy, humanities, motor learning and development, motor control and biomechanics, the psychology of physical activity, exercise physiology, adapted physical activity, physical activity and health, and sport management examine the role that their subdisciplines have played in the broader discipline of kinesiology and the Academy, highlighting the contributions of NAK Fellows. Taking a variety of approaches, they reflect on the status of their fields, identifying critical issues and future directions for their...
specializations in the broader field of kinesiology. There is also a clear thread running through these essays about the strengths that are evident when there is collaboration with other subdisciplines and how various specializations complement others.

Transitioning from a focus on subdisciplines to broader perspectives, Doune Macdonald (Fellow International) et al. (2024) organized the C. Lynn Vendien International Session as a panel discussion examining whether there is a global narrative for kinesiology. In their essay, the international fellows who participated on the panel concluded that while there are global narratives relevant to the knowledge base, program priorities, evaluation metrics, and professionalism, the label of kinesiology is not universally accepted across the globe. Ang Chen (FNAK # 496; 2024) examines the curricular disalignment between the discipline of kinesiology and school physical education programs. He makes a strong case for aligning school physical education with the academic discipline while maintaining a strong focus on promoting physical activity to improve health and wellness across the lifespan. Next, Brian Focht (FNAK # 602; 2024) and his colleagues consider the challenges and opportunities that are associated with the trend for kinesiology departments to be housed in larger academic units with a focus on health and human sciences. In her essay on preparing the next generation of scholars, Diane Gill (FNAK # 331; 2024) points out that the high level of specialization and the singular focus on research in doctoral programs have led to lost connections with physical activity practitioners and the public. Like Wiggins, she advocates for the preparation of polymaths who not only have specialized knowledge in a subdiscipline but also have a broad understanding of the discipline and the ability to relate their scientific expertise to professional practice and to communicate their messages to the public.

Throughout these papers, analogies are drawn to Wiggins’s (2021) characterization of “focused frogs” and “visionary birds.” We all agree there is a need for “focused frogs” with regard to conducting research and generating knowledge in areas of specialization, but we cannot survive without “visionary birds” who promote an understanding and appreciation of the discipline of kinesiology. In his essay, Scott Kretchmar (FNAK # 330; 2024) identifies two recurring themes of the 2023 program: “how to articulate the value of physical activity most forcefully and how to promote it most effectively.” He eloquently advocates for a unified field that encompasses broad and diverse perspectives that engender positive meanings related to physical activity.

Conclusions
As Roberta Park (2017) observed, the current state of the academic discipline that Franklin Henry (1964) promoted is not what he had envisioned. The chasm between high-quality research and the application of that research into practice, as well as the overspecialization and fragmentation that has evolved, is not what he intended to foster. In the session prior to Kretchmar’s reflections, NAK Fellows with upper-level administrative experience served as panelists for a discussion of how kinesiology units can flourish in university settings. This dialogue echoed themes that are recurrent in the scholarly articles: the need for unity and integration across the field; the importance of establishing and maintaining connections, not only with each other but also with physical activity practitioners and the public; and perhaps most importantly, the need to do a better job of telling our story to a wide range of consumers through a variety of platforms. Using these themes to guide our efforts should serve us well as we look to the future of the NAK.

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References