Kinesiology, the scientific study of human movement, is a field that developed over the years from the physical education profession (Hoffman, 2013). The discipline now includes a number of highly specialized subdisciplines, such as exercise physiology, motor learning, biomechanics, sport and exercise psychology, sport and fitness management, and sport history. Some undergraduate kinesiology students may find it easy to choose their particular concentration and to know the specific area they would like to study (e.g., pre-physical therapy, sport management, pedagogy). However, other kinesiology students, such as those in departments of exercise and sport science, may choose a subdiscipline simply because they are interested in the general area of health and fitness. In fact, it is common for exercise science students to reach senior year and still not know which

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areas within the discipline might best align with their career objectives (Hoffman, 2013).

The issue of career choice has been studied through social cognitive career theory (Lent Brown, & Hackett, 1994). This theory establishes three constructs — self-efficacy, outcome expectations and choice goals — and explores how these constructs interact with environmental factors to correlate with the choices people make. Research suggests that environmental supports are key in assisting students in determining their career selection (Cunningham, Bruening, Sartore, Sagas, & Fink, 2005). Part of providing this support involves faculty guidance to help students determine their interest in specific concentrations, since interest is closely aligned with the ability to establish choice goals (Cunningham et al., 2005).

The large number of choices in kinesiology stems from the fact that a broad group of courses underlie the field: sports management, athletic training and sports medicine, sociocultural analyses of sports, sport and exercise psychology, fitness leadership, and physical education teacher education. In addition, there is pre-professional training available for allied health careers, such as in physical therapy and occupational therapy (American Kinesiology Association, 2015). Being able to more clearly understand these various subdisciplines and to connect academic content with the workplace can greatly help students in making better decisions regarding their career choice. One way to gain knowledge of the subdisciplines is through rigorous content preparation in the classroom. However, connecting this content to employment or further schooling can arguably and most logically occur in an applied setting. We see this most often in the internship or capstone experience, which is typically a semester-long experience in students’ the senior year.

Capstone internships can be very rewarding for students, allowing for integration of what was learned in the classroom throughout their plan of study. However, these internships typically range from 150 to 400 hours. For students who are still not sure which areas are of most interest, this is an inordinate amount of time to spend in one facility, particularly if students realize early on in the experience that the site they chose is not relevant to them. To give students additional experience in the workplace, students in concentrations such as sports management and pre-allied health typically have a shorter field experience (40 hours or fewer) as a separate course in management or clinical settings. For accreditation purposes, as well as additional experience, some authors recommend service-learning (community) experiences specifically for physical education teacher education candidates (Cervantes & Meaney; 2013; Everhart, 2014). However, for students who are in broader concentrations such as exercise science and fitness leadership, one extra field experience course may not be enough to help determine which area interests them. In order to address the issue of helping students determine their interest areas, some authors have suggested pre-internship experiences that involve on-campus activities (e.g., assisting with conducting fitness assessments, teaching group exercise classes, coordinating health fairs; Campbell & Kvar, 1994). However, the authors of this article would like to recommend the field study, a different type of experience for kinesiology students who have not yet determined a definite career direction. The purpose of this article, therefore, is twofold: (1) to establish a case for the inclusion of field studies earlier in exercise science curricula, and (2) to offer a step-by-step process for its implementation.

Field Study

Altman, Hahn and Knitzer (1978) introduced the term “field study” to refer to a “systematic sequenced program of opportunities for field learning” (p. 56), explaining that it is “seen as a component of undergraduate experience and is not necessarily linked to any one field or to particular, already-made career choices” (p. 56). Given the other projects, exams and assignments that are required in any particular course, the field study is set up so that only a small time commitment is required. These 8–10-hour experiences can occur in off-campus health and fitness facilities and are just a portion of the requirements for an academic class. For example, in a Group Leadership course, students would observe various types of group fitness classes (e.g., a Zumba class). Students might observe personal trainers in a Strength and Conditioning class. Students taking an Exercise Programming for Special Populations class may observe people with disabilities participating in modified exercise activities. In other words, the choice of field study site would be directly related to the specific academic course.

The field study serves multiple functions. Altman et al. (1978) argued that it can assist students with the career choices associated with exercise science. Because of the small time commitment, this experience can provide opportunities for the students to see a wide variety of professionals in the work setting. Also, field studies allow the students to observe how course content can be applied to a workplace setting. Connecting and applying information presented in a class not only allows the student to make an immediate link between content and its application, but also makes it more likely that the student will be motivated to acquire the necessary classroom knowledge associated with that application. It is also important that students grasp the importance of research, and it is particularly helpful if they can see the application of scholarly work to a professional setting (Altman et al., 1978). Additionally, these observations might also lead toward advanced study in exercise science. Seeing a variety of professionals at work and developing an understanding of the credentials necessary to perform the job can provide good motivation for post-graduation training. Finally, developing a familiarity with various careers throughout the first few years can help the student make informed decisions when selecting an internship site. Exposure to multiple workplace settings can lead to a more focused and satisfactory learning experience. While arguments supporting field studies are persuasive, they do not explain the logistics of incorporating a field study into a course. Therefore, the authors offer a step-by-step process of how to systematically include a field study in an academic course.

Steps for Implementing the Field Study into an Academic Class

A field study is particularly suitable for courses in which students learn how to direct group or individual fitness activities. These courses tend to be offered early in an exercise science student’s plan of study. At this point many students have not participated in group fitness classes. They may have been members of youth sports teams, but few have belonged to a fitness club. Therefore, this particular field study is likely to provide an observation that will be novel. It might also be noted that this experience is especially worthwhile since there are so many forms of group and individual exercise, and there is simply not enough time to explore all of these iterations in the classroom setting. Though some of the logistical strategies are similar to those for an academic class,
the environmental constructs are somewhat different. This step-by-step process offers general instructions, followed by a specific example for a Group Leadership class (see Figure 1).

Preliminary Contact with a Facility. The class instructor makes contact with local facility managers, explaining the focus of the field study. It would be important to find out if there is a limit to the number of students the facility will accept.

- **Group Leadership:** It is important that the clubs allow the students to take the classes free of charge. In return, students get exposure to the facility and may eventually become a member or an instructor/trainer there in the future. In order to gain access to the facility, the club can give them two 30-day passes or have a list of student names at the front desk. Students participating in the field study in fitness centers do not need special clearance or qualifications to be in a fitness center (e.g., criminal background check); they should be able to get a temporary pass and sign a waiver and release form that other guests are required to fill out.

Facility List. The class instructor gives students a list of facilities from which to choose. This list should have all pertinent information that will help the student move smoothly through the experience (e.g., contact information for managers, club location).

Contact Form and Time Sheet. After the first two steps have been completed, students then visit the facility, meet with the manager, and obtain signatures to verify approval of the students’ contact.

- **Group Leadership:** When students visit the facility, they will meet with the manager and obtain signatures to verify approval of their contact information (Figure 2). The student should also obtain a copy of the monthly class schedule to make sure it fits their academic schedule. Each time a student takes a class, the group exercise instructor signs a time sheet acknowledging that the student was on time, participated in class, and stayed for the entire class (Figure 3). Students should be reminded that they are not allowed to use any other equipment or services while at the facility.

Class Meetings. To offset the field-study hours, the instructor may assign days during the semester in which the class does not meet.

Evaluation. The instructor may consider having students complete pre- and post-field study questionnaires. The first can help the student begin to think in advance about the experience and to focus attention on the aspects of the field study that are most critical. The post-survey can provide an avenue by which students can reflect on how beneficial the experience was to them. This reflective piece ties into social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) by helping students consider the outcome expectations and choice goals of the experience. Other assessments may include small assignments related to their experiences at the facility or simple documentation of hours completed. Regardless of how the student is ultimately evaluated by the faculty, it is important to minimize the amount of work on the part of the site supervisor.
• Group Leadership: Students fill out a class evaluation after each class in which they participate (Figure 4). During 8 of the 10 hours the student will be a participant; the last 2 hours are spent observing and evaluating. In the evaluation observations the students will have a longer and more comprehensive form to complete. These classes would be best observed toward the end of the semester after the students have a more advanced knowledge of what should occur in a group exercise class.

Other. When implementing a field study, university instructors should consider easy access to transportation. It is helpful if there are multiple clinical and corporate health-club facilities nearby and a city transit system (some allow students to ride for free). In addition, the instructor might set up a ride-share signup.

Support for Field Studies: Student Reflections

A student’s reflection on the field study is an integral part of the learning process. Some students may never have considered working in a certain type of environment simply because it was something they had not been exposed to. An example of this can be seen in this student's comment:

Overall I had a great experience with doing these exercise classes. It showed me many different ways to exercise and get my body active... These classes really helped me to see group exercise in a different light. Before, I never would have thought I would develop an interest, but now I feel like I would love to teach a spin class.

Other students may avoid certain career paths due to preconceived notions about a particular job or work setting. The field study can provide a way for these students to develop a more accurate understanding of what actually happens in various environments. Because almost two thirds of group-exercise participants are female (IHRSA Health Club Consumer Report, 2012),[26] males may not realize that these courses can be rigorous. Some males may also believe that they are not coordinated enough to participate in them. Requiring both males and females to take group exercise classes may alter their perceptions.

In a course taught by one of this article’s authors, the students were asked to write a short paragraph describing their overall experiences related to group exercise classes. One male wrote, “This field experience turned out better than I thought. If I would have never had this experience I probably would have never tried any of these classes.” Another wrote,

When I first started the workouts, I was nervous because I hadn’t done group exercises before...and because I thought everybody would look at me crazy if I was doing the exercises wrong. Then, once I started taking the classes, I enjoyed them a lot...I would do this all over again if I had to. Also, I’m thinking about getting a membership at ... [name of facility].
Another student specifically addressed the connection between classroom learning and the group exercise setting.

I ended up really enjoying this field-experience assignment...I liked being able to critique the instructors on what I learned in class. I felt like I had actual background information and was knowledgeable about what was going on. After taking [group exercise] and doing this assignment, I believe I would enjoy being a class instructor for an aerobics class.

Field studies associated with a different course, Special Populations, might also lead to new experiences for students. In a course taught by one of the authors, several students said they were hesitant at first to go to the facilities because they had never been in a rehabilitation center and did not think they would enjoy it. After their field study, however, many of them opted to return to volunteer because of how much they enjoyed the experience.

Though reasons for enjoying the field studies vary among students, the overall perception is that these exposures to actual work settings can contribute to their professional growth. Given that there are many exercise-science career paths, narrowing down the possibilities through short observations is very beneficial. Most importantly, students believe that they can make a more informed decision when it comes to selecting a site for the program’s capstone internship.

Summary

Field studies can ensure that the students’ selection of an internship site will be more appropriate, give students a way to directly apply classroom content to the workplace setting, and possibly lead toward advanced study in exercise science. In addition, it is noteworthy that today’s college-graduate employment patterns are quite different from those of older workers: “Over half of workers age 55 to 64, and those age 65 and over had 10 years or more of tenure in 2012, compared with less than 1 in 10 workers age 25 to 34” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Because of the predicted decrease in years of employment at any one place, placing students in the field early in their career will ensure that they understand that their academic preparation can lead to a variety of employment opportunities in the event that they decide to deviate from their initial choice. Therefore, the benefits of field studies are multidimensional. This article provided a structured strategy for implementing this important experience early in an exercise-science student’s coursework.

References