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# WHAT IS KINESIOLOGY?



## **After completing this chapter you should be able to:**

- explain the meaning, significance, and scope of the focus of kinesiology;
- explain the choice of kinesiology as the preferred name for the field;
- describe the diversity and inclusiveness of kinesiology;
- experience the meaning of kinesiology in your own life.

“The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.”  
ROBERT M. HUTCHINS

Studies in kinesiology, or the science of human movement, not only accommodate a range of educational purposes but also have a very personal impact. From the moment we wake up in the morning to the moment our heads hit the pillow at night, we perform hundreds of different movements and engage in a wide array of physical activities. Issues related to health and human movement have become primary concerns of all societies today. From health promotion to human performance, the highly interdisciplinary field of kinesiology provides a natural springboard for students interested in discovering and unravelling the complexities of human movement.

The popularity of kinesiology reflects its wide scope and significance as an emerging field of study. But to understand where the field is going, we have to know where it came from. This chapter will help you understand how the discipline of kinesiology has evolved and will discuss why it has taken its current form and focus.

## Definitions and Dimensions

### Kinesiology Defined

**Kinesiology** is a sophisticated word for the study of movement, a relatively new and exciting area of learning. In 1990, the American Academy of Physical Education resolved to identify a common name and focus in order to describe the academic discipline and to unite the field. Through this action, the Academy hoped to settle the following problems facing this emerging field of study:

- More than 100 different names were being used for academic programs and administrative units related to the study of human movement.
- The basic conceptual framework of this body of knowledge varied greatly from campus to campus.
- The multitude of degree titles, program names, and administrative rubrics had produced confusion regarding the nature of the study of movement, even among people working in the field.



### Terminology Alert

*ki-ne-si-ol-o-gy (n.) 1. The study of the anatomy, physiology, and mechanics of body movement, especially in humans.*

The American Academy of Physical Education believed that an officially accepted name and definition of the body of knowledge would provide a stronger sense of purpose, higher visibility in the academic community, and a greater understanding of the discipline by the public, so it crafted the following resolution:

Be it resolved that the American Academy of Physical Education recommends that the subject matter core content for undergraduate baccalaureate degrees related to the study of movement be called Kinesiology, and that baccalaureate degrees in the academic discipline be titled Kinesiology. The American Academy of Physical Education encourages administrative units, such as departments or divisions, in which the academic study of Kinesiology is predominant, to adopt the name Kinesiology. Finally, in any situation in which an administrative unit feels comfortable in describing the totality of its components by the title of the body of knowledge, the Academy recommends that this descriptor be Kinesiology.

This statement by the Academy was a long time coming; the leaders of the field had been discussing definitions and dimensions throughout the preceding century. As long ago as 1893, Thomas Wood suggested, in his address to the International Congress of Education, that “the term physical education is so misleading, and even misrepresented, that we look for a name which shall represent fairly the real idea of the science.” And that name is *kinesiology*.

This course gives you the opportunity to study a distinctive area that no other course in the high school curriculum emphasizes – the human body. Science courses such as biology and physics discuss various concepts that relate to the human body, and so do certain health and physical education courses. However, *Foundations of Kinesiology* is the only course of its kind that truly explores anatomical, physiological, biomechanical, and psychological components of the human body.



## The Scope of Kinesiology

The confusion about definitions and dimensions went on for so long partly because of the extraordinary breadth and scope of academic approaches and professional purposes that have both defined and divided programs through the years. Despite (and because of) years of intense – and sometimes tense – discussions among the leaders of the evolving field about the form it should take and the name it should be given, the field has continued to flourish.

A primary reason for the popularity of kinesiology is the increasing recognition of the importance of health-related and skill-related human movement. Because health and human movement are so closely linked, the study of human movement naturally links with a concern for health. The correlation between being physically active and being healthy is proven. Physical activity of various types is valued not only for its ability to prevent disease but also as a form of treatment for many conditions. Of course, it has always been the basis of physical therapy, but physical activity can also promote health through such activities as tai chi and yoga in the Eastern tradition.

The biophysical bases of movement to which you will be introduced in this book are essential prerequisites for professions in human movement and health enhancement. It is no accident that graduates of kinesiology programs



*A primary reason for the popularity of kinesiology is the increasing recognition of the importance of health-related and skill-related human movement.*

are in great demand in health-related and medical professions as well as in performance-enhancement and teaching settings. Health in kinesiology is more **proactive** and preventive than the **reactive** forms of medicine that focus exclusively on the treatment of disease. Health encompasses the dynamic, constantly changing process of trying to reach one's potential; **wellness** goes one step further to combine health and happiness in a balanced state of well-being.

Skill-related performance is an important star in the constellation of kinesiology practice. It includes athletic movement that may involve varying degrees of vigor and may invoke both fine and gross motor skills. It fluctuates along a continuum of organization, from the creative freedom of play to the more structured modes of organized competitive sport played at every level by people of all ages with varying degrees of seriousness. Competition is a variable concept that may range from team sports, where groups of people compete against each other in such popular pastimes as hockey and basketball, to a range of individual challenges (Figure 1.1), including

- one versus self – contests motivated by a desire for personal challenge;
- one versus another – individual sport contests, such as tennis;
- one versus many – activities such as marathon running and triathlons;
- one versus standards – of distance (jumps, throws) or time (time trials); and
- one versus nature – conquering the elements (e.g., rock climbing).

When combined into one program of study, health-related movement and skill-related physical activity provide considerable scope for study and a broad array of potential professions in and through kinesiology.



**Figure 1.1** Competition is a variable concept that includes a range of individual challenges including **A.** one versus self, **B.** one versus another, **C.** one versus many, **D.** one versus standards, **E.** one versus nature.

## The Significance of Kinesiology

Kinesiology has the potential to help answer many of the major questions facing the global community. It is hard to name other academic fields that address topics of such significance as personal, public, and environmental health; teaching and learning based on motor development and skill acquisition; and sport performance at every level, from beginner to elite. Issues abound in high-level athletic performance, and the research conclusions can have great significance because sport is a cultural phenomenon of intense public interest – just think of how large-scale amateur and professional sports such as the Olympic Games and World Cup soccer grip the attention of nations.



Organized sport's cultural impact also makes kinesiology an area of considerable scholarly significance. Influenced by media coverage of sport and by concern for their own health, people of all ages, of every skill level, and in the full range of physical conditions are active in sports. Similarly, the focus on health and wellness, prevention of lifestyle diseases, and promotion of lifespan well-being has never been as pronounced or as widespread as today. The biophysical bases of our field, such as exercise physiology, biomechanics, and nutrition, attract many people to kinesiology, as does the scope for sociocultural, behavioral, and philosophical analysis afforded by the full range of human movement in society today. Consequently, kinesiology is becoming the choice of an ever-increasing number of students, who ultimately swell the ranks of such movement-related professions and health-related careers as teachers and coaches, researchers and professors, physicians and physical therapists.



*An ever-increasing number of students are choosing to pursue movement-related professions and health-related careers as the focus on health and wellness has grown.*

## The Name Game

### The Importance of Choosing the Right Name

The label we use to introduce and define ourselves, and most importantly to describe our field of study, has drastic consequences. It immediately implants images of what we do and who we are. We can wear the right label proudly, as a badge of respectability, or we can expend time and effort dispelling negative connotations from the minds of our audience if we pick an inappropriate term. Acceptability, credibility, and viability ride on our choice. Centrality in an organization (such as a college or university), funding for research, and upward professional mobility are affected by how we project ourselves and how others view the reputation of our area of study. This is the challenge faced by the field of the science of human movement.

### The Contenders in the Name Game

Many names have been tried, some of which are preferred over kinesiology in particular institutional settings. The most widely used name for the field throughout history has been **physical education**, sometimes paired with health, recreation, and dance. In some universities and in some societies other than North America, physical education might still be the best choice, particularly when the sole mission of that program is to prepare teachers of physical education for the K–12 school system. However, a consensus seems to be forming in North American higher education that physical education is no longer the most appropriate descriptor for most programs, primarily because the field of study underwent a curriculum metamorphosis in the latter part of the 20th century. The title *physical education* fails to adequately describe either the focus of study or the change in approach. The field has gradually been shifting toward a more scholarly, research-oriented, disciplinary approach.



Although physical education has been the most widely used name for the field throughout history, this name may still be appropriate only for programs focusing on preparing teachers of physical education for the public school system.

The reality of kinesiology is far removed from stereotypes of physical education. Changing these stereotypes is problematic, however, because they are deeply rooted in traditional associations with the following:

- Activity programs encountered in K–12 education that lack academic content and are rarely linked to the intellectual mission of the school.
- High school and postsecondary athletics programs based on the development of student-athletes. On the one hand, you would expect an individual who excels in athletic performance to gravitate toward the department that studies human movement. Many of these student-athletes excel in all spheres of learning and are so well rounded that they become leaders of the field, but some are marginal students with high athletic talent but low scholarly expectations. All too frequently, teacher-coaches who taught physical education have “taken care of” such athletes in the classroom, providing passing grades to ensure athletic eligibility regardless of academic performance. The damaging “easy major” stereotype that runs counter to the modern-day reality of academic excellence, terminal degrees, and cutting-edge research lingers on despite the best efforts of physical education reformers.
- One exclusive mission: the preparation of school teachers. Recently, the focus of professional preparation has broadened to encompass an array of alternative opportunities. The label *physical education* suggests one future career and one only, which complicates the lives of students who have chosen to study human movement in order to embark on professional pathways in fields far removed from teaching, such as health care or research.
- Labels that are limited and limiting. The word *physical* is too narrow to be used in the title. *Physical* tends to suggest that the study of human movement is not intellectual, mental, or spiritual. Similarly, *education* is unnecessary and redundant in a college or university setting: Other departments do not add education to their titles (history education or mathematics education). And, once again, the word *education* is misleading in that it narrowly points toward a teaching degree in a setting where students are preparing for many other careers (see Chapter 2).

Other names exist to describe the study of human movement. Many of them incorporate the words *exercise*, *sport*, *fitness*, or *human movement*, usually in combination with *science*, *studies*, or, less frequently, *arts*. The problem with such titles is their constricting capacity; such labels as *exercise science* by definition limit the focus of the program (to exercise) and eliminate alternative methodological approaches (except science). Because the label *physical education* is associated with stereotypes and public misperceptions, and to avoid complex titles such as *human movement and sport studies*, many universities have adopted the name change resolution proposed by the leaders in the field and reinforced in 1993 when the American Academy of Physical Education changed its own name to the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education. In 2010, the Academy took this even further, moving the physical education pedagogy under the umbrella of kinesiology and changing its name once again, to the National Academy of Kinesiology.

**“It’s time to blow the whistle on physical education stereotypes.”**



Although kinesiology is far removed from stereotypes of physical education, it will be difficult to change long-standing and deeply rooted associations that have been formed over time.