

Sapere Aude — Dare to be Wise

11 Mark J. Kittleson

CHILDHOOD

Full Name: Mark J. Kittleson

Where were you born and how did you grow up?

I am the third of six siblings and was raised in the northern suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota. I was born in White Bear Lake in 1952, moved to a nearby community at age six, and during my junior high years, I returned to White Bear Lake, which I have always considered my hometown.

Our household was lively and busy. My mother, Cecile, had two children—Dennis and Kathleen—from a previous marriage before she met my father, Melvin. She divorced shortly after Kathy's birth and later married my father in 1950. Together, they had four more children: me, John, Annette, and Jeff. We never considered Dennis and Kathleen as half-siblings; they were just our brother and sister, even though they carried their father's surname. My grandmother Emma, on my mother's side, also lived with us until I reached junior high, so there were seven members in the household. Although our family relied on a single income, we didn't suffer from a lack of it. My father was a self-employed carpenter, and my mother took great care of the household. Looking back, I am amazed at how they were able to support a big family on just my dad's salary.

What kind of educational environment did you grow up in?

Academically, I performed well in some areas but struggled in others, particularly in math. My math grades stayed around C's until ninth grade, when a cross-country coach who also taught algebra 1 used a tough, yet effective teaching style that suddenly made everything

click. I earned straight A's for the first time, and my 9th-grade guidance counselor was so impressed that he placed me in honors geometry for my first year in high school (10th grade). However, a week into that geometry class, I realized I was in over my head and dropped it. Ironically, despite avoiding math classes for the rest of my life, I later discovered that statistics became one of my strengths as a researcher.

Outside the classroom, sports became my main focus. In my early years, I always carried a baseball glove and played pickup games daily. That changed in eighth grade when, during a required 600-yard run, I realized I had a natural talent for running. I joined the track and cross-country teams the following year and performed well, winning every race in junior high.

What were your interests in high school?

During my sophomore and junior years (my high school was 10th through 12th grade — junior high covered 7th to 9th), I lettered in both cross-country and track, consistently performing well, though not at the very top. That changed in my senior year. In cross-country, I was our team's second-best runner behind my best friend (who was also the nation's top long-distance runner at that time—nobody could beat him!). In track, I specialized in the 880-yard run and dominated, winning conference, district, and regional titles before claiming the state championship. I also helped lead our 880 relay and mile relay teams to fifth and third place, respectively, contributing to our school's first-ever state team title. That season cemented my passion for athletics and the discipline it required.

EDUCATION

Tell me about your undergraduate experience and key professors.

My success in running earned me a scholarship to Mankato State College (now Minnesota

State University, Mankato). I arrived early for preseason training, sharing dormitory accommodations with my cross-country teammates and the MSC college football team. Additionally, our dorm was shared with the Minnesota Vikings, who conducted their preseason camp there. During those initial days, our meals were exceptional—thick steaks, ribs, baked potatoes. I initially thought this was typical for dormitory food; however, that perception evaporated once the Vikings left, revealing the true nature of dormitory cuisine.

Unlike my fellow football players who aimed for professional careers, runners at that time lacked similar opportunities, so I concentrated on academics. My days followed a consistent routine: a morning run, classes, an afternoon workout, and trying to finish all my studying between classes and workouts. It was a rhythm that suited me well. I wasn't a top runner in college, but I did well academically and began shaping my path in my studies.

One weekend run during my freshman year changed the course of my career. On a solo 10-mile run, I met another runner who turned out to be my health professor, Dr. Norman Eburne. For an 'old guy' (he was around 28, and yes, I was an arrogant and ignorant 18-year-old), he was remarkably in shape. During this run, he introduced me to the idea of "preventive health," which resonated deeply. Under his mentorship, I switched my major to health education. Mankato was one of the few schools at the time that offered health as a separate discipline from physical education—a distinction that later proved invaluable in my career. Dr. Eburne became my mentor and informal coach, guiding my academic and athletic growth. After he left for a federal project at Oregon State, we stayed loosely connected. Years later, we coauthored a mental health textbook with one of my doctoral mentees, Joseph Donnelly—linking three generations of students and advisors.

Another mentor, Dr. Robert Cobb, played a vital role during my senior year. When

I was financially struggling, I secured a job delivering pizza that ended at 3:00 a.m. My last class for graduation was a summer course that started at 7:30 a.m. Dr. Cobb noticed that I was having difficulty. After a class toward the end of the first week, he asked what was wrong, and after I explained, he told me to skip class the next day but to come see him in his office later that morning. When I arrived, he handed me a large stack of papers and told me I would take this class 'independently'. He outlined all the readings and assignments and asked me to schedule a weekly meeting with him. As a result, I was able to keep working while still completing this course for graduation. His compassion inspired me to offer similar flexibility to my own students—a principle that ultimately influenced my interest in alternative education formats, such as online and weekend courses.

I graduated in August 1975 as part of the first class from the newly renamed Mankato State University. My first job was teaching health careers at two small high schools in Iowa, where I experimented with hands-on learning—sending students into health facilities to shadow professionals. It was a rewarding job, but I soon realized that my heart was in higher education.

What inspired you to pursue your master's degree?

Although I enjoyed teaching health careers in Iowa, I quickly realized that high school wasn't the right fit for me. During my second year of teaching, I started taking graduate courses at Mankato to earn a master's degree. After that, I resigned from my teaching job and returned to Mankato as a full-time graduate student. My mentor, Dr. Harold Slobof, played a key role in inspiring me to pursue further education and consider a career in college teaching. My goal then became clear: to work in higher education, ideally at a university.

As I was finishing my master's degree, my job search became more intense. I had a

few interviews, but none resulted in an offer. One day in late July, my department chair, Dr. Loy Young, called me into his office to speak with Dr. Einer Olson, president of the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) and former chair of Health Sciences at Mankato. During that conference call in Dr. Young's office, Dr. Olson directly offered me a faculty position. Within a week, I packed a U-Haul, loaded my dog and cat, and drove through Canada to Maine. Later, I learned that Dr. Young played a key role in helping me secure the job. I was fortunate to work under Dr. Mary Sutherland, a sharp, no-nonsense leader with a heart of gold. She mentored me in navigating academia and emphasized the importance of faculty collaboration.

My experience at UMF was enjoyable, but neither my wife nor I liked living in Maine. It was too rural, and the 'Mainers' I became acquainted with didn't seem to welcome outsiders. Before heading back to Minnesota for the summer in 1979 (when I was starting summer classes at the University of Minnesota for my doctorate), I was invited to stop at Youngstown State University to interview for a faculty position. The interview went well, and before I left, the chair offered me the job.

Youngstown was a wonderful experience despite the economic downturn caused by the steel mills' closure. The campus made a strong impression, and even though I had no prior background in physical education, the faculty seemed friendly. The department included four health education faculty members—three women in their mid-to-late 50s and myself at age 26—along with 14 physical education faculty members. Interestingly, over 40% of the credits were earned by the health education faculty; however, I quickly noticed that health education was never given priority in that department—it was simply an afterthought. Despite that, my experience remained positive.

The health education program offered two majors: a BS in Health Education, which prepared students to teach health, and a BA in

Health Education. I found that the BA was mainly a fallback for students who didn't succeed in the teacher education program. What was notable was that I was granted authority to completely redesign the BA in Health Education into a Community Health Education program. I followed the SOPHE guidelines developed by Helen Cleary and others, which outlined what should be included in a community health major. After making those changes, the number of majors in the Community Health emphasis increased from just six in the BA program to over 100. Meanwhile, the number of students in the BS in Health Education (School Health) track also declined as they switched to the community health option. The job market for school health educators was almost nonexistent, with schools often preferring to hire physical education majors to teach health. Despite earning my undergraduate degree in school health education, this experience convinced me that the future of health education lies in the realm of community/public health.

Tell me about your doctoral journey. What motivated you to pursue it?

After my first year at Youngstown, I started looking for a nearby doctoral program; the University of Minnesota was no longer an option because of the distance and residency requirements. I was committed to earning a PhD but needed a more flexible program that would allow me to continue teaching full-time. The University of Akron, just an hour away, offered exactly what I needed—a doctorate focused on research, curriculum design, and evaluation, which perfectly matched my interests in health education.

Balancing full-time teaching at Youngstown State University with doctoral studies was demanding, but I thrived on the challenge. I completed my degree in May 1986. I was disappointed that neither my advisor nor any faculty members from my doctoral program attended my graduation—an

absence that left a lasting impression. Since then, I've made it a point to attend as many of my students' graduations as I can.

Earning my doctorate deepened my passion for research and mentoring. Over the years, I published extensively, which was uncommon among faculty in my department or at the university. I then began searching for institutions that valued scholarship and didn't require me to teach 12 credits per quarter. In 1989, I accepted a faculty position at Southern Illinois University (SIU). It turned out to be one of the most important chapters (and decisions) of my career.

What factor or set of actors contributed to your pursuing an academic career and becoming a researcher, and who were key mentors?

Although I gained some research experience at Youngstown, my time at SIU truly ignited my research interests. I worked under the guidance of a supportive chair, Dr. Dale Ritzel, who encouraged creativity and innovation. One of my closest collaborators was Dr. Paul Sarvela, an energetic teacher and exceptional researcher who became a full professor at age 30. We complemented each other well—his bold, fast-paced style balanced my more diplomatic approach. Together, we published research, mentored doctoral students, and developed new academic initiatives.

My early years at SIU involved developing a comprehensive and impactful scholarship plan. I learned how to harness the enthusiasm and skills of the dozens of doctoral students in our program. I earned tenure after two years and was promoted to full professor three years later. During this period, I began exploring the role of technology in education. In 1992, two doctoral students asked if I'd heard of conducting a Delphi Study via email—a novel concept at the time since email was so new. It inspired me to expand on the idea by creating a directory of email addresses for health educators, enabling better

communication among professionals. At a professional meeting that year, I invited department chairs nationwide to submit their faculty members' email addresses. This became the foundation of HEDIR—the Health Education Directory—which grew into the first major listserv for health educators.

By January 1994, I sent out the first HEDIR listserv message to 200 members. It grew quickly, transforming from a simple contact list into a vibrant online community for sharing resources and research. For many in health education, it became the first genuine professional social network. However, I did not want to be known solely for HEDIR; I aimed to go beyond this technology and continue my research initiatives. As a result, HEDIR's success spurred other projects, including the International Electronic Journal of Health Education (IEJHE), launched in 1997 as the first peer-reviewed online journal in our field. The IEJHE streamlined the review process and incorporated multimedia well before such practices became standard. The journal was so successful that AAHE acquired it in 2001. Unfortunately, it did not receive strong support from the organization, and its reputation soon declined. Nevertheless, HEDIR listserv continued to grow in size, popularity, and significance.

Following the university's decision to streamline departments, the Department of Health Education merged with the Department of Recreation in 1994. After the merger, the Dean appointed Regina Glover from Recreation as chair. For those of us in health education, we were devastated that Dr. Ritzel was not chosen. However, I eventually grew to appreciate Dr. Glover's leadership. She was a true advocate not only for health education but also for my professional development. She always took the time to listen and served as a great sounding board when I discussed ideas. She asked me to oversee the graduate program as the Graduate Director in 1997, which I enjoyed immensely.

In 2004, I founded HEDIR Publishing, offering affordable digital textbooks well before open educational resources became widespread. Alongside these efforts, I helped establish the HEDIR Technology Award, which was later merged with the American Association of Health Education in 2009 to honor innovators in health education technology. These initiatives enhanced my reputation in the field and demonstrated how technology could improve access to academic communication.

After more than 20 years at SIU, I grew professionally but also felt the negative effects of unstable leadership. During my 22 years there, 18 involved interim presidents or provosts (or both), which led to enrollment declines and faculty losses (the health education faculty shrank from 20 in 1988 to five in 2010), despite still offering two undergraduate degrees, an MS, an MPH, a PhD, a MD/MPH, and a PhD/MPH. When Dr. Mike Young encouraged me to apply for a department head role at New Mexico State University (NMSU) in 2010, I hesitated but was convinced after a two-hour discussion with Dean Tilahun Adera about leadership, ethics, and public health education. His vision and authenticity resonated with me.

I accepted the position at NMSU and started in January 2011. The department had experienced a tough period over the previous four years, but with Dean Adera's support and the faculty's trust, we boosted morale, improved the curriculum, and regained CEPH accreditation. Those five years strengthened my belief that effective leadership relies on integrity, communication, and empathy.

In late 2014, the College at Brockport, part of the SUNY system, invited me to apply for the position of Dean of the School of Health and Human Performance. They were impressed by how I turned the Department at NMSU around in such a short time. The School of Health & Human Performance was a large, diverse school with 16 programs and a dedicated faculty. The first year was

productive, and I believed this was where I would spend the rest of my professional career. However, at the start of my second year, a new interim provost decided to dissolve the School and merge its departments and programs with other schools—an unwise move, considering peer institutions were creating similar schools rather than dismantling them. Despite my protests, the restructuring went ahead. When my administrative role ended, I was offered a faculty position that paid less than half my dean's salary—clearly showing it was time to move on. It was a frustrating experience, but also an important reminder: not every administrative decision is based on sound, academic reasoning.

In fall 2017, I negotiated an administrative sabbatical with Brockport. During this time, I also moved to New York City after my wife secured a position at a local college. While on sabbatical, I actively searched for job opportunities. In late 2017, New York Medical College (NYMC) invited me for an interview and later offered me a position to begin on January 1, 2018. Before my start date, NYMC decided to combine three small departments—Epidemiology and Community Health, Health Policy and Management, and Environmental Health—into a single department called the Department of Public Health. As chair, I was responsible for unifying these units into a cohesive academic structure and leading the MPH and DrPH programs toward reaccreditation. This opportunity appeared very promising, and I appreciated the offer. NYMC did not provide faculty tenure; instead, it offered five-year contracts. I expressed concerns about the lack of tenure, but I was assured that there had never been an instance where a faculty member's contract was not renewed.

The early years were marked by success. We increased enrollment, hired new faculty, and built a strong international reputation, especially among Saudi Arabian students. We also created numerous joint programs, including MD/MPH, DO/MPH,

PsyD/MPH, DPT/MPH, and PharmD/MPH. When the pandemic hit in 2020, our department transitioned smoothly to “live via Zoom” courses. Students appreciated the flexibility, and this hybrid model became a lasting part of our programs. We experienced a significant rise in enrollment during this period.

However, the CEPH reaccreditation introduced new challenges. Much of the documentation from the previous self-study was missing, and several current faculty members resisted the teamwork needed to rebuild it. Fortunately, I found two outstanding colleagues—Dr. Denise Tahara and Dr. Penny Liberatos—who worked tirelessly (without pay or course release) to complete the new self-study. These two individuals, along with the support of Associate Dean Ben Johnson, guided the department through a thorough and honest review.

When the site team report arrived in May 2022, we met or exceeded 37 of 39 CEPH criteria. The two “Partially Met” items were easily resolved, and by November, we received full seven-year accreditation. It was a moment of great pride. Unfortunately, the celebration was short-lived. The day after we received our accreditation letter from CEPH, the Dean’s office informed Denise, Penny, and me that our contracts, which were expiring in December 2022, would not be renewed—allegedly due to budget cuts. The timing was disheartening, coming less than 24 hours after our accreditation success. That experience reminded me that integrity and service to students must remain nonnegotiable, even when institutions fall short. The abruptness and timing were hard to accept, but I took solace in knowing we had left the department stronger than before.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

What has been your proudest research or other professional accomplishment to date?

Several projects have filled me with pride. The founding of HEDIR in 1992 greatly influenced my career, leading to innovations like the IEJHE and HEDIR Publishing. During a period when academia was slow to adopt new technology, these initiatives demonstrated how digital tools could foster collaboration and enhance accessibility in scholarship, teaching, and service. However, I am most proud of mentoring over 100 doctoral students at SIU—many of whom have become department heads or have published extensively in their fields.

Two other events were very significant during my time at SIU. In the late 1990s, Elbert Glover asked me to join a small group of like-minded professors to explore the creation of a research academy for health educators. We met at various locations (before Zoom) to discuss this academy which Glover named, the American Academy of Health Behavior (AAHB). The people involved in this early group were individuals I knew and admired, although I hadn’t worked closely with them before. Aside from Bob Weiler (whose dissertation I served on at SIU), founders Glover, Randy Black, Molly Laflin, Chudley Werch, Jim Eddy, Nick Iammarino, Terri Manning, Bob McDermott, and Mohammad Torabi had my respect, but I had minimal collaboration with them. This experience allowed me to become close colleagues and friends. Watching the AAHB grow over the past 28 years has been very exciting.

The second lasting impact was being selected by AAHE as their 2008 Scholar of the Year. AAHE then gave the scholar the chance to give a one-hour presentation the next year in Tampa, Florida, in 2009. I probably prepared more for that talk than I did for my dissertation. I watched presentations from previous years by notable scholars like Elbert Glover, Randy Black, Jim Eddy, and Skip Valois. I didn’t want

to mess it up. Hundreds of people attended my presentation, and I was the most nervous I have ever been. Thankfully, my nerves settled, my preparations went smoothly, and I delivered a strong talk.

Inasmuch as you have been successful in disseminating your research, what advice do you have for young professionals who struggle? What advice would I pass along to new investigators?

Over the years in academia, one lesson has remained consistent: collaboration increases productivity. Since my transition into administration in 2011, my personal research has been limited; however, I take pride in mentoring younger professionals to enhance their scholarship. I tell them that my most successful research was conducted while working with multidisciplinary teams in healthcare management, psychology, and social work. Each discipline provided unique perspectives that enriched our projects and expanded the impact of our findings. I actively encourage this type of collaboration when mentoring assistant professors.

However, it is also important to understand the politics and toxicity of higher education. Toxicity in academia is widespread—I saw it firsthand at every university where I worked. Whether it was a toxic faculty senate, poor and vindictive chairs, unstable leadership that was petty, disruptive, or held negative views of faculty, or reliance on non-academics to decide the fate of a program, it's crucial to look beyond the toxicity and find people you can trust. Despite these challenges, I've learned from my mentors how to do things right and what NOT to do from unsuccessful leaders.

My current role as Dean of the College of Health Sciences at SUNY Polytechnic Institute in Utica, New York, has been the most rewarding of my career. The new SUNY Poly president, Dr. Winston Soboyejo, arrived in 2023 and emphasized “Gratitude, Kindness,

and Respect” as additional core values of the university—three words that have significantly improved the campus culture. It reminds us that civility supports academic excellence. I am very grateful to work in such a positive environment, and I find it most fitting that I'm teaching at a polytechnic institute, given my impact on technology in the fields of health education and health promotion.

Describe the most courageous thing you have done in your academic career.

One of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences was stepping in for a doctoral student at SIU who was unfairly treated by her dissertation committee. Although she was advised to defend prematurely, she received no clear feedback (in fact, none). With support from the department chair and the Graduate School dean, she replaced her committee and asked me to serve as her chair. Together, we reconstructed her study, clarified her methodology, and ensured she completed a strong, defensible dissertation. Her successful defense remains one of my proudest moments—it reaffirmed my belief that advocacy and mentorship are essential parts of academic leadership. I am proud that I intervened, even though it meant confronting two nationally recognized health educators (and friends) about their failure to support this student.

When your career ends, how would you like to be remembered?

I want to be remembered, above all, as someone who supported students and helped them succeed. For faculty and colleagues, I hope my legacy reflects that I was a “professor's administrator”—someone who understood the realities of teaching, scholarship, and service because I had experienced them firsthand. Lastly, I hope I am remembered as a person who got things done.

Is there a price for success in higher education?

There's always a trade-off, but academia offers great flexibility. I often say that committing to a full eight-hour day helps you find balance and enjoy a fulfilling life outside of work. Those eight hours don't have to be confined to nine-to-five—they can include early mornings, evenings, or weekends. Consistency is key. This flexibility has enabled me to sustain a long career without sacrificing family or personal interests. I strongly believe that family success is closely connected to academic and professional achievement.

Who outside your professional world has influenced you most?

Two people have played, and continue to play, a vital role in my life. My wife, Dr. Susan Cardenas, a professor of public health, has been my biggest supporter through every high and low since I first met her in 2012. She understands the demands of academia but constantly reminds me to keep balance and perspective. The other is my longtime friend and colleague, Dr. Bruce Ragon, whom I've known for over 45 years. We share many professional similarities, but our friendship goes far beyond the workplace. One of our most memorable experiences was completing the famous bike ride across Iowa. This was a seven-day, 480-mile journey that showed just how hilly Iowa really is.

What are your leisure passions?

I was a competitive long-distance runner well into my forties, but now my activities are simpler. My wife and I enjoy spending time outdoors, walking our dogs, working in the yard, and exploring farmers' markets, as well as local restaurants and movies. In 2023, I started teaching myself how to play the piano. After nearly two years of practice, I'd describe

myself as “decent”—not concert-ready, but it brings me great joy and peace.

If you weren't in academia, what career might you have chosen?

That's a tough question because I've never imagined myself doing anything else. So, as I approach retirement, I genuinely worry. I think more about what my good friend Bruce Ragon says: “You shouldn't retire **from** something; you should retire **to** something.” I'm still exploring (and struggling) with what that next “**to**” might be, but for now, I'm grateful to have a great job where I still love what I do.

If you could spend an evening with anyone, living or dead, who would it be and why?

There are two answers—one personal and one historical. Personally, I'd choose my father. There are many questions I never thought to ask while he was alive. He was a World War II veteran (and hero); he worked tirelessly, raised six children, and never once complained. I would love to let him know how grateful I am for all he has done. I didn't truly realize his contributions until I became a parent.

From a historical perspective, I'd love to share a meal with Theodore Roosevelt. His ideas on public health, conservation, and social reform transformed the country, and I would enjoy discussing how his hundred-year-old ideals still influence our world today.

Which three non-academic books would you recommend and why?

First, the ‘Book of Proverbs’—its focus on wisdom, humility, and sound judgment—provides timeless advice for living. I especially like Proverbs 17:28: ‘Even fools seem smart when they are quiet’ (which is why I stay so quiet!). Second, ‘The Plot Against America’ by Philip Roth paints a chilling yet thought-provoking picture of how fragile democracy can be. Based on historical facts, Roth depicts

an alternate 1930s America where Nazism gains strength in the United States. When I first read it in 2004, I thought its premise—that authoritarianism could take hold in America—was far-fetched. Today, it feels eerily relevant. Finally, any of Anne Rice’s books, starting with ‘Interview with a Vampire,’ are good reads.

What’s something people often misunderstand about you?

Many assume that because I’m outgoing and comfortable in public, I must be an extrovert. In reality, I’m an introvert. Solitude is how I recharge my energy. While being with others can be exciting, quiet times help me recover. Recognizing this has helped me balance leadership with self-care.

Closing Reflection

I thank the editors for the chance to be part of Sapere Aude. My career has two main parts: my academic pursuits, where I was productive in scholarship and teaching, and my administrative work. Since 2011, my focus in administration has been to support faculty success, whether through scholarship, teaching, or advancing in their fields.

I will enter my fiftieth year in higher education in 2028 and will likely consider retiring soon after, possibly moving back to New Mexico to be closer to family (although I still have much to accomplish before then). I’ve come to see my career not as a straightforward climb but as a series of seasons—each with its own lessons, successes, and challenges. Whether mentoring students, leading departments, or facing institutional obstacles, I’ve tried to live by the same principle: Sapere Aude—“Dare to know.” Knowledge requires courage, humility, and perseverance. From my career, I’ve learned that leadership is action, not a title. Finally, I’ve discovered that some defeats are necessary for growth, and even though I was

disappointed in such ‘defeats,’ I am also grateful that I have been able to learn and grow from them. If I’ve managed to inspire even a few others to pursue truth with integrity and compassion, then I consider my life’s work well spent.

Editor’s note.

Dr. Kittleson was the seventh member of the original 33 founders to join the Academy in April 17, 1997.

Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*