Let's Not Forget What the Educational Experience Should Be!

By Malissa Martin, EdD, ATC

Having students work alongside a supervising athletic trainer is an age-old tradition in our profession. Providing instruction, guidance, direction and serving as a mentor is part of the role and responsibilities ATCs accept as clinical instructors. Although the first role of the ATC is to provide athletic health care services to athletes and physically active persons, ATCs who are clinical instructors must also accept the role of being part educator in the clinical setting.

When you are an educator the expectations are about sharing your time, your experiences and your knowledge with students in order for them to grow both academically and clinically. It is about providing an environment conducive to learning. It is about developing an environment where students are not afraid to ask questions and where communication is positive and productive. Accepting the role of an educator means the emphasis is no longer on you – it is on the student.

Athletic training centers, athletic fields and athletic courts serve as laboratories for athletic training students to perform clinical and field experiences. Clinical experiences, required for athletic training education, are extensions of the classroom and should be treated as all other educational settings. During clinical experiences students are to be exposed to a variety of sports so they may experience prevention methods, injury evaluation, injury treatment, injury rehabilitation and health care administration procedures.

They are also exposed to the interactions between ATCs and athletes, coaches, physicians and administrators.

Throughout these experiences the clinical instructor must realize s/he is in an educational setting. If ATCs want athletic training students in their facilities, they must assume the responsibilities of all other instructors and faculty at the institution. They must abide by the faculty manual and understand policies concerning student rights. Students in athletic training educational programs are no longer to be seen or treated as workers for athletic departments and or ATCs. They are there to learn within the clinical environment and to learn through the delivery of health care services.

Athletic training students should not be asked to do tasks that are not part of the athletic training experience, just as students in an anatomy lab or students performing internships are not asked to do tasks unrelated to the laboratory lesson or the internship experience.

When students are asked by their clinical instructor to do tasks not associated with the athletic training experience, it puts the students in an awkward position. If the student refuses a request, s/he may feel the clinical instructor may no longer like him/her. The student may think his/her clinical evaluation or grade may be in jeopardy if s/he does not do what is asked.

Athletic training students should not be put in these compromising situations. Faculty and clinical instructors are in a position of authority over students. This authority should not be abused by asking students to perform tasks not associated with their athletic training clinical education.

When students do have problems with their clinical instructor, the CAAHEP entry-level athletic training education program chain of command for that institution should be followed. In most instances, the chain of command would have the student first approach his or her clinical instructor about the problem. If the student does not feel comfortable approaching the instructor, s/he should approach the coordinator for clinical education. If there is no clinical education coordinator, then the student should meet with the program director to discuss the problem.

Policies and procedures should be developed detailing how problems in the clinical education portion of the program between students and clinical instructors are to be handled. At no time should students be reprimanded for bringing problems forward and discussing their concerns.

The clinical education portion of an athletic training education program is vital and can be an excellent educational experience for the athletic training student. However, clinical instructors must accept the roles and responsibilities of faculty and provide an educational environment that is conducive to learning.

I challenge all clinical instructors to reflect on the clinical experiences they provide. Is the clinical experience positive? Is it one of open communication that welcomes ideas, questions and interaction? Does the clinical experience encourage students to use their expanding knowledge, apply skills and empower them to become the professionals that will lead this profession into the future? And finally, are you doing your job as a clinical instructor? **nn**

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