Renewing Athletic Training Education – A Step into the Future

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By Dawn McMullan

Education is the backbone of any allied health care profession. For athletic trainers, education has been the subject of lengthy discussion and debate over the past few years.

NATA's Board of Directors started looking into athletic training education in December 1994, when the Board appointed a 15-member Education Task Force. The task force is composed of a diverse group of individuals, ranging from athletic training educators, members of the NATA Board of Certification and athletic trainers from internship route schools.

Since the task force was formed, the members have met, brainstormed, talked to fellow athletic trainers, researched and hashed out the education requirements for certified athletic trainers. From undergraduate education to continuing education – the task force covered it all. What is the result? Seventeen recommendations for improving the education of athletic trainers.

The possible changes affect every aspect of athletic training education. One recommendation: By the year 2004, a requirement that, in order to sit for the certification examination, all individuals must have completed all the requirements for athletic training from a bachelor's or master's program accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Program (CAAHEP).

But that is just the tip of the iceberg...

Why the Change?

Image is certainly one of the issues. Having two routes to certification doesn't sit well with lawmakers and other health care professionals.

Ever try explaining how to become a certified athletic trainer? You can take the curriculum route that requires a bachelor's degree in athletic training and 800 internship hours, or you can go the internship route that requires a bachelor's degree and 1,500 internship hours. This can be a bit confusing. In fact, many practicing athletic trainers don't understand the certification process. And with issues like health care reform and third party reimbursement on the table, it is important that those who decide what part athletic trainers will play in the future health care system understand how the certified athletic trainer is educated.

"In my opinion, the fact that there are two very different routes to certification is confusing to our employers," said Chad Starkey, PhD, ATC, who sits on the NATA Education Task Force as well as the Board of Certification. "This change will give the profession a sense of solidarity.

"That, in turn, should help gain state licensure laws, should help those people who want to go for third-party reimbursement. Just about every other issue you look at, this will affect in some way or another."

According to NATA President Denny Miller, ATC, PT, the need for such a change has been building for several years.

"Some things that have been coming up consistently loud and clear were problems with employment, problems with the quality of the education of the entry-level athletic trainer, problems with the clinical education of the entry-level athletic trainer, problems with licensure," Miller said.

"From the people in the field, the committee chairs, the members, a single request kept coming back: We've really got to look at where we're at, where we need to be – and it all comes back to education."

Developing the Proposals

The 17 recommendations came from a previous list of more than 120 ideas of what the task force would do if it had to

scrap every educational rule the profession had, said Richard Ray, PhD, ATC, head athletic trainer at Hope College in Michigan and co-chair of the Education Task Force.

While continually talking to members at meetings and monitoring the athletic training LISTSERV on the Internet, the task force kept meeting, each time whittling away and refining the list. NATA's Board of Directors has reviewed these 17 recommendations. Now, the task force goes back to the membership, presenting the report at every district meeting in 1996. After getting all the input it can, a final draft of the report will be presented to the Board of Directors.

"We needed to make things more consistent so when the public and other members of the health care community and legislators see the name 'athletic trainer,' they'll know exactly how that person was educated and they'll know exactly what skills that person has," Ray said.

The task force members expect quite a bit of discussion over the recommendations, especially the recommendations regarding the internship route to certification.

"People have to look beyond their own environment for what's ultimately best for the profession," said John Schrader, HSD, ATC, assistant athletic trainer and curriculum coordinator at Indiana University, who sat as co-chair of the task force. "No other allied health professional has on-the-job training as a basic route to entry. This is critical to our credibility."

Task force member Karen Toburen, EdD, ATC, has significant experience in both routes to certification. Toburen, director of sports medicine and athletic training at Southwest Missouri State University, came up through the internship route to certification and now directs a curriculum program.

A major problem Toburen sees with the internship route is the disparity among courses students take from one university to another. In an approved curriculum program, classes must address specific content areas covering 191 competencies. In an internship offering, classes must have a specific name – leaving a wide door of interpretation of what that class should entail, Toburen said.

"We recognize that in order to protect the integrity of the credential, you just really need to have a degree in athletic training," she said.

At Southwest Missouri State, the curriculum route means 1,200 hours of hands-on training – not 800 as is required for certification. Which brings the next question: is there enough hands-on training for students in curriculum programs? While the task force didn't suggest a specific number of supervised clock hours for the curriculum, members did recommend that the number of hours be reviewed and possibly increased.

Task force member Mike Nesbitt, ATC, of Northern Arizona University, stood by those programs that provide an internship route to certification, but offered his support of the proposal.

"I was probably the strongest supporter on the task force of the internship route to certification," Nesbitt said. "I knew the change was inevitable, but I wouldn't support a proposal without making sure student athletic trainers in the internship route would have the opportunity to pursue an entry-level master's program."

And, according to Nesbitt, after hours of deliberation, the task force was able to put the needs of the profession above individual needs.

"Everybody was looking out for the profession, not for themselves," he added. "What we have is a workable document to give to our members."

Member Concerns

Task force members expect certain questions to come up as they discuss their recommendations at district meetings:

Q: What will happen to schools with an internship route?

A: Task force members believe many schools with internship routes are

on the verge of being up to the standard for accreditation.

"People should know that I have an internship right now (at Hope College)," Ray said. "I'm trying to convert it so I can apply for accreditation. I'd like to encourage other people out there who feel they have a strong enough education program to do the same thing."

Q: Since not all schools have the ability to develop a curriculum program, won't future athletic trainers be severely limited in where they can go to school?

A: Task force members say the need for curriculum programs will drive the creation of more programs.

Today, 14 graduate programs are accredited by the NATA/Professional Education Committee (NATA-PEC) and 84 entry-level programs are accredited by the CAAHEP/Joint Review Committee on Educational Programs in Athletic Training (JRC-AT). But over the past two years, 300 schools have requested information on accreditation.

"With an eight-year period of implementation, I don't anticipate anyone who really cares about the education process not being able to be accredited," said Robert Behnke, HSD, ATC, professor of physical education at Indiana State University and chair of both the NATA-PEC and the JRC-AT. "I don't anticipate that eight years down the road there won't be sufficient numbers of programs to cover those who want to enter the profession."

Despite the expected questions and disagreements, task force members defend every proposal they have made.

"If the membership could have sat in the room during all of the task force meetings and listened to the varying responses from a task force intentionally selected to represent all facets of NATA, they would have seen it agree upon these proposal unanimously," Miller said. "I think these are a great set of recommendations that are, in fact, absolutely essential to our future."

The members of the NATA Education Task Force encourage you to read the following report. This information will be presented at NATA's District Meetings and at the NATA Annual Meeting & Clinical Symposia in June. Any questions should be directed, in writing, to the task force co-chairs:

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