NATA Board Takes First Step in Reform

by Dawn McMullan

The move toward education reform in the athletic training profession has taken its first big step — the NATA Board of Directors has approved eighteen recommendations made by the Education Task Force.

The members who took part in the process say this is a significant move for the NATA.

"This landmark decision will affect education significantly into the millennium," said Pete Carlon, MS Ed, ATC, District Six representative to the Board of Directors. "It's a major reform in how we prepare individuals to meet the demands of the profession, both entry-level and continuing education. It will further enhance our credibility, help us keep abreast of current techniques and better qualify our members to perform their function of caring for the physically active."

Combining Educational Routes

The most significant of the eighteen points is the combination of the internship and the curriculum routes of education into one new route, which is heavy on curriculum, but plans to take the important hands-on experience aspect from the internship route.

"We're really eliminating both routes of certification and just creating one, which is graduating from an accredited program," Carlon said. "We're taking the best of both of these routes and putting them into one to develop the best possible preparation for our students."

The changes don't officially take place until 2004, giving everyone plenty of time to adjust.

"The first group of students this will affect are in the ninth grade today," NATA President Kent Falb, ATC, PT, said. "We could not enact it any faster for multiple reasons. First, we couldn't change requirements on students already in programs. Second, there are a lot of actions that must be taken by the Board of Certification, the Board of Directors, the Research and Education Foundation and the Joint Review Committee on Athletic Training (JRC-AT). It just can't happen overnight."

Some of the recommendations, however, are already taking place, Falb said: working to bring uniformity to state licensure laws, promoting research, encouraging the name "athletic trainer" instead of just "trainer."

All of this goes toward better preparing athletic trainers and giving the profession a better public perception.

"It brings the athletic trainer in line with other allied-health-care professions and their credentialing routes," said John Schrader, HSD, ATC, co-chair of the Education Task Force. "That's important because, as the work environment for the athletic trainer has increased, most of those positions have been in a traditional health-care environment. Athletic trainers have historically been in a non-traditional environment.

"If we're going to be a legitimate health-care provider in that industry, then our credential pattern should be consistent with the standard for other allied health-care professionals."

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Creating the Task Force

The actual process started in June 1994, when the Board of Directors created a task force to address the educational preparation and continuing education of athletic trainers. By the end of the year, the 15-member task force, which was comprised of athletic training educators, members of the Board of Certification, and athletic trainers

from both the curriculum and internship routes, was in place and ready to go. The Board also balanced the membership of the task force to include men and women, minorities, individuals from a variety of geographical settings, and professionals who hold dual credentials.

The task force brainstormed, talked to NATA members, researched education requirements within the profession and in other health-care professions, then brainstormed some more. From its original list of 120 ideas for education reform, the task force narrowed its wish list to 18.

"We looked at every aspect of educational preparation for the athletic trainer," said Karen Toburen, EdD, ATC, department head of sports medicine/athletic training at Southwest Missouri State University and a member of the Education Task Force. "We knew we had one chance to reform the present system and we wanted to make sure it was done right. I see this as a very positive move for the athletic training profession. I think this will have a very positive impact on the profession in the next decade."

This December, the Board of Directors embraced those 18 recommendations. Board members are now working toward appointing a 45-member Education Council, which will help usher in these changes, and help members understand and implement the changes.

Richard Ray, PhD, ATC, co-chair of the Education Task Force, said the process was difficult but vitally important to the profession.

"When we started down this path two-and-a-half years ago, the first thing we tried to do was design a process that we thought would result in a product that everybody could accept and live with," Ray said. "By and large, that has happened. We worked hard to have inclusiveness on the Education Task Force and that has helped us craft a document that reflects those backgrounds.

"We spent a lot of time getting input from members, to have their opinions and feelings shared on this issue. The result was a set of recommendations that most of the profession can pretty much live with. It's not going to be comfortable for everyone. It amounts to some tough changes. But, for the most part, there is a pretty good consensus that it's the right thing to do."

And the right thing it is, echoes Falb.

"I believe this will enhance our status in the health-care field and, likewise, our efforts toward third-party reimbursement," Falb said. "The internship route has served us well for many years. But in order to meet some state regulatory acts, and to be looked upon as equal to other health-care professionals, the Board of Directors felt we needed to eliminate that route and create the educationally enhanced program."

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Establishing Standards

The biggest way to enhance the education of the athletic trainer was to standardize it, Ray said.

"This will have the benefit of letting the public and other members of the health-care community know that when they work with an athletic trainer, they are always going to be working with a person of high quality and a person who has been educated to a very rigorous standard," he said.

In addition to helping the entry-level athletic trainer, plans for the new Education Council include streamlining the way athletic trainers receive continuing education, Ray said.

All of this will improve the image of the athletic trainer, Ray said. Image improvement isn't the most important aspect of the recommendations, but it shouldn't be overlooked.

"We didn't do any of this just to look better," he said. "We could've done easier things if that were the case. But this, I think, will make a substantive improvement in the quality of the product we are producing."

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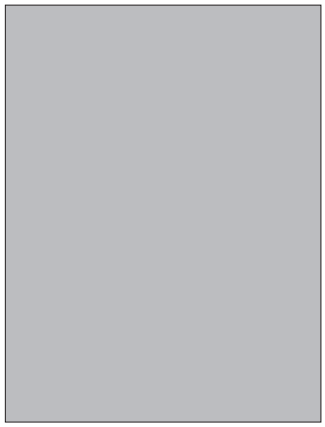

This move for education reform started under the leadership of former NATA President Denny Miller, ATC, PT, who also sat on the Education Task Force. Miller said the Board of Director's approval of the recommendations is one of the best moves the Board ever made for the profession.

"I think the bottom line is it has the potential to elevate the capability of the athletic trainer into the health-care field and what we are going to be facing as we go into the next century," Miller said. "In my mind, this is absolutely necessary. And it's only the beginning. We cannot ever be satisfied with the level of expertise. If we are, we are doomed."

"This affects my institution greatly. But it will give me more credibility as we work toward accreditation. I came up through the curriculum route, and I have supervised and taught in both routes. Now we will be paralleling our academic program with other medical fields, that is, other health-care fields. Medical schools and physical therapy schools have stand-alone recognition. Having a single-route to certification will hopefully put us in the same place. — Cynthia "Sam" Booth, MS, ATC

Of course, there will be members—especially those intimately involved in the internship program—who will have concerns about the changes: What will happen to schools with internship routes to certification? Where will schools get their student athletic trainers? Won't future athletic trainers be severely limited in where they can go to school?

Board and Education Task Force members say these recommendations were not meant to put internship-based college and university programs out of business. While some universities with internship programs may decide not to pursue accreditation, most are already in a position to do so.

"I was very skeptical initially," said Carlon, director of athletics at the University of Texas at Arlington (an internship school). "My entire experience, with the exception of one year, has been with the internship route. But I think if institutions will evaluate what they have in place, they will find that they already qualify for accreditation."

Ray, as coordinator of athletic training at Hope College in Michigan, had concerns, too, because Hope's program is an internship one.

"We are working on accreditation," Ray said. "I'm trying to put my money where my mouth is. I really put my neck on the line with these recommendations because I know the long-term benefits."

Because colleges and universities have so much time, Ray believes most will be able to be accredited before 2004. The process for accreditation takes one-and-a-half to two years, he said.

Another concern involves the student athletic trainers but, as schools with internship programs won't disappear, neither will student athletic trainers, board and task force members say.

"I don't think that is ever going to happen," Ray said. "I've tried to spread that message over the last year, but there is still a fear out there and I can understand why people feel this way. They think, 'If my kids can't get certified coming out of my institution, why come here in the first place?'

"Well, there have always been student athletic trainers, long before we had certification. Many of our student athletic trainers don't go into the profession anyway. There are a wide variety of reasons why they work as student athletic trainers, and I think those reasons will exist long after this change takes effect."

Miller agrees, saying the profession needs to look at itself a little differently.

"I think we have to get over the concept that the athletic training profession is responsible for providing all the colleges and universities with low-cost health-care," he said. "It is the responsibility of the institution to provide appropriate medical care. That is a major hurdle for us."

A Matter of Choice

Many of the student athletic trainers are doing the work for enjoyment or a small stipend, Falb said.

"Those who really want to get into this profession will get their baccalaureate degrees from the institution of their choice, then go on to what we have created—post baccalaureate approved entry-level programs," Falb said. "There will be

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ways for these students to become certified and still go to the institution close to home, or the one most financially feasible."

The post-baccalaureate program will allow students to choose a liberal arts college, then get their athletic training credentials at an accredited college or university. The exact standards such a program will entail will be up to the university, Schrader said.

Mike Nesbitt, ATC, a member of the Education Task Force, works as head athletic trainer at Northern Arizona University, which is an internship school. He did his undergraduate work at an internship program, and his graduate work with a curriculum program.

In Nesbitt's opinion, one of the more important recommendations to ease the change is the post-baccalaureate program.

"If that happens, a student can go to one school (that may not be accredited), then transfer to get the other coursework he or she would need at another university," Nesbitt said. "I've seen both sides of this, and I truly believe in it as long as it involves more than just curriculum. I certainly think it's possible to place as much emphasis into the practical and clinical area as we do the didactic area.

"I think it will be up to many internship programs to start building these alliances with curriculum schools so they can get their students in. We will work with other schools to take care of the students."

Working together—in the transition period and beyond—is the key, Nesbitt said: "This is going to take a lot of input from lots of people—not just those in curriculum programs. It will take a unified effort from everybody."

Cynthia "Sam" Booth, MS, ATC, District Four Representative to the Board, also works with an internship program at Moorhead State University in Minnesota.

"This affects my institution greatly," she said. "But it will give me more credibility as we work toward accreditation. I came up through the curriculum route, and I have supervised and taught in both routes. Now we will be paralleling our academic program with other medical fields, that is, other health-care fields. Medical schools and physical therapy schools have stand-alone recognition. Having a single-route to certification will hopefully put us in the same place.

"I think there is a fear out there among the membership that we might lose more of the hands-on approach with these recommendations. But I challenge those who are planning to have accredited programs and those who currently have them to continue the quality of practical experience."

Members of the Board of Directors and the Education Task Force know not everyone will agree with their recommendations. For the betterment of the profession, however, they hope NATA members will use their talents and knowledge to continue the process of educational reform.

"One of the things I learned a long time ago with things like this is that understanding is more important than agreeing," Ray said. "What we are trying to do is to get everybody to understand what has happened and what needs to happen.

"Our profession is becoming increasingly diverse, as well as large. The days when we could all sit down in one room and agree are long gone. This is a solution that meets the needs of the profession as far as we can see into the future. Our goal is to try to get everybody to understand where we are going and why we are going there."

Please see pages 16-24 for a full report on the Education Task Force recommendations and rationale.

NATA's

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