Recommendations to Reform Athletic Training Education

by the NATA Education Task Force

Editor's Note:

These recommendations were adopted by the NATA Board of Directors at its December 1996 meeting in Dearborn, Michigan. See pages 4-6 for the history of Education Task Force and the decision-making process.

Provision 1

The NATA should work with the NATABOC to institute a requirement, to take effect in 2004, that in order to be eligible for NATABOC certification, all candidates must possess a baccalaureate degree and have successfully completed a CAAHEP accredited entry-level athletic training education program.

Rationale

The body of knowledge in athletic training is increasing at a phenomenal rate every year. Evidence of this is provided in part by the number of new books and journals in sports medicine, and athletic training in particular, generated by various publishers every year. Some educators, especially those whose programs lack human or financial resources, find it increasingly difficult to help students master this body of knowledge. The NATA has historically offered two routes to certification one requiring education in the context of a formal educational program and the other a more "hands on" experiential route supplemented by a minimal amount of course work. There is a mounting body of evidence that the second route —the internship route —no longer functions to consistently prepare entry-level athletic trainers in accordance with standards that the profession is (or should be) willing to accept.

Many educational programs that now prepare students via the internship route to certification could, with a few modifications, qualify for CAAHEP accreditation if they were willing to submit to the review process. The newly proposed Education Council (see Provision 8) should stand ready to provide assistance to these programs as they make the transition. This group's assistance would presumably go a long way toward reducing the anxiety that many educators who prepare students by the internship route now have about the process.

Provision 2

The NATA should encourage the development of accredited entry-level post-baccalaureate certificate programs in athletic training and allow these programs to consider an applicant's previous didactic and clinical experience as a partial criterion for admission. The NATA should encourage the development of 2-3, 3-2, 4-1, and other creative models for entry-level education.

Rationale

Not all athletic trainers make the decision to pursue entry into our profession in their freshman or sophomore year of college. Many come to this decision later in their college career or even after some post-baccalaureate experience. Conversely, some students know that they want to become athletic trainers, but for a variety of reasons choose to attend a college or university not accredited by CAAHEP. Their reasons are many. The college they choose often has special qualities that both they and their parents desire in an undergraduate experience. Perhaps the college has offered them an attractive financial aid package critical to their ability to pursue higher education. The list is endless.

What should we do with these students, many of whom would be excellent athletic health care professionals? We think that we should encourage people like this to pursue entry into our profession through entry-level post-baccalaureate certificate programs in athletic training, some of which may be bundled with traditional master's degree programs. These people are usually older and more mature than the typical college freshman. Graduate education is often more consistent with their learning style. They are often more financially committed to pursue their career goals than undergraduates dependent on parental support.

The other point that must be made explicit is that these programs will be expected to adhere to the same accreditation criteria as CAAHEP applies to undergraduate programs. This will present special challenges to graduate educators, but we believe the potential payoffs, both for the institutions and the profession, are significant. The Education Council (see Provision 8) should stand ready to provide advice and assistance to institutions interested in developing these programs.

It should be stated categorically that we are not recommending that all programs convert to the graduate level as a prerequisite for certification for their students. We remain committed to the baccalaureate model of education. This suggestion is simply intended to help provide educational opportunity in athletic training for those students who would be better served by an alternative to the traditional baccalaureate program. This approach will help our profession establish a bona fide alternative route to certification. In addition, it will provide an opportunity for students in internship "programs" to eventually become certified.

Provision 3

The NATA should develop and implement a program leading to certificates of advanced qualification (CAQ) for athletic trainer educators. The educational content of these continuing education courses would be developed by the NATA Education Council (see Provision 8). Certification of competence of the participants and the subsequent awarding of the credential should be contracted to the NATABOC.

Rationale

Our purpose in recommending this program is twofold. First we want to recognize those among us who have developed special skills and acquired specialized knowledge that extends significantly beyond that required for entry-level certification. We should hold these people up as examples of what our professionals are capable of both to our younger members and to those outside the profession who may lack respect for our talents.

The second reason we think this is important is that we feel an obligation to not only prepare health care professionals for the practice of "generic" athletic training, but also for the special skills required in the marketplace. Although there are vast areas of overlap, the high school demands different skills than the sports medicine clinic. The industrial setting requires different skills than the university. We are specifically not trying to water down the basic set of skills that have made athletic trainers so adaptable in the marketplace. We're not trying to change the essence of what it means to be an athletic trainer. We are trying to help athletic trainers position themselves as uniquely qualified professionals in the markets we've already identified and in new health care niches we haven't identified yet.

- **The NATA should recommend to the JRC-AT that the CAAHEP Essentials & Guidelines be amended to include a guideline recommending that clinical instructors possess a Clinical Instructor CAQ or its equivalent by the year 2000.** *(see Essentials & Guidelines, Section I.B.1.b.[1][b]).*

Rationale

A common assumption in our profession is that every certified athletic trainer is qualified to educate students. Virtually anyone can supervise the clinical experience of

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student athletic trainers. We assume that athletic trainers, by virtue of their certification, have both the knowledge and expertise to establish learning objectives, structure learning experiences, and assess student learning, even though the vast majority have had no formal training in these areas.

This provision is intended to help provide those who supervise the clinical experiences of student athletic trainers with the tools they need to help them create the most meaningful clinical education experience possible. We think that program directors will appreciate the opportunity to improve the quality of their students' clinical experiences. We think that clinical instructors will feel more comfortable knowing that they have the tools they need to structure experiences of high quality. Finally we think that students will appreciate the improvements in their clinical education that are likely to accrue from this programmatic enhancement.

- **The NATA should recommend to the JRC-AT that the CAAHEP Essentials & Guidelines be amended to include a guideline recommending that program directors possess a Program Director CAQ or its equivalent by the year 2001.** *(see Essentials & Guidelines, Section I.B.1.a.[1][b]).*

Rationale

This provision builds on the previous one. It goes one step farther by insuring that those who design and implement the educational programs our students rely upon to help them master the entry-level competencies possess the knowledge, skill, and experience to accomplish these tasks. Educational program design, management, and evaluation are not entry-level skills. Yet any certified athletic trainer with a minimum of three years of post-baccalaureate experience is presumed to be qualified in these areas. Our students deserve, and frankly need, better than this. We feel the standards for program directors are set too low. Some members are concerned that program directors can move from degree to degree with little actual athletic training experience before assuming the leadership of an educational program. The Program Director's CAQ would provide a useful service to those who would educate our students.

Should some program directors be "grandfathered?" Perhaps. Those program directors who have doctorates in educational leadership, educational administration, or curriculum design and evaluation may find the content of the CAQ course redundant and unnecessary. Perhaps a set of equivalent qualifications similar to those just listed should be developed to parallel the CAQ requirement. This provision will obviously require further refinement before it is ready to be implemented, but we think the idea is sound and the time is right to raise the standard in this area.

Provision 4

The NATA should recommend to the JRC-AT that the CAAHEP Essentials & Guidelines, section II.B.2.b., be modified to reflect formal instruction in pharmacology and pathology.

Rationale

Although athletic trainers are typically although not always prohibited from prescribing, storing, or dispensing prescription medications, they have an important role to play in the medications that athletes use as a part of their recovery from athletic illness and injury. In some states athletic trainers can and do legally participate as an intermediary in the "prescription medication chain" from physician to athlete. Even in jurisdictions where athletic trainers are statutorily prohibited from such activity, they still remain a source of information to athletes regarding their medication questions. Athletic trainers can, under appropriate circumstances, help athletes make appropriate choices about non-prescription medications. That athletic trainers store and dispense non-prescription medications is common knowledge in our profession.

At present, formal instruction in pharmacology is only recommended for athletic trainers. We think that there are at least three reasons why formal instruction in pharmacology ought to be required of all athletic trainers. First, the most recent role delineation study identified pharmacology knowledge as one of 10 "universal competencies." The second reason this guideline should be changed to a requirement is that pharmacology is included in many places in the Competencies in Athletic Training. Finally, athletic training educators from both accredited and non-accredited programs agree to an overwhelming degree that formal instruction in pharmacology should be included in our entry-level programs.

Many of the arguments used to support formal instruction in pharmacology apply in equal measure to the teaching of pathology. It can be argued that it is impossible for athletic trainers to restore injured and ill athletes to normal function

unless they can make rational treatment decisions based on their knowledge of the body's reaction to injury and illness. Unfortunately and somewhat surprisingly athletic trainers are not presently required to receive formal instruction in the pathology. Knowledge of pathology is basic to many of the activities identified in the most recent role delineation study. Although this is more implicit than the pharmacologically oriented activity described above, it nonetheless forms the foundation for many of the functions we undertake on a daily basis.

Provision 5

The NATA should recommend that the NATABOC reevaluate the minimum number of hours necessary to sit for the certification exam and that the present high-risk sport requirement be reevaluated.

Rationale

Most candidates who sit for the certification examination have far more clinical hours than the minimum requirement. Many athletic training education programs have clinical experience requirements that exceed the minimum recommended by CAAHEP and required by NATABOC. The perfect clinical education mix is still an elusive phantom after which we continue to chase. The effectiveness of the clinical experience is still probably more closely related to the quality of the experience, rather than the quantity of clinical hours.

The definition of "high-risk" requires additional study. The list presently used by the NATABOC has been called into question by some and should be reviewed. We suggest that a joint committee of the JRC-AT and the NATABOC be appointed to re-define the standards for what constitutes "high-risk." Perhaps the injury rates identified through the NCAA Injury Surveillance System would be a useful point of departure for defining "high-risk." Whichever method is eventually used, this issue must be addressed.

Provision 6

The NATA should recommend that the JRC-AT investigate the extent to which the various practice settings in which athletic trainers are commonly employed are incorporated into the clinical and didactic components of the education programs.

Rationale

The clinical skills required in different settings in which athletic trainers are employed are, in fact, different. Even if one chose to argue that the skills are the same, there could be very little reasonable argument with the statement that the patients are different.

Our students need to learn to work with patients in a variety of settings for at least two reasons. First, our profession has asserted that its members are qualified to work in a variety of settings. It is difficult to justify that position if we don't provide our students with access to the kinds of patients they are likely to encounter in those settings. Second, these kinds of clinical experiences provide our students with the information they need to be able to decide where they want to work. Our profession has a national goal of placing a certified athletic trainer in every high school, yet we don't require our students to acquire any experience with adolescents during their education that will help them decide if they even want to work in a high school. The sports medicine clinic has become the primary source of employment for our members, yet we don't require our students to acquire any experience in the very setting in which they are most likely to work after college.

Provision 7

The NATA should subcontract the accreditation of accredited master's degree programs in athletic training to the JRC-AT.

Rationale

Program evaluation and review requires special knowledge and skill. This knowledge and skill requires an investment of time, financial resources, and people. The JRC-AT exists to evaluate educational programs in athletic training. It has invested in all three of these elements to develop a comprehensive education evaluation and accreditation program. It has made itself an expert body in the art of helping institutions uphold the high standards for athletic training education that we in the profession demand. It also fulfills an important requirement for the NATA's membership in CAAHEP.

The JRC-AT has so far limited its activity to the evaluation of entry-level athletic training education programs. This is entirely appropriate and consistent with its mandate. In

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light of the expertise the JRC-AT has developed in this area, however, it doesn't make sense to develop another, separate, body to evaluate accredited master's degree programs in athletic training. Why not take advantage of the JRC-AT's expertise? We think that the most logical way to approach the accreditation of advanced master's degree programs in athletic training is to contract this function to those who already have the expertise in this area. The JRC-AT is in a better position than we are to determine how they would organize for this advanced responsibility. Perhaps they would create a subcommittee devoted to post entry-level program accreditation. This, in addition to the financial considerations inherent in such an arrangement, remain to be negotiated between the NATA and the JRC-AT.

Provision 8

The NATA should reconfigure the way professional education is organized. The NATA should establish an Education Council to act as the clearinghouse for educational policy, development, and delivery in our profession. Specific functions of the Education Council should include, but not be limited to the following:

- **Maintain a constant dialogue on accreditation of entry-level programs through its association with the JRC-AT.**

Rationale

The importance of this provision seems self-evident.

- **Maintain a constant dialogue on accreditation of master's degree programs through its association with the JRC-AT.**

Rationale

Assuming that Provision 7 above is enacted, this function of the Education Council seems rather obvious. The question of who would establish (the Graduate Subcommittee of the Education Council vs. the JRC-AT) the standards for accreditation of master's degree programs, as opposed to who would enforce (The JRC-AT) the standards is open to debate. In any case, however, a close working relationship between the two bodies would be a prerequisite to effective accreditation of master's degree programs under this scenario.

- **Act as a resource for the development of doctoral programs in athletic training.**

Rationale

The profession of athletic training needs more doctoral-educated members for several reasons. The doctorate is still considered the terminal degree in most institutions of higher learning. If our profession hopes to impact higher education policy we must have a critical mass of doctoral-educated athletic trainers among the senior faculty of colleges and universities around the country. Doctoral programs are also important because they provide much of the research agenda that helps expand our body of knowledge. Finally, doctoral programs in athletic training are important because they will provide the next generation of athletic training educators. Athletic trainers could continue to seek doctorates in related fields like exercise science, education, and health, but considering the way our body of knowledge has increased over the past few years, and given the likelihood of further expansion, we think the need for more athletic trainers with PhDs in athletic training is justified.

- **Coordinate the educational content and delivery of all NATA-sponsored continuing education and CAQ programs.**

Rationale

There is no area of greater duplication in our profession than continuing education. At least three entities, excluding the PEC, have expanded some willingly, some unwillingly, and some through necessity into ventures designed to enhance the professional capability of the post entry-level athletic trainer. These entities include the Convention Committee, the NATA Board of Certification, and the NATA Research and Education Foundation. In addition, district and state continuing education groups are responsible for planning and delivering a substantial percentage of all the continuing education hours available to our members.

Is this duplication of services all bad? Not necessarily. The problem that arises from our diversified approach to continuing education programming is that we may be losing sight of who should be appropriately accountable for the quality of continuing education in our profession.

We recommend that the Education Council be empowered as the official clearinghouse of continuing education at the national level in our association. The EC should develop partnerships with others who have a legitimate interest in

continuing education and continuing competence of the post entry-level athletic trainer, including the NATABOC and the NATAREF. The Education Council is especially encouraged to work with the NATAREF to develop funding sources for continuing education programs. This will be an important factor in keeping the cost of continuing education as low as possible for our members, in addition to acting as a possible source of revenue for REF programs.

- **Serve as a resource to district, state, and local continuing education program planners.**

Rationale

The Education Council, if properly staffed and funded, will have the expertise to substantially assist local continuing education planners. They will be able to help local planners develop programs that are educationally sound. They will also be able to assist in the evaluation of local continuing education programs. The national body has resources it can share with local entities. This should be viewed by local planners as a positive move that will help them improve program quality.

- **Act as the approval agency for certifying continuing education providers.**

Rationale

The people in our profession who have the best understanding of education in its broadest sense ought to be responsible for determining the suitability of continuing education providers. They have the expertise needed to judge the competence of potential providers to deliver continuing education consistent with the standards we desire. It seems logical to us that the group responsible for overall coordination of the continuing education program ought to also take responsibility for approving the providers of the programs.

- **Develop new technologies for the delivery of continuing education programs.**

Rationale

New technologies for the delivery of educational services are being developed at a surprisingly fast rate. Satellite education programs and learning opportunities that take advantage of computer technology, especially the Internet, are just two examples of the avenues we ought to explore as we consider new continuing education ventures for our members. The EC should be in a good position to do this since many of its members will presumably work in colleges and universities where such technologies are already being used. As the cost of travel continues to rise and fewer of our members are able to travel to our national symposium, we must consider new and innovative ways to bring education to them. The EC is the logical choice for this important assignment.

- **The Education Council should replace the present Professional Education Committee. This provision is contingent upon approval of Provision 7.**

Rationale

Since the Education Council would be assuming all of the responsibilities of the present Professional Education Committee, in addition to taking on a few additional duties, it seems logical that the PEC be phased out.

Provision 9

The NATA should cooperate with the NATABOC in its ongoing evaluation of the new rules for CEU accumulation and recertification.

Rationale

In 1994, the Board of Certification adopted new standards for accumulation of CEUs. We are in the third year of a three-year cycle. The NATABOC is presently engaged in a process to evaluate the effect of the new rules. Because we will not have any conclusive evidence of the effect of these changes until late 1996, it seems logical that we must wait for the results of the BOC investigation before recommending any action in this area.

Provision 10

The NATA should develop and implement a program leading to certificates of advanced qualification (CAQ) for the post-entry level athletic trainer. The educational content of these continuing education courses would be developed by the NATA Education Council *(see Provision 8)*. Certification of competence of the participants and the subsequent awarding of the credential should be contracted to

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the NATABOC. By the year 2000 an inaugural CAQ program should be made available.

Rationale

Our association should help its members develop the special expertise they need to gain meaningful and full employment in specialized work environments. This is important because, although we all share the same basic set of skills, some of us are required to use some of those skills to a greater extent in some settings. The work that a high school athletic trainer does, although similar in most respects, is different in some important ways from that of the athletic trainer employed in a clinical or corporate environment. CAQs would be useful to ATCs in specialized settings because they would provide the highly qualified individuals who meet the requirements of the CAQ program with the recognition they deserve.

CAQ programs are not intended to diminish the credentials of the ATC who does not go through the program. We envision this as a highly specialized program that will provide recognition for specialists of our profession. We do not envision these specialty certificates becoming the standard by which all of us are judged in the marketplace.

CAQ programs are likewise not intended to replace the functions of advanced graduate programs in athletic training. They will be very narrowly focused, and will be offered as continuing education. Indeed, a graduate degree may be a prerequisite for some CAQ programs.

Provision 11

The NATA should encourage the development of multi-disciplinary education programs that coordinate athletic training with teaching, nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy, or other appropriate baccalaureate level professions.

Rationale

Provision of health care services in the future is likely to be provided, to an increasing degree, by professionals who are multi-skilled. The multi-skilling movement is being driven by many forces. One of the most important is economic. Professionals who can perform multiple functions can provide more athletic training, education and health care than those with a narrower range of skills at a similar cost. The education and health care markets demand more multi-skilled providers as the dollars available for health care delivery continue to shrink.

The athletic trainer is already a multi-skilled professional. We are trained in a broad range of important health care roles ranging from injury and illness prevention to the provision of counseling and guidance. Indeed, our wide range of skills, high standards and professional flexibility are responsible for our successful penetration of so many health care markets. These are some of our strongest and most enduring professional characteristics.

Are we suggesting that every entry-level athletic training program be forced to align itself with another profession's preparation program as a condition of accreditation? The answer is an emphatic "NO." It is clearly unnecessary, both in our view and presumably in CAAHEP's as well, to merge another profession's knowledge and skill in order to master the entry-level competencies in athletic training. We are simply suggesting that those institutions who share this vision of education and health care futures with multi-skilled professionals be allowed or encouraged to investigate and establish joint programs. We accompany this Provision with the expectation that if such programs wish to be accredited by CAAHEP as entry-level athletic training education programs, they would still have to meet all the requirements mandated for such programs.

Provision 12

The NATA should encourage new athletic training education programs to consider aligning themselves in colleges of health-related professions.

Rationale

Athletic training is an allied health profession. Our roots, however, are found in physical education and athletic programs. There are several reasons why we think this Provision is important. First, traditional professional preparation programs for physical educators are becoming less financially and politically viable. The market for physical educators in the nation's public schools never rebounded after the drastic cutbacks of the 1970s. Athletic training programs housed in departments of physical education may find themselves at risk of redundancy as these programs continue to be downsized or eliminated.

A second reason for this provision is related to the curricular content of the modern athletic training program.

Athletic training used to be a modified physical education curriculum. Even a cursory review of the requirements for accreditation of the modern athletic training education program reveals that athletic trainers are now educated in a manner much more consistent with other health professionals than with physical educators. The resources needed to educate athletic trainers exist in abundance in educational units designed to prepare other health professionals. Athletic training course work looks almost out of place in the physical education section of most university course catalogues.

Will athletic training programs be required to make this move in order to maintain their accreditation? No. CAAHEP will not place such a mandate on universities. This decision is one that each institution will have to make for itself. Many accredited athletic training programs exist in colleges or universities that have no medical, nursing, or allied health schools. Our profession should, however, strongly encourage every program than can to make the move.

Provision 13

The NATA should strongly encourage athletic training education programs to title their programs as "Athletic Training."

Rationale

Anyone familiar with the issues our profession has faced over the past few years is aware that the name "athletic training" is a source of contention among our members. For every argument against changing our name another equally compelling reason can be found to maintain the status quo. We do not intend to propose a solution to this problem, for it clearly lies beyond our charge. The problem of naming our educational programs, however, does have political consequences for our profession. Where are physicians educated? In medical schools. Where are nurses educated? In nursing schools. Where are athletic trainers educated? In athletic training programs. Or in sports medicine programs. Or in physical education programs. Or in sports science programs. The list goes on. The consequences of this problem are intangible, but not unimportant.

Provision 14

The NATA should encourage the Research and Education Foundation, the *Journal of Athletic Training*, and other appropriate entities to continue to recognize and reward high quality research in those areas of the body of knowledge specific to athletic training.

Rationale

The amount and quality of athletic training research produced over the past several years is impressive. The research not only improves the quality of clinical practice in athletic training, it helps legitimize our profession as a leader in health care for physically active people. Good research should be rewarded, both for its own sake and as a statement to those both inside and outside the profession. We should look for every possible avenue to reward and encourage good research in athletic training. The REF and the *Journal* have made a good start toward this effort. We should applaud their efforts and supplement them wherever we can.

Provision 15

The NATA should encourage and assist in initiating the process of legislative reform, with particular emphasis on standardization of educational requirements for state credentialing.

Rationale

State credentialing is our greatest hope for the future and our biggest threat both at the same time. The present patchwork quilt of state credentialing laws define athletic training in such different ways that planning for our profession at the national level including educational planning will become more difficult with each passing year. Our education and professional preparation should be the defining characteristic of our professional practice irrespective of geographic region. The days when it was enough for the NATA to simply act as a resource for states seeking credentialing must be put behind us. We need a firm, centralized, and direct approach to state credentialing especially as it relates to educational requirements or the education reforms we propose will have minimal impact.

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Provision 16

The NATA should work to identify and promote positive work models for the high school environment including, but not limited to, the full-time athletic trainer and the teacher-athletic trainer.

Rationale

The high school environment has been an important employment setting for athletic trainers for many years. The NATA has long recognized its responsibility to serve the single largest group of injured athletes in America our nation's high school students. The commitment to serve the high school population runs deep in our profession, both because the need is so great and due to the sheer size of the potential employment market.

The high school setting is, for a variety of reasons, the one that has the greatest lack of health care resources. High school athletic trainers frequently experience burdens not shared by others in our profession. The teacher-athletic trainer is often forced to work two jobs for one salary. Athletic trainers who are contracted to a high school (or in some cases to several high schools at the same time) often find it difficult to provide the level or continuity of care that they would like to provide.

Nevertheless, many high school athletic trainers have crafted model programs for which they and we can be justifiably proud. Ironically, even though the funding for most high school programs is precarious, some of our profession's best paid members are high school athletic trainers. The NATA should seek out these athletic trainers and hold them up as examples of what is good about this employment setting. It should promote minimum standards for high school sports health care programs so that athletic trainers who want to work in this setting can do so knowing that they won't have to sacrifice their personal lives for their professional ones.

Provision 17

The NATA should encourage and provide assistance to the JRC-AT for the process of helping them contract their administrative functions with a professional management firm.

Rationale

The JRC-AT is presently housed at Indiana State University. Its administration is carried out by a certified athletic trainer who has released time from his faculty duties and a full-time administrative assistant. The present workload involved with administering the accreditation of approximately 90 programs is a significant burden for such a small staff. We can reasonably predict that the number of educational programs applying for accreditation will increase. The JRC-AT has responded to over 300 requests for accreditation information packets this year alone. The demands associated with attempting to service what is likely to be a growing number of programs will soon exceed the ability of the staff to meet those demands.

The JRC-AT has already received two proposals from professional management firms who specialize in educational accreditation. They should be encouraged to follow up on these proposals. To the extent that the NATA can be of assistance with this process, it should stand ready to help.

Provision 18

The NATA should collaborate with the NATAREF to make planning grants available to those institutions who wish to make the transition from the internship to the accredited model, but whose financial or historical situation hinders them from doing so.

Some colleges and universities will want to make the transition from the internship to the accredited model, but will be faced with financial and other concerns that may impede their ability to do so. In some cases, the loss of these institutions will have a disproportionate impact on universities that help provide much needed diversity in our profession. If the REF could help these institutions begin to plan for how they might make the transition through modest, short-term financial grants, it is reasonable to conclude that at least some of these universities will develop enough ownership in the process to see it to fruition after the grants have been exhausted.