

Strategies for Getting Students Involved in the Athletic Training Profession

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PREPARING athletic training students for future engagement and service to the athletic training profession has been an assumed goal of educational programs for years. Recently, a significant number of initiatives were implemented to encourage leadership and instill the importance of professional involvement

among students. These measures include student “sneak peek” subscription options to the *Journal of Athletic Training*, Think Tanks for students and young professionals, STAR Tracks—a leadership development program for young professionals, and iLead—a student leadership conference. Additionally, the Collegiate Sports Medicine Foundation offers a student leadership workshop.

Collectively, these efforts suggest a coordinated response to a growing and perhaps disturbing trend in which the percentage of Certified Athletic Trainers (ATCs) who join the National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA) is declining. From September 2004 to September 2008, there was a 10.2% decrease in ATC membership.¹ Although the data clearly

demonstrate a descending trend, there are no empirical data to explain why this trend is occurring. The purpose of this report is to present specific teaching and curricular strategies to enhance student interest and participation in athletic training professional organizations.

Over the past several years, many educational reforms have been implemented to improve the formal preparation of entry-level athletic trainers. For example, an exhaustive list of competencies and clinical proficiencies has standardized the knowledge base, clinical skills, and entry-level professional competence that every student must attain. Athletic Training Educational Programs (ATEPs) have gone to considerable length to implement systems to test and track the completion of the published educational competencies. Subsequently, first-time pass rates for the Board of Certification (BOC) examination have increased.²

What is less clear, however, is how students become assimilated into the profession. What methods do ATEPs employ to encourage student involvement in the NATA state and local professional organizations? Is it a planned and programmed part of the curriculum? Is sufficient time devoted to the process in academic courses to address professionalism as a content area or, is it merely glossed over? Is NATA membership and involvement discussed during student

KEY POINTS

Numerous opportunities exist for teaching students the value of athletic training professional organizations.

Faculty, staff, and clinical instructors should model involvement in athletic training professional organizations if they expect the same from students.

Future student participation in professional organizations requires a planned, purposeful effort on behalf of the athletic training education program.

advisement? Should all faculty, staff, and clinical instructors of a nationally accredited ATEP also be members of the NATA? We propose that ATEPs purposefully adopt specific strategies to enhance learning and prepare students for participation in professional organizations. While there is no clear answer, it is clear that a program must devise a strategy that works within the context of its unique characteristics.

Assimilation is defined as the act of making similar. It is process by which a person absorbs the culture of a certain population.³ Similarly, enculturation is the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values.³ Through a multifaceted socialization process, a person, such as an athletic training student, may learn the traits and expectations of the group (i.e., athletic training and therapy profession, NATA).

Assimilation, enculturation, and socialization involve many steps; however, the key to successful socialization is structured and consistent mentoring. Appropriate mentoring is critical for facilitating the professional growth and development of students as they are socialized into a discipline. The athletic training literature has substantiated the role of mentors by suggesting ATs rely on previous guided-learning experiences to assist them in meeting the demands of the job.^{4,5} Further, nurturing was found to have a profound impact on the professional development of students.⁶ Therefore, it is incumbent for ATEPs to develop and implement strategies to facilitate the mentoring and nurturing process in a systematic way, preferably as part of a supportive environment.

Professional socialization plays a key role in the professional preparation and continued development of students in all health professions, such as medical education,^{7,8} nursing,^{9,10} occupational therapy,¹¹ and physical therapy.¹² Pitney⁵ reported that professional socialization is a two-part developmental process that includes experiences both before (anticipatory socialization) and after (organizational socialization) entering the work setting. Anticipatory socialization refers to the formal training that a student receives in his or her curriculum, including educational experiences outside of athletic training, such as volunteer experiences.

As time demands increase for the athletic training student, and competition for student enrollment increases in today's climate of rising tuition and economic challenge, some ATEPs may consider forging the philosophical commitment to assimilation,

enculturation, and professional socialization that is paramount to the future of national, state, and local athletic training groups. However, ATEPs can address the growing membership problem by using the approaches as described below.

Didactic Courses

An obvious place to initiate the assimilation and enculturation process is in the traditional classroom. Virtually every didactic athletic training course presents opportunities for assimilation and enculturation, and many ATEPs include historical and theoretical framework topics in introduction, orientation, or survey courses. ATEPs face challenges, however, in how to best inform students of the merits an athletic training career at a stage when students are often deciding between athletic training and a variety of other career options.

Learning opportunities may include assigning students to read historical articles about the BOC and books such as *Far Beyond the ShoeBox: 50 Years of the NATA*,¹³ or viewing and discussing the Cramer Story on DVD.¹⁴ Providing copies of the *NATA News* and *Journal of Athletic Training* during classroom time or as Internet assignments provide students with evidence of the multiple efforts that promote the profession of athletic training. Inspirational messages on video from previous NATA convention keynote speakers, such as Vince Papale, Cal Ripken, Liz Murray (homeless Harvard student), Dennis Byrd, and Lee Woodruff (the wife of Bob Woodruff, ABC Nightly News co-anchor injured by an Iraqi roadside bomb) may also serve as motivational tools for first-year students, as they provide a very compelling perspective for the importance of athletic trainers and therapists.

Additional classroom options are possible in administration, legal aspects, or professional practice courses. Learning activities that address professional behaviors and professional ethics can be found in a variety of athletic training textbooks. For example, students can learn to formulate a solution to an ethical dilemma from the various models proposed in ethics textbooks. The number of potential ethical dilemmas is virtually endless. Examples of such dilemmas might include violation of HIPAA guidelines relating to disclosure of an athlete's injury status, failure to complete continuing education requirements, and deliberation over an athlete's return to play status. These provide

great avenues for discussion about situations that students may encounter in clinical practice. Encouraging students to consider the ramifications of the decisions they will make in daily practice as a professional is invaluable. Having an established framework will greatly reduce the anxiety when these and similar situations actually arise.

Clinical Laboratory Courses

Another area where opportunities exist to address the development of professional traits is in clinical laboratory courses in evaluation and assessment, therapeutic modalities, and therapeutic exercise. A class assignment could include having students review the *NATA Code of Ethics*, the *BOC Standards of Professional Practice* document, and state regulatory guidelines, and then compare and contrast how these influence the practice of athletic training and therapy. For example, the *Educational Competencies* outline the clinical skills that are to be taught in courses. The *Standards of Practice* outline the duties and obligations of a certified athletic trainer. Novice students may not be aware that skills they are learning have a foundational aspect. Learning a skill has both a knowledge component, which requires practice and repetition, and an assimilation component that integrates the knowledge into clinical practice in a manner consistent with established standards.

Clinical Setting

Numerous options exist in the clinical setting for the integration of professional values that will foster future student involvement. Modeling professional behaviors and demonstrating professional involvement exert powerful influences. As much as we might talk about “doing the right thing,” students will ultimately respond to what we do, not what we say. If we wish to have knowledge, concepts, skills, and, ultimately, entry-level clinical practice attributes engrained in students, whatever is imparted in the classroom must be reinforced in the clinical setting. Consequently, ATEPs should have affiliations with individuals who are advocates of the profession and are fully engaged as members of NATA.

Journaling or reflective writing about experiences in the clinical setting serves as an important learning tool that helps students make connections between didactic and clinical education experiences. Approved

Clinical Instructors (ACIs) should establish daily or weekly topics for student discussions. For example, one informative assignment requires students to interview two ACIs about their past experiences with national, state, or local athletic training organizations and to compare the information derived from the two interviews.

Service Learning

Structured Service learning experiences can be invaluable for developing a sense of professional obligation in students. Service learning is defined as a method whereby students research the needs of the community and then plan activities to meet those needs.¹⁵ Service learning activities may include taking blood pressure and pulse measurements for a community organization, performing body composition assessments and other fitness assessments under the supervision of an ACI in a residence hall, or simply providing instruction in dynamic flexibility exercises to grade school students or a youth sports team. These types of activities instill the idea that some service must be done for the good of the profession, and that financial compensation is not expected for all professional activities. Further, service learning reinforces the likelihood of future involvement in volunteer opportunities endorsed by NATA, such as disaster relief efforts or calls to join committees or working groups.

Programmatic Approaches

Another strategy for reinforcing professional behaviors and instilling a desire for involvement is through a program approach. An example of this approach is the Professional Development Unit (PDU) model,¹⁶ which currently utilized at Concordia University in Wisconsin. The PDU model is loosely based on the BOC continuing education requirement (units in multiple categories over period of time). Students attending Concordia are required to complete PDUs in six different categories.

The first category consists of attendance at professional conferences, seminars, or workshops (NATA, GLATA, NSCA, etc.). The second category pertains to professional involvement. Students may receive PDUs for membership in a professional organization, serving as a program newsletter editor, or submitting a case study for publication. The third and fourth categories

provide PDUs for paid or volunteer work, respectively (e.g., intern, athletic training student, first aider, or surgical observer). The fifth category provides opportunities for recognition as a volunteer at workshops, serving as a tutor, or serving as an exam model. A sixth category allows students to develop preapproved options that have not previously been recognized. Other ATEPs utilizing this model emphasize activities that are consistent with the institution's mission.¹⁷

Portfolio development can also be used to document professional assimilation and enculturation progress over a student's academic career. Platforms such as Folio 21 make this the process user-friendly and feasible.¹⁸ Students develop the portfolio to demonstrate progression and new learning. If a portfolio is already in place to document other program outcomes, it is a simple process for the student to incorporate additional exhibits and faculty assessment of progress is easy.

Creation of a local chapter of a collegiate professional fraternity can teach students the value of involvement in athletic training professional organizations. Iota Tau Alpha (ITA) is a national Athletic Training Education Honor Society, founded in 2005 at Troy University (Troy, AL). There are currently 25 active chapters, which are organized by districts in a manner consistent with that utilized by NATA. Specifically stated purposes include the promotion of "activities designed to stimulate interest, scholarly attainment, and investigation in athletic training education and to promote the dissemination of information and new interpretations of the Society's activities among students of athletic training education." Much like a club or leadership group at the ATEP institution, ITA provides leadership opportunities, fundraising involvement, community service rewards, and clinical symposia ideas for educating others about the athletic training profession within a national structure.

Conclusion

Opportunities to encourage student involvement in national, state, and local professional organizations are endless; however, a strategic or systemic approach for achieving this goal is often lacking. Every athletic training educator and ACI should take a proactive approach to teaching students about the benefits of

involvement by making it a planned and purposeful part of the academic program. ■

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