GUEST EDITORIAL

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Athletic Training Education: Looking Beyond the Degree Designation

In the past year, the athletic training profession has seen extensive debate surrounding the very important question of how to best position athletic training education in the future. These discussions are not new. In fact, a review of athletic training history will show that most substantial moves forward in the profession came only after lengthy and sometimes contentious debate. It is also not surprising that the major moves forward focused on professional preparation—certification in the 1960s and 1970s, internship and accreditation in the 1980s and early 1990s, and now the degree level for professional preparation dominates the discussion. Time passes and we often forget that the things we now take for granted (eg, certification) were not universally accepted at the time. We may someday have a similar thought process about the appropriate degree.

Although I view the degree discussion as the cornerstone of our educational future, one so important that it has graced this and other editorial pages numerous times and has generated vigorous discussion at state, regional, and national meetings, it should not exist in a vacuum. Any substantive deliberation of professional preparation must look beyond this singular matter and examine other important issues that will continue to impact athletic training practice, regardless of the degree.

Fortunately, the profession does not have to set out on an uncharted path. In June 2012, the National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA) Board of Directors approved a report titled Future Directions in Athletic Training Education,1 which was prepared and submitted by the NATA Executive Committee for Education. The genesis for the systematic discussion of the degree issue came directly from the Future Directions document. It is worth remembering that the NATA Board of Directors accepted this document and by doing so put the degree discussion front and center. The result was the white paper report titled Professional Preparation in Athletic Training: An Examination of the Professional Degree Level,2 presented to the Board of Directors in December 2013. However, exploring the degree designation is but 1 of 14 recommendations found in the 2012 Future Directions report. Other important issues need be a part of the current professional discourse, not overshadowed by the volume of the degree debate.
I personally identify 3 issues from the Future Directions report that seem to be interwoven with the current degree discussion and worthy of greater attention: interprofessional education (recommendation #3), residencies and specialty certifications (recommendation #6), and transition to clinical practice (recommendation #12). Of the 3, it is #12—the transition to clinical practice—that may be the most important issue outside of the degree designation. The ability for novice clinicians to socialize to the profession and advance to fully independent practice to the full extent of their credential is a critical issue. Few health care professions allow new providers to practice without periods of orientation and supervision.

An intellectual game of “hot potato” is being played among educators, employers, professional organizations, and regulatory groups regarding who has the responsibility to ensure that new professionals are ready to practice in a specific setting. It is paramount that all stakeholders in the practice of athletic training identify these responsibilities and that a candid discussion of transition-to-practice takes place.

Frankly, I am alarmed by the observation that the most available employment setting for a new athletic trainer graduate in my state is the setting with the least oversight—the high school outreach setting. Athletic trainers in this setting are unlikely to have professional health care peers on site and very little, if any, transition-to-practice mentoring. Furthermore, these athletic trainers are likely hired, supervised, and evaluated by someone with no training in health care delivery (eg, athletic directors). Compounding this issue is an equally alarming trend of underemployment that makes a higher percentage of high school jobs less than full time.

Given recent research that shows that a majority of high school athletic trainers do not always practice across all of the professional practice domains, we run the risk of creating high school jobs that are less interesting, provide less return on investment, and relegate the athletic trainer to a “coverage” role. The athletic training profession has identified the interscholastic athlete as a population with great need, yet the status quo is to address this need with underemployed, newly minted professionals with few resources for professional socialization. Clearly, we need better transition-to-practice and employment models in this setting, which still has great growth potential for our profession.

The role of clinical education within the available educational models is but one consideration for improving the transition to practice. As an educator, I am excited by the possibilities the graduate entry-level degree could provide to create clinical education rotations that are more authentic and do not compete with other undergraduate obligations. Having clinical education that is more immersive and takes place all day for several weeks, rather than in and around other courses, is appealing, but it is not the complete answer. I also do not feel that an internship or mandatory graduate assistantship experience is a panacea. Many of these experiences suffer from the same absence of transition-to-practice efforts as the entry-level jobs under discussion.

The Future Directions document nicely articulates some needed steps on the transition-to-practice issue. These include identifying the constructs of model educational practice that result in an independent clinician, shaping best practices in education, and determining methods that develop clinical decision-making skills in the context of real patient care. The report also emphasizes the identification of effective transition-to-practice models that will serve as the foundation for a purposeful strategy that facilitates the change from student to practitioner while ensuring socialization into the hiring organization and the profession at large. Finally, the role of the employer in the transition process should be identified. There are specialized skills that can be unique to an employment setting or nuances to particular organization processes (eg, electronic records) that require greater involvement of the hiring organization as new employees assume their responsibilities.

Where does that leave us? We have plenty of talking, researching, sharing of best practices, and candid reflection ahead of us on this and plenty of other athletic training education and practice issues. I predict in future years we will look back not at the Professional Preparation white paper but at the Future Directions report as a game changer in shaping athletic training education and practice. We have been blessed with a road map of 14 recommendations that, if adopted, would create a desirable future for the athletic training profession—a future firmly rooted in the health care establishment, providing exceptional care for our patients. We have a map; let’s follow it.
REFERENCES

