The Results of the 2014 NATA Salary Survey Are in. . .Now the Bad News!

I read with interest the most recent issue of the NATA News, which spotlighted the 2014 NATA salary survey. Commendably, the NATA conducts this survey every 3 years, the last being performed in 2011. Worth noting is the fact that salaries for athletic training professionals have risen during this time period. Although this portrays a positive message for the profession, we must keep in perspective the fact that the picture does not include any reference to adjustments for inflation, which has averaged a 2% rise annually during this same time period; nor does it compare athletic training salaries to those of our counterparts in physical therapy, physician assistant, nursing, and other allied health professions. As an athletic training educator and professional I’m concerned that although the NATA and the profession of athletic training as a whole are doing well in improving average salaries, especially for entry-level professionals (first 1 to 5 years), there are other areas we must continue to improve upon, namely refining working conditions and convincing our best and brightest to remain in the athletic training profession.

The Internet is a purveyor of information both good and bad, accurate and inaccurate! Back in 2011 I read a New York Times online article written by Cecilia Capuzzi Simon in the Education Life section titled “Top 10 List: Where the Jobs Are.” Needless to say, I was pleasantly surprised that athletic trainers made the list excerpted from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ compilation of the fastest growing occupations. Expected job growth for the athletic training profession was 37% (6,000 new jobs) by 2018. However, several colleagues and former students have recently sent me links to articles posted on the web portraying mixed messages about careers in athletic training.

Taube and Baer recently wrote an article posted in November 2014 at the Business Insider website titled “The 20 College Majors That Lead to the Most Satisfying Careers.” They suggest that “though many college students choose their major based on how much money they will be able to earn in the real world, it’s important to consider whether your future job will be one you feel good about doing.” Athletic training was fifth on the list, with more than 78% of graduates from athletic training education programs responding that they found their job to be “meaningful.” Although at first glance this is positive, on the same page it notes an average mid-career salary average of $45,900.
Although there may be some inaccuracies with the salary data compared to more contemporary statistics from the NATA, the message with regard to mid-career salaries is alarming. Whereas the recent NATA salary survey data does break out salaries across years of experience, the most alarming categories are the “career starter” and mid-career (> 10 years) category, where salaries are stalled in the $60,000 range; compared to that of other healthcare professionals such as physician assistants ($101,000), physical therapists ($90,000), nurses ($88,500), and health sciences graduates ($84,900). Even students who graduate with degrees in the exercise science area have mid-career salaries listed at $54,600.4

Interestingly, a week earlier Jacquelyn Smith, writing for the same Business Insider website, identified the “13 College Majors in Which the Pay Goes Nowhere” and, yes, you can surmise that athletic training was not portrayed in a positive light.5 She further opines that “according to PayScale, the creator of the world’s largest compensation database with more than 40 million salary profiles, looked at the difference between starting (less than 5 years of experience) and mid-career (10 or more years of experience) pay by college major, and it determined the 13 majors with the smallest salary growth.” Sixth on the list was athletic trainer with the same $45,900 mid-career salary mentioned above.

I’m trying to remain optimistic, but with the mixed messages flowing regarding the profession so near and dear to my heart, I proceed with caution concerning the future. In my role as an athletic training program director I have an abundance of opportunities to meet prospective students and discuss with their parents the profession of athletic training. I must say the constituents that I deal with are extremely savvy from a financial standpoint and fully aware of the marketplace as related to healthcare careers for their sons and daughters. Having grown up in the Internet age, today’s parents see and hear a lot that flows on the web, especially as it relates to the financial burdens of a college education for their children. The bottom line is that they know what the cost-benefits are and what career pathways make the most sense from a financial standpoint.

Although I always remain optimistic, it is hard not to have a bit of doubt creep into my psyche, especially given the high costs associated with attending my particular institution and for those who come from out of state where the costs are nearly quadruple those that in-state students pay. Compounding this predicament is the recent push by some entities in the NATA to change from the current baccalaureate degree to a master’s degree for entry into the profession.6,8 The argument perhaps has some logic from an educational foundation standpoint given that students would be gaining an extra year of schooling and perhaps a more developed clinical skill set, but one must question whether it makes sense from a financial cost-benefit standpoint. Given my argument above, I don’t think so. Strapping students with additional debt to enter a profession whose future growth potential is compressed does not bode well. This I fear is already beginning to steer our best and brightest away from the profession of athletic training into more lucrative health professions.

Raising awareness of these alarming statistics and trends infiltrating the athletic training profession is one thing, finding potential solutions is yet another. I certainly do not have all of the answers, but until all of us in the profession, including clinicians, educators, administrators, and our profession’s leaders, realize that salary surveys alone are not helping to advance the profession forward quickly enough, the consequences will be alarming and an exodus of epic proportion from the profession will ensue. Job satisfaction is typically high in the “helping” professions, but satisfaction alone and the “pat on the back” that you’re doing a great job can only go so far. Salary “bottom lines” must improve, especially for mid-career athletic training professionals, and keep pace with other allied health careers.

One area where improvements in workplace attitudes and reductions in athletic trainer burnout have occurred recently is with shifts in traditional athletic training practice environments to a medical health care delivery model of set hours and time off.9 Although improvements in workplace satisfaction have been enhanced in athletic training environments where such models have been enacted, whether or not subsequent advances in compensation are also occurring has yet to be exposed.9

I entered the athletic training workforce fresh from a master’s degree back in 1985 with a base 9-month salary of $14,000.00. My own graduate students make more than that now and they have not even entered the workforce yet—progress, yes, but we still have a long way to go to improve career satisfaction and staying power.
Acknowledging that we have a problem is an important first step; we now have to find solutions to make the profession attractive to future athletic trainers in the years to come.

REFERENCES

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