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Athletic Training Educational Reform: A Midterm Update



A few weeks ago, I received a brochure in the mail advertising a Doctor of Athletic Training (DAT) educational program, and it got me thinking about where we are in the latest round of educational reforms sweeping the athletic training profession. I'm an old-school guy approaching my 40th year as a member of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA), so trust me when I say I have seen a few educational changes in that time span.

The most recent reforms were initiated in 2015 when the AT Strategic Alliance "Joint Statement" headline read, "After 2.5 Years of Diligent Analysis, Leaders of the Key Athletic Training Organizations Have Decided to Change the AT Degree Level to a Master's." As an athletic training educator for more than 35 years and a program director for more than 20 years, I knew I would be directly impacted by the mandate: "The CAATE Standards for Accreditation of Professional Athletic Training Programs will be changed to include a requirement that professional programs be at the master's degree level with a specific implementation deadline of no less than seven years." In light of this, I thought I would use this editorial to provide a midterm report as to how this change has affected my world at the Univer-

sity of Delaware and my duties as an educator and administrator in our educational program. President John F. Kennedy once said, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future." Although I agree, I must say that during the past 4 years I have often pondered why I signed up for this task.

The athletic training education program at the University of Delaware began in 1973, and has a rich tradition of producing competent and highly skilled athletic trainers. The bottom line is that our program was (and still is) fulfilling all that is expected of an entry-level, professional preparation educational program. Our students have consistently landed terrific graduate assistant positions in athletic programs large and small across the United States. Those opportunities have declined over the past few years—thankfully we only have two remaining undergraduate cohorts to complete our program (our last will finish up in the spring of 2021).

When the latest mandate from the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) was handed down, I, in my role as program director, was not a happy camper! I take comfort in the old adage "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." So, after a few months

of serious professional introspection and speaking with colleagues in the profession facing similar challenges, including *Athletic Training & Sports Health Care* editorial board member and educational guru Dr. Paul R. Geisler, I decided that we would press on with the transformation process. I won't bore you with all of the juicy details: let's just say it was a ton of work and a task not for the faint of heart.

The time, effort, and energy spent creating our new Master of Science in Athletic Training (MSAT) degree program was facilitated by a process already in place for such changes at the University of Delaware and our graduate college, as well as the talents and expertise of the amazing colleagues I work with on a daily basis. Faculty senate approval for our new MSAT program was granted in February 2018, followed by approval by the University of Delaware Board of Trustees in May 2018. We then moved on to the CAATE Substantive Change process and a new set of hurdles and challenges. Looking back on the process, I must say that I was fortunate to have put together a solid case for change. With the expertise of the CAATE staff and site review team, we successfully transitioned our program from an undergraduate to graduate entry-level program in December 2018. Thinking that the hardest part of the transitional process was in the rear-view mirror, I was going to be disappointed in the months ahead.

I am a huge sports fan, and I have worked clinically as an athletic trainer in a variety of intercollegiate athletic settings throughout my career. During that time, I never fully appreciated the efforts of the coaches in the student-athlete recruitment process! I had this vision (wrong) and perhaps

a misguided perspective established during the many CAATE educational reform sessions I attended that when we transitioned from the undergraduate to graduate model we would have a huge pool of potential student prospects to entice to come to Newark, Delaware, and become a Blue Hen graduate student. Needless to say, we were sadly mistaken by that notion. We had worked hard and long with our graduate school to create an online admissions portal, only to find out after a few months of no traffic that the Athletic Training Centralized Application Service was the place to be. We quickly created space on this website and a few applicants noticed that the University of Delaware ATEP was open for business in the entry-level master's degree arena!

As an undergraduate athletic training program director, I benefit from having a highly skilled admissions team guarantee that I'll have enough students to fill our classes on an annual basis. For all of you novice entry-level master's degree program directors out there—this is not the case at the graduate level! This is where your coach recruiting skills come into play, and I was woefully underqualified when it came to this new administrative task. Like most educators, I did not have any formal training in the art of student recruitment. I've been good with meeting future undergraduate students and their parents, but I had no idea how much would be involved in recruiting future graduate students into our new MSAT degree program. Equally difficult was the pressure to meet administrative recruiting goals and benchmarks to ensure a qualified class of new graduate students. I have several coaches at the University of Delaware who I can lean on and pick their brains about the best

recruiting strategies, and believe me I plan to exploit those resources in the years to come!

Looking back, I was sadly mistaken about the pool of qualified graduate students to choose from and the time spent in the recruiting process. Despite many sleepless nights, we filled our first cohort of graduate students. They completed their first 7 credit hours toward their degree requirement this summer and are headed toward their degree in the spring of 2021. I know there will be more growing pains along the way, but I am confident that we will emerge stronger and better off moving forward. However, only time will tell as to whether this move pays dividends (eg, better salaries and a better qualified clinician/health care professional) for the profession into the future.

I would like to conclude this editorial by saying a few words about the DAT programs beginning to flourish and populate the athletic training landscape. During the past year, I have had a unique opportunity to get involved with the Moravian College DAT program, using an online educational format focused on evidence-based medicine in the clinical setting. I have been appreciative of this opportunity, and getting familiar with the online "distance" educational delivery platform has been a steep learning curve.

More and more DAT programs are starting to sprout across the United States as a direct result of the CAATE mandate to shift entry-level education to the master's degree level. This year's NATA Annual Meeting in Las Vegas even included a session sponsored by the NATA's Professional Development Committee titled "The Doctorate of Athletic Training: What Can We Do With

DAT?” That program is to be followed by the 2020 Participatory Design Conference’s District Lecture Series on the same topic. Interest is growing and I applaud those programs moving forward to provide an educational outlet for the advancement of athletic training skills and abilities beyond the entry level.

In my own experience, I have been impressed by my interactions with thought-provoking and challenging athletic training professionals thirsty to improve their own clinical delivery. Notice that I said “improve clinical delivery.” Perhaps

it is too early to tell where an added DAT credential will lead those securing this advanced degree. However, I am concerned that some individuals are using the DAT degree as an avenue to a career in higher education instructional delivery. Perhaps I’m naive to think this, but knowing full well from my own experiences as a doctoral student and having graduated many doctorally trained students in my tenure in higher education, there is no replacement for the traditional doctoral degree (PhD, EdD, or DA) as the true “terminal” degree for employment in athletic training

education programs. I don’t mean to sound elitist, I just believe that the training secured in the traditional doctoral programs is better suited for a career in higher education, and that the training the DAT provides best enhances clinical delivery. I’ll be watching intently to see how this all plays out! Check back in a few years when I provide my final report on the educational reforms of 2015!

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