How to Get the Athletic Training Graduate Position You Really Want

MARK RODGER, MAT, ATC, LAT • University of South Carolina
SUSANNE RADEKE, MA, ATC, LAT • East Carolina University

Junior year has begun, and now is the time to seriously think about your future athletic training career goals. So, what do you ultimately want to do with that undergraduate athletic training degree? A variety of options are available: Head into the workforce, continue education in another allied health profession, or obtain a graduate degree while serving as a graduate-assistant athletic trainer. As of July 2006, there were 352 accredited entry-level athletic training programs and 12 accredited postcertification programs according to www.jrc-at.org, resulting in numerous athletic training students vying for the same graduate positions. The question arises as to how students can make themselves stand out over their peers to employers.

This article focuses on improving your marketability by gearing undergraduate coursework and clinical experiences toward obtaining the ideal graduate assistantship for your ultimate career goal. Furthermore, pros and cons of various graduate-assistantship and degree choices are discussed. Students graduating in other disciplines normally select an explicit concentration or seek to learn under a specific researcher in their field. In the field of athletic training this is not always the case. Those graduating from athletic training curricula often obtain a postgraduate degree to increase their clinical experiences and improve job-earning possibilities. We hope that this article makes prospective graduate students aware of various options in developing a postgraduate plan. This is especially important for students wishing to eventually pursue a doctorate. Because doctoral programs require a research component, a National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA) accredited master’s program might provide the best mechanism for demonstrating attainment of discipline-specific research knowledge. Athletic training graduate assistantships can be categorized as athletics only, dual appointment between athletics and academics, high school outreach, and postcertification master’s programs in athletic training, which might have similar rotations along with clinic, research requirements, and administrative responsibilities.

Preparing for Graduate Assistantship

Undergraduate students can market themselves to employers with an effective résumé, acquiring additional clinical experiences, expanding leadership roles, and taking advantage of networking opportunities. Résumés often create the first impressions employers have of future employees. Under-
graduate students normally lack prior job-related employment, although they should include in their résumés information such as additional clinical and learning experiences, mentoring and teaching experiences, leadership positions, and references geared toward the position being sought.

Employment opportunities for athletic trainers are varied, so if you are unsure of which pathway to choose, volunteer time in a clinic, high school or physician’s office or with a professional team during school breaks. An alternative would be to select clinical rotations that will benefit your future plans. These experiences can provide exposure in unfamiliar settings and might help guide your decision in choosing which career pathway to pursue. In addition, if you have already chosen a field of interest, volunteering in that field provides more clinical experience and therefore enhances your marketability. Do not forget to include on the reference list your supervisor, program director, and approved clinical instructor.

Personal attributes such as professionalism and leadership skills are looked on positively by employers. Professional involvement as an undergraduate student with the institution’s student government or athletic training club; attending state, district, or national conferences; and presenting student research at conferences provide early professional exposure. Employers wish to see well-rounded students who have interests outside of their clinical experiences, such as community volunteerism or other school activities.

**Finding a Graduate Assistantship**

When it comes to finding an appropriate graduate assistantship, knowing where to look is beneficial. The NATA career center (www.nata.org) is the first place to search, but employers also post job and graduate-assistantship listings on state and district Web sites. Employers may also post available positions during college athletics, dual appointment—athletics and academics, high school outreach, postcertification master’s state, district, and national conferences. Therefore, attending meetings and conferences will not only aid in professional exposure but might also help in the job search. The sidebar provides key points to consider when looking for a graduate assistantship.

Job postings commonly include a general job description. Contact the person located on the announcement via phone and/or e-mail to obtain more specifics about the position, such as coverage assignments, contract length, waived fees, membership dues, and liability insurance. Always be extremely professional and respectful when inquiring about a position. Remember to always address the contact person as Mr., Ms., or Dr. and use an appropriate (professional) e-mail address and voice-mail message on your phone.

Students should not underestimate the role professionalism in demeanor and dress plays at conferences. Networking as a student is important—you never know whom you will have an opportunity to meet and make an impression on (positive or negative). Show confidence and initiative by stepping out of your comfort zone and introducing yourself to various athletic trainers in the field. Conferences normally have attendants wear nametags that state not only their names but also their employers. Using this information to strike up a conversation, introduce yourself, and ask for a business card—in place of blending in with other students—make yourself stand out and leave a positive impression. On the business card, make a notation regarding the place (e.g., NATA convention, district convention), situation (e.g., fireside chat, poster presentation), and date of the encounter in case you wish to contact the person in the future.

**Other Things to Consider About Graduate Assistantships**

Job requirements placed on graduate assistants normally differ quite a bit from those for undergraduate students. Clinical hours for students in programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) are generally limited. These hour limitations typically do not carry over once one has been certified by the Board of Certification (BOC). Graduate assistants normally work until the job is done, which can lead to long hours and limited days off.

Graduate assistants working in a CAATE-accredited curriculum will often be expected to be clinical instructors (CI, who provide supervision) or approved clinical assistant.