Incorporating Service Learning in Athletic Training

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Athletic training has made significant strides in establishing its place in society as a health profession. Athletic trainers (ATs) have created a unique niche within the health care community for management of a wide variety of musculoskeletal conditions; however, a significant segment of the population does not understand the scope of practice of ATs. One way for our profession to be proactive in demonstrating our skills to society is to participate in service learning. The Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) program defines service learning as “a structured learning experience that combines community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation, and reflection.”

The purposes of this report are (a) to demonstrate the importance of participation in service learning, (b) to relate Kolb’s experiential learning theory to service learning, and (c) to present examples of how service learning can be performed by ATs and ATSs in various clinical settings.

Why Engage in Service Learning Activities?

The daily responsibilities of an AT and ATS can be highly time consuming. There is often insufficient time to get everything accomplished; however, thoughtful planning can allow ATs and ATSs to provide professional service to the community.

As professionals, we are expected to display appropriate behaviors and make decisions that uphold the high standards of the NATA Code of Ethics. Principle 4.2 of the Code of Ethics states the following: “Whenever possible, members are encouraged to participate and support others in the conduct and communication of research and educational activities that may contribute knowledge for improved patient care, patient or student education, and the growth of athletic training as a profession.” One way for ATs to fulfill this principle is through service learning, which will develop better understanding of community concerns and provide economic, operational, and social benefits to the community.

The Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education specifies “Professional Development and Responsibility” as a content area that ATSs must understand. Service learning can provide students with...
opportunities to apply knowledge and skills in a manner that provides a sense of accomplishment and can serve as a mechanism for documentation of learning over time.

**Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory**

Kolb’s experiential learning theory centers on the derivation of meaning from experience. ATs can readily apply Kolb’s theory in the effort to continuously improve patient care. This theory is based on the idea that a learner must possess specific abilities in order to gain knowledge from an experience. The abilities are derived from a four-stage cycle, which will be illustrated by a service learning example involving blood pressure screening. Specific abilities that a student must possess include measurement of blood pressure, explanation of the dangers of high blood pressure, and communication of the necessary steps for control of high blood pressure through physical activity.

During stage 1, Concrete Experience, the learner is actively involved in creating the experience. ATSS can identify community concerns, determine the type of service that is needed, and implement the service project. For example, ATSS might visit a retirement facility and discover that a significant portion of the population suffers from high blood pressure. The ATSS might decide that the service experience should include blood pressure screening, provision of educational material about the dangers of high blood pressure and demonstration of physical activities that could help individuals to improve overall fitness level.

Stage 2 of Kolb’s cycle is Reflective Observation, which requires individuals involved in the service to reflect on the experience. This reflection can involve group discussion with the ATSS or may result from composition of a reflective essay that conveys thoughts and feelings about the service learning experience.

Abstract Conceptualization (stage 3) is also accomplished through reflection but specifically asks the ATSS to identify connections between curricular content and their roles in the larger social, political, and cultural contexts of the community concerns being addressed through the service activity. This objective may be achieved by asking ATSS to respond to the question, “In what ways did your understanding of course content assist you in carrying out the project?”

The final stage of Kolb’s cycle is Active Experimentation, which occurs when individuals apply their understanding to make improvements for future service experiences. For example, this stage might be represented by awareness of the need to include a variety of physical activities or the need to modify educational materials to better match the characteristics of the participants. The Active Experimentation stage leads to repetition of the four-stage cycle, beginning again with the Concrete Experience of another service learning experience.

**Application to Athletic Trainers in Different Settings**

ATs who work in different settings can participate in service learning projects. The secondary school AT is in a unique position to develop relationships and become involved in the local community. ATs in this setting are often communicating with a variety of constituents, including student-athletes, parents, coaches, teachers, booster club members, and administrators. Many of these individuals understand the professional role of the AT. The secondary school AT should utilize relationships with these individuals to gain access to others within the community who are not familiar with the profession, particularly those who are involved in community sports activities such as Little League baseball, adult softball leagues, Pop Warner football, youth soccer leagues, etc. Recreational sports organizations provide ideal opportunities for the secondary school AT to provide a valuable service, speaking on topics such as weather safety and the necessity of having a properly stocked first aid kit and basic first aid skills.

The AT who works in a clinical/industrial setting is responsible for injury prevention and work-specific conditioning, which includes specialized skill in areas such as instruction of proper lifting techniques. Service learning experiences that this specialized skill set might be highly beneficial for include community service agencies (law enforcement, fire fighters, emergency services personnel, etc.) or non-profit organizations (American Cancer Society, food/clothing banks, etc.).

ATs who work in the college or university setting are often associated only with intercollegiate athletic teams at the institution where they are employed. To promote the profession outside intercollegiate athletics, ATs could collaborate with student health services and student wellness centers to provide health screenings for the campus community. A screening program might address conditions such as asthma, diabetes, osteoporosis, hypertension, and eating disorders.