Development of Statewide Clinical Sites for an AT Education Program

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The clinical education environment is where experiential learning acquired is key to developing successful young professionals. Although many health professions have clinical sites across the country, athletic training education has not followed this practice. Of the 300+ accredited undergraduate athletic training education programs, many are located in areas that provide limited clinical opportunities for students. The athletic training education program (ATEP) at Northern Arizona State University is one the few that utilizes state-wide clinical placement sites. Having a diverse collection of clinical sites across the state provides benefits to students and presents challenges for the administration of the ATEP. The purpose of this report is to describe the process of developing a statewide clinical education program, so that others may consider this option.

Demonstrated Need

Flagstaff, Arizona is a community of approximately 60,000 people. There are three athletic training clinic sites available for clinical experiences within a 30-mile radius of the city, including the main athletic training clinic at the university and two local high schools. General medical, orthopedic, and rehabilitation clinic rotations are utilized locally, but few other clinical experiences are available in the local area.

To promote student learning and expansion of the ATEP, a greater number and variety of clinical sites were sought. This required looking outside the local community for high-quality learning environments for our students. However, requiring students to travel beyond the 30-mile radius daily or weekly to gain more varied clinical experiences would have presented considerable financial costs and potential liability. Thus, a decision was made that distant clinical placements would be one year in length, and students would be required to live in the immediate area of the clinical placement. The only way to accommodate this arrangement in the curriculum was to send our students outside the Flagstaff area during the senior year and to deliver the senior-year curriculum entirely online. By doing this, the ATEP was able to expand by 15-20 students per year.

Development Process

The steps followed for development of statewide clinical sites are presented in Figure 1. Developing a list of preferred clinical site types was the first step. The site types most desirable were those unavailable in the Flagstaff area, which would provide specific experiences relating to our students’ career interests.

The optimal environment for learning within each type of clinical site was considered. We are very concerned about the quality of our students’ learning environments, so we devoted substantial effort to ensure that each site had athletic trainers who embraced their roles as approved clinical instructors (ACIs).

After prospective sites around the state had been identified, communication was established with the head athletic trainer at each site. This communication began with telephone conversations and was followed by a visit to each site to ensure that the physical environment was appropriate for student learning. After sites were selected, clinical site affiliation agreements were developed and implemented.
To make the students’ time at these sites as valuable as possible, a one-year placement was established. Online senior-year courses included Administration in Athletic Training, Structure and Current Trends in Athletic Training, Psychology of the Injured Athlete, two clinical education courses, and a senior capstone course. Online liberal studies courses were also included to acquire the required number of graduation credits during the senior year. This curricular change intensified the academic demands of the sophomore and junior years but allowed more emphasis on experiential learning, reflection, and development of a sense of professionalism during the senior year.

**Benefits**

There are numerous benefits to having a state-wide clinical education program, with student learning being the most important. A 1:1 student to ACI ratio is highly beneficial in this regard. Often, the student to ACI has been 1:2 or greater at some sites. Focused attention and mentoring provides enhanced learning experiences and fosters development of confidence and professionalism, which has been documented by our ATEP alumni survey data.

Having a variety of available clinical sites offers a greater diversity of ACIs as role models and mentors. Consequently, we are able to choose the “best of the best” athletic trainers in the state to mentor our students. With the most capable ACIs across the state as stakeholders in our ATEP, recruitment of new students from a broad geographical area is enhanced.

The opportunity for students to choose a senior-year clinical placement site provides an excellent recruiting tool. We are able to offer senior-year clinical placements at the University of Arizona and Arizona State University for those students who want work with a major university athletic program, three professional baseball rehabilitation facilities for students who want to experience professional sports, several high schools and community colleges, and a rehabilitation clinic owned by an athletic trainer who is involved in delivery of services to professional rodeo participants. Without a state-wide clinical program, such clinical experiences would not be available.

**Challenges**

Clinical affiliation agreements are legally binding documents that must be reviewed and approved by the administrative management of each clinical organization. With more than 30 clinical sites, keeping each affiliation agreement up to date presents a challenge for the ATEP’s clinical coordinator.

Although some of our clinical sites may not have a student assignment for a year or more, we have all ACIs participate in a workshop at least once every three years. This requires our Clinical Instructor Educator (CIE) to travel to distant sites once or twice per year. Additionally, the clinical coordinator must visit each