Strategies for Getting Students Involved in the Athletic Training Profession

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Preparing athletic training students for future engagement and service to the athletic training profession has been an assumed goal of educational programs for years. Recently, a significant number of initiatives were implemented to encourage leadership and instill the importance of professional involvement among students. These measures include student “sneak peek” subscription options to the Journal of Athletic Training, Think Tanks for students and young professionals, STAR Tracks—a leadership development program for young professionals, and iLead—a student leadership conference. Additionally, the Collegiate Sports Medicine Foundation offers a student leadership workshop.

Collectively, these efforts suggest a coordinated response to a growing and perhaps disturbing trend in which the percentage of Certified Athletic Trainers (ATCs) who join the National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA) is declining. From September 2004 to September 2008, there was a 10.2% decrease in ATC membership. Although the data clearly demonstrate a descending trend, there are no empirical data to explain why this trend is occurring. The purpose of this report is to present specific teaching and curricular strategies to enhance student interest and participation in athletic training professional organizations.

Over the past several years, many educational reforms have been implemented to improve the formal preparation of entry-level athletic trainers. For example, an exhaustive list of competencies and clinical proficiencies has standardized the knowledge base, clinical skills, and entry-level professional competence that every student must attain. Athletic Training Educational Programs (ATEPs) have gone to considerable length to implement systems to test and track the completion of the published educational competencies. Subsequently, first-time pass rates for the Board of Certification (BOC) examination have increased.

What is less clear, however, is how students become assimilated into the profession. What methods do ATEPs employ to encourage student involvement in the NATA state and local professional organizations? Is it a planned and programmed part of the curriculum? Is sufficient time devoted to the process in academic courses to address professionalism as a content area or, is it merely glossed over? Is NATA membership and involvement discussed during student

Key Points

Numerous opportunities exist for teaching students the value of athletic training professional organizations.

Faculty, staff, and clinical instructors should model involvement in athletic training professional organizations if they expect the same from students.

Future student participation in professional organizations requires a planned, purposeful effort on behalf of the athletic training education program.
advise? Should all faculty, staff, and clinical instructors of a nationally accredited ATEP also be members of the NATA? We propose that ATEPs purposefully adopt specific strategies to enhance learning and prepare students for participation in professional organizations. While there is no clear answer, it is clear that a program must devise a strategy that works within the context of its unique characteristics.

Assimilation is defined as the act of making similar. It is a process by which a person absorbs the culture of a certain population. Similarly, enculturation is the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values. Through a multifaceted socialization process, a person, such as an athletic training student, may learn the traits and expectations of the group (i.e., athletic training and therapy profession, NATA).

Assimilation, enculturation, and socialization involve many steps; however, the key to successful socialization is structured and consistent mentoring. Appropriate mentoring is critical for facilitating the professional growth and development of students as they are socialized into a discipline. The athletic training literature has substantiated the role of mentors by suggesting ATs rely on previous guided-learning experiences to assist them in meeting the demands of the job. Further, nurturing was found to have a profound impact on the professional development of students. Therefore, it is incumbent for ATEPs to develop and implement strategies to facilitate the mentoring and nurturing process in a systematic way, preferably as part of a supportive environment.

Professional socialization plays a key role in the professional preparation and continued development of students in all health professions, such as medical education, nursing, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. Pitney reported that professional socialization is a two-part developmental process that includes experiences both before (anticipatory socialization) and after (organizational socialization) entering the work setting. Anticipatory socialization refers to the formal training that a student receives in his or her curriculum, including educational experiences outside of athletic training, such as volunteer experiences.

As time demands increase for the athletic training student, and competition for student enrollment increases in today’s climate of rising tuition and economic challenge, some ATEPs may consider foregoing the philosophical commitment to assimilation, enculturation, and professional socialization that is paramount to the future of national, state, and local athletic training groups. However, ATEPs can address the growing membership problem by using the approaches as described below.

**Didactic Courses**

An obvious place to initiate the assimilation and enculturation process is in the traditional classroom. Virtually every didactic athletic training course presents opportunities for assimilation and enculturation, and many ATEPs include historical and theoretical framework topics in introduction, orientation, or survey courses. ATEPs face challenges, however, in how to best inform students of the merits an athletic training career at a stage when students are often deciding between athletic training and a variety of other career options.

Learning opportunities may include assigning students to read historical articles about the BOC and books such as Far Beyond the ShoeBox: 50 Years of the NATA, or viewing and discussing the Cramer Story on DVD. Providing copies of the NATA News and Journal of Athletic Training during classroom time or as Internet assignments provide students with evidence of the multiple efforts that promote the profession of athletic training. Inspirational messages on video from previous NATA convention keynote speakers, such as Vince Papale, Cal Ripken, Liz Murray (homeless Harvard student), Dennis Byrd, and Lee Woodruff (the wife of Bob Woodruff, ABC Nightly News co-anchor injured by an Iraqi roadside bomb) may also serve as motivational tools for first-year students, as they provide a very compelling perspective for the importance of athletic trainers and therapists.

Additional classroom options are possible in administration, legal aspects, or professional practice courses. Learning activities that address professional behaviors and professional ethics can be found in a variety of athletic training textbooks. For example, students can learn to formulate a solution to an ethical dilemma from the various models proposed in ethics textbooks. The number of potential ethical dilemmas is virtually endless. Examples of such dilemmas might include violation of HIPAA guidelines relating to disclosure of an athlete’s injury status, failure to complete continuing education requirements, and deliberation over an athlete’s return to play status. These provide...