Governance Matters: Part 3

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This is the third in a series on governance issues facing the National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA). In Part 1 of this series, I argued for a governance system based on a state-national axis, rather than the regional-national axis that currently exists. I also presented an argument that a separate policy-making body, independent from the Board of Directors (BOD), is crucial to the future of association governance. In Part 2, I explored the recently established State Advisory Group (SAG), which is an outgrowth of the NATA’s constituent relations effort and represents an effort to enhance the relationship with state athletic training associations.

The purpose of this third report in the series is to propose several specific governance changes that I believe would enhance the ability of the NATA to advance the profession and practice of athletic training. These proposed changes are consistent with contemporary trends in the governance of professional associations. Following each proposal is an explanation and, where necessary, some insight into the detail of the structural and functional implications suggested by the change.

To begin, let me clearly state the assumptions that inform the proposals presented below. First, I distinguish between the needs of the NATA as an association and the needs of athletic training as a profession. They are not the same. In fact, the needs of one can challenge the needs of the other. When this occurs, the needs of the profession must always take priority. Second, I believe the NATA could be doing a better job of addressing the strategic and policy issues affecting the practice and profession of athletic training. Currently, too much board energy is focused on association management rather than strategic issues facing the profession. Third, I believe this and other problems are the direct result of an antiquated and increasingly ineffective governance structure. Fourth, I believe those problems can be remedied by significant governance reform and structural changes. Fifth, I believe that the governance structures of several peer healthcare professions are helpful models from which the NATA can draw lessons. Those professions have demonstrated that they are adept, at a level beyond the NATA, at identifying and addressing emerging strategic and policy issues.

**Proposals**

**Proposal One:** NATA Districts are anachronisms and their role in NATA structure and governance should be minimized or eliminated.

NATA districts are an historical remnant of the association and provide few strategic or organizational advantages to the athletic training profession.
AT population disparities across districts, which is both undemocratic and illogical. How can the association justify the fact that District 7 (my home district), with a relatively small population of ATs, carries an equal vote to that of District 4 or District 9, which by comparison are densely populated districts? With this said, there is a potential role for districts to play if a policy-making body were established within the NATA. I will talk more about that in proposal number three below.

Proposal Two: The leadership selection process of the NATA is antiquated and inconsistent with best practices. District elections should no longer dictate NATA BOD membership. Instead, a nation-wide nominating and election process should be created that reflects the current and future leadership needs of the association and the profession.

The most concerning aspect of the district-based governance structure is the way in which the NATA BOD is selected. Currently, the NATA BOD is composed of directors of the 10 NATA districts, all elected and sent to the board by their individual districts. My experience is that few districts work on strategic issues relating to athletic training practice. Districts are not typically involved in things like professional advocacy, governmental affairs, practice-related policy setting, or any of the other activities that are regularly encountered at the national level. For most, continuing education, and to some extent scholarship and research support, is the sole focus. Ironically, leadership of a state association has become a better preparation for national leadership because of the types of issues that are addressed by state associations.

Consequently, district service gives people precious little experience in dealing with the sorts of strategic professional issues that confront them, or should confront them, in the NATA boardroom; it is simply not an effective training ground for the kind of leadership increasingly required at the national level. And, although previous district service is not a requirement to run for director in many districts, it greatly enhances the chances of an election victory. Therefore, otherwise qualified individuals, who could make a significant impact in a national board room, are forced into district service before standing any chance of winning an election to the position of District Director and for apparently no reasons related to sound governance.

We then compound this problem by requiring that our presidential nominees be former BOD members. Why mandate such a criterion when it excludes the possibility that someone with sizeable leadership experience outside of the NATA can ever be elected as president? For example, why should a former president of the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education or the Board of Certification not be able to run for NATA President just because he or she hasn’t previously served on the NATA BOD? Is there any doubt about his or her ability to direct a board or govern an organization the size of the NATA? Second, when it is very likely that previous BOD experience would function as an advantage to the candidate in the eyes of the electorate, why not let the electorate decide instead of mandating BOD experience as a necessary requirement of presidential candidates?

An obvious solution to this problem is to amend NATA governance policy to allow for the NATA BOD to be composed of “at large” candidates, nominated and elected from outside existing district boundaries. Several examples of this approach are easily found both within and outside our profession. For example, as this article is being written (June, 2012), the BOC has an open call for nominees to fill a vacancy on its BOD. The call requests specific areas of experience and expertise (e.g., experience with governmental affairs) that will be given priority in the nominating review process. Interested candidates must fill out an application and submit a nominating letter that explains how they are qualified for the position. The entire process is run by a standing nominating committee, which thoroughly vets nominees against the identified experiential and leadership requirements. Qualified candidates are then slated and a general election is held.

A similar process is used in several peer healthcare professional associations. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has assigned specific areas of responsibility for each of its board positions. For example, one board position is called the Vice-President for Government Relations and Public Policy. Detailed description of the service and qualification requirements exist for each position. Nominees to those positions must demonstrate experience and/or expertise in those areas to a standing nominating committee, which then forwards a slate of qualified candidates to the general membership for voting. This practice is duplicated by the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) and the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). The American Medical Association (AMA) approach is slightly different from that of the APTA and AOTA, but it still relies on an open nominating and election process.