

# Realities of Reform: Schools Respond Differently to Change

*The sweeping athletic training education changes approved in 1996 are shifting from paper to practice in colleges and universities across the nation. How are the new parameters of education fitting into schools? How are the myths different from reality?*

**By Valerie Hunt**  
*NATA News*

They're going to let everybody get accredited. They're going to let nobody get accredited. Hundreds of programs are applying. Nobody's applying.

How many myths have you heard?

As the athletic training profession marches toward its third year since an education overhaul, the reality of the changes is setting in – but sometimes being misconstrued.

## **Fact from Fiction**

While the NATA Education Council continues to answer questions through meetings and Internet sites, the Joint Review Committee on Athletic Training (JRC-AT) is beginning to see the effects of the education overhaul: more and more programs are seeking accreditation through the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP).

However, the numbers remain relatively modest.

In the past several years, almost 600 people have requested information packets, said JRC-AT Chair Peter Koehneke, MS, ATC. However, only 70 schools have followed through with an application, said Lynn Caruthers of the JRC-AT office in Colorado.

At the end of March, 91 programs had CAAHEP accreditation – including those who have been approved for years – and nine awaited a final vote by CAAHEP. The numbers are much lower than many people have suggested.

Also unfounded, however, is the belief that a limit exists regarding the number of schools allowed to become accredited. While the process is stringent, all programs may apply as many times as they wish, said JRC-AT Vice-Chair Karen Toburen, EdD, ATC.

“It's not legal to set a limit on the number of programs that can be accredited,” Toburen said.

“If they meet the standards of CAAHEP, then they will be accredited. People may think otherwise because they may have heard that only one-third of the schools applying will gain accreditation.”

But Toburen said the one-third statistic can be traced to incomplete documentation or non-compliance; programs may re-apply after addressing the issues that resulted in denial.

## **Accreditation Process**

The process to gain accreditation follows well-defined steps. First, Toburen said, a university requests a self-study packet from the JRC-AT.

The packet includes definitions, requirements and directions for completing the self-study. An applying school usually forms an accreditation committee to assess its athletic training education program, looking for weaknesses and making sure it meets the CAAHEP requirements.

Twice each year, on

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June 1 and September 1, the JRC-AT accepts completed self-studies, which then are sent to readers. If the reader finds incorrect or insufficient documentation, the missing details are requested from the school, sometimes repeatedly, Toburen said.

"It takes about a year to write a self-study," she said.

After self-studies are accepted, the school is assigned a visitation team for a site visit.

Caruthers said visitation teams include two people chosen from a pool of 122 qualified people. The team, after visiting the school and seeing the program first-hand, writes a report for the JRC-AT, which meets in August and March to review the findings of visitation teams and decide if applicants should be recommended for accreditation.

The JRC-AT then issues a recommendation to CAAHEP, which votes to approve or deny applying programs at meetings in October and April.

### Applications in Action

Towson State University program director Gail Parr, ATC, said the process sounds straightforward enough – but going through it can be anything but simple.

"The part that is the hardest is the preparation of the study," she said. "It was kind of hard to know how much detail to include: should I throw in the kitchen sink, or just the basics?"

While Parr awaits a vote by CAAHEP, she knows the university is committed to the academic program, no matter how long it takes to gain accreditation.

Not every university has such a clear path.

University of Kansas head athletic trainer Lynn Bott, MS, ATC, said his school has not decided whether to implement a curriculum.

"A decision still needs to be made," said Bott, an incoming NATA board member. "From an academic standpoint, I don't know why they would not consider it, but I also know they're probably looking at it from an expense point of view: what will it cost in additional faculty and staff?"

At the same time, Bott said he must concentrate on his role.

"I am in athletics," he said. "When our athletics department put together a mission statement, we put together a mission for athletics. It didn't say anything about teaching students. It was basically about how we are going to care for student athletes."

Athlete care, Bott said, remains the bottom line for him.

"I've realized I don't have that much control over a lot of this," he said. "Instituting an academic program is up to the university and Board of Regents. I hope we can get accredited, but I want to do it right."

### For the Right Reasons

Toburen said she continues to be surprised by the number of colleges and universities that turn to accreditation as a means of keeping their student athletic trainers.

"I've had people in the workshops we've presented stand in front of a whole group and admit that's the only reason they're looking into accreditation," she said. "They don't know what they're going to do without their student athletic trainers. That is the wrong reason to have a program."

Toburen said an academic program should be viewed in and of itself.

"You need to have an academic program in athletic training that has the same status as any other major," she said. "They have faculty members, they teach classes. If a school is going to have its certified athletic trainers who care for the athletes also teach classes, who's going to help with the

workload? Caring for athletes is already extremely time-intensive.

"The reality is, more positions have to be added," she said.

"Certified athletic trainers cannot run a curriculum and take care of all the student athletes at the same time."

Bob Broxterman, ATC, of the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis, emphasizes Toburen's point.

"Currently we do not have an accredited program," Broxterman said. "My viewpoint is that we should not – not at the undergraduate level."

Broxterman said he thinks too many universities are pursuing accreditation already.

"Expanding the total number of accredited programs does very little to enhance any future exclusivity to our profession," he said. "It does not improve the job market at graduation. We simply move the gun from our right foot and point it at our left foot."

And implementing a program for the wrong reasons does a disservice to the students who enter the program, to the athletes and to the ATCs on staff, Broxterman added.

"I think for schools with non-accredited programs, it has to be one of the top two most critical decisions that face those departments," he said.

Toburen offers simple advice.

"Be very aware of what's required in the accreditation standards," she said. "Communicate with your administration to make sure you have support if you choose to pursue accreditation. If the university isn't going to support them as an academic unit, it's going to be a struggle."

### Finding the Right Path

University of Georgia director of sports medicine Ron Courson, ATC, PT, said developing a quality program takes time, effort and cooperation. The UGA program now in place was in planning for years.

“We started organizing it about three years ago,” he said. “We found if we could get some corporate sponsorship it would significantly speed up the process.”

As a result, UGA now has an athletic training program supported by the university, with supplemental funding by Coca-Cola, Inc. and Novacare.

Koehneke said corporate sponsorship is a complex issue.

“The sponsorship must be an adjunct resource, not a primary,” he said. “If corporate sponsorship is the primary resource, then the program is in non-compliance with the standards of accreditation.”

After securing resources, UGA hired program director Mike Ferrara, PhD, ATC, to oversee the development, and it recently dedicated a new

facility for the program.

“Now we’re going through the paperwork to become accredited,” Courson said. “Fortunately we’re in a good situation because our athletics administration has been very supportive of it, and the academic side – with the School of Exercise Science – is supportive as well.”

Both sectors believe better education of ATCs will ensure continued high-quality care for athletes, he said.

For some schools, support is not an issue at all. Pomona College in California, for example, supports its ATCs – it just is not committed to a curriculum in the profession.

“It was not a hard decision at all to decide whether to become accredited,” said head athletic trainer Kirk Jones, MS, ATC. “The school is a liberal arts college, and they think an

athletic training curriculum is too narrow of a focus.”

Jones said the decision makes sense. “Not every school needs accreditation,” he said.

Toburen agreed. “There are options,” she said. “Smaller schools can affiliate with larger universities who have programs, and they can be sites for clinical experiences. Or they can simply expand their staff of certified athletic trainers.

“It will be interesting to see how the profession changes.” ■

*For more information about the accreditation process, contact the Joint Review Committee on Athletic Training Chair Pete Koehneke at (716) 888-2954 or Lynn Caruthers at (303) 779-4853, or visit the JRC-AT homepage link at <[www.nata.org](http://www.nata.org)>.*

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