

Student Athletic Trainer vs. Athletic Training Student: Get Over It and Get On with It!

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In the past several years, the athletic training profession has undergone some rather radical changes. The internship route to NATABOC certification has just about gone by the wayside, CAAHEP-accreditation requires strict adherence to guidelines and standards that make it extremely difficult for most programs to get established, and athletics administrations are up in arms because student athletic trainers are acting like students, rather than certified athletic trainers.

The truth of the matter is, the profession of athletic training is not the same as it once was. It is evolving; it is maturing. Certified athletic trainers are no longer willing to work around the clock, get paid minimal salaries or endure deplorable work conditions. The student athletic trainer, the principal work force for most athletic training programs, is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

Many ATCs reading this can remember our student athletic trainer days: being in charge of a sport, covering practices and games, writing injury reports and developing rehabilitation programs for injured players – all by ourselves. Many of us have fond memories of traveling with our teams, being out on our own and making tough decisions. What better experience than to be solely responsible for an entire team? What better way of learning the hard realities of the profession?

The truth of these memories is, or should be, startling! These are memories of students. These are memories of, many times, unsupervised students who were required to perform the services that only a certified athletic trainer should have provided. Student athletic trainers were often asked to make decisions regarding injuries without having a thorough knowledge base or the experience in dealing with such injuries. These are the memories of the free work force of most athletics departments in the country.

Student athletic trainers were, and in many places still are, regarded as part of the athletic training staff because athletics departments have not been able to distinguish student athletic trainers from certified athletic trainers. Why should they? They have always assumed that all practices and games are covered and that trained, knowledgeable and experienced individuals are managing the health care of their athletes – at the cost of only one or two certified athletic trainers.

Q: How many certified athletic trainers does it take to meet all of the health care needs of all the athletes in an athletic program?

A: Why, only one or two, of course! That is, provided there is a full contingent of student athletic trainers available to assist.

Thank heaven above for student athletic trainers. And shame on the certified athletic trainers for allowing it to go on for so long!

Well, it's all about to change. The role of old-time student athletic trainers is different than it once was. The new athletic training students will no longer perform athletic training services while traveling, unless supervised by a certified athletic trainer. Nor will the new athletic training students cover practices or games unless they have audio/visual contact with a certified athletic trainer.

Just as we would not want a student nurse or physician intern to perform tasks of responsibility without supervision, so it should be with the new athletic training students. The new students will be strategically placed in situations of learning, not responsibility. Their education will emphasize a quality, directed learning experience that will be extended over time, rather than the old hours-equals-experience way of thinking. Eligibility for NATABOC certification will require the new athletic training students to meet strict educational competencies and clinical proficiencies, many of which were not required when present-day certified athletic trainers went to school.

The athletic training profession as a whole is changing for the better. Eventually, it will be recognized for what it truly has become: an allied health profession dedicated to the health care of athletes and the physically active. Eventually, the radical changes in the education of athletic trainers will not seem so radical, and athletics departments will recognize athletic training students as students. Foremost, as a result of these educational changes, the health care of athletes and the physically active will improve. ■■

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