

Change and Athletic Training

Richard Ray, EdD, ATC
Hope College, Holland, MI

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I'd like to talk to you today about the need for ongoing change in athletic training, and in a particular way, athletic training education. It's true. We've all gone through a lot of change in the past few years. Most of us are ready for a bit of a breather. We all know that the profession's reaction to the changes engendered by the education reform movement have been met with mixed emotions. While the overwhelming percentage of athletic trainers accepted – and perhaps even welcomed – the gradual switch to accredited programs as the gateway to certification, the ramifications of that decision have been met with skepticism by some. The delineation of specific clinical proficiencies and the expansion of the competencies into new content areas – all in the context of new accreditation standards – has forced all of us to recreate – indeed, to give new birth – to the didactic and clinical parts of our programs. It hasn't been easy for most of us. But are students better off as a result of the changes? Absolutely! I have never been more confident that athletic training students across the country are being educated in a manner that will allow them to succeed and compete in today's health care environment. The changes have been hard. The result has been well worth the effort.

Resistance To Change

Why are we so resistant to change in our profession? What is it about athletic trainers that – as a group – makes maintaining the status quo so attractive to us – even as we complain about all the



Dr. R. Richard Ray, Jr. is a Professor and Chair of Kinesiology at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Since 1982 he has served as the Program Director for the Athletic Training Education Program at Hope College. Dr. Ray is the author of several books and over 40 articles.

ray@hope.edu

things we'd do differently if we could? I have a few ideas about this. And please note – these are just my ideas. I have no data to support these hypotheses, so keep what you like and throw the rest away. I can think of at least three reasons for our shared resistance to change:

Religious Passion for the Profession

First, our collective passion for the profession is almost religious in nature. We believe in the essential goodness – the rightness – of what we do. We have created a set of unwritten ethical standards that comprise a kind of moral compass for how athletic training ought to be practiced. The sense of guilt and the anxiety created by that guilt if we stray too far from these collectively owned precepts tends to give rise to common practice patterns and ways of doing things that permeate the profession. This is a partial explanation for why athletic trainers in Michigan look and sound and act in a way that, for the most part, is indistinguishable from the way athletic trainers look and sound and act in Montana or Massachusetts or Maryland. Even small changes in such a strongly shared culture to which all of us have a quasi-religious devotion are sure to be resisted.

Professional Patriotism

A second possible explanation for our collective resistance to change is closely related to the first. Athletic trainers have successfully created a history—and to some degree a mythology—that has led us to participate in a kind of shared professional patriotism. In much the same way that we were taught to believe in the goodness of America – or at least the ideals of America – by learning about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, we've also been taught to believe in the goodness of athletic training by revering the lives, beliefs, and actions of our professional Founding Fathers – people like Pinky Newell, Otho Davis, and the Cramer brothers. Just as our nation's early patriots were not perfect, our profession's first leaders had their faults. Still, their sacrifice and example of lifelong service have created an ethic that only the crassest of us would be quick to want to change. If there were a flag for athletic training, most of us would fly it right below the American flag. Such a powerful symbol makes change difficult.

Distaste for Conflict

April 4, 2006 Finally, our collective resistance to change is rooted in our distaste for conflict. Change and conflict are the conjoined twins that mark the evolution of every society and social system. If you want one, you'll get the other every time. Who among us welcomes conflict? Who among us wouldn't prefer peace and tranquility and amicable relations to bitterness and strife and division? As a profession that has such a strong service ethic and predisposition to selflessness, perhaps we have an even more robust distaste for the conflict that accompanies change. How can we minimize the conflict and loss of control that accompanies the inevitable march of change in our profession? I think there are at least two things to which we must corporately commit. We must both embrace and expect change.

Why should we embrace change? Well, if we agree that change is inevitable in the evolution of our profession – and all of us have seen enough change to know that this is true – then it makes some sense to embrace it so we can minimize the level of dissonance and conflict it engenders. Most of the changes we've seen in our profession have been good. Most of us – given the chance – wouldn't turn back to the “good old days.” Change, managed carefully, is usually for the good. If we embrace change, it is usually less costly and painful.

The second thing we must do if we're to reduce the conflict that comes with change is to expect the change. Why should we expect change? Change is an essential component of competition. Competition – for better or worse – is both an ingrained element of American culture and the future of our profession. Athletic training must compete to survive. The high school athletic trainer must compete with the sports medicine clinic down the street. The college or university athletic trainer must compete with the other sports medicine professionals with whom his or her athletes already have a relationship before they come to campus. The athletic trainer in the sports medicine clinic must compete with the other clinic across town. The athletic training educator has to compete with other disciplines in the academy for a shrinking pool of resources. ALL of us have to compete with other professions whose scope of practice overlaps with ours or we will become irrelevant, and by that I mean extinct. This has never been truer than it is in these days of shrinking health care dollars. When competing for our place in the world becomes second nature – when we learn to expect change the level of discomfort we experience with change won't disappear, but it should become more manageable.

AT Education Change

Having laid the foundation for why change is resisted in our profession let me focus my remarks specifically to athletic training education. What changes should we anticipate in our lives as athletic training educators? How should we respond to those changes?

I believe there are five themes for change with which all of us are going to have to come to grips. Changes in what we teach,

changes in how we teach, changes in how we relate to other parts of the academy, changes in how we relate to our students, and finally, changes in how we relate to each other.

What We Teach

The first change with which all of us are going to have to come to grips involves what we teach. As the body of knowledge in medicine in general – and in athletic training in particular – continues to grow, the content of the curriculum will expand in kind. The recent expansion of the curriculum into non orthopedic areas of medicine is only the first in what is sure to be a long string of changes we'll be called on to shoehorn into already cramped syllabi. More about this later. Another factor that is likely to force expansion of the curriculum is the continued diversification of the athletic training workplace. The diversification into new health care settings both creates new sources of knowledge and a demand for that knowledge. The new non orthopedic competencies and clinical proficiencies were largely a response to the fact that more of our graduates are working with a greater segment of the lifespan than ever before. If our efforts to achieve third party billing continue to bear fruit allowing access to the general public that other health care professions enjoy, then it is quite likely that athletic trainers will be practicing in settings we can now only imagine. The canon of knowledge now in place will serve athletic trainers in these new settings well, but each new niche will bring new requirements and new skills. Eventually this knowledge will find a way into the mainstream of practice and our profession will look to us to make sure that students have mastered the new skills.

The Way We Teach

The second aspect of change for which we must be prepared will be a direct result of the first – we will have to change not only what we teach, but the way in which we teach it. The curriculum has expanded and is likely to continue to expand. Obviously, it cannot continue to swell ad infinitum. The day will come, and indeed it may be here already for many of us, that there will simply be too much information for the number of credits or contact hours we have available to us. Stated another way, we are going to have to find a way to help students learn more in the same amount of time. Please note that I did not say we were going to have to find a way to teach more content in the same amount of time. We are going to have to refine our teaching methods so that we can help students learn more and learn better in the fixed and rather small amount of time we spend with them every week. We will become organizers for our students' learning instead of content deliverers.

Lecturing will become less practical and remain less useful than other forms of student-centered, skill-oriented learning. First exposure learning will, by necessity, shift away from the classroom to the dorm room. It's not that we'll never deliver content, just that we'll be forced to shift away from this in order to accomplish our students' learning objectives in an expanded curriculum.

What role will technology play in this new pedagogy? Although many will consider me a Neanderthal for saying so, I think that this is an open question. I think technology is a factor but

is not likely to change the essential elements of the teaching and learning process as much as other things will. The shift to web-based teaching is being heralded as the new frontier, but with the exception of non-traditional students who can't come to the university for their learning, most hoped for solutions involving technology are— to quote the Gospel of Luke— just new wine in old wineskins. History shows us that most technological solutions to pedagogical problems have been no solutions at all; the printing press, blackboard and the overhead projector being notable exceptions. The way to improved student learning in an increasingly cramped curriculum is most assuredly not paved with technology. Those of us who try to substitute “virtual learning communities” for student-centered instruction based on meaningful mentoring relationships with caring instructors do so at their own peril.

Interaction Within The Academy

Another change we can anticipate involves our interactions with other parts of the academy. Our integration into the mainstream of the professorate is still in its formative years. The integration that has taken place has been gradual, born of many models, and has often been unconventional. Some of us came to the faculty directly in the manner of our colleagues in other disciplines. Get your doctorate, apply for a tenure-track position, teach a little, publish or perish, get tenured, get promoted. Many of us—perhaps most of us—landed in academe in a different way. Some jumped directly from our roles in the athletic department. Others straddled the academic/clinical line and then gradually drifted across to the classroom on a more full-time basis, sometimes in tenure-track roles and sometimes not. Some of us still have one foot planted solidly in the academic world with the other firmly rooted in the athletic realm. Though there are several models into which we can fit, we are going to have to look and sound more like than unlike our colleagues in other disciplines if we are going to be accepted into the academic mainstream— especially when economic times get tough. You may say “That’s nonsense— I’m accepted already.” On some level I'm sure you are. But if you came to the professorate in a way unlike your faculty colleagues did in History, Biology, or English, or more importantly, the faculty in your own department, ask yourself if you are a realistic candidate to become department chair, dean, provost, or president. Some athletic training faculty have certainly been accepted but most have a long way to go to fit into their institutions in a way that is accepted without question or reservation.

We all would do well to recognize that the academy thrives on convention. Indeed, establishing, enshrining, and preserving custom seems to be one of its central purposes. Unless we can significantly influence the process, the terminal degree and publish or perish will continue its gradual evolution until it is firmly established as the norm for the critical mass of athletic training educators. Is this good or bad? I'm not sure. It's a complex question. I do think however, that we'll need to help influence the creation of different models—some of which may not include tenure for program directors and clinical coordinators—that will allow these

folks to succeed. The risk in this, of course, is that by doing so we may be relegating them to second class academic citizenship.

I implied in my previous comments on technology that we can and should expect changes in how we relate to our students. Let's face it. It is becoming much more expensive to attend college. State subsidy of public higher education is declining precipitously. Private colleges and universities have seen their inflation-adjusted endowment values reduced by billions in the stock market decline. Both of these factors have driven tuition costs higher, and in many cases, have led to dramatic reductions in the amount of financial aid available to students. Students and their parents may be willing to pay more for a college degree, but they are also going to expect more value in the educational experience.

Value To Students' Education

How can we add value to the educational experiences of our students? One of the first areas to which we should look—and I'm very pleased that this is starting to get some attention—is the clinical component of the undergraduate athletic training major. Clinical experiences will have to become more meaningful than they have been over the past 20 years. Though the concept of students as service providers is slowly fading away, it has a long way to go. We've been doing clinical education on the cheap by asking people who already have full-time jobs as our clinical ATCs, to take on teaching roles—often without release time or other compensation. We have to find a way to reduce role conflict of clinical instructors, whose primary job is clinical, not educational. The ACI concept is a step in the right direction in this regard, but I suspect we still have a lot to learn about the concept of role conflict and how to decrease it to the mutual benefit of both our clinical instructors and our students.

As we consider our changed relations with students, we also need to face the fact that an increasing number of students come from non-traditional and troubled backgrounds. All of us know students who differ from the norm—whatever that is—and require extra effort from us. They need counseling, mentoring, and sometimes hand holding in amounts that other students don't need. We need to get ready for more, not less of this.

This personalized, value-added instruction will be delivered in the context of a shifting ethical and moral standard. An increasing number of students have a more porous conception of long-held moral and ethical beliefs. The Josephson Institute's 2002 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth paints a bleak picture of the moral fiber of our nation's young people. Shame on us— their parents and teachers— for allowing it to be so. This data is balanced somewhat by the unprecedented levels of voluntary service and the gradual return to religious commitment of young people. While the optimists among us, and I am one of them, look for the silver lining in reports like those of the Josephson Institute, we must face the fact that today's students have a different world view than we did when we were in school. We're going to have to adapt to this.

Program and University Advocates

Finally, we should prepare for changes in the way we relate to each other in our roles as advocates for our programs and our universities. Within the next few years, accreditation is going to become what it was always intended to be—the lowest common denominator in determining program quality. Once every school that wants to be in the business of athletic training education is accredited, students and their parents will begin to choose schools and athletic training programs based on other distinctive qualities. In short, we are going to have to compete for students in ways that we haven't had to up until now. Adam Smith taught us that competition and consumer choice spur economic development. In the same way, competition for athletic training students is likely to force us to improve our programs in order to make them unique and distinctive—all for the benefit of our students. Once universal accreditation makes this free market transition possible, we are likely to see winners and losers emerge. Some programs will adapt and compete successfully. Others, for a variety of reasons, won't be able to make the necessary changes and they will probably fail.

Change Is Exciting

I don't know about you, but I get excited about all of the changes I've mentioned this afternoon. Sure, some of them are daunting and are going to create a lot of work over the next 10-15 years, all at a time that I wouldn't mind a bit of a rest. But think of the possibilities these changes will create. Our academic programs in athletic training, already better than at any time in our history, can only continue to get better as we carefully and thoughtfully adapt to the changing environment. We have the chance to slowly help our graduates and our profession become a mass-market commodity. It's going to be difficult. It's going to take talented people to pull it off people like you; people who believe in the goodness, the rightness of what we do.
