

Athletic Training Continuing Education Needs Assessment: Pilot Study

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Abstract: Continuing education for certified athletic trainers is both required and essential. The purpose of this study was to determine the need, including solutions and priorities, for continuing education for athletic trainers in various employment settings. Focus group sessions were conducted during the Spring 1992 District 4 meeting of the National Athletic Trainers Association. Representatives for each of the following employment settings were selected from the preregistration list and invited to participate: high school (7 participated), college/university (8), corporate/industrial (6), professional (3), and clinical (8). Data were compiled from written lists and audio cassette recordings of group discussions. Focus group participants across all employment settings felt that their primary continuing education needs were not being addressed at district meetings. Less traditional topics (eg, ergonomics, budgeting, public relations, and functional capacity evaluations) were identified as the more essential education needs. Focus group opinions varied somewhat regarding specific topics and methods of presentation. Recommendations included a more thematic approach to topics and presentations and ample opportunities for work or discussions in small groups. Results of the focus groups could impact the professional preparation of athletic trainers.

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Continuing education is essential for all medical and allied health professions. The National Athletic Trainers' Association-Board of Certification, Inc (NATA-BOC, Inc) requires that 8.0 continuing education units (CEUs) be completed by each certified athletic trainer every 3 years.^{3,4} A variety of activities will satisfy this requirement (eg, attendance at conferences/workshops, publications, presentations, and/or supervision of student athletic trainers). Each NATA-BOC, Inc-approved activity is assigned 0.1 CEUs per contact hour.

Many athletic trainers earn CEUs by attending NATA conferences/workshops (ie, national-, district-, and state-level athletic training association events). Although much planning and development is invested in these conferences, there is little published information concerning what specific topics would most suitably address the continuing education needs of the registrants.

In order to aid conference planning committees to address the specific continuing education needs of certified athletic trainers, I conducted a continuing education needs assessment study during a NATA district meeting. The purposes of the study were:

Determine Need: attempt to verify the perceived need for continuing education among athletic trainers employed in specific settings.

Identify Solutions: make suggestions and recommendations for addressing specific education needs for athletic trainers in each of the various employment settings.

Prioritize Solutions: identify relative importance of the suggestions and recommendations for improving continuing education of athletic trainers, categorized by employment setting.

Methods

Focus group^{2,6} and needs assessment research methods^{5,7} were reviewed and combined for this study. I conducted five different focus group sessions during the Spring 1992 District 4 meeting of the NATA, with each focus group composed of employed certified athletic trainers from one of the five primary employment settings: high school (7 participants), college/university (8), corporate/industrial (6), professional (3), and clinical (8). I randomly selected participants from the conference preregistration list, with a goal of eight representatives from each employment area accepting an invitation to participate. All corporate/industrial and professional athletic trainers who attended the conference participated in the study.

A focus group session lasted 60 minutes. Each group was divided into two smaller subgroups during each session, with the exception of the professional athletic trainers' focus group. Sessions were scheduled so as not to conflict with important conference proceedings (eg, business meeting, keynote address, or presentation of interest to a particular group of participants). Meetings were conducted in a quiet room located adjacent to the conference presentation hall. The location of the focus group session was chosen for its convenience and comfort.

Meetings began with an orientation to the purposes, goals, and format of the sessions. The value and importance of the participants' responses was also communicated. Subgroups were instructed to work separately on three different tasks:

1. Assess whether continuing education opportunities during NATA district conferences are addressing the needs of athletic trainers in their particular employment area.

2. Develop a list of topics to address unmet education needs (including preferred method of presentation).
3. Prioritize needs.

These tasks provided a loose structure while allowing participants flexibility over the direction and depth of the discussion. I requested honest responses from participants and immediately attempted to establish a nonthreatening atmosphere. The moderator played a critical role in gently directing the course and pace of topical discussion, with freedom to pursue unexpected directions of discussion while encouraging thorough examination of the selected tasks. Following discussion of a particular issue for approximately 15 minutes, subgroups verbally reported their collective comments to the group at-large, and additional comments were then solicited. Each subgroup recorded their comments on a flipchart. In addition, all discussions in the sub-groups and in the group at-large were recorded on audio cassette. Prior to audio recording, I obtained informed verbal consent. Comments within and across focus group sessions relative to the three tasks mentioned above were compiled, categorized, and listed.

Results

Focus groups across all employment areas felt that their primary continuing education needs were not being addressed at their NATA district conference. Although conventional topics such as orthopedic/sports injury evaluation, surgery, or rehabilitation are considered important, they were not high priority continuing education needs and/or were not presented satisfactorily. A variety of less traditional topics were preferred by more than one focus group (Table 1). Other nonconventional topics were also identified as the more essential education needs in the corporate/industrial (eg, industrial health, safety/Occupational Safety and Health Administration compliance, worksite wellness, occupational therapy), sports medicine clinic (eg, functional capacity evaluations, insurance, manual therapy), and professional (drug rehabilitation,

financial planning) settings. Setting-specific topics were also important in the high school (eg, practical tips for athletic trainers on a small budget, athletic training program design) and college/university (eg, clinical instruction, career/academic guidance, research).

The method of presentation recommended by the focus groups was topic-dependent. However, several consistencies in their suggestions were apparent. To provide enough depth and breadth in a given topic area, a more thematic approach was indicated (eg, shoulder surgeries, shoulder mobilization, shoulder proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation). More comprehensive, less fragmented learning experiences were preferred. Another common suggestion was to provide ample opportunities for work or discussions in small groups, with limited enrollment in these sessions in order to protect the quality of the experience. An example suggested in the focus groups was to begin a session with a large lecture presentation which would then lead into activities or discus-

sions in smaller groups. Participants would then reconvene as a large group to interact with expert panelists. Pre-/post-convention "hands-on" workshops and courses were also highly recommended.

Discussion

The results of this study should be considered to be preliminary. The sample size was small, and the reliability and validity of the comments may be tenuous. Gender, years of experience, and types of previous experience may be important variables to consider in future research. However, several recommendations and implications can be considered from this study. For members of athletic training conference planning committees, I recommend the following:

1. Select less generic topics on a more regular basis. Setting-specific topics were strongly preferred by the athletic trainers in this study. However, avoid topics which are merely different and do not adequately meet the continuing education needs of athletic

Table 1.—Summary of Preferred Continuing Education Topics Among Athletic Training Employment Settings

	Setting				
	High School	College/ University	Sports Medical Clinic	Corporate Industrial	Professional
Time management	X	X	X	X	X
Legal issues	X		X	X	X
Promotion/marketing of athletic training	X	X	X	X	X
Athletic training skills Administration	X	X	X	X	X
Budget management	X			X	
Tx & rehabilitation nontraditional athlete	X		X	X	
Injury psychology	X			X	
Workmen's comp				X	X
Documentation (invent/billing/ contracts)			X	X	X
Presentation skills			X	X	X
Athletic training instruction/ evaluation	X	X			

trainers in any given employment setting.

2. Develop a thematic approach to topics and presentations. Unrelated topics do not provide enough breadth or depth.
3. Provide ample opportunities for work or discussions in small groups. Informal dialogue and experience-sharing fostered in this format is often invaluable.
4. Continue the pre-/post-convention workshop and courses frequently scheduled as part of athletic training conferences/symposia. Very specific skills can be acquired in a relatively short period of time.
5. Develop concurrent tracks or stream of topics intended for athletic trainers in specific employment settings. Crossover topics should be strategically organized.
6. Provide sessions which point out for the NATA membership the primary responsibilities of athletic trainers in different employment settings. A broader understanding of the roles and responsibilities of our colleagues is fundamental to understanding and appreciating the future directions of athletic training.
7. Rely less on regional networks of professionals as presenters. Solicit proposals for presentations which are subject to peer review and acceptance by a selection committee. Invited speakers should reflect the input of athletic trainers employed in a particular setting.
8. Address the roles and responsibilities of athletic training educators. Provide sessions on athletic training instruction, evaluation, curriculum design, etc, perhaps using small groups to discuss teaching tips.

Implications from this study may be important. Although the professional

preparation of athletic trainers for employment appears adequate,^{4,8} many unmet educational needs for athletic trainers remain, particularly in the sports medicine clinic and corporate/industrial settings. It appears prudent to emphasize the topics identified by athletic trainers in different employment settings and to include cognitive, affective, and clinical learning experiences. Structured rotations/practicums in a variety of athletic training employment settings could be organized. When considering current employment demographics of athletic trainers,¹ professional preparation experiences limited to the college/university would seem restrictive. Further, role delineation studies of athletic trainers in specific employment settings may yield meaningful information useful, for more comprehensive professional preparation program design.

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