

# Where Should Athletic Training Programs Be Housed?

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**Context:** Where a professional athletic training education program (ATEP) should be housed within a college/university has been a topic of discussion for many years. While individual institutions have unique preferences and priorities that suit its specific situation, it is essential that the field as a whole develops a consistent and cohesive model to guide ATEPs in their initial or continued development as programs. The current literature investigating the appropriate location of both undergraduate and graduate professional ATEPs is limited.

**Objective:** To begin a discussion on what ultimately will be the best situation to ensure the sustained growth of ATEPs and, therefore, the profession.

**Conclusion:** The current literature is inconclusive as to the optimal location for professional ATEPs within a college/university community. It is the author's opinion that undergraduate ATEPs should maintain their traditional place in physical education/kinesiology departments, as that is the most appropriate location for students to receive well-rounded, multi-disciplinary educational opportunities. Professional graduate ATEPs, on the other hand, should be housed in schools or departments of health sciences, because of the similarities between their two-year intense professional focus and those of other allied health fields.

**Key Words:** physical education, athletic training, universities and colleges, setting

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The athletic training profession has evolved significantly over the past sixty years. From the founding of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) in 1950 at a meeting attended by about 200 men, the profession has grown to more than 30,000 members, including over 24,400 certified athletic trainers.<sup>1</sup> The most significant changes over the years have occurred through attempts to improve the means by which athletic trainers are educated and prepared for entry-level employment.<sup>2</sup> Athletic training has grown from four NATA 'approved' undergraduate athletic training programs in 1969 to 368 accredited professional athletic training programs in 2010.<sup>1,3,4</sup> Athletic training education programs (ATEPs) were initially spawned from departments of physical education, with graduates originally taking a minimal number of athletic training specific courses while receiving general physical education degrees. Today, athletic training programs offer a highly specialized professional degree that must be awarded through a major specifically designated as athletic training by the institution no later than the 2014-2015 academic year.<sup>1,2,5-7</sup>

The NATA's Task Force on Education once suggested that although ATEPs were typically and traditionally aligned with and housed in departments of physical education/kinesiology, they should realign themselves with other health programs in a college of health-related professions.<sup>1,2</sup> While more than a decade has passed since this pronouncement, approximately 70% of ATEPs (both undergraduate and graduate programs) remain housed in departments of physical education/kinesiology, and only 24% of ATEPs are located in schools of health sciences.<sup>1,2</sup> The question then becomes, should athletic training programs follow the recommendation of the NATA's Task Force on Education and align with schools of health sciences, or should they remain in physical education/kinesiology departments?

The task force's rationale for programs to leave departments of physical education/kinesiology was predicated on the belief that physical education/kinesiology programs were becoming less financially viable, and that the considerable strain of meeting the rigid CAATE accreditation standards would require an already challenged departmental budget to absorb significant, additional resources.<sup>1,2</sup> The resources used to ensure that ATEPs meet accreditation standards and provide adequate educational opportunities for students appear to be more readily available in educational units designed to prepare other health professionals.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, contemporary athletic training education is developed in a pre-professional manner more consistent with other allied health professions, which would make realignment into schools of health sciences seem appropriate.<sup>2</sup> The opportunity to share valuable, high-tech treatment and rehabilitation resources for educational purposes, that are considered abundant in allied health departments, is essential for a field that requires a rigorous accreditation process. Additionally, the connection with other health care fields, such as physical therapy or occupational therapy, would be useful for athletic training students because of the similarities in curricular content and the opportunity to gain valuable insight into the related fields.<sup>2</sup>

Realigning with health departments would also benefit ATEP faculty in their pursuit of tenure and promotion. If ATEPs realign with health care programs, then it is more likely that faculty

members would be evaluated for tenure/promotion based on the medical model, which includes teaching, service, clinical research, and/or clinical expertise.<sup>2</sup> ATEP faculty in departments of physical education/kinesiology may struggle to achieve promotion and tenure if these other components are not included, and if the administrative responsibilities required of program directors and clinical coordinators are not clearly outlined and rewarded in the tenure and promotion guidelines.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true at research-intensive institutions where greater scholarship demands are placed on faculty, and the medical model is not considered in tenure and promotion decisions.<sup>2</sup>

While health profession departments offer tangible benefits to ATEPs, their faculty, and their students, there are disadvantages to being housed in these departments as well. First, many health care programs (eg, physical therapy, occupational therapy) already housed in the department are graduate programs or entry-level professional programs. Since athletic training requires a baccalaureate degree for entry-level employment, there would be a significant difference in student profiles between ATEPs and the other allied health majors. The difference between undergraduate and graduate student traits, behaviors, and expectations may make it difficult for successful interaction and communication between programs, which would eliminate one of the primary benefits of relocating to allied health departments.

Allied health departments also tend to focus on and emphasize professional training as the principle component of the educational plan of study. While this form of training is quite useful for professional preparation, an undergraduate program should stress not only a well-rounded educational experience to ensure that students have a quality general education, but also an appropriate professional preparation. General education requirements are established at most colleges and universities, both at the institutional and at the departmental level. These educational requirements provide a sound foundation of knowledge that ensures students graduate with a depth and breadth of knowledge both in general studies and within the major. It is important that ATEPs continue to prepare well-rounded graduates and professionals.

The arguments both for and against the transition of ATEPs from departments of physical education/kinesiology to allied health departments are valid. While departments of allied health offer numerous benefits for ATEP programs, there are also disadvantages associated with relocating. When determining the most appropriate location for each individual ATEP, there is also a strong rationale for remaining aligned with their traditional home in the department of physical education/kinesiology, where they can continue to exist and even flourish.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the field of physical education can take credit for providing opportunities to athletic training education that would not have been available otherwise, while also enabling the field to progress where it is today.<sup>1</sup> Physical education/kinesiology is a discipline, or body of knowledge, based on the study of physical activity. Athletic trainers are health care professionals who specialize in injuries that primarily result from being physically active.<sup>1</sup> This shared emphasis generates a number of logical links between the curriculum and research interests of both programs.

Another rationale for remaining aligned with physical education/kinesiology is the opportunity for students to gain a well-rounded education as a component of their degree program rather than solely prepare for professional employment. Taking courses that include philosophy/sociology of sport, exercise physiology, biomechanics, sport psychology, and motor learning that are normally found under the physical education/kinesiology umbrella, provides the student with a much greater depth and breadth of knowledge. Having an understanding of different aspects of physical education/kinesiology allows students to integrate multi-disciplinary skills and information into their professional practice that will benefit both them and their patients. Finally, remaining aligned with physical education/kinesiology departments allows ATEP students to maintain ties with the other undergraduate students in the department, thus fostering interaction, effective communication, a sense of a common purpose and goals, and a valuable support system.

While moving to an allied health department is not the clear-cut choice, there are also disadvantages to remaining aligned with physical education/kinesiology departments, many of which affect the department more so than the ATEP itself. First, the departments must review tenure and promotion procedures to decide if there are alternative strategies available to allow ATEP faculty a better opportunity to gain promotion and tenure. Physical education/kinesiology departments must also evaluate their financial resources and determine if it is feasible to meet the ATEP's needs in terms of accreditation and faculty expenses without causing resentment from other members of the department, especially in light of the significant budget cuts that currently face higher education.<sup>1</sup> Finally, ATEP administrators need to review departmental policies and determine if any of the benefits that allied health departments provide can also be offered in the physical education/kinesiology department. While there are many educators who believe that athletic training education can remain in the physical education/kinesiology departments if academic leaders are willing to be flexible and use creative solutions,<sup>1,2</sup> the individual groups of faculty at each institution must make the decision that is right for their situation.

While there are physically more undergraduate professional ATEPs than graduate level professional programs, graduate tracks are steadily gaining popularity nationwide. At this time, there are 23 accredited professional graduate programs, with several additional institutions either in the process of creating courses of study or transitioning their current undergraduate ATEP to the graduate level.<sup>2,8</sup> This shows an increase from 16 programs just three years ago.<sup>2</sup> The increased popularity is primarily attributed to a school's ability to attract students who would like to enter the athletic training profession after completing their undergraduate study in a different major, either because of a personal desire to change careers or because the student attended an undergraduate school that did not offer an accredited ATEP. Since there are significant differences between a graduate ATEP (a clinical program) and the typical master's degree program in physical education/kinesiology (a research or pedagogy program), an allied health/health sciences department may be the most appropriate location to house graduate athletic training programs.

Professional master's degree students should complete certain pre-requisite courses (such as anatomy and physiology) prior to acceptance into the ATEP. These courses provide essential foundation knowledge for athletic training students, but are not consistently included in the graduate ATEP curriculum. When these courses are removed from the ATEP educational program of study, there is no longer the curricular connection found between athletic training and physical education/kinesiology.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the professional master's degree program is squarely on professional preparation for a career in athletic training, requiring an intense curriculum and related clinical experiences that prepare students for BOC certification and a career in the field. This type of academic format is better aligned with schools of allied health/health sciences, which also have a specialized graduate curriculums leading to professional certifications.

## CONCLUSION

In my opinion, undergraduate ATEPs should be housed in physical education/kinesiology departments--their traditional homes and the best location for students to receive well-rounded educational opportunities. However, graduate level professional programs should be housed in schools or departments of health sciences, which offer the best educational opportunities for students in professional preparation program. Is this the correct answer? Only an open debate and discussion on the topic will help solve this dilemma and allow the educational field to continue its evolution.

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