

Academic Freedom In Athletic Training Education: Food for Thought

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Introduction

Academic freedom is defined as the “freedom of the individual scholar to pursue truth wherever it leads, without fear of punishment or of termination of employment for having offended some political, methodological, religious, or social orthodoxy.”^{1(p5)} In American colleges and universities the concept of academic freedom is outlined in the “1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*.”² This document provides the fundamental basis for faculty rights (see <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs>) regarding teaching and scholarly activities, tenure, and the students’ rights in learning.² Revised in 1969, 1989, and 1990 to remove gender-specific references from the original text, the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments*² continues to make academia the unique institution it is today and continues to apply the principle of the “advancement of truth” to a faculty member’s role both in teaching and researching. In fact, academic freedom at public higher education institutions is linked to First Amendment rights and has traditionally been supported by the courts.

Currently there is paucity of literature addressing the issue of academic freedom specific to athletic training education programs. As with other topic areas in athletic training, examining research and commentaries from similar allied healthcare fields such as nursing⁴⁻⁶ and physical therapy^{7,8} may be useful in introducing the topic, offering insight for professional discussion(s) and stimulating future research in the area. Therefore, this column will review the historical contexts of academic freedom, examine the current literature related to academic freedom in other allied healthcare

professions, and provide recommendations for how to approach academic freedom in athletic training education programs.

History of Academic Freedom

Many aspects of early American higher education were developed from universities in Europe, particularly England and Germany.⁹ From their earliest foundations, institutions of higher education in Europe historically served 3 main purposes: (1) training young people (initially men) for knowledge-based professions, (2) providing training in character and discipline, and (3) to expand what is known about the universe. In the early days of American universities, many institutions adopted a fourth function- to accomplish all 3 of the above purposes while providing service to the community. Being able to meet these 4 tenants through one’s teaching and research, though, requires the freedom to pursue the truth.¹⁰

Academic freedom is also the primary catalyst for the traditional tenure system in higher education.² Under this arrangement, American universities may grant tenure to qualified professors. Tenure provides university professors the freedom to exchange and develop new ideas through teaching and research, as well as economic security for institutions to attract qualified faculty members.² With tenure, a professor is granted the freedom to discuss ideas in the classroom that may be somewhat controversial, providing they are relevant to the course content or the academic discipline under investigation. Once granted tenure, a professor can have the assurance that he or she will not face economic or academic punishment for his or her teaching

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or research findings. As professors have, at times, found their teaching or their research findings to be in direct opposition to historical events, this freedom has been used to protect criticisms of governments, businesses, or social dynamics. For example, academic freedom protected university professors' criticism and protests of World War II, while simultaneously protecting researchers in the sciences whose work led to advances in atomic weapons.

American universities have implemented other measures to preserve academic freedom. Faculty contracts, for example, contain policies regarding grievance procedures. These policies are designed to provide a fair process for dealing with criticism of faculty members and institutions. Faculty are free to choose his or her own line(s) of research, while the institutional review boards (IRB) help preserve academic freedom by ensuring that research is conducted with proper ethics and acceptable methods, thereby protecting faculty members from undue criticism of their research. Academic freedom also allows faculty members to share research findings without the fear of being stifled by the government or other public or private agencies. Ironically, however, the IRB can also limit academic freedom by restricting research design and providing stipulations about the type of research questions and interactions that are permissible.¹¹ While federal laws require timely information and disclosure of textbook pricing, universities have found they cannot compel faculty to use certain textbooks, nor can they compel faculty to attend professional development training because of issues stemming from academic freedom.¹² State licensure and professional certifications however, often mandate the need for professional development with no regard to the concept of academic freedom.

Institutions with different charters and missions may run into varying issues with academic freedom. For example, large research universities may struggle to keep up with the ethical and methodological concerns with a large quantity and broad scope of research proposals. Colleges and universities with church affiliations must balance their religious missions with the free exchange of ideas that inevitably include views in opposition to the church's beliefs and teachings. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) recommends that universities with church affiliations should clearly state any limitations to academic freedom in writing when hiring new faculty members.² At some institutions, achieving tenure requires an extensive line of scholarly productivity, in the form of peer-reviewed articles, policy papers, book publications, and grants. In other institutions, tenure is based more upon quality teaching, with a more liberal view of scholarship.¹³ Differing requirements for tenure will, to some degree, determine the scope of the challenges to academic freedom faced by universities. It is clear that institutional type and mission can influence the challenges related to academic freedom.

Academic Freedom in the Allied Healthcare Professions

Nursing, physical therapy, and athletic training education programs are all similar in that they must follow specific criteria to meet accreditation, educational, and professional standards.¹⁴ However, these educational programs are reviewed by third party accreditation organizations that provide program oversight in a wide variety of areas such as program sponsorship, faculty requirements, program safety, outcomes, curriculum development, and clinical education. Following graduation from

an accredited healthcare program, students are then usually required to successfully complete national testing for certification and/or licensure into the professions. Educational programs are also responsible for socializing students into the professions within the guidelines of the professional organization's code of conduct, ethics, or standards of practice behaviors.⁶

Currently most accreditation bodies do provide provisions on how educational programs meet their accreditation and professional standards based on the concept of institutional autonomy. Institutional autonomy provides an institution "freedom" to act without external control, but does institutional autonomy provide for an educator's academic freedom? Some suggest there is a potential for limited individual academic freedom when teaching in accredited educational programs due to the significant role academic responsibility or duty plays within a discipline and the preparation of its students.^{6,7,14} Educators are entitled freedom in the classroom to teach and discuss the subject matter as they choose as long as they are careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial material that has no relationship to their subject. Manning-Walsh¹⁴ recommended faculty "learn to balance academic freedom with academic responsibility." (p30) Educators must meet the standards required of the academic program, but how they accomplish their goals within the overall curriculum, specific courses, and individual lessons is the autonomy allotted to faculty members through the concept of academic freedom. Educational programs should clearly state in writing at the time of one's appointment what limitations and rights individual faculty members may have in the classroom. Many of the rights of the faculty are outlined in an institution's faculty handbook or contract. New faculty may even consider negotiating other "rights" upon hiring as well.

Educational guidelines for nursing programs focus on outcomes rather than specific procedures within the curriculum to meet the educational guidelines. For nurse educators, focusing on outcomes rather than procedures has allowed for the creation of more innovative curriculums within nursing education programs.¹⁵ Sheehe¹⁵ states that the "unrestricted approach to curriculum development will liberate faculty members to continue the quest for new knowledge and will result in graduates who value freedom of thought for others as well as themselves." (p17) Similarly, in early physical therapy literature, Carlin⁷ writes "The freedom to teach, to explore, to innovate and to experiment is real and positive, but we will benefit from this opportunity only if we dare to use it." (p382) These ideas of quest for new knowledge, exploring, and innovating apply to teaching, curriculum development, and research and transcend academic disciplines as well as embodies the concept of academic freedom.

Athletic training educators need to use this same approach in the development of their curriculums. More encouragement and freedom is necessary to create innovative curriculum, taught in a more meaningful manner. These innovative curriculum should be created using sound pedagogical principles within the context of accreditation guidelines and be used to promote deeper learning and appreciation for the content among students and not just the regurgitation of facts. Indeed, now is the time for some educators to break the traditional habits of teaching to the test particularly with the introduction of the 5th edition of the National Athletic Trainers' Association Education Competencies. This edition of the education guidelines places greater emphasis on outcomes and clinical integration and now is time to be proactive and challenge the old constructs we currently use in the preparation

of the entry-level athletic trainer. But why change you may ask? As Carlin⁷ states, “The freedom to teach, to explore, to innovate and to experiment is real and positive, but we will benefit from this opportunity only if we dare to use it.”^(p382) How many of us dare to challenge contemporary thought in the hopes of educating more qualified and better prepared athletic trainers?

In physical therapy, Mercer et al⁸ argued the need for academic freedom, especially with the current increase in the use of evidence-based practice (EBP) in the field. Mercer et al⁸ discuss the need for academic freedom in physical therapy education and possibly controversial ideas based on current research as opposed to conventional treatment methods. The authors provide examples of specific orthopedic assessment tests widely used in physical therapy and athletic training practice, but lacking research on their reliability and validity. For example, Ober’s test is widely taught in both programs, but the research has yet to support the validity of this test in evaluating iliotibial band tightness.⁸

Mercer et al⁸ also discussed the professional dilemma an educator may face in being free to teach new and/or unique injury assessment methods in relation to the requirements for the students’ professional certification examination. These injury assessment methods may not reflect the most current research in the field, or better yet, they have not been introduced into documents that serve as the blue-print for exam development. How can an educator be free to teach current research trends or practices when students may be assessed on antiquated material because it meets the “current standards”? Even back in 1967 Carlin⁷ discussed the role of academic freedom in presenting physical therapy students “with new and sometimes controversial material” and adapting to the “ever changing medical world.”^(p382)

Sheehe¹⁵ discussed constraints to academic freedom in nursing education, many of which are still pertinent today and are applicable to athletic training education as well. These general constraints to academic freedom were: (1) limitations on research funding, (2) the faculty evaluation process, and (3) resource allocation within departments. The requirements of national certification are especially important to address. Faculty should not be pressured to “teach to the test” in any field and should be free to present the findings from the latest research to their students. Sheehe¹⁵ states, “when academic freedom is compromised, the student may not become an ‘educated’, critically thinking person during the education process.”^(p18) Manning-Walsh¹⁴ supports this idea and states, “Good professors learn to balance academic freedom with academic responsibility, creating an environment in which students can become people who think and question freely.”^(p30)

Educators in nursing, physical therapy, and athletic training may face these types of dilemmas and constraints over the course of their careers, especially in light of the push for EBP in all three fields. What has always been done in the clinical setting and taught in the classroom is being questioned and evidence is needed to support the continued use in practice. Carlin⁷ suggested continual evaluations of the curriculum and that, “We must teach in reference to what is happening and what will happen, not in response to what has happened.”^(p382) Educators need to be proactive in their teaching. Faculty members need to be supported in teaching new material backed by the research, even if it may differ from the certification examinations or conventional treatment practice. That is not to say faculty should not prepare students to be successful on the test, they should prepare students for both the test and entrance into the profession.

Recommendations about Academic Freedom

Bellack’s⁴ editorial in a *Journal of Nursing Education* reviews academic freedom as it relates specifically to nurse educators and stresses knowing the limits to academic freedom. She discusses that educators need to be aware of the concept of academic responsibility or duty, the counterpart to academic freedom. Academic duty includes: (1) knowing institution policies and procedures, (2) teaching topics relevant to the course and the overall curriculum, (3) avoiding the use of the classroom for one’s personal agenda, engaging in both ethical teaching and research, and (4) holding high standards of all aspects of your work. Bellack⁴ concludes by stating:

When faculty step outside these bounds and assert academic freedom as justification, they not only place their institutions in potential legal jeopardy but also violate the agreed-on standards of conduct of the professorate and their corresponding academic duty to themselves, their students, their peers their institutions, and most important, the public, which grants the privilege of academic freedom in the first place.^(p528)

Academic freedom and academic duty are both important concepts for educators in all areas of academia.

Sheehe¹⁵ made a number of recommendations in relation to academic freedom for nurse educators, several which are applicable to athletic training educators. The first and probably one of the more significant recommendations, is the need to “review the rights and responsibilities of academic freedom with all new nursing faculty members as part of their orientation to academe.”^(p18) New educators need to be taught about their rights within their institution as it relates to academic freedom as well as their duties within the specific academic program. Sheehe¹⁵ recommends using strategies, like mentorship programs, to support non-tenured faculty members through the tenure process. She believes this might help promote creativity and innovation within teaching and research. Sheehe¹⁵ also suggests teaching the concept of academic freedom to undergraduate nursing students so they will know about the idea as they continue their education and practice. The use of these recommendations within the field of athletic training education to promote academic freedom would be beneficial to the individual academic programs and the growth of the profession.

Kneipp et al⁵ also discuss the importance of teaching doctoral students about academic freedom. Through mentorship, doctoral seminars, and other academic support structures graduate students need to learn about academic freedom and how it differs from academic duty. Senior faculty members are charged to help prepare their future colleagues for the academic environment ahead of them. If these ideas are not formally addressed in graduate programs doctoral students need to ask their advisor and professional mentors about academic freedom and academic duty and the role both ideas play in athletic training education programs. How do they incorporate the most recent research in their classes without compromising student success on the certification examination? How do they achieve the “balance” between academic freedom and academic duty? We recommend that doctoral programs in athletic training incorporate measures to educate future faculty about academic freedom and the ways their faculty work could be affected.

New athletic training educators may also benefit from additional support and mentoring during the beginning of their academic careers and through the tenure process.¹⁶ As aforementioned, depending on their educational backgrounds, new athletic training educators may have never received any information on academic freedom or related university responsibilities. There is also the potential for significant role strain related to the position, as many athletic training educators are not only tenure-track faculty, but also program directors.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Mentoring and support from within the department and college or university can help ease that strain and make new educators more successful in their faculty roles, as both teachers and researchers. We recommend that universities with athletic training education programs provide information and/or mentoring about academic freedom to new faculty. We also recommend that new faculty take an active role in learning about how academic freedom will have an effect on their careers.

Mercer et al⁸ provide three considerations related to academic freedom specific to the field of physical therapy, which again translate well to athletic training. These include: (1) providing faculty with the time and resources needed to be effective researchers, (2) teaching using the latest research and EBP, including exposure to controversial new methods and (3) encouraging students and educators to question efficacy of traditional treatment methods. All three of these considerations could be applicable to athletic training education as well. Allowing athletic training educators the freedom to choose his or her own line of research without the fear of being stifled by government or other agencies (while providing adequate institutional support) can allow for advancement of the profession and contributions to the larger body of evidence to challenge contemporary thought. Athletic training educators should not shy away from sharing controversial research or ideas that are germane to the development of entry-level athletic trainers. If athletic trainers are versed in a variety of issues, this may strengthen the public perception of the profession and better-prepare students to use research in their practice.

Mercer et al⁸ also discuss the obligations that a faculty member in physical therapy may have to his or her students. These include the obligation to prepare students for their examination and future practice, provide the skills for students to be lifelong learners in their profession, to use the latest research in all teaching, and to be a person of honesty and integrity in research and teaching.⁸ These obligations could also apply to athletic training faculty since athletic training educators face similar pressures related to academic freedom as physical therapy educators. Academic freedom may also help promote good teaching in the classroom and positive mentoring/interactions between students and faculty members. Good teaching may involve controversial or unproven methods, but practices that have support from the literature can be studied and validated under Boyer's¹³ scholarship of teaching. Faculty members may bring up controversial research or issues with students during informal mentoring/interactions, but academic freedom should protect this type of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Academic freedom is an essential issue within colleges and universities. Academic freedom is what drives professors' teaching and research, and students' learning. In athletic training education, it is important for faculty members to remember their rights under the protection of academic freedom, especially with

the constraints placed on the programs by outside influences. Educators need to be free to research and teach without restrictions, they should not feel they have to "teach to the test" or be afraid to teach information supported by the latest research and aligned with the push for EBP in athletic training. By having faculty aware of their rights under academic freedom they can help promote athletic training research, scholarship, and the profession, to a new level based on the latest research in the field.

Research needs to be conducted evaluating athletic training educators' current views about academic freedom. This could help drive future research about the perceived constraints on academic freedom within the field and develop recommendations to help promote academic freedom in athletic training teaching and research. Dewald and Walsh¹⁶ also call for research on issues that affect athletic training educators. One of the easiest things to do now to help to promote academic freedom, as suggested above, is to educate doctoral students and new faculty members about the issues related to academic freedom.

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