



AATE Post-Professional Pathways Work Group Executive Summary

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I. Executive Summary

Recently, the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) announced the evolution of the entry-level athletic training degree to a professional, Master's level Athletic Training degree. This transition created a shift in many previously sought out post-professional educational opportunities, while also creating decreased awareness and misinformation among various stakeholders of current post-professional opportunities. This issue presents a significant barrier for the promotion of and retention of the athletic training profession. Therefore, we sought to identify the primary values and barriers for various post-professional pathways and identify mechanisms to better prepare applicants seeking to enter post-professional pathways.

The workgroup began by identifying common myths and misconceptions surrounding the post-professional pathways. The overwhelming barrier determined by the workgroup is the need for central messaging across the athletic training profession regarding the proper terminology, and corresponding regulation, of various post-professional pathways (i.e. Internship, Residency, Fellowship). This lack of regulation has not only created confusion and misinformation across the athletic training profession, but among consumers, employers, and other stakeholders. Ultimately, we determined that it is imperative to promote a greater understanding of the goals and outcomes of each pathway, as well as regulation of proper terminology and corresponding job postings of these positions.

While we determined that the perceived myths and misconceptions are the most critical, the workgroup also identified the importance of the perceived value and positive aspects of the various post-professional pathways. We did this in the context of both the generalized value of enhanced knowledge and skills, as well as the individual values of each distinct post-professional pathway. Despite the emergence of various themes related to these positive aspects, it became apparent that many of the values were overshadowed by the aforementioned myths and misconceptions, especially as it relates to inconsistent terminology and stakeholder messaging.

Following these conversations, it became clear that educational efforts would be paramount prior to initiating a specific strategical plan. To facilitate this next step, the workgroup explored various resources related to other health professions in an effort to link these resources to some of the aforementioned barriers identified with the athletic training profession.

Collectively, the workgroup determined that our recommendations to the AATE Board be considered as a tiered approach in which all initial on-going efforts and resources be put toward strategies geared toward promoting central messaging to educate respective stakeholders. Once this task is complete, the workgroup then recommends that subsequent efforts focus on 1) identifying specific gaps in post-professional athletic training education; 2) collaboration with a marketing consultant to facilitate this information as it relates to recruitment for the profession; and 3) exploring innovative and effective approaches for the transition to clinical practice.



II. Board Charge

Problem identified by AATE Board: Athletic trainers are often looking for educational opportunities following their professional preparation. Historically, athletic trainers transitioned to practice in various forms of post-professional master's education, some of which were tightly tied to the profession, while others gave athletic trainers an opportunity to “diversify” their resume. As the profession continues to evolve in the delivery of professional education at the master's level, several post-professional learning opportunities have emerged, including residencies and advanced practice doctoral programs. At this critical time, we need to educate stakeholders (both consumers and their mentors) about these opportunities to ensure growth of these programs.

Scope of Work: The AATE Post-Professional Pathways Work Group is task with examining the following as a basis for formulation of a recruiting strategic plan for the AATE:

Board Charge 1

Perceived value and barriers to entering post-professional pathways.

Board Charge 2

Mechanisms to better prepare applicants for residency and post-professional academic programs, including foundational knowledge and marketing the range of opportunities

Board Charge 3

Dispelling myths and developing mechanisms for consistent terminology and messaging

Board Charge 4

Exploring growth potential for post-professional pathways

(Credited to AATE work group planning form for Post-Professional Pathways)



II. Background Information

To begin to address the charges, the workgroup agreed it was important to share our own experiences with and perceptions of post-professional pathways in athletic training. Doing so allowed us to identify and reflect on any biases, both positive and negative, that could hinder our progress of this workgroup. Below is a summary of the pathway each member of the workgroup went through to enter and progress in the profession.

Table 1. Workgroup Member Athletic Training Pathway Experiences

Member	Professional Pathway	Post-Professional Pathway	Current Role
1	CAATE-accredited professional (BS) program	CAATE-accredited post-professional MS program; PhD program; Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship	Educator in DAT program and CAATE-accredited post-professional MS program
2	CAATE-accredited professional (BS) program	Post-professional MA program; athletic training residency program	Clinical athletic trainer, core faculty in CAATE-accredited residency program
3	CAATE-accredited professional (BS transitioned to MS) program		Educator in CAATE-accredited professional MS program
4	CAATE-accredited professional (BA) program	CAATE-accredited post-professional (MS) program	Athletic Trainer in Secondary School Setting
5	CAATE-accredited professional (BS) program	CAATE-accredited residency program	Clinical Athletic Trainer in Physician Practice
6	CAAHEP-accredited professional (BS) program	MA program; PhD program	Educator in CAATE-accredited professional MS program
7	CAATE-accredited professional (BS) program	CAATE-accredited DAT program; currently seeking PhD	Educator in CAATE-accredited DAT program

Once we discussed our own pathways and experiences, we reviewed the four charges and agreed that it seemed most prudent to discuss charge # 3 (dispelling myths and developing mechanisms for consistent terminology and messaging) first. It is necessary to identify perceived myths about post-professional pathways in order to effectively strategize how to address perceived values and barriers to post-professional pathways, mechanism to better prepare applicants for post-professional pathways, and to explore growth potential for these pathways. Before our group meeting, we each individually documented perceived myths and misconceptions about post-professional pathways by reaching out to colleagues in various roles. Collectively, we discussed our individual findings and identified the common myths and misconceptions that naturally emerged during the conversation. The table below provides a summary of our findings and discussion about perceived myths and misconceptions about post-professional pathways.

Table 2. Emerged Themes and Notes Regarding Post-Professional Pathway Myths and Misconceptions

Myth/Misconception/Issue	Notes
Terminology confusion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internship (looked as less favorable) - Graduate assistantship - Residency - Fellowship - “Short-term” athletic trainer (union-based) - Specialty certification (not CSCS, Graston) - Cert. of Advanced Qualification (CAQ) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GA is now framed as “intern” – job description is identical - “DAT” vs. “DAT in residence” vs. “Residency” - Most positions are marketed as residency or fellowship, but really just an internship - There is zero consistency in terminology (lack of regulation by NATA Career Center creates large issue with understanding of different pathways) - More education needed about “additional certification” vs “specialty certification” - As a profession, there is no central way to communicate – messaging is coming from all over the place
Residencies/DAT are meant to be a substitute or means for transition to practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creates an issue where students apply to residency and are told they do not have enough experience, yet student thought residency was meant to serve as transition path
Pathway to Specialty Certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Currently being discussed. Initial pathway will be via accredited residency, but people don’t understand residency training, so may create inherent confusion
Stakeholder messaging: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “you don’t need PP education; you’ll already be certified” - “it doesn’t matter what PP pathway you take, just get the experience” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need greater understanding of the goals and outcomes of the PP pathways that exist (DAT, Residency, Specialty Certification)
Financial burden of different PP pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unclear what the financial gains of completing each of the PP pathways are - With transition to ELM, how has the demand changed for Residency and DAT programs? - People feel like they HAVE to get a DAT because graduates now enter profession with MS
Only complete residency if you want to work in physician practice/ “All residencies are the same”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More education about the purpose and role of residency training - Residencies are not “setting-based” - More education on the different focus areas/how relate to specialty certification
You should only obtain a DAT if you want to teach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not all university will accept DAT as a terminal degree - More education is needed about institutional requirements (PhD, DAT, EdD, DHSc)
Research expectations of PP pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is expected in DAT vs Residency vs PhD - Research doctorate, academic doctorate, clinical doctorate – what can each of these do?
PP Pathways intend to produce experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More education about clinical specialists vs advanced clinical practice vs contemporary expertise vs “expert”
“All DATs are completely different”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unclear how to determine the outcomes/focus of one vs another - The role of accreditation and clarifying CAATE’s position not to accredit PP degree programs
Stakeholder Uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employers unlikely understand the differences between program types, accreditation vs not, etc



Following the discussion of perceived myths and misconceptions, the workgroup completed the same process regarding perceived value and positive aspects of post-professional pathways. Individually, each workgroup member documented perceived positive aspects and reached out to colleagues for additional insights. Then collectively, we discussed our individual findings and developed a list of emergent themes related to the perceived values and positive aspects of post-professional pathways in athletic training. Interestingly, during our discussions it became apparent that many of the perceived values and positive aspects of post-professional pathways were overshadowed by numerous myths and misconceptions, most notably terminology confusion and inconsistent stakeholder messaging. The table below provides a summary of our findings and discussion about perceived values and positive aspects of post-professional pathways.

Table 3. Emerged Themes and Notes Regarding Post-Professional Pathway Value and Positive Aspects

Value/Positive Aspect	Notes
Enhanced level of knowledge and skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Theoretical knowledge - Psychomotor skills - Self-efficacy and confidence - Clinical decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - While enhanced level of knowledge and skills was a large theme that emerged, it was followed with conversation about clear differences between knowledge and skill gain among different post-professional pathways as well as within each post-professional pathway (particularly DAT programs)
Develop advanced level paradigm of evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helps build on foundational knowledge base for clinical skills AND enhances clinical decision making - Education still needed to clarify to stakeholders about terminology, DATs vs Residencies, a deep dive into DAT programs, and a deep dive into Residency programs
Residency programs can lead to clinical specialists and create a clear, formal pathway to specialty certification DAT programs produce advanced practice leaders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advanced practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clinical specialists, content expertise, contemporary expertise – need more clarification about distinct differences and similarities between these terms - Uncertainty about what 'advanced practice leaders' actually means - Need more clarification about differences between a 'specialist' and a 'leader' - Questions about in what ways advanced practice is different from residency training
Community stakeholder perspectives about ATs may continue to positively evolve as more and more ATs seek post-professional pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The DAT degree may lead to more respect among other healthcare professionals, but important to note that the DAT should be compared to DNP or DMS (post-professional doctorates), not DPT, OTD, or PharmD (professional doctorates) - Residency training could make ATs more marketable for employment opportunities within athletic training
More education needed before value and positive aspects can truly be explored	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education about entering the profession should also include education about progressing through the profession



Following the exercises of identifying emergent themes related to myths and misconceptions as well as perceived value and positive aspects of post-professional pathways, it became apparent to the workgroup that it would not be feasible to properly strategize how to address several of the original workgroup charges until more education, consistent terminology, and central messaging was emphasized for post-professional pathways. The workgroup believed that educational efforts will be extremely important in order for all stakeholders to have a better understanding of athletic training pathways, especially related to post-professional education. Therefore, the last activity completed by the workgroup before submitting a progress report to the board was to investigate how other health professions clarify educational pathways, particularly post-professional pathways, to stakeholders. This exercise was important to not only determine how other professions education stakeholders and prospective students about the various paths to enter a profession, but also how to advance through the respective profession. The workgroup thoroughly explored resources provided by several health professions (eg, nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy) and the summary of the findings from this exercise were used to help guide the recommendations set forth by this workgroup via this progress report.



III. Recommendations

Based on the findings and work produced, the Workgroup recommends a tiered approach to addressing the challenges and messaging of post-professional education within athletic training. Therefore the recommendations below are structured based on level of importance to be addressed in order for a systematic and effective approach to not only address the concerns presently influencing post-professional education, but also to seek innovative strategies to enhance post-professional education in the future.

Below are recommendations made by the Post-Professional Pathways Workgroup for consideration by the AATE Board:

1. The AATE Board draft communication letter to the strategic partners discussing the need for central messaging across the profession regarding post-professional pathways and job posting regulation. In order to progress with further recommendations, it is imperative to have consistent and accurate messaging to all partners that represent the true role and outcome of post-professional education.
 - a. Identify strategies for central messaging across all strategic partners to promote and educate stakeholders about post-professional pathways in athletic training. The current mechanisms to educate partners (including potential students, employers, etc.) are not comprehensive in their current form, which leads to confusion about post-professional pathways. Subsequently, current available resources (eg, educational pathways in athletic training infographic: https://www.nata.org/sites/default/files/educational_pathways.pdf) do not include a level of detail and may contradict the actual goal of certain post-professional pathways.
 - b. Establish joint mechanisms to ensure job postings on available platforms are regulated to ensure accurate terminology and representation of the athletic training profession. When programs or employers advertise job positions with terminology that is inconsistent with the purpose or desired outcome of post-professional pathways, more confusion between partners is introduced. A mechanism to review and approve job postings to ensure accurate terminology and requirements for job postings should be developed and execute to avoid the perpetuation of confusion.
 - c. Develop materials for central messaging that differentiates the purpose of post-professional education from the purpose of transition to practice strategies. With the shift in the educational landscape of athletic training, central messaging to dispel the myth that these post-professional education pathways should serve as a route for transition practice should be developed.



2. The AATE Research Network (AATERN) form a research group to collect data specific to the recruitment of athletic trainers for post-professional pathways. We believe the focus of this research group aligns well with the recruitment and retention strategic priority recently identified by the AATERN. While some research has been produced in this area, we believe a more targeted approach to understand the perceptions of post-professional pathways from all stakeholders (i.e. professional athletic training students, faculty, preceptors, employers, practicing clinicians, administrators, professional organizations, the community at large) is necessary for the future recruitment and evolvement of post-professional education in athletic training. The aims of this research group might include the investigation and exploration of the following:
 - a. Stakeholders' perceptions of post-professional pathways
 - b. Identification of flaws in current mechanisms available to educate stakeholders about post-professional pathways
 - c. Stakeholders' perceptions of effective delivery methods to educate and encourage athletic trainers to pursue post-professional pathways
 - d. Factors that influence the return on investment of athletic trainers who have pursued post-professional pathways in athletic training

We believe that a 360-degree, multi-pronged approach to collect these data are necessary to better inform the AATE Board to develop a purposeful and innovative strategy to further education of and recruitment in post-professional pathways in athletic training.

3. Ensure there is intentional focus on post-professional pathways on the AT each moment website (www.ateachmoment.com). Now that the website has officially launched, it is an excellent opportunity to leverage the platform to deliver educational content about post-professional pathways. While the website currently includes general information about some post-professional pathways (e.g., DAT programs, accredited Residency and Fellowship programs) and provides links to additional resources, it would be impactful to develop and provide content about post-professional pathways directly on the website without the need to click out of the website to different webpages.
 - a. The educational materials about post-professional pathways should be developed based on the data collected in recommendation #2.
 - b. Post-professional pathways educational materials that are uniquely tailored to specific stakeholder groups should also be considered for development and available to AATE member institutions.