

## Professions Spotlight: Athletic Training

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### **Who Are Athletic Trainers?**

Athletic trainers are highly educated and licensed healthcare providers who focus on the comprehensive and holistic well-being of physically active individuals across their lifespans. Athletic training as a profession has been recognized by the American Medical Association (AMA), Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as an allied health profession (NATA, 2021). Serving as key partners within the healthcare team, athletic trainers focus their services in the areas of injury and illness prevention, emergency care,

examination and diagnosis of injuries, and therapeutic intervention and rehabilitation (NATA, 2021).

To become credentialed athletic trainers, individuals must pass an initial certification exam administered by the Board of Certification (BOC). To maintain their credentials, they must complete continuing education to demonstrate competence in contemporary knowledge and skills and retain certification in current emergency cardiac care. Furthermore, a specialty certification in orthopedics is currently available for advanced practitioners; there are other specialty certifications in development.

**Professions Spotlight: Athletic Training** *(continued)***What Do Athletic Trainers Do?**

According to the BOC Content for Practice Analysis, 8th Edition (2022), there are five domains in which athletic trainers practice. These domains are:

- Risk reduction, wellness, and health literacy
- Assessment, evaluation, and diagnosis
- Critical incident management
- Therapeutic intervention
- Healthcare administration and professional responsibility

Most recently, athletic training has been in the spotlight due to the high-profile case of Buffalo Bills player, Damar Hamlin. Athletic trainers, in conjunction with other members of the healthcare team, were instrumental in providing swift and immediate life-saving cardiac care. Additionally, due to the impact on the healthcare system during the COVID-19 pandemic, athletic trainers were able to expand their role within the healthcare team to include a targeted focus on intervention and support related to public health, mental health, and social determinants of health.

**Where Do Athletic Trainers Work?**

According to the latest data from the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](https://www.bls.gov/) (2022), athletic training is projected to grow 17% from 2021-2031, with nearly 2500 jobs opening annually. Athletic training continues to thrive as a profession within its traditional roots in interscholastic, intercollegiate, and professional sports arenas. Surprisingly, however, less than 50% of athletic trainers work in these settings. Due to the varied skills provided by an athletic trainer and the recognition of physical activity and injury prevention as critical to well-being, the definition of an athlete has expanded into new clinical settings and patient populations. Athletic trainers are now working with patients in specialty populations such as the performing arts, the military, tactical (police and fire), and industrial/occupational settings. Additionally, with current global agreements with Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, there are opportunities for athletic trainers to work internationally.

Currently, 49 states (the exception is California) and the District of Columbia regulate the practice of athletic training. The BOC exam is recognized by all athletic training state regulatory agencies, and individuals must be legally recognized by the appropriate state regulatory agencies prior to practicing athletic training. Compliance with state regulatory requirements is mandatory and the only avenue to legal athletic training practice. It is critical that certified athletic trainers become familiar with the regulatory process at the state level, as medical practice acts vary from state to state.

**What Are the Educational Pathways for Athletic Trainers?**

Beginning in the fall of 2022, athletic trainers must graduate from an accredited master's-level educational program that is recognized by the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE), and current baccalaureate programs will no longer be able to enroll students (CAATE, 2022). These professional programs will lead students to be eligible to sit for the BOC examination and to enter the profession of athletic training. A list of all accredited programs, as well as those programs seeking accreditation, can be found on the [CAATE website](https://www.caate.org/).

To capitalize on innovative recruitment and retention opportunities, many universities have created 3+2 curricular plans in response to the change in educational standards. These plans can be internal 3+2 degrees to the sponsoring institution or external, in which neighboring universities develop articulation agreements whereby students are considered for early admission to the master's program before they have been granted a baccalaureate degree. Universities can also create a stand-alone, 2-year master's program in athletic training. While there are several universal prerequisites students must have prior to entering a master's program, each institution may have additional prerequisites for admissions. This information can be found on the individual programmatic websites.

After athletic trainers become certified, there are specialty residencies, fellowships, and doctoral programs available to them to gain advanced clinical skills and techniques. These programs can also be found on the [CAATE website](https://www.caate.org/). These programs are intended to build upon entry-level foundational knowledge and provide clinicians with a more specialized focus in their clinical practice.

**What Makes Athletic Training Education Unique?**

Building upon a foundation of basic sciences and exercise science, athletic training education incorporates a hands-on learning approach to the development of highly qualified clinicians. As part of the [CAATE 2020 Education Standards](https://www.caate.org/2020-education-standards/), students are expected to develop the skills to assess and treat patients across a spectrum of age ranges and physical activity levels. Though athletic training is often associated with orthopedic clinical care and concussion management, students are immersed in primary care, injury and illness prevention, diagnosis, referral and management of acute and chronic conditions, and the coordination of care in collaboration with an interprofessional team of clinicians.

Students are expected to complete varied clinical education experiences under the supervision of qualified athletic training and physician preceptors throughout their curriculum. At a minimum, all accredited programs must also include a

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practice-intensive immersion clinical rotation, which allows students to experience the totality of care provided by athletic trainers. These rotations are typically scheduled in the student's final semester and often serve as a capstone experience to assure professional competence and readiness for clinical practice. However, some programs have structured their curriculum to include more short-term immersive experiences, typically lasting from 4-8 weeks, throughout the entirety of the curriculum. These differences in clinical structure can be found on the individual programmatic websites.

In addition to the inclusion of the immersive clinical rotation, athletic training education is unique because students engage in intentional interprofessional education and interprofessional collaborative practice opportunities with other healthcare professionals. These opportunities allow students to see diverse patient populations across their lifespans and hone their skillset as orthopedic evaluation and concussion-assessment experts, prevention specialists, and primary care evaluators.

**Resources For Health Professions Advisors and Students**

In addition to the websites provided below, health professions advisors are encouraged to connect with athletic trainers on their own campuses or in nearby clinics and school settings. The following websites provide helpful information about the profession of athletic training.

- **National Athletic Trainers' Association** (NATA): This website is the homepage for the professional membership association for certified athletic trainers. There is information for prospective students who are interested in the field, as well as resources based on clinical setting, professional interests, pertinent healthcare topics, and advocacy efforts at the state and federal levels.
- **Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education**: This website provides information on the current accreditation standards for academic programs and a link to all the currently accredited (and seeking accreditation) professional academic programs, residencies, and fellowships.
- **ATCAS**: Like other centralized application systems for allied health professions, ATCAS is the centralized application service for professional athletic training programs. Many, but not all, institutions use the CAS system for applications. Students applying to professional programs should refer to the list of accredited programs on the CAATE website for individual program application information.
- **AT Each Moment**: This website, developed by the [Association for Athletic Training Education](#) (AATE) provides useful information for both students and academic advisors. The website provides information on upcoming virtual career fairs and different educational pathways and links to sponsored academic programs.
- **AT Your Own Risk**: This website, developed by the NATA, is the public-facing arm of the NATA and provides additional information about the profession of athletic training and the benefits of seeking the care of an athletic trainer.

**References**

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