

Invited Paper

# Examining the Educational Requirements for Entry-Level RT/TR Practice

## The Process and Recommendations of the ATRA Higher Education Task Force



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### Abstract

Over the span of two years (2016–2018), a Task Force within the American Therapeutic Recreation Association's Higher Education Committee planned and implemented a systematic study to investigate the educational requirements for entry-level education in recreational therapy/therapeutic recreation (RT/TR) and to provide recommendations and strategies addressing educational requirements. The Task Force conducted a mixed-methods study with four stakeholder groups, including practitioners, educators, students, and credentialing and accrediting bodies in RT/TR. Data were collected and analyzed from this study, in addition to a review and consideration of existing literature and resources associated with education in health disciplines. This process yielded one finding and five recommendations to inform the future of RT/

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TR education. Results indicated that the most current and pressing need in higher education is to improve the quality and consistency of the bachelor's degree in RT/TR. The five recommendations for the future of RT/TR education are reported and discussed.

### Keywords

*Entry-level practice, higher education, recreational therapy education; therapeutic recreation education*

## Introduction

In 2016, The American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA) Board of Directors approved the development of a Task Force within the ATRA Higher Education Committee to determine if a change in the educational requirements for entry-level education in recreational therapy/therapeutic recreation (RT/TR) was warranted. A second aim of the Task Force was to provide recommendations and strategies addressing educational requirements. This report presents a summary of the study and findings associated with the complex evolution of TR education and RT professional preparation.

### History of Education and Professional Preparation in RT/TR

Before the work of the Task Force is reported, a brief history of the educational and professional preparation is necessary to understand where the field has come in terms of educational requirements and curricular evolution. As early as 1961, and through 2017, a recurring theme in RT/TR professional preparation has been one of inconsistent curricula (Comeback, Inc., 1961; Connolly & Riley, 1995/1996; Kinney, Kinney, Witman, & Malcarne, 2017). Authors of recent curriculum studies have stated that without consistency in curricula, there is no or little standardization of the degree or exit skills of graduates (Stumbo, Carter, Wilder, & Greenwood, 2013; Witman & Saville, 2006). These studies span across several decades and demonstrate the inconsistency in curricula that remains today.

A history of research identifies professional preparation competencies and content at the entry level, with three studies also completed on master's-level preparation (Carter, Ashton, Hutchins, & Wolfe, 2017). Undergraduate preparation has been recognized as a bedrock of the profession and a key link to defining professional boundaries (Stumbo, 2009). However, each program seems to have its own formula for educating students into the profession, with the only acknowledged difference in preparation among entry and advanced-level education being the inclusion of management and research with the advanced master's degree (Carter et al., 2017; Kinney et al., 2017)

Since the initial reporting of research on professional preparation in the 1970s, a number of conferences and workshops, notably the 1995 ATRA curriculum conference, and the Therapeutic Recreation Education Conference I (2005) and II (2009) have addressed professional preparation guidelines and potential mechanisms to bring consistency to curricula. More recently, a number of conference presentations have brought increased attention to the inconsistency in curricula (e.g., Beck, 2015; Beck, & Negley, 2016). These conferences, presentations, and a review of curriculum research in our profession and other health disciplines have affirmed that the body of

knowledge is expanding, increasing competencies are necessary for practice, and there is a historic need for consistent education in RT/TR.

### ATRA Higher Education Task Force History and Charge

Despite the identified inconsistency in education and the evolving and increasing competencies needed for practitioners, few changes in educational preparation requirements have been made within the profession since the inception of the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC). The ATRA Higher Education Task Force took this historical context into consideration as they moved forward with their charge: *To systematically examine education requirements for entry-level RT/TR practice and make recommendations to the ATRA Board of Directors.* To commence work on its charge, in April 2017, the Task Force developed a research plan to gather data to inform recommendations and guide the future of RT/TR education and professional preparation. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the Task Force's study and the recommendations driven by the results.

## Methods

In the early months of the Task Force (January–April 2017), members conducted an initial literature and resource review in areas such as RT/TR higher education history, health care competency literature, strategic planning, higher education and health care trends and issues, peer professional preparation, and regulatory initiatives. The Task Force used this literature review to develop a matrix cross-referencing content related to practice and identifying potential new content. The matrix document helped to inform the need for the study and development of study tools (i.e., focus group protocols, survey, credentialing bodies interview guide). The Task Force additionally communicated with key informants and reviewed documents from related disciplines who conducted similar studies of entry-level education (i.e., music therapy, athletic training, child life).

Three broad goals guided the work of the Task Force: (a) determine stakeholders and develop a communication plan to inform them of the Task Force's purpose, activities, and study; (b) develop a systematic approach for the data collection process and engage stakeholders; and (c) develop and deliver a position paper with recommendations for entry-level degree requirements in RT/TR to the ATRA Board of Directors. The following sections discuss each goal, identify the method and tasks used to accomplish the goal, as well as describe the accomplishment of the goal.

### Goal 1: Determine Stakeholders and Develop Communication Strategies

**Stakeholders.** The Task Force identified four stakeholder groups to participate in the data collection process, and developed communication strategies to inform ATRA members of its work. Stakeholder groups included: (a) practitioners (i.e., practicing Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists in the U.S. and Canada); (b) educators (i.e., faculty members at academic institutions from across the U.S. and Canada who provide undergraduate and graduate education in RT/TR); (c) students (i.e., undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in RT/TR programs across the U.S. and Canada); and (d) credentialing and accrediting bodies (e.g., board members of the NCTRC, the Committee on Accreditation of Recreational Therapy Education, state licensure boards).

**Communication strategies.** The Task Force developed the following communication strategies, employed by ATRA to communicate the work of the Task Force to ATRA members throughout the course of the study: (a) an initial constant contact email blast, (b) an info-graphic handout posted on the ATRA website, (c) updates in ATRA's quarterly newsletters, (d) presentations at conferences and professional development events, (e) development of a page for the Higher Education Committee Task Force on ATRA's website, and (f) webinars. The communication plan was implemented to assist in transparency and to include all stakeholders within the profession in the Task Force's work.

## Goal 2: Data Collection Procedures for Systematic Study

A multiphase mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) involving focus groups (face-to-face and online) and electronic surveys was used to gather data from practitioners, educators, and students. An interview method was used with credentialing and accreditation bodies. Focus groups were used in the first phase of the study to identify relevant topics and questions for the second phase of the study, the survey method. Focus groups and interviews were continued during and after the survey phase of the study to further contextualize education and preparation in RT/TR. Quantitative and qualitative data sets were compared during and at the end of each study phase to help the Task Force provide well-grounded and informed recommendations to the ATRA Board of Directors. All data collection tools and procedures were approved by the ATRA Research Committee and the NCTRC Research Committee (per NCTRC's policy related to the distribution of electronic surveys through the certificants' email listserv).

**Instrumentation.** Quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups and interviews were used to gather data to help inform the recommendations of the Task Force.

**Focus groups.** The focus groups, approximately 60 minutes in duration for each, solicited opinions and sharing of experiences using a protocol that was tailored for practitioner, educator, and student groups. Each protocol addressed similar questions regarding these topics: (a) benefits and limitations of the bachelor's degree, (b) current status of educational programs' ability to prepare competent practitioners, and (c) the ideal level of education and the impact of that level of education. RT/TR educators, practitioners, and students were recruited to participate in the focus groups through written and verbal announcements at RT/TR regional conferences and professional development meetings, and during continuing education sessions at those conferences describing the work of the Task Force. The Task Force developed an info-graphic and written invitation to participate in the Zoom cloud videoconferencing focus groups, which were distributed to ATRA members via a constant contact email blast from the ATRA main office and posted on the ATRA website and social media outlets.

Ten members of the Task Force conducted focus groups, with some members conducting multiple focus groups throughout the country. Approximately 50 ATRA member volunteers were recruited to assist with focus groups. To enhance consistency and fidelity in facilitation of the focus groups, the Task Force developed and implemented online focus group facilitator training session materials for facilitators, note-takers, and assistants from within and outside the Task Force. In accordance with best practices (Krueger & Casey, 2015), focus groups were limited to 10–12 participants, were audio

recorded, and field notes were taken. Data were then thematically coded and analyzed by Task Force members.

**Surveys.** An electronic survey was developed via the Qualtrics online survey platform for practitioners, educators, and students. Three surveys were developed, one tailored to each stakeholder group, that collected demographic data and assessed stakeholders' (a) perceptions of higher education trends and forces, (b) competencies for practice, (c) educational delivery models, and (d) opinions related to the entry-level degree in RT. The surveys were distributed through NCTRC to all active certificants, posted on ATRA communication channels and social media, and emailed to academic program directors for undergraduate and graduate student distribution.

**Interviews.** An interview protocol was developed and shared with the leadership of the respective credentialing and accreditation bodies. These stakeholders were directed to respond individually (if desired) and with a collective response that represented the perspective of their credentialing or accreditation body. The following questions were asked of all bodies: (a) What are the forces and trends that influence higher education in RT/TR?, (b) What are five changes you would recommend to advance higher education in RT/TR?, (c) What are the areas that programs need to improve upon as they prepare for accreditation?, (d) Why aren't schools applying for accreditation?, and (e) What are the issues in higher education that prevent students from meeting professional eligibility requirements?

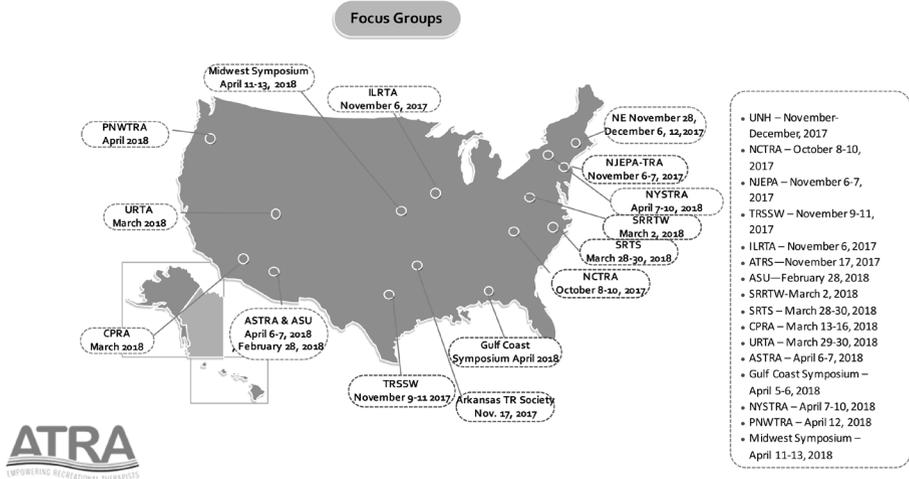
**Data analyses.** Focus group and interview data were synthesized and thematically analyzed and coded by Task Force members. Themes were refined until agreement was reached that they accurately reflected the meaning of the data being analyzed. Survey data were analyzed using the Qualtrics report program and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used to analyze each of the survey items. Final data analyses and data mixing, as part of the mixed methodology, occurred during the second and final Task Force retreat in April 2018. This process, coupled with the systematic literature and resource review (e.g., review of other therapeutic disciplines, consideration of public policy), yielded the final results, recommendations, and identified strategies to accomplish the recommendations. Strategies are not reported in this manuscript.

### Goal 3: Develop and Deliver Position Paper to ATRA Board of Directors

After Goal 2 was accomplished, the Task Force developed and delivered an initial report to the ATRA Board of Directors on May 1, 2018. This report was followed by a final report delivered on June 30, 2018. These documents included a description of the study's rationale, plan, process, procedures, and findings, as well as the Task Force's recommendations and the strategies identified to implement them regarding the suggested educational requirements for entry-level practice in RT/TR.

## Results and Recommendations

Between October 2017 and April 2018, one-hour focus groups were facilitated with practitioners ( $N = 25$  groups, 257 individuals), educators ( $N = 10$  groups, 49 individuals), and students ( $N = 17$  groups, 222 individuals) at 19 state and regional conferences and meetings throughout the country. These totals also include three one-hour focus groups using the Zoom Pro cloud videoconferencing platform conducted with one student group, one educator group, and one practitioner group. See Figure 1 for a map demonstrating the geographic reach of focus group data collection.



REGION	Focus Groups
Northeast	Springfield College, Springfield, MA November 28, 2017
	Mid-Atlantic NJEPA-Therapeutic Recreation Association Conference (NJEPA-TRA), November 6-7, 2017
	New York State Therapeutic Recreation Association (NYSTRA) Annual Conference, April 7-10, 2018
	Slippery Rock Recreational Therapy Workshop, March 2, 2018
	UNH, Durham, NH, November 28, December 6, and 12, 2017 (students, practitioners, educators)
Midwest	Illinois Recreational Therapy Association Conference (ILRTA), November 6, 2017
	West North Central Midwest Symposium April 11-13, 2018
South	South Atlantic: North Carolina Recreational Therapy Association (NCRTA) Annual Conference, October 8-10, 2017
	Southeast Recreational Therapy Symposium (SRTS), March 28-30, 2018
	Arkansas TR Association, November 17, 2017
	East South Central Gulf Coast Therapeutic Recreation Symposium, April 5-6, 2018
West	West South Central Therapeutic Recreation Symposium for the Southwest (TRSSW) November 9-11, 2017
	Mountain: Arizona State Therapeutic Recreation Association (ASTRA) Annual Conference April 6-7, 2018
	Utah Recreation Therapy Association Annual Conference (URTA) March 29 – 30, 2018
	Pacific: Pacific Northwest Therapeutic Recreation Association Annual Conference (PNWTRA), April 12-13, 2018
	California Parks and Recreation Society-Recreation Therapy Section (statewide) Long Beach, March 15-18, 2018

**Figure 1.** Focus Group Map and Chart

In total, 483 students, 1,663 practitioners (97% CTRS), and 141 educators responded to the survey. Six of the eight invited credentialing and accrediting bodies responded to the interview method.

The data analyses yielded one overarching finding: *The most current and pressing need in higher education is to improve the quality and consistency of the bachelor’s degree in RT/TR.*

From this finding, the Task Force made five empirically based recommendations for the future of RT/TR education related to both the bachelor’s and master’s degrees. This manuscript is not able to report specific data and results at the time this report was submitted for publication due to continuing review of the final report and results by the ATRA Board of Directors and other RT/TR professional organizations. However, the following information is a summary of the recommendations included in the Task Force’s final report.

### Recommendation 1

**Entry-level education should be the bachelor's degree with increased and improved fieldwork experiences across RT/TR curricula.** Data across all stakeholders reinforced the need to bolster the benefits and legitimacy of the bachelor's degree, primarily through creating consistency and depth among curricula, and increasing and improving fieldwork requirements. The need for increased and improved fieldwork requirements noted as strongly as the need for consistency and breadth in curriculum.

### Recommendation 2

**Require all RT/TR curricula to show consistency in learning outcomes that reflect entry-level competencies in the field.** The data interpreted collectively indicate that the field should improve the consistency of learning outcomes in educational preparation programs, regardless of degree level, to ensure graduates have at least the basic competencies for practice. Increasing consistency in curricula was the top priority as indicated by survey respondents across all stakeholders and was reflected in the focus groups and interviews as well.

### Recommendation 3

**Incorporate new and increasing levels of competencies into bachelor's and master's RT/TR curricula.** Increasing the depth and scope of competencies was recommended and agreed upon by respondents in the areas of evidence-based practice and research, interprofessional practice, marketing, financing, cultural competence, technology, and documentation. To prepare students for practice, implementation of a teaching-learning process that fosters clinical reasoning and decision-making in complex health care situations is necessary to develop professionals' capabilities allowing them to adapt to change, continue to develop knowledge and improve their performance (O'Connell, Gardner, & Coyer, 2014).

### Recommendation 4

**Improve the infrastructure for a graduated progression of quality fieldwork experiences.** Building upon recommendation #1, all stakeholder groups viewed fieldwork as an active and meaningful learning experience; however, they specifically recognized the importance of structured and graduated progression of fieldwork experiences staggered throughout the RT/TR curriculum. High-quality fieldwork supervision was viewed as critical to students achieving competency in professional behaviors required for successful practice.

### Recommendation 5

**Determine effective models that will ensure quality, consistency, access, and affordability in graduate education to advance practice and the profession.** Although, as stated above, the data support a strengthened bachelor's degree as the priority for RT/TR education at this time, results indicated the benefits and drawbacks of moving to a master's degree for entry-level practice. The master's degree can provide benefits such as increased practice knowledge, research and evaluation skills, salary (in some cases), and job opportunities and competitiveness to name a few. Despite these benefits, data uniformly indicated the low priority of requiring the master's degree at this time due to the benefits of being able to practice TR/RT with a bachelor's degree (e.g., economic benefit, legislative support), high cost and low market value of the master's degree, greater value and need for state licensure, and inadequate access to master's degree programs, for example.

## Conclusion

The goals of the ATRA Higher Education Task Force were accomplished through literature and resource reviews; educator, practitioner, and student focus groups and surveys; and interviews with credentialing and accreditation representatives. Five recommendations reflected the input of over 2,000 individuals; face-to-face contact with stakeholders at 19 state and regional conferences; videoconferencing contact for stakeholders who were unable to attend conferences; interviews with credentialing and accreditation representatives; as well communication with key informants and review of documents from related disciplines who conducted similar studies of entry-level education.

Data supported the historical and present need for consistency in RT/TR education through accreditation at the bachelor's level. In addition, respondents clearly voiced the need to incorporate progressive levels of competency and fieldwork experiences with professional preparation. Future consideration of the master's degree should follow undergraduate improvements. The proposed strategies with each recommendation were derived from research and identify stepping-off points for future research, discussion, and planning as the ATRA Board of Directors and other organizations and members of the profession consider the complex issue of education and professional preparation in RT/TR.

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