

prime-time

player

The Whitworth Athletic Training Education Program sets a national standard of excellence and prepares record numbers of graduates for fulfilling careers

Text and photos by Julie Riddle, '92

In the 1980s, Whitworth's athlete-treatment facility was dismal: Located in the basement of Graves Gym, the room was so small it could only accommodate four therapy tables – one of which had three legs – and a whirlpool that janitors often mistakenly used as a garbage can.

Athletics Director Scott McQuilkin, '84, who was a Whitworth student-athlete during this period, recalls, "There was so little space it might have been better to run the facility like a deli and have athletes take a number before entering, lest we violate fire-code occupancy rates, which, for this room, would have meant any number of people greater than a 4x100 relay team."

What was once a struggling sports-medicine program with a skeleton staff that provided instruction to a handful of students and treated athletes in a sub-par facility has become a nationally accredited program that sets the standard for excellence. The Whitworth Athletic Training Education Program features a state-of-the-art learning and treatment facility, an average of 90 student-majors per year, certification-exam pass rates that are off the charts compared to the national average, and employers who are snapping up graduates before the ink dries on their diplomas.

"From the program's inception, students' interest in the major has been tremendous," says Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty Tammy Reid, '60. "Over time, enrollment has held strong, and job-placement rates are still close to 100 percent of graduates, which tells us that the demand for the program remains constant."

The success of the Whitworth ATEP is largely due to the college's commitment to hiring faculty who are experts in the field, to alumni support, and to the vision and efforts of Russ Richardson, who developed Whitworth's athletic-training program and serves as its director.

After arriving on campus in 1988, Richardson remodeled the

anemic treatment facility, served as head athletic trainer and sports-medicine instructor, and raised funds for new classroom and treatment facilities.

Richardson also designed the new athletic-training program and, in 1997, facilitated the initial national accreditation process; the program was officially accredited two years later. Re-accreditation reviews are required every five years; because of its stellar review, Whitworth ATEP's accreditation was renewed in February 2005 for a rare seven years.

Since its initial accreditation, the Whitworth ATEP has developed a regional and national reputation for excellence – and stands apart from programs at peer institutions – because of its innovative and holistic approach to preparing students for successful careers.

Five Whitworth ATEP faculty lead students through course-

"Good athletic trainers stick with their teams through the wins and the losses – even the heartbreakers. And they get the best seat in the house for every competition."

–Patti Stranger, '05

work in 14 domains, including upper-extremity assessment, general medical issues in athletic training, and organization and administration. Students also work alongside faculty to provide medical care to Whitworth's approximately 450 athletes, both on the sidelines during competitions and in the treatment center throughout the sports seasons. This hands-on experience allows students to put classroom theory into practice. But this classroom and sideline learning is nothing extraordinary; students in athletic-training programs across the country do the same.

What has helped move the Whitworth ATEP to the head of the pack is that Richardson and ATEP faculty have taken this theory-into-practice model further by developing relationships with clinical affiliates in the Spokane area, including Rockwood Medical Center, Whitworth Physical Therapy (not affiliated with Whitworth College), and Shadle Park and Mead high schools, that allow students to work in professional settings each semester. When Whitworth students graduate, they have

Below, ATEP Director Russ Richardson presents a lecture on cervical-spine injuries. At left, Aubrey Prince, '07, conducts a balance test during a heat/cold, speed/agility lab. For the lab, students measured their speed and agility, then soaked their legs in a 40-degree whirlpool. Students then repeated the tests to determine whether the cold water significantly affected their performance.



Name: Melinda Larson, '92

Post-Whitworth education: Master's degree in exercise physiology, Florida International University, '94

Position: Associate professor and head athletic trainer, Whitworth Athletic Training Education Program

What it takes: Filling the dual roles of teaching and providing health care is extremely challenging: both require major time commitments and physical, mental and emotional effort.

Larson's view: "My love for my profession makes me want to learn as much as I can and share my passion and knowledge with my students. It's rewarding to see my students go on to succeed in their post-college lives and careers. I know that I'm a part of their accomplishments and I'm very excited for and deeply proud of them."

experience working in four environments that are the primary employment areas for athletic trainers: collegiate, high-school, clinical, and other health-care-related fields.

This clinical experience is an innovative model among the nation's athletic-training programs.

"Nationally, faculty at other schools are still scratching their heads trying to figure out how to get students this medical/clinical experience," Richardson says. "We've been creative and intentional in how we've developed Whitworth's program, and we think we've provided the model for the nation to follow."

Whitworth faculty have also been creative and intentional in designing the senior seminar, a capstone course launched in spring 2004 that has already led to a notable boost in seniors' academic performance and career preparation.

The senior seminar covers every angle of the athletic-training profession, from succeeding in job interviews and writing résumés to taking the Myers-Briggs test to identify personal strengths and weaknesses. Professionals in the field – including Whitworth alumni such as Tyson Burton, '01, an athletic trainer for the Atlanta Braves professional baseball organization – speak to students about employment opportunities and provide real-world insight.

Seminar faculty also help students prepare for the National Athletic Trainers Association's Board of Certification exam, which graduates must take in order to become certified athletic trainers.

Although Whitworth students' pass rates consistently exceed the national average, 12 graduates in 2004 – the first group to take senior seminar – achieved a 74 percent first-time exam pass rate, more than doubling the national average of 36 percent.

"We think the senior seminar may be one of the smartest moves we've made in the history of our program," Richardson says.

Unlike similar courses offered at other institutions, Whitworth's senior seminar helps students explore and define concepts such as worldview, the integration of faith and vocation, and the role of servanthood.



Name: Daren Nystrom, '02

Post-Whitworth education: Master's degree in kinesiology, Fresno State University, '04

Position: Athletic-training intern for the Miami Dolphins pro football team

Duties: Treats athletes and implements rehabilitation protocols established for injured and post-surgical athletes. Travels with the team and sets up locker room, training room, hotel, and field at each game site. Provides on-field coverage of all athlete conditioning and training.

Nystrom's view: "No two days are the same; the variety is what keeps me fresh and excited about my work. I am always learning something new, either from the people I work with, the books I read, or the cases I study. The challenge of the job is that the information we as certified athletic trainers use daily is constantly in flux, and we need to keep up on new theories, techniques and research to provide our athletes with the highest level of care."



Above, from left to right: Sophomores Nicole Starkey, Lindsay Davis, Jordan Montgomery and Kyle Havercroft and other ATEP students feel the frigid effects of soaking their legs in near-freezing water during the heat/cold, speed/agility lab. At right, Erin Fletcher, '06, uses a penlight to check the eyes of Amy Bowers, '06, as part of a concussion assessment during the upper-extremities lab. In the background, Athletic Training Instructor Jolene Fisher observes.

“Athletic training is a service-oriented profession,” Richardson says. “Trainers deal with sweaty athletes, stinky feet, blood and puke and a lot of other unglamorous things. The athlete is the focus, and the athletic trainer works in the background caring for God’s people, even in the simple act of providing water to a dehydrated athlete.”

According to senior Patti Stranger, her professors’ model of servanthood is what has best prepared her to succeed as an athletic trainer.

“My professors demonstrate the highest level of respect for every athlete, coach and student with whom they deal on a daily basis; their level of servanthood is not always easy to adopt,” Stranger says.

ATEP students cite their professors’ examples of service and leadership as aspects of the program that most challenge and influence them, along with the program’s time demands, and small class sizes that allow professors to give each student individualized attention.

“We get to know our professors quite well,” says junior Cameron Collings. “From holding a class at Starbucks to leading Bible studies with students, each faculty member influences us beyond the academic arena. They challenge us in our lives outside of class and in our faith.”

As students integrate the academic, physical and spiritual components of the program, they can explore new methodologies and philosophies by studying abroad, in Japan. Noted by accreditation teams as one of the strongest aspects of Whitworth’s ATEP, students live for a month at Seiwa College, a Whitworth sister school located near Nishinomiya, in southern Japan, where they compare and contrast Eastern and Western approaches to health care and athletic training. Students also visit Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

“Students credit this study program with being the catalyst that helps them define their worldview and figure out who they are and how their faith fits into a broader perspective; it’s a powerful experience,” says Richardson, who will lead Whitworth’s fifth Japan study program in May.

Students also enjoy unique learning experiences on their home turf. Since ATEP faculty often provide medical care to world-class athletes during Spokane-hosted competitions, students have opportunities to work with the pros. In January 2007, after taking an intensive Whitworth Jan Term class covering all aspects of figure skating, students will work with Richardson and Ed Reisman, the Whitworth Athletics team physician and a former world-class figure skater, to provide medical care to athletes competing in the U.S. Figure Skating Championships.

Since high schools are a major employer of athletic trainers and the Whitworth School of Education has a widespread reputation for producing top-of-the-line teachers, ATEP faculty encourage students to earn K-12 teaching endorsements in health-fitness or physical education in addition to their degrees in athletic training. Students who choose this option don’t worry about finding jobs after graduation; the jobs find them.

“School administrators throughout the Northwest call me and say ‘We’ll take any of your graduates who have the teaching endorsement – give us their names,’” Richardson says. “Each year we place all of our graduates who have teaching endorsements.”

In addition to suggesting that students earn teacher certification as undergraduates, ATEP faculty encourage students to enter master’s-degree programs after graduating from Whitworth. Nearly 75 percent of Whitworth ATEP graduates enter such programs within two years of completing their undergraduate degrees.

“Nationally, it’s almost an expectation that every athletic trainer should have a master’s degree,” Richardson says. “The master’s degree qualifies graduates to work as athletic trainers at colleges and universities, and if they choose to work at high schools, the advanced degree puts them at a higher pay level.”

Whitworth ATEP graduates have earned graduate degrees at major institutions ranging from Stanford University, Ohio State and Penn State to Florida International University, San José State University and the University of Washington.

After two Whitworth alumni completed Utah State University’s graduate athletic-training program, a USU faculty

■ The 1993 construction of the Dr. J. Pat Evans Athletic Training Center was funded by Evans, '52, a retired orthopedic surgeon, by Dick, '64, and Patty (Obendorf, '67) Anderson, and by the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust. Located in the Whitworth Fieldhouse, the complex features the Ben B. Cheney Treatment Center (funded by a grant from the Ben B. Cheney Foundation), a human-performance lab with a student computer center, and faculty offices. The complex also contains modern therapeutic modalities, a hydrotherapy center, and a rehabilitation center.



Name: Chika Hirai, '96

Position: Athletic-training instructor at Fuji Athletic and Business College in Tokyo, Japan; part-time trainer for R-Body Project, a new fitness club.

Career Highlights: Leads Fuji Athletic and Business College students on Whitworth-hosted cross-cultural tours of athletic-training programs in the Pacific Northwest; serves as a Japan Anti-Doping Agency doping-control officer; co-authored the book *Sports Taping* (in Japanese) and translated from English to Japanese a leading athletic-training text, *Concepts of Athletic Training*.

Hirai's view: "The most fulfilling part of teaching athletic training is when my former students tell me that I have helped them succeed in their careers. At R-Body Project, I really enjoy doing fitness evaluations and planning clients' training programs. It makes me happy when clients benefit from the training."

member called Richardson to say that the university would have five graduate-assistantship openings in the fall and to ask if Whitworth could send a few of its recent graduates to Utah.

"The caliber of Whitworth's program and its students has opened doors for many of our alumni to be awarded funded graduate assistantships," Richardson says.

Regardless of whether they go on to earn advanced degrees, Whitworth ATEP graduates are working as athletic trainers, physicians' assistants and physical therapists in high schools, colleges and medical clinics nationwide.


Others are following in Richardson's steps by developing athletic-training programs at high schools and universities across the country. Kasee Hildenbrand, '98, and Christina Davlin, '94, the first Whitworth alumni to earn doctoral degrees in athletic training, are using Whitworth's ATEP as a template to create athletic-training programs at Bethany College and Xavier University, respectively.

Whether they are just starting in the profession or are directing their own programs, Whitworth alumni are loyal supporters of the ATEP and contribute to its growth and success by providing feedback on areas in which the program can improve and by recommending the program to others.

Growth and continuing success are two goals Richardson set for the ATEP when he designed the program two decades ago. Although both goals have been achieved, ATEP faculty aren't unlacing their marathon shoes and heading for the showers.

"The program has grown so rapidly – 17 years is a short time to build an academic program – it's time to maintain what we've built," Richardson says. "Based on our success, it would be easy to become complacent at this point."

Once a scrawny, struggling program lagging at the rear of the pack, the Whitworth ATEP has become a sure-footed contender that is setting the pace.

To read more about the Whitworth Athletic Training Education Program, including extended alumni profiles and an article on faculty and student leadership in national organizations, visit www.whitworth.edu/athletictraining. 



Name: Mark Gallegos, '97

Post-Whitworth education: Graduate of the Duke University Physician Assistant Program, '02

Position: Physician assistant at the Southwest Medical Associates Urgent Care Clinic, Las Vegas, Nev.

Volunteer Service: As a Christian Medical Response Team volunteer, Gallegos was part of a medical team that was among the first to arrive in Honduras following Hurricane Mitch, which left thousands of Hondurans sick and homeless. In 2000 Gallegos spent two months in war-torn Kosovo, where he worked in a hospital's physical therapy and rehabilitation department.

Gallegos' view: "To be an effective health-care professional, it's important to express an empathetic and caring attitude and be willing to serve others. We all possess a certain knowledge base that allows us to do our jobs. However, those who possess a spirit of servanthood are most effective in touching the hearts of those whom they strive to help."