

ACCE Was in the Cards

A clinical educator shares her story.

There I was, sitting in a lab packed with anxious students, not knowing what I was getting myself into. It was fall 1994: day 1 of my physical therapist assistant (PTA) program at the University of Evansville in Indiana. Each of us shared with the group his or her name, hometown, and an interesting personal fact. We were an eclectic bunch with 2 things in common: big fears and big dreams.

Over the next 2 years, many of us would bond during study sessions and long days in the lab, honing our skills and crafting funny mnemonic devices to help remember the tsunami of facts we were expected to recall. Each lecture exam was a freeform ballet in which we gyrated and palpated in search of correct answers. Some of my happiest memories of those years involve cramming with my best friends at a 24-hour restaurant in the wee hours of the morning, laughing and happily envisioning that glorious day when our studies finally would come to an end.

After graduation, I spent time at skilled nursing facility, coached high school track and field, then moved out West, to the city in Oregon where I'd completed my first clinical rotation. I found myself working in outpatient orthopedics, regularly using my degree in sports medicine and my certification in strength and conditioning. I became active in the community and

strove to absorb as much continuing education as I could. Networking with other clinicians at local, state, and national events inspired me to expand my horizons. I received Recognition of Advanced Proficiency for the Physical Therapist Assistant in musculoskeletal physical therapy. I also began working on a regular basis with PTA and physical therapist (PT) students through clinical instruction.

a meeting, joined an advisory committee, and, a year later, interviewed for the position of academic coordinator of clinical education (ACCE) for the new PTA education program at Lane Community College.

I got the job, but once again I had little idea what I'd signed up for. Program coordinator Christina Howard, PT, MPT, and I dove headfirst into the process of developing from scratch a

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I found it very rewarding to share my accumulated wisdom with fresh minds—individuals who wanted to know what I was doing and why. It forced me to verbalize my clinical decision-making process—which, in turn, made me cite a specific reason for every move I made. These students wouldn't take "because I said so" for an answer. They made me a better PTA by pushing me to sharpen my skills.

A flyer came through the clinic one day, seeking our input on whether it was feasible and desirable to create a PTA education program at our local community college. "Yes!" I immediately thought. We needed additional talented PTAs in Oregon. I attended

brand-new program. Heightening the challenge, the curriculum was to be taught in a hybrid format with a great deal of online content. In only a matter of weeks, leading up to the initial accreditation site visit, our PT/PTA team had to construct course offerings, school ourselves in the online education platform we were to use, organize all the supplies and equipment, set up clinical sites, and welcome our initial cohort of students.

The program kicked off in a trailer in the back of the campus. It was cramped, cold, and musty in there, but at least we had space that was all ours. What an eye-opening experience! In those early days I regularly called Barbara Hahn,

PT, MA, coordinator of the PTA program at my alma mater, to ask, “How do I do this?” I sent a barrage of e-mails to APTA’s lead PTA services specialist, Janet Crosier, PT, DPT, MEd, seeking her advice, as well. Each response concluded “Blessings, Janet” and encouraged me to move forward—even though I felt as if I was in over my head.

But then, toward the end of that stressful first year, I was thrilled and a bit stunned one day to hear words I’d spoken in class coming back to me from the mouth of an outstanding student who was “treating” another student in a lab exam. Suddenly it hit me: Wow! They’ve been listening to me! Afterward, I praised the student for his excellent performance. We both were choked up and teary-eyed by the end of the exchange.

Three years of blood, sweat, and more tears later, I am elated to report that Lane Community College’s PTA education program has been accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education. Our first graduates have taken the exam, and several now are licensed or are working under a temporary license. As ACCE, I have the pleasure of conducting site visits with students and clinical instructors during clinical rotations. I’m looking forward to seeing new graduates out in the clinics this spring, and I fully anticipate that a crop of new clinical instructors eventually will arise from our alumni ranks.

During the academic year my inbox always is full and my to-do list never is less than a page long. While I miss having daily contact with patients, I prefer to focus on how many more patients I can help by training PTA students to be extensions of my own hands. Standard 6 of Standards of Ethical Conduct for the Physical Therapist Assistant¹ states: “Physical therapist assistants shall enhance their competencies through

the lifelong acquisition and refinement of knowledge, skills, and abilities.” I consider teaching to be part of that learning process, and I encourage my fellow PTAs to become clinical instructors, mentor new PTAs, and join with APTA in educating lawmakers and the public about everything our profession is doing to make individuals and our nation healthier and stronger.

Never in my career have I felt like “just an assistant.” I’ve been extremely fortunate to have had supportive family members, friends, instructors, and colleagues who’ve backed my drive for excellence. I try, similarly, to nurture future PTAs, by both instruction and example. I tell my students that they, too, can become an ACCE—or a rehabilitation director or practice owner, like some of the PTAs who have been

profiled in this magazine.² All it takes is a big dream, faith that those initial big fears will dissipate, and considerable hard work. Take it from a PTA who’s been there. **PT**

References

1. American Physical Therapy Association. Standards of Ethical Conduct for the Physical Therapist Assistant. www.apta.org/coredocuments. Accessed January 24, 2012.
2. Ries E. Ascendant assistants: PTAs are tapping emergent opportunities for career enhancement. *PT in Motion*. 2011;3(11):28-34. www.apta.org/ptinmotion. Accessed January 24, 2012.



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