

[IMAGE]

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Ecological Succession

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

"You can't depend on your judgment when your imagination is out of focus."

- *Mark Twain*

Staring into crystal balls to discern future trends is more often than not like starting Monday morning without downing a stiff swig of fresh brewed coffee after a fiercely active weekend - mostly an experience of perceiving fog.

Still, every now and again, the clouds shift and a few shapes become perceptible. As the nights become longer and cooler (yes, even in central California), and the streetlights glow through the dark and mist, it seems a suitable time to ponder shapes faintly seen ahead.

Massage is rapidly paddling into the mainstream of culture, but few appear to have looked far downstream. It's not so much that there are rapids ahead, as the character of the river is changing as we emerge from the secluded canyon in which we've been both hidden and sheltered. I've recently been looking at massage education statistics for California. One such statistic shows that since the beginning of 2002, there have been half as many career colleges adding massage training to their programs, as there have been startups of dedicated massage schools. Career college programs were only about one-third of all non-degree programs prior to 2002 and have increased by 75 percent since the beginning of 2002. From the hour-distribution of new entry programs (Table 1), it also seems that new massage schools and new career college programs are targeting different student populations.

Table 1: Relative increases in massage programs for different hour categories in California, 2002-present

| First-Level Program Hours | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| | 250 or less | 251-300 | 301-499 | 500-599 | 600+ |
| Massage Schools | 80% | 10% | 0% | 0% | 10% |
| Career Colleges | 13% | 6% | 6% | 6% | 69% |

Relatively few stand-alone massage schools in California are accredited and tapping into federally sponsored financial aid. Instead, the vast majority of such schools in California glean their financial solvency by targeting pay-as-you-go students - students often making mid-career transitions.⁴ One reason for this is simple: many programs are shorter than the federal financial aid minimums of 600 hours for loans and 720 hours for Pell grants.^{2,3}

The U.S. Department of Education approves agencies that accredit schools because accreditation is a big part of the gate-keeping on financial aid. To assure their stability, schools applying for accreditation must have been in existence for more than two years. Stand-alone massage schools tend to be accredited by program, while colleges tend to be school accredited. Because of the two-year rule, accreditation by school rather than by program can be a significant competitive advantage, particularly if graduation from an accredited school is required for licensing. Career colleges tend to be veteran players in the financial aid and accreditation end of the marketplace, and have now spotted massage training as an attractive market. As Ralph Stephens exclaimed in his July column, "We've made it!"

The academic college community, both public and private, is another new training provider with growth potential. Both career and educational colleges can leverage support for courses over multiple health care professions. They can provide a broader choice of electives, including courses in small business management, communications, and psychology that are synergist to successful practice. Colleges often have media departments to help with developing presentation materials and with moving parts of traditionally lecture-based courses online. Colleges can also wrap associate degree programs around certificate programs, providing greater educational portability and more career flexibility.

Community colleges often benefit from state support motivated by effective workforce development. Here in central California, the program at De Anza Community College, initiated in the early 1990s by Jeffrey Forman, provides an example of two-certificate programs leading potentially into an associate's degree.⁵

The competitive exclusion principle of ecology states that two species that compete for the same resources cannot stably coexist. One of the two competitors will always have an ever so slight advantage that

eventually leads to extinction of the other. Survival strategies for both species and businesses include finding a niche that avoids head-on competition, gaining the upper hand via internal efficiencies⁸ and making use of spatial heterogeneities to find a local advantage.⁶

In California, a large diversity of massage schools (over 200) has managed to survive together via these strategies. Local regulations have differed from place to place, even within the same region, and schools have found different training niches and targeted different student markets with different length programs.

One aspect of most licensing legislation and something many of us in California are trying to avoid, has been to force all schools, stand-alone, career, and college, uniformly into the same educational hour-requirement niche.

Texas, one of the holdouts in this rush, seems about to join the crowd, judging by last month's article in *Massage Today* (www.massagetoday.com/archives/2004/11/04.html). The Texas Association of Massage Therapists (TAMT) seems not to discern the difference between state regulation that does not require a program to be more than 300 hours, and regulation that forbids it to be longer. Massage schools in Texas could get more change than they anticipate.

Ultimately, the career schools and community colleges, now that they have found the market, will seem likely to grow to dominate the market from 600 hours upward. Just as Southwest and Jet Blue have redefined profitability for airlines, careers schools and colleges may do so for massage training. Nature has a path of ecological succession after a forest fire, with initial grasses and herbs giving way to shrubs, giving way to different stages of trees.⁹

Stand-alone massage schools and the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation's (COMTA) focus on them may be part of the "shrub phase" of succession in massage education. Current massage-only schools, could well need to either broaden their offerings or create partnerships with colleges, teaching under the latter's school-accredited umbrellas.

For the individual practitioner, heavy reliance on financial aid implies that most will enter practice with a significant debt burden. Needing to pay down loans will likely impel recent graduates into jobs at spas and health clubs rather than the riskier entrepreneurship of trying to start a sole practice. Over the next decade, it's likely that massage training will become much more like any other career training, partly from new competitors and partly from uniformity created by legislation.

The challenge comes in guiding this natural succession to give students full worth. The emphasis should be on outcomes carried into practice rather than simply hours on the meter.⁷ Such outcomes are not just limited to technique, but include the interpersonal relationship facets of our massage profession.¹⁰

"You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there."

- *Yogi Berra*

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