



*Massage Today*

December, 2004, Vol. 04, Issue 12

## **Massage Therapy Education Accreditation: Industry Professionals Voice Their Opinions**

By Editorial Staff

In September, *Massage Today* reported that the National Accrediting Commission of Cosmetology Arts and Sciences (NACCAS) had received formal approval by the United States Department of Education (USDE) to accredit massage therapy programs.

Currently, seven organizations are recognized by the USDE to accredit massage therapy schools and/or programs: Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES); Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCT); Accrediting Commission of Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS); Accrediting Council for Continuing Education Training (ACCET); Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA); Council on Occupational Education (COE); and National Accrediting Commission of Cosmetology Arts and Sciences (NACCAS).

While some in the massage industry believe massage education accreditation should involve a more diverse mix of organizations, others believe that doing so could sacrifice the overall quality of massage education, while still others are completely opposed to accreditation or, at least "mandated" accreditation.

*Massage Today* asked industry professionals for their positions regarding massage therapy education accreditation.

The following articles represent a breadth of perspectives on the subject. Please note the views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of *Massage Today*; they have been edited for clarity.

---

**Notes on the Move to Massage Accreditation by the National Accrediting Commission of Cosmetology Arts and Sciences**

*By Mary E. Bird, Esq.,*

Director Government Relations & Legal Department

[www.naccas.org](http://www.naccas.org)

Since 1969, the National Accrediting Commission of Cosmetology Arts and Sciences, Inc. (NACCAS) has been recognized by the United States Department of Education (USDE) for its accreditation of institutions and programs in the field of cosmetology. In the 1980 and 1990 editions of the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP Codes) published by the USDE, massage was listed as a subcategory of cosmetic services. In 1989, NACCAS surveyed the institutions it accredited about new programs they would like to offer. The response for massage was high, so NACCAS added it to the list of programs for which schools could apply for approval.

*American Salon Magazine* published a profile of salon clients in its *Green Book '92* stating that massage services were not used frequently. Massage became a growth service area in salons as a result of a trend toward spas and day spas during the 1990s.

Institutions accredited by NACCAS responded to employment opportunities offered at spas by adding massage programs. They sought approval for massage programs from NACCAS, choosing to deal with one agency with well-established procedures to approve all their programs.

Some schools that participated in federal student financial assistance (Title IV) programs had massage added to the Eligibility and Certification Report issued by the USDE, and others waited for re-certification - both being options under federal regulations. As with all programs listed on the Eligibility and Certification Report, massage programs were listed next to the corresponding CIP Code.

In 2000, USDE published a final review draft of the 2000 edition of the Classification of Instructional Programs in which massage was moved from the cosmetic services section to a new section on "Alternative and Complementary Medicine and Medical Systems."

This change became final in 2002. At that time, the USDE asked NACCAS to submit a special petition for official recognition of the agency's accreditation of massage programs. This was done, and official recognition was extended to NACCAS by Secretary of Education Rod Paige in May 2003.

Massage educators and practitioners have full involvement in NACCAS on par with their colleagues from other specialties within NACCAS' scope. This involvement includes development and improvement of standards, establishment and revision of procedures, evaluation of programs and institutions, and eligibility for board membership.

---

### **Thoughts on Massage Education Accreditation**

*By Bob Benson,*

President Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals

[www.abmp.com](http://www.abmp.com)

The massage and bodywork education universe is mushrooming - from 600 state-approved schools in the United States eight years ago to 1,047 two years ago, and 1,420 today. Some of the newer schools are thoughtfully conceived and display considerable promise. Others seem shallow in conception and weak in instructor experience. For them, chasing the latest career fad seems a greater motivation than a deep commitment to developing knowledgeable, caring massage therapists.

Weak though some may be, each new massage or bodywork training program introduces added competition. Established programs are under increased pressure to articulate how they are different and better. Many established schools also are taking a probing look at their programs and seeking ways to strengthen existing offerings while also considering additional subject coverage or services. Another potential way a school can distinguish itself is to pursue accreditation. Today, 384 of 1,420 massage schools are accredited by one or more of the seven U.S. Department of Education (USDE)-approved accrediting bodies. Some professionals believe that all massage training programs should be accredited.

Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP) holds a different view. We encourage every massage training program to commit to continuous improvement. We salute those schools that have made the time and resource commitment to pursue and secure accredited status. But we believe strongly that a decision to seek accreditation should remain voluntary and not mandated. Gaining real value from accreditation requires putting heart and commitment into the process.

Reluctant soldiers may go through the motions of accreditation, but that won't necessarily benefit students. The reality is that many of the finest massage and bodywork schools are purposely modest in size so they can offer highly personalized instruction, and that modest size often doesn't match up with the substantial

financial and human resources necessary to obtain and sustain school accreditation.

ABMP also believes that schools benefit from having a choice among accrediting agencies. I recently attended a meeting in which senior staff members from four of the accrediting entities interacted with massage and bodywork organization leadership. They each have over 30 years' accreditation experience and average 13 years' experience accrediting massage and bodywork schools. Though their accreditation processes and standards covered plenty of common ground, each agency had unique aspects to their programs and processes. Differences in focus and expertise allow massage and bodywork schools to seek out an appropriate accrediting agency match. The fact that there are seven such agencies competing for candidate schools helps all schools because those agencies have to sharpen their offerings in order to attract work.

Of particular interest to me was the answer of these accrediting experts to the question, "Do you think massage and bodywork school accreditation should be voluntary or mandatory?" They acknowledged that it would seem to be in their self-interest to have guaranteed business from all 1,420 massage school campuses, but three of the four agencies came down on the side of "voluntary."

While those three hoped that all massage and bodywork schools would constantly strive to improve, they understood the size/limited-resources issue and also made clear that their best accrediting work comes when they interact with schools that enthusiastically sink their teeth into the accreditation process.

---

### **Comments from the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA)**

[www.amtamassage.org](http://www.amtamassage.org)

AMTA is not opposed to there being more than one accrediting body for massage therapy schools and programs. We do believe it is vital for there to be one education standard developed by the profession that is used by all accrediting agencies. There are several accrediting bodies for massage therapy education programs, and the United States Department of Education (USDE) has recognized more than one.

AMTA views the accrediting body issue within the context of ensuring that the massage therapy profession has clear standards for massage therapy education that recognize the need for both massage programs and students to demonstrate competency. On principle, AMTA believes that it would be detrimental to the profession and confusing to the public to have multiple massage-program accrediting bodies, each with

different standards that don't reflect input from all massage therapy profession stakeholders. When AMTA objected to USDE-approval of NACCAS as a body to accredit massage programs, it was primarily because it was our understanding that NACCAS did not have the expertise internally to develop such standards.

Subsequently, we have learned that NACCAS would welcome the establishment of more universal standards for massage-therapy training programs and seeks that expertise from the stakeholders in the profession, especially the professional associations in our field.

AMTA believes that the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA) is an established accrediting body with standards developed through input from massage therapy stakeholders - educators, practitioners and students, employers, regulators, researchers and consumers.

We believe the competency-based accreditation standards developed by COMTA through this process are the best standards currently in existence in our profession.

---

### **Massage Education Accreditation**

*By Dr. Gregory T. Lawton,*

Founder Blue Heron Academy of Healing Arts and Sciences

[www.blueheronacademy.com](http://www.blueheronacademy.com)

When it comes to accreditation, consider the following:

1. Accreditation does little to change or influence school curriculum other than to organize its administrative paperwork and procedures.
2. Accreditation does not affect the content of courses taught at schools. Case in point: some accredited massage schools continue to teach curriculum based on metaphysical studies, fringe practices, and pseudo sciences.
3. Accreditation drives up the cost of education because of the high administrative costs that are associated with maintaining it.
4. Accreditation and its access to Title IV funding provides benefits to many students who qualify for this financial assistance, while forcing many other students to pay the higher tuition costs usually seen at accredited schools.

We have a local accredited massage program in our area. This school attracts a significant number of students who lack certain key personal development skills that would be essential for success in the massage field. One local accredited program has to have security guards onsite to protect its staff and teachers. Our school has always provided quality education at an affordable price, we have financial programs in place such as Sallie Mae, and we offer work-study programs for deserving students. We never turn a student away because of a lack of money; we have, in effect, conducted our own "Title IV" program for years.

My schools are now entering the accreditation process, but I am very conflicted about this. I feel forced to go down this path because of trends that I am seeing in states where a massage license requires graduation from an accredited school. The future trend in massage education and licensure will probably go this direction. I am concerned about smaller individual or family owned massage schools that lack the resources to accredit. I fear that these schools will be lost in the future as fewer, larger accredited schools take control of massage education (including colleges and universities). Should this occur, I believe that the massage profession will lose valuable educational resources.

I think that the trend toward centralization and nationalization of the massage profession, especially massage education, is a bad idea. I believe that regional and local control, based on the needs and characteristics of smaller in-state groups, is a better and more effective way of ensuring quality within the massage profession because it is easier for local groups that know their areas and to unify and work toward common goals. The role of any national organization should not be to control or to direct activities but instead support and serve local groups and organizations.

---

**From the AMTA Council of Schools (COS)**

*By Winona F. Bontrager, LMT,*

COS Board President

lsmassage@redrose.net

Originally, the COS opposed United States Department of Education (USDE)-approval of NACCAS to accredit massage therapy education programs because the organization did not have expertise in the massage profession, and we did not want to see multiple accrediting bodies with differing standards. We now understand that NACCAS would prefer to work with the profession and adopt what the profession sees as appropriate standards. We no longer object to NACCAS or other agencies accrediting massage therapy

education programs, if they use one standard for education.

The COS wants to ensure high quality and consistent standards for massage therapy education programs and schools. As a profession, we should work to make sure all accrediting bodies use the same standards, and that those standards have been developed with input from massage school owners, educators and students, in collaboration with massage therapy professional associations, massage therapists, state regulators, researchers, and those people who receive massage.

It would not be good for our profession to have more than one accrediting body for massage therapy education if they use different standards, or if their standards are created without discussion with representatives of massage therapy schools and education programs, as well as others with a direct interest in guaranteeing that massage therapy students enter the profession with at least the minimum training and education needed to provide good massage and make a living in the profession.

So far, the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA) is the only recognized accrediting body with accreditation standards based on competencies. We believe they are still the best standards created by any accrediting body. As our profession grows and the profession updates standards, we should be careful to create a situation where those changes reflect what is best for all of us in the profession.

---

*Massage Today* contacted COMTA to solicit its participation in this feature and received the following reply from its executive director: "At this time, COMTA is not available to participate."

Look to *Massage Today* for continuing updates on the issues related to massage therapy education accreditation.



Page printed from:

[http://www.massagetoday.com/archives/2004/12/02.html?no\\_b=true](http://www.massagetoday.com/archives/2004/12/02.html?no_b=true)