

# Athletic Training Accreditation – “Affectively” Debilitating?

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**Editor's Note:** As one who has conducted self-studies and hosted peer reviewers for 4 entry-level (now professional) and 5 graduate (now post-professional) accreditation visits, and as one who has provided sympathetic consolation to numerous program directors undergoing the process, I found myself alternately nodding in agreement and laughing at the astute observations of Dr. Claiborne. Although we doubt this essay will decrease the fears of educators going through the process, we hope at least they will know that many before them have experienced similar fears and frustrations. – kk

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## Introduction

This commentary is meant to take a light-hearted, although honest look at the accreditation process in the “affective domain.” Athletic training program directors and faculty spend many hours discussing the mechanics of how to best meet accreditation requirements. However, very little is shared about the experience. I consider myself to be relatively competent and even-tempered in stressful times. Yet, as I embarked on my first journey through the murky waters of the self study, I longed for consolation. Evidently, misery loves company!

Over time, I shared my angst and frustration with both novice and seasoned program directors. I came to realize how similar our emotional voyages were. Of course as individuals, our perspectives and coping mechanisms varied, but regardless, we had all navigated some fraction of an emotional roller-coaster during the accreditation process. Consequently, in the spirit of peer edification, I was inspired to write this comedic and perhaps embellished narrative. After all, laughter is the best medicine!

## Commentary

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance



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Marked by feelings of anxiety, frustration, exhaustion, sadness, and peace. Most recognize the above as the five stages of grieving. Whether you are embarking on the journey of initial or continuing accreditation, you probably suffered through these emotions in secret anguish. I affectionately call them “The Five Stages of Accreditation Emotion.”

As a moderately experienced clinician, however, relatively new to academia and my role as program director, I felt confident that I could successfully navigate my way through the re-accreditation process. Excited to begin, I rallied the troops and bolstered their confidence in me and the status of our great program. Phrases such as, “We do things in the true spirit of educational reform,” and “It shouldn’t be too much work to compile the necessary documentation” resonate in my head. Masquerading as what many would characterize as confidence and enthusiasm, the first stage of accreditation takes hold: Denial. Defined as, “a temporary response that carries us through the first wave of pain,”<sup>1</sup> denial is surprisingly long in duration. It is actually a saving grace throughout the complete process. It lifts you up and suspends you like a life-vest. Basking in your buoyancy, you are blind to how much you will desperately need Denial as you are carried through turbulent waters.

Over time, the writing, compiling, and hounding persist unrelentingly. No one is immune to your requests. Tirelessly, administrative assistants, faculty, CIs, and ACIs politely respond to e-mail requests with the red envelope (you know the one) posted “urgent,” and “please respond ASAP.” You write in capital letters to get the reader’s attention, but soften the delivery with a disclaimer, “Not yelling.” After a time, simply saying “sorry to bother you,” becomes bothersome, and frustrations mount. You begin to question the purpose and usefulness of the process. “Why don’t these dates match? This isn’t signed. Where is that document? Why do we need to have this? AHHHH!” You feverishly e-mail the commission for answers to your questions. With weeks between correspondences, it is like calling a suicide hotline and being put on hold. You want to explode! Shhhh, there, there . . . take comfort in the fact that you have done something

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right; you successfully made it to the second stage of accreditation: Anger. “As the masking effects of denial begin to wear, reality and its pain re-emerge . . .”<sup>1</sup>

In beautiful coordination, Denial and Anger dance, each taking turns leading you through organized chaos. You flounder between thinking you are in good shape to thinking this is the most ridiculous task you have ever been asked to complete. Although you have entered the stage of Anger, you certainly don’t want anyone else to experience this stage. Disguised as the fearless leader, you forge ahead with a strong exterior and polite demeanor. Never let them see you sweat. “Sorry to bother you, but . . .” “I know this is above and beyond, but . . .” “If it was up to me, but it’s not . . .” “Thank you so much for all that you do. By the way, I need . . .”

You lay down at night, and instead of counting sheep, you count proficiencies, hours, evaluations. You are tired and frustrated that you have no time; no time to do the job you were hired to do; work for the students . . . teach. You look up and raise your hands with clenched fists. “Just get me through this relatively unscathed and I will do anything!” Well, maybe that’s a little dramatic, but you get the point. You unconsciously slip into the fourth stage of accreditation, Bargaining. Marked by the overwhelming need to regain control (Did I ever have control?), this stage is “a normal reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability.”<sup>1</sup> So, on you march with your dedicated and capable team, finally finishing the report. Along with the fate of your program, you box up approximately 500 trees worth of bound copies. Finally, it’s in the mail. The silence is deafening as all involved breath a sigh of relief.

Following a brief intermission (time now to catch up on teaching, scholarship, and service) the proverbial lights blink to indicate the commencement of the second act; the site visit. As the site visit looms, there is a rapid reprise of the first three “stages of accreditation emotion.” You find yourself stuck in an agitated state, tumbling between stages. Denial supports you. “I don’t know what they could possibly cite us on.” Anger butts in. “This standard is absolutely ridiculous!” Bargaining smoothly negotiates. “I know you are busy, but if you help me out, I will buy you lunch – better yet, a beer . . . OK, all the beers you want!”

Motion sickness sets in, and just as you feel the reflux gurgle up, you are spit out into the fourth stage: Depression. In this stage, one might feel “intensely sad, hopeless, drained and helpless.”<sup>1</sup> Exhausted from the anticipation, and hustle of the site visit, Depression struck me unexpectedly about half way through the oral exit conference. Yep, I was reduced to a slovenly puddle of tears, and embarrassment in front of the site visitors and administrators I had worked so hard to impress. Now, only a shell of my former confident and enthusiastic self, I felt as if I had done nothing right. Following the meeting, my administrators practically skipped out of the room, realizing that a couple non-compliances would be easily addressed in the rejoinder. Hmmm . . . if they’re happy, I should be too. However, the experience was painfully anticlimactic. I expected to feel a sense of accomplishment. I naively thought we would actually be complimented on the strength and organization of our program. Instead, no balloons rose and no band

played. We simply packed up and moved on.

Stage 5: Acceptance. “This phase is marked by withdrawal and calm.”<sup>1</sup> During this final stage, the fog begins to lift. You are soon able to objectively evaluate the importance (or lack thereof) of the citations. You realize that the emotions you experienced were a sign of your wholehearted investment and dedication to your students and your program. Happily, your focus eventually returns to the fulfilling part of your job, the students. Your understanding of the importance of the accreditation process might be restored at this stage, but regardless, you resume your work toward positive curricular change.

With time, clarity, and distance, I would be remiss not to concede . . . at least a little. This intense programmatic review allowed our curriculum to grow in directions it might not otherwise have grown. With the “closet” clean and re-organized, I am rejuvenated, inspired, and seasoned with perspective. Fundamentally, but most importantly, the philosophical lens through which we view our curriculum has widened. Although an easy trap to fall into, individual standards, competencies and proficiencies are no longer the driving force behind our curricular decisions. Our program has evolved to allow the accreditation standards to provide the underpinning so that ideals of “best practice” prevail; a much more rewarding and effective progression.

As you move through “the five stages of accreditation emotion,” remember that you are not alone. Perhaps CAATE should offer a support group or a t-shirt exclaiming, “I survived!” or better yet, a secret hand-shake symbolizing membership of the alliance. Now that the “five stages of accreditation emotion” have been defined, there is no need to suffer in silence. Congratulate yourself and your colleagues on a job well done, all the while being careful not to become complacent, because denial is only a self-study away!

## References

1. Taking the Lead. Available at <http://www.takingthelead.co.uk/2/Grieving/griefstages.htm>. Accessed January 10, 2007.