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2022 ISSUE BRIEF ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION

ISSUES

The number one issue USOLMT identified during our 2020 & 2021 research is entry-level massage education in the United States. We found that entry level education is not just a problem for students, massage therapists, educators, and school owners, but also a huge problem for managers and business owners who are looking to hire massage therapists.

When we asked entry-level educators what was different in massage school programs ten years ago, versus five years ago, versus today, they said that technology has advanced, but the programs remain largely unchanged. Some educators expressed disappointment that outdated research is still being taught in some massage schools, and that it limits the advancement of the massage profession.

Other educators expressed disinterest in teaching to the test, meaning the entry-level exam, MBLEx, under limited hours, making them unable to expand entry-level education for students much beyond what is needed for the entry-level exam.

Additionally, the newest online education model which is meant to assist employers (mostly in the franchise realm) with staff shortages has its own unique problems and is struggling with industry-wide acceptance due to early issues with licensing of their students and scholarship funds being offered by some employers in exchange for work contracts. In addition to the licensing issue, there are also students currently expressing problems with being able to obtain the hands-on clinic hours they need at employer locations to graduate from the online school.

STANDARDS

There is no standard of education in the United States for massage schools, and no formalized, widely adopted curriculum. The COMTA curriculum is not widely adopted by schools. The AFMTE educator certification is not widely adopted by schools or educators either. There are very few other teacher training programs available. The Entry-Level Analysis Project, ELAP, and the Massage Therapy Body of Knowledge, MTBOK, have also been largely ignored. The US Department of Education does not accredit private massage schools; however, they do accredit and govern massage programs at Community Colleges.

Differing levels of education across the United States have made it historically difficult to move across state lines, as many times a therapist will need extra education, in addition to exams or practicals and additional monies to become licensed after a move across state lines.



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We see required entry-level massage education hours range from 500 to 1000 hours across the country. Entry-level educators express their interest in science literacy courses, public health, critical thinking, safety, clinical reasoning, business, and communication as additions to the curriculum, but experience problems with fitting all this into the required number of teaching hours available to them.

There are still “diploma mills” out there that push students through massage programs, even though they don’t quite make the grade, accept students into massage programs even without high school diplomas or basic literacy skills, and, as we’ve seen in the news in 2021, provide paid-for diplomas to students who didn’t even attend school. This is not most massage schools in the United States, but it is an issue to watch, because without school oversight, accreditation standards, post-secondary regulation and law-enforcement recourse, it can easily happen again.

EMPLOYER ISSUES

Current employers are raising issues that massage therapists are not prepared to do the job upon graduation, and that the quality of education seems to be diminishing in the United States for massage therapists.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

The number of massage therapy students entering the field and the number of massage schools have decreased due to Covid-19. It was reported by Ruth Werner in her Keynote speech at the AFMTE Convention that less schools closed during the pandemic than they had seen in previous years when the corporate schools were closing. The number of schools closed because of the pandemic was about 75 schools in the country. This is better than we thought. The number of student enrollments over the course of the pandemic is a statistic that remains to be seen, but we do know that enrollment has decreased significantly.

Because of this decline in student enrollment, we have seen schools lower tuition costs, which may also result in lower wages and longer working hours for entry-level educators and other massage school administrators. The costs of student clinics by massage schools appears to have remained relatively the same, at approximately \$25.00 per hour for a student massage.

LABOR SHORTAGE

Due to the pandemic, massage employers are experiencing an unprecedented labor shortage. There has been an ongoing labor shortage of massage therapists for many years in the industry, but the pandemic really pushed this over the edge. Not only did we lose student enrollment, but many massage therapists who were previously employed due to the pandemic took the leap and opened private practices, some retired, and others found different jobs. We know that one major franchise in our industry closed over



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100 locations during the pandemic, the highest number of closures they've had since 2016. We expect this number to continue to rise until the pandemic is well under control.

The labor shortage has driven up wages and prices for massage across the country. Consumer demand is still increasing, so, it only makes sense to increase pricing, and to increase wages to remain competitive in today's tight labor market.

Employers are looking to massage schools to increase enrollment to supply more massage therapists to fill their open positions. The burden truly is on the entry-level massage school to attract new massage therapists, educate them properly, train them well, and release them into the workforce prepared to begin whatever massage career path they choose.

THE VOICES OF EDUCATED MASSAGE THERAPISTS

Quite a few massage therapists we spoke to said that they acquired only the most basic education, and that their education felt like a scam. A lot of them have good reason to say that, considering how many for profit schools popped up during the vocational education boom in the early 2000's and then were eventually shut down by the United States government. This is where the terms "diploma mills" and "school to franchise pipeline" came from.

Many more massage therapists said that there were not enough business courses in massage school, no marketing courses, or finance courses. They also said that they were told they would make bank as a massage therapist, and then pushed into a low-paying environment to gain experience and didn't even come close to making the money they were told they'd make.

A major complaint was that massage schools partnered with employers, and those employers had influence on their curriculum, they were trained the way that employers wanted things done, feeling that they missed out on valuable parts of their expected education. It has also come to our attention that some massage schools have or are currently receiving kickbacks from major employers in the field in exchange for graduating students.

Some therapists complained about the inclusion of pseudoscience and superstition into their curriculums. They also said that they were taught outdated information that was potentially unsafe or less effective for their clients. A lot of them believe that business owners and the public look at them as if they are uneducated and unskilled because there is so much more to learn after you get out of school.

They said they wanted more training in school about how massage therapists were paid, so they could understand what they were getting themselves into if they decided to work for an employer or become an independent contractor. They wanted to know the laws surrounding employment and contract work. They also said they wanted more safety education in school surrounding the risk of sexual solicitation, assault, harassment, and handling inappropriate clients.



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UNPREPARED MESSAGE THERAPISTS

While educators do the best they can within the parameters set forth by the massage school they work for, it is almost impossible to truly prepare massage therapists for some of the pitfalls they may run into in the workplace or over the course of their career.

Additionally, franchise marketing is playing a role in educating the public about what terms such as “Deep Tissue” mean, when academically, what the marketing term means versus what the actual term means are two different things. This is an issue that has played out between massage therapists, employers, and massage schools for a long time, and one contentious issue that leads to early career burnout.

The bottom line on this issue is that if schools don’t have acceptance requirements and curriculum is not standardized, employers are never going to know what they can expect from a new graduate.

LACK OF BUSINESS EDUCATION

Business education in massage schools has always been limited. The best schools have educators teaching business courses that have experience running a business and have also been massage employees and teach from their experiences.

The issue is, for students entering the field without any sort of previous business experience or education, the classes barely scratch the surface of what a massage business owner needs to know and don’t cover the most important things like knowing your numbers, managing your finances, what overhead costs, or what kind of income you should expect right out of school. They don’t cover establishing pricing or business taxes. This is a disservice to our industry’s professionals, the majority of whom go to massage school to open independent practices.

EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS & SCHOOL KICKBACKS

Every massage school receives constant calls from employers who are looking to recruit students into their businesses, and most massage schools offer students employment assistance. Most massage students will see franchise recruiters at least once during their time as a student, who visit to do presentations about their businesses to get students to apply.

Students are often told that the best way to gain experience is by working with one of these businesses, getting their hands on as many people as possible for the first two years, and then moving on. Unfortunately, we also found through our research that some massage schools receive kickbacks from franchise employers and are paid by franchise owners for placing students in their available positions.



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EMPLOYEES DON'T UNDERSTAND COMPENSATION MODELS

Massage therapists need to know how they are going to be paid when they graduate and what to realistically expect from employers. There are many different compensation models out there that need to be understood along with the differences and origins of tips and gratuities, managing those expectations, laws surrounding tip credits, being engaged to wait, and other conditions massage therapists work under as employees. It would also be proper to provide education in the independent contractor model and how to navigate that process in entry-level education.

BEING A MASSAGE THERAPIST HAS ITS HAZARDS

No matter how much education is given in massage school, a therapist really has no idea how they will react to sexual harassment or assault or solicitation until it happens to them. Some schools have a model to assess a situation like this, and students would do well to pay attention. Schools would do better to provide an entire course of instruction dedicated to safety in these situations, as they are growing in numbers post-pandemic, and employers would do better to make it clear that they support therapists right of refusal, not to work on clients that make them feel uncomfortable, while making these policies clear to their clients.

THE VOICES OF EDUCATORS

Several years ago, one of the largest, national, corporate schools of massage therapy closed most of their locations, leaving students without a school to attend, educators and administrators out of jobs quite suddenly. It later came out that educators were treated poorly in those schools, suffered low pay, and long hours. Their teaching power was limited in these schools. What they could and could not say in the classroom was micromanaged, and students were being pushed through their programs without displaying the skills necessary to graduate.

We heard from some educators who took teaching positions with certain payment agreements that were shorted by the schools they were employed by. We've heard from some educators that made less than \$20.00 an hour teaching at schools, working two class shifts and student clinics with no breaks. Educators put in additional, unpaid administrative time too, and that can range from 25-30 additional hours per week preparing for classes and grading assignments.

Educators expressed concern that even if students didn't know the material, the policy was that if the students simply showed up, they had to pass them. In the real world, this translates into a whole lot of unprepared, unskilled massage therapists. There are many educators who have started their own schools, for no other reason than to combat this and do better.



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THE BIG PICTURE

It seems that most massage therapists and educators want all fifty states to adopt the same educational standard. Our research shows that some massage associations pushed for 500 hours of required education for licensing, but, that most of us believe more foundational hours are needed. The 500-hour standard of education is incredibly basic. This level of education only trains you how to perform basic massage techniques and not to hurt anyone.

Based on the therapists we've spoken to; they don't think that common massage education is enough to be a good therapist. There are some massage therapists in the field pushing for 1200 – 1500 hours of education, who want to work along healthcare lines, bill insurance, and prescribe corrective exercise. We found that there is also a middle ground of 700-800 hours most massage therapists would like to see required, and they want to see it consistently across the United States.

Overall, the consensus is that massage therapists are missing out on everything outside of the treatment room in their basic education, and those aspects of being a massage therapist can make or break you in your career. They teach those skills on the job – how to greet your guest, what the customer journey should look like, how many times you should ask about pressure, what to ask for in the consultation, but there is still so much that you won't learn until you've got the experience behind you. Most massage therapists can agree that learning the hard way, isn't the best way.

Massage Therapists today also desire elective options in massage school. They would like to choose between clinical or medical massage and spa massage. There are a few schools that have entry-level programs with additional "Master" programs that teach more advanced techniques. Most therapists we've spoken to would like to see those electives separated into the two main avenues in our field.

PART 5 – ONLINE EDUCATION

Prior to the pandemic, it seemed like most educators and massage therapists were against the idea of online education, but, now that it has become necessary to embrace technology such as Zoom, Canva, Blackboard and other learning management systems, live online training, and even telehealth, it appears we are somewhat ready to embrace online learning going forward.

We are currently watching the rise of online entry-level education options. Plenty of educators and therapists are genuinely concerned about these programs. USOLMT supports online and hybrid models of education. We know that it is highly possible to learn anatomy, the science of the human body, and even kinesiology online, however, that does not trump the importance of hands-on skills and experience.

USOLMT's biggest concern with the newest online education models is about the scholarships and the contracts with franchise employers. We absolutely know that there will be massage therapists who will



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not fit into the workplace they've contracted with and who will not be able to fulfill the terms of their contracts for all sorts of reasons. In that case, the student who received the scholarship will be held liable for paying it all back, to the best of our knowledge. Others have voiced concerns about how this solidifies the "school to franchise pipeline". Other therapists and educators have expressed concern over students in these programs missing out on valuable business education, that students are being trained to the specifications and expectations of the specific place where they learn and work, and that these specific workplace requirements will influence their curriculum. We found through our own research, that while some workplaces are taking their hands-on curriculum seriously, others are telling teachers they really don't care what they teach, if those students can do a basic massage and work. Finally, we are concerned about how these programs are being advertised by employers, seeing ads calling them "degree" programs or "apprentice programs", which they clearly are not.

Online entry-level education is a fairly new concept massage therapy. Many educators do not believe that employers should oversee massage training programs or lock students into employment contracts in exchange for scholarships. It remains to be seen how these programs will work out for graduates. We do not see online entry-level education going away. We see it expanding to relieve some of the barriers to entry into our field. For one, it's much cheaper than in-person education.

The average cost of massage school five years ago was \$12,000. Online programs appear to be costing about half that for students, around \$6,000.00. Interestingly, we are seeing some community college programs are going much lower than that price. Lowering the cost of tuition seems like a good thing, considering decreasing enrollments and the labor shortage. Lower tuition may also create opportunities for low-income individuals to attend massage school, whereas traditional education would be cost prohibitive.

The issues that come along with lowering tuition, however, include lower teacher and school administrator salaries, and lowering the incentives for the franchise workplace to raise wages for new graduates. It may also attract more unsavory characters into the field of massage therapy, who are potentially dangerous, further damaging the reputation of legitimate massage practice and franchises who already have issues with this sort of thing.

IN SUMMARY

Massage Schools are the first point of contact for anyone entering the field. They have the power to bring in a more diverse population of massage therapists, the power to increase the skill levels of massage therapists, and the opportunity to help change the public perception of massage therapy. See suggestions to move forward on this issue on the following page.



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SUGGESTIONS TO MOVE FORWARD ON THIS ISSUE

- Ensure that every massage school in the United States is teaching critical thinking, science literacy, clinical reasoning, business, and public health as part of foundational massage education
- Work towards standardizing the number of required entry-level education hours for massage therapy across the country to the middle ground of 700-800 hours so curriculums can be expanded and standardized to include necessary coursework.
- Improve online education offerings for students, while also ensuring access to the hands-on hours needed to complete their programs, passage of the MBLEx, and access to licensing.
- Advocate for imposing consequences for the false advertising of massage programs as “degree” programs” or “apprenticeship” programs. Massage therapy education is vocational education, or trade-school education, offering either a “Diploma” or a “Certificate” in massage therapy. Businesses should be held accountable for using proper terminology in their ads.
- Report known or suspected “diploma mills” to the authorities such as post-secondary boards, accrediting bodies, or the department of education for investigation.
- Raise the standards of entry in massage schools to include passing a basic literacy (reading, writing) assessment and require students to produce a high school diploma or GED to enter.
- Work towards the adoption of a standardized massage school curriculum across the country, with variations the schools can choose based on the mode or specialty of practice they want to teach.
- Provide electives in massage school so that students can choose their career path and get basic training in those areas, making them better prepared to enter the workplace or the field independently in their chosen specialty area.
- Increase visibility and marketing to the public of accredited, positively reviewed massage schools to ensure students continue to choose massage therapy as a career.
- Provide affordable training for entry-level educators in the areas of adult learning concepts, classroom management, and more.
- Reconsider how scholarships are being offered to students and do so based on need, rather than in exchange for employment contracts that may place an undue financial burden on recent massage school graduates who are unable to fulfill their contractual obligations.
- Focus on educating potential students during the admissions process honestly, making sure they consider the pros and cons of being a massage therapist, what compensation may look like, and their career options, rather than an admissions sales pitch, which often leads to disappointment.



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USOLMT'S ROLE IN ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION

USOLMT will advocate for higher instructor pay and benefits, being paid for all working hours (including administrative time served), instructor autonomy in the classroom, and promote initial training programs that provide instructors with education on teaching adult learners.

We are actively building lists of massage schools in the United States, looking for gaps between education, the workplace, and business ownership, and building educational programs that fill in these skill gaps for our membership base while also providing resources and discounts to quality education programs.

Additionally, we are working to get massage students involved in activism and industry advocacy while they are in school, showing them how to make a difference and an impact on the future of our profession, and offering leadership training and the opportunity to serve on our Board after just one year in the field. We want and need to hear the voices, ideas, and opinions of young people entering our industry. We believe that if they come into the field with eyes open, they will be able to hit the ground running.

By working with massage schools to reach students, we believe that the partnership will empower new graduates with the confidence they need to speak publicly about massage therapy, engage inside and outside the treatment room to provide public education, and that students will be able to overcome challenges, advocate for themselves and our profession. Students will have access to high-quality education and online learning as members of our organization, along with our free Mentorship Moments program that meets online once a month to strengthen the gap from school to employment or business.

We also believe that business owners would appreciate a program that better prepares therapists for the workplace, so we are working on additional training programs for massage employees and will work with business owners to implement these online training programs in their locations. We are also providing employer members a discounted staff membership rate.