

# Massage Therapy Training – The Next Step

by Steven Schenkman

In recent years the field of massage and bodywork therapy was thought to be an ‘underground mainstream.’ When the field was finally surveyed, it was discovered that professionals all over the country were administering tens-of-millions of massage and bodywork therapy treatments. Willing consumers,

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mostly paying one hundred percent out-of-pocket for these services, were lining up for treatment and virtually no one was aware of it! These trends have grown stronger still and current numbers indicate continued unprecedented growth. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 2006 and 2016 the demand for Licensed Massage Therapists will increase by 18–26 percent.<sup>1</sup> This important statistic means that the demand for massage therapy is expanding at a rapid rate due to the fact that growing numbers of people are becoming aware of and learning the many positive and healthful benefits

of massage therapy. Today it is clear and no longer any secret that massage therapy has emerged from the underground and stepped proudly into the mainstream of this nation’s health care system as one of the fastest growing professions in America.

## **For Institutions with Programs in Massage Therapy: What Next?**

Academic institutions that are already running massage therapy programs should be thinking about new ways to grow and evolve them in order to create real quality programs, remain competitive and regain the edge in this rapidly evolving field.

Many institutions interested in offering programs in massage therapy have already jumped on the bandwagon. However, most of these schools have been confronted with a completely different reality when it comes to running a massage program compared to programs in other allied health care fields. In other words, it’s easier to add a new program in massage than to run one.

My work with institutions in this category has revealed many incorrect assumptions from the very inception of their programs about the real needs and requirements of building a successful massage therapy program. These incorrect assumptions have allowed these schools to forge ahead

without having sound advice and direction and now, as a result, these schools may not be meeting their enrollment, completion and placement rates and financial expectations. Some multi-campus institutions have been forced to close their programs because of low enrollment and low profitability; others are struggling to operate, and yet others are functioning but producing graduates who either fail the national certification/licensing exam or pass but are less than competent practitioners. As a result, these therapists cannot survive financially in the profession.

Perhaps the biggest mistake these institutions made was not getting the advice and direction they needed from experienced professionals in the operation of massage therapy schools. Instead, institution leaders relying on in-house staff with general knowledge of their school's operations, but without direct knowledge of the field, were often handed the task of launching the pro-

gram. Eventually, a massage therapist faculty member from a competing program was usually hired away and given the overwhelming job of school or program director to run the day-to-day operations. It is a known fact in this particular field that most good massage therapists are generally not good teachers. Just so, good massage faculty members do not necessarily make good school administrators.

Therefore, academic institutions should always be thinking about and looking for ways to improve their programs and educational offerings by seeking out knowledgeable and experienced professionals in the field.

### Seven Ways to Strengthen Your Massage Therapy Program

Based on my experience, I have compiled a list of seven ways in which academic institutions can strengthen their massage therapy programs. Implementing any one of them can make a big difference in the success of these

<b>Projections Data</b>							
<b>Projections data from the National Employment Matrix</b>							
Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment 2006	Projected Employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16		Detailed Statistics	
				Number	Percent		
Massage Therapists	31-9011	118,000	142,000	24,000	20	<a href="#">PDF</a>	<a href="#">zipped XLS</a>
<p>NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the <i>Handbook</i> introductory chapter on <i>Occupational Information Included in the Handbook</i> (<a href="http://www.bls.gov/oco/oco2001.htm#projections_data">http://www.bls.gov/oco/oco2001.htm#projections_data</a>).</p> <p>Detailed statistics: <a href="ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/ep/ind-occ.matrix/occ_pdf/occ_31-9011.pdf">ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/ep/ind-occ.matrix/occ_pdf/occ_31-9011.pdf</a>  <a href="ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/ep/ind-occ.matrix/occ_xls/occ_31-9011.zip">ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/ep/ind-occ.matrix/occ_xls/occ_31-9011.zip</a></p> <p>This occupation includes a large percentage of part-time and self-employed workers who practice massage therapy to supplement their incomes from other employment or make good livings as self-employed, full-time massage therapy practitioners. It is likely that most of these therapists are not included in the data shown in the chart above. According to the American Massage Therapy Association, in February 2007 there were about 266,722 massage therapists in this country of which approximately 166,478 of them were licensed in their states. These numbers indicate that over the last nine years this occupation has grown by about 71 percent.<sup>2</sup></p>							

programs. Institution decision makers should take some time to consider which ways apply to their particular school. Since each institution is in a different place in the evolution of their massage programs, differences in overall mission, philosophy, curriculum, staff and faculty from one school to another will dictate which changes are more relevant to any individual school. However, it can be extremely beneficial to reflect on these seven ways and take an objective look at what, if anything, to do next!

### ***I. Reevaluate, Review and Revise Curriculum***

As with education in any field, the curriculum of a specific program is a living, breathing entity that becomes tired and begins to wilt if it's not being tended to properly. And so, there comes a time in any curriculum's life when it needs to be seriously re-evaluated, revised and up-graded based on the changes in the field, new findings in research, the latest trends in employment, the needs of the school, changes in the certification/licensing requirements and examinations, etc.

Although each educational institution may have its own philosophy and way of structuring its academic programs, in massage therapy there isn't a lot of room for developing a program that offers much beyond the basics if the school's leadership opts to limit the program to the 500 hour minimum national standard. This is the bottom line education for graduates to meet the entry level to sit for the National Certification Examination, now used by 32 states plus the District of Columbia as their licensing exam.

In states that regulate the field, minimum hours for massage therapy programs are dictated by their laws and regulations and generally go beyond

500 hours, and as high as, 1000 clock hours. Presently, most unregulated states are in some process of moving towards state licensure for the profession of massage therapy.

Academic institutions interested in providing a program that teaches to a more comprehensive level of training should consider at least 720–750 hrs. A program that's nine hundred hours or more will allow for an education that not only provides the important basic foundation required for entry level,

but, if designed properly, will allow for training in massage and bodywork specialty areas, as well as in professional and practice development, business, marketing and advertising. The extra time, if

allocated wisely, can educate and train more qualified and well rounded practitioners who are versatile in their abilities and therefore more marketable, employable and successful. This in turn will reflect well on the school's program and provide word of mouth recommendations to those interested in the field.

### ***II. Avoid the Temptation of the 'Smorgasbord Syndrome'***

All too often institutions stuff their programs with a multitude of short courses in different modalities of massage therapy and bodywork in the hopes and mistaken belief that this will somehow have a positive outcome for the graduate and for the school. I call this the 'smorgasbord syndrome.' Although it's a marketing dream and it may look attractive, appetizing and exciting to an uneducated, prospective enrollee (as in "look at all I'm going to

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learn if I enroll in this program”), it unfortunately produces a program that

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turns out graduates very weak in the fundamentals and ineffective in the basic foundations and technical competencies of treatment. As a result, it can backfire in a lower

pass rate for the licensing/certification exam, which becomes much lower than the national average. Employees who hire these graduates often complain about lower competence levels and unprofessional demeanors. It’s not long after that when these graduates begin to wake up to the fact that the program they graduated from was, “a mile wide

and an inch deep.” Of course, as already mentioned, longer programs wisely developed have the room to offer and competently teach a broader array of forms of massage and bodywork which can be of great benefit to the graduate and to the clients they treat.

It is recommended here that as a bottom line all basic, entry level professional programs should be at least 600 hours and should be focused on no more than two treatment modalities, i.e., Swedish massage and Shiatsu, or Swedish massage and Deep Tissue. An additional modality can be introduced, but it should be made clear to students that it is only an introduction and that real competence will come after many more hours of continuing education classes and practice.



**STEVEN SCHENKMAN** is an established leader in the field of complementary and alternative medicine. He served as president of The New York College for Wholistic Health, Education, and Research (now known as the NY College of Health Professions) from 1989 through 2001. The college

offers associate’s and bachelor’s degree programs in massage and bodywork therapy, master’s degrees in acupuncture and Oriental medicine, certificate programs in holistic nursing and physical arts. Under his leadership the institution evolved into a premiere college for holistic education and developed the first associate’s degree program in massage therapy in the country in 1992. Steven has also demonstrated leadership and commitment to the profession of massage therapy as a founding member of the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB) whose examination is now used in 32 states for licensing in massage therapy. He spent five years on that board. Steven also served as chairman of the New York State Massage Therapy Board for six years and was a member for 10 years. He was also a founding member and served as president of the American Organization for Bodywork Therapies of Asia (AOBTA) for five years.

Since 2001 Steven has been consultant and curriculum specialist to career colleges, allied health

and business schools and schools of massage therapy. He has developed and written certificate, diploma and degree curricula and programs in massage therapy and western health careers. As a consultant, Steven specializes in assistance with accreditation and administration, licensing, internal consulting, reorganization, curriculum and new program development, new business development, marketing and advertising, strategic planning, NCB Providership application, project management, job training, methods and procedures.

Steven is also a member of the Cengage Learning (formerly Thomson Delmar Learning) Massage Advisory Board. In addition he has been contracted by Cengage to write a book on the subject of massage therapy entitled, *Massage Therapy: What It Is and How It Works*, scheduled for publication in 2009. Steven has been licensed in massage therapy in New York since 1984. He has studied and practiced Advanced Amma Therapeutic Massage and was a certified biofeedback specialist and stress management consultant. In addition, Steven was trained in acupuncture using the apprenticeship model and is a master tai chi practitioner and instructor.

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In states that have practice laws, the minimum length of training will have to be commensurate with state requirements. On the other hand, in unregulated states it's usually current competition that's the main determinant for an institution in choosing program length. However, upgrading, revising and staying a cut above by offering a longer, more comprehensive program that is marketed properly, can reinvigorate a massage therapy school or program. Importantly, working with an expert can help determine the best path to new program development in line with your institution's mission, philosophy, structure and needs.

### ***III. Implement A Tiered Curriculum***

Another interesting option is the development of a tiered curriculum. Although this is a good choice for a single campus school, it works especially well for academic institutions with campuses in many states, each with different requirements. A tiered curriculum enables the institution to standardize their core curriculum across the board and add the course work needed for their campuses in states with greater hour requirements.

For example, the first tier of such a program would meet all state, national and accreditation requirements and guidelines. Graduates of this program receive an entry-level certificate or diploma. If students choose to continue or return at a later date after graduation, they move to the second tier, earning an advanced certificate or depending on the institution, an associate's degree, which might include advanced training in different specialty areas. Institutions already offering associate's degree programs in the health care professions can easily weave the required general education courses into the program design, creating an excellent, well-

rounded professional training experience in massage therapy.

In addition, developing a massage therapy curriculum that includes some overlapping bioscience courses, in which students in other allied health care programs can share classes, can make for easier scheduling. Batching classes can be a good way to reduce the cost of running the massage therapy program. For example, the most obvious course to share in this way would be Anatomy & Physiology.

### ***IV. Consider Adding an Externship***

Although most programs have an on-site student clinic in which professionally supervised senior students treat clients from the outside community (usually required to be part of the massage therapy curriculum), externships in massage therapy programs are rare. There is no requirement by any state regulatory body or accrediting agency mandating that academic institutions must include an externship component in their approved or accredited massage therapy programs as in, for example, a profession like medical assisting.

That being said, accrediting bodies generally have basic regulations, requirements and guidelines on externships for schools that wish to include them in their programs.

Although externships may add additional administrative work for the school including acquiring and maintaining numerous extern sites for their students, tracking and overseeing the quality control of the experience, grading, etc., an important advantage can be an increased job placement rate.

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If the institution trains high quality massage therapists, the externship site will be more likely to want to hire the practitioners after they successfully graduate, pass the certification/licensing exam and receive their state's credentials for legal practice.

In addition, externship sites can become a great source of exposure and advertising for the school, especially if the student externs are of good quality.

#### ***V. Increase Hours of Business and Marketing Classes***

Upon graduation most massage therapists start their own practices. In fact, working for oneself is often a big motivating factor for getting into this profession to begin with. Generally speaking, massage therapists who have the marketing and business skills can often do better financially when working on their own compared with

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working for someone else. Unfortunately, people who are often good with their hands do not necessarily have the business skills and acumen to help make their professional choice successful. Hence the

importance of incorporating sufficient business courses within the massage therapy curricula.

According to the 2007 American Massage Therapy Association Industry Survey, "When asked what they wished they were taught more of in school, most massage therapists mentioned business skills, practice management, marketing and advertising, and building and maintaining a practice."<sup>3</sup>

It would serve the institution, its graduates and the profession-at-large

very well if programs would add more hours (45–90 hrs.) of training in business and practice management. This may mean adding hours to the total program and may be met with some resistance for different reasons. However, it will provide a large payoff particularly in the placement and overall success of the program and its graduates. It is unconscionable to send neon graduates out into the field without a solid grounding in the very tools that will play an enormous role in their future success.

#### ***VI. Provide Post Graduate Continuing Professional Education***

Becoming a health care practitioner, such as a massage therapist, is a commitment to lifelong learning and professional development. It is a responsibility that is concomitant with being called a health care professional. It is also a responsibility of an academic institution to provide their graduates with opportunities in postgraduate professional continuing education. Every massage therapist forms habits and patterns of treating after practicing for many years. Brushing up and expanding their knowledge base and techniques with continuing education courses at their alma mater will reflect positively in their work and foster a positive connection between graduates and their school. All schools should try to cultivate their alumni who not only can help the school grow and become successful through taking continuing education programs, but who also will be a positive advertisement for others seeking to attend their institution.

Institutions can also offer longer, mini-training and certification programs in specialty areas such as Spa Therapies and Spa Management, Asian Bodywork, Cranial Sacral Therapy, or Sports Massage Therapy, not previously offered or

only minimally taught in their undergraduate programs. This is another wonderful way to provide an ongoing connection with alumni while developing a professional continuing education program and, of course, a new revenue stream for institutions not presently offering ongoing CE courses.

A few years back the International Spa Association (ISPA) estimated that there were 9,600 spas found throughout the U.S. where approximately 155.8 million spa visits were made. Employment in resort spas, destination spas, medical spas, and day spas, incorporating various modalities in massage therapy, has become an avenue of practice that has soared over the last several years. Spas have become one of the largest employers of massage therapists. Therefore, offering an undergraduate or postgraduate continuing education spa track that meets the market's demands can provide great employability opportunities in spas for graduates and alumni and become a win-win situation.

In addition, the National Certification Exam for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCETMB) used by 32 states plus the District of Columbia as their licensing exam requires forty-eight continuing education units every four years to maintain certification. Schools that provide continuing education can tap into a ready-made alumni audience

of certified and licensed practitioners who need those hours to keep their practice current and legal. At the same time, a plan to bring in other non-alumni massage professionals looking for more training and education to grow in the field can expand the institution's CE program and make it more profitable as well.

### ***VII. Attend National, Professional Association Conventions and Conferences***

I attend the AMTA Council of Schools (AMTA COS) Leadership Conference & Annual Meeting every year and I'm always surprised, given the amount of schools offering programs in the country, how many are unrepresented.

Budget constraints aside, I often wonder if the decision not to attend is based on some assumptions regarding the potential value gained from attending. As a former college president, including a school of massage therapy, I always found attending the COS meeting an extremely valuable experience, one in which I would come away with a myriad of new ideas and ways to improve my school.

Networking with others in the same position is always enlightening, and, often, it was a relief to be able to communicate with other professionals facing the same predicaments and issues operating a massage therapy program. I learned a great deal discussing with them exactly how they went about resolving them. Besides all of the great seminars on relevant topics facing schools and programs in this field that are offered at these meetings,

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***"The Massage Therapy Use For Men Increased by 5.3 Million From 2004 to 2006."***

***"1 in 6 American Adults Received a Massage During 2006."***

***"Twice as Many Doctors Recommended Massage Therapy to Their Patients in 2006."***

Sources: The Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals (ABMP) & The American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA)

just one networking moment—a meeting with a new potential hire, learning one new valuable idea, finding one new product or book—can more than make up for the expense of attending. I recommend it highly.

I also strongly suggest that school or program directors attend and/or send some of their top faculty to the AMTA National Convention, or at least recommend that they go and offer them the time off to attend. This meeting is for professional practitioners and will re-energize and revitalize the staff and faculty who go. They are the ones who are in direct contact with other institutional faculty and, very importantly, the student body. Not only is it an investment in staff and faculty who become enriched by attending, but their enthusiasm and excitement about the field will spill over into the school along with word of the latest trends in equipment and other adjunctive modalities and products, new texts, great CE speakers, research, etc. In this field, one or two truly expert and committed faculty can make the difference between a successful program and a mediocre one. Cultivating exceptional faculty is what often attracts exceptional students to a school's massage therapy program.

The next AMTA Convention and AMTA Council of Schools Leadership Conference & Annual Meeting are:

**AMTA Council of Schools  
2009 Leadership Conference &  
Annual Meeting**

January 22–24  
San Antonio, TX

**AMTA National Convention 2009**

September 23–26  
Orlando, FL

### **Adding a New Program in Massage Therapy**

For existing schools that already have institutional accreditation and the essential administrative and academic infrastructure in place, adding a new massage therapy program as part of the institution's offerings is not a very difficult undertaking. Since the equipment needed is minimal and inexpensive (mostly massage tables to furnish technique rooms and student clinic), and lab requirements ARE very simple, the main hurdle lies in developing the appropriate curriculum for the institution, hiring the right staff and faculty to run it and getting the new program proposal through state and relevant accrediting body approval processes.

The other factor and potential major expense has to do with the space available to run the new program. For those institutions who can supply available dedicated classroom and clinic space, minimal construction should be necessary to retrofit the space into an adequate teaching facility for massage therapy. If a new location is necessary or construction of a new space within the institution has to be designed from scratch, including waiting for all building permits and approvals necessary, then clearly the time and expense will be greater. That said however, a newly created space, designed specifically with this program and its outcomes in mind, can go a very long way in contributing to a successful operation.

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008–09 Edition*, Massage Therapists, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos295.htm> (visited August 06, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> From data compiled by the AMTA, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

## The Five Important Qualities of Quality Massage Instructors

by Steven Schenkman

Academic institutions offering massage therapy programs are frequently faced with the challenge of first finding and then having to prepare new and qualified faculty to teach a variety of different courses, including specialty massage techniques and modalities. And that's usually not too easy. Given the rapid rate of expansion of more than twelve hundred schools and growing, finding qualified instructors to satisfy their needs is arguably one of the most important issues facing these institutions, as well as the profession itself. Teachers that provide students with their entry level training shape this profession by the quality and outcome of the product they put out—their students.

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Attracting and holding onto qualified faculty has become difficult, especially because, as practitioners, they can make a lot more in private professional practice than the average \$25.50 per hour they receive for instructing in massage therapy classes. Add in the required or necessary hours of preparation faculty must do for each course assigned (most school's faculties are comprised primarily of part-timers who usually do not get paid for this) and it's not difficult to see why massage therapy schools and programs are having a hard time building a qualified team of instructors.

As a result of this paucity of quality instructors, and almost by default, many schools fill teaching positions with recent graduates. Although these

individuals may have the time and be eager to stay involved with the school, they usually are not qualified to teach. Sometimes schools may be truly lucky to find among their recent graduates the winning combination, and, when that's the case, it's worth the effort on the part of the administration to put in the time and money to cultivate and hold onto those individuals.

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In addition, the growth of massage programs in career and community colleges has thrown a new difficulty into the mix. Faculty teaching in these programs must have both an academic degree and the qualifications in massage. So then the search begins—finding massage therapists who want to and can teach, and who also have an academic degree to meet the requirements when teaching in a college. Therefore, an institution that finds a qualified instructor without the additional requisite traditional academic degree must pass.

Reliance on academic credentials to validate one's ability to teach is equal to relying on a license in massage as an indication of one's ability to teach. So, if academic degrees aren't the marker of what qualifies someone to teach in a massage therapy program and being a licensed massage therapist isn't either, then what is?

In spite of the fact that there exists an enormous amount of literature and research on how to teach effectively, there is no complete list of "dos and don'ts" that, if followed, result in

quality teaching. Generally speaking, effective teaching cannot be separated from the teacher. A faculty member's personality, preferences, prejudices and overall self-awareness will have an enormous influence on student success.

Hippocrates, the Father of Modern Medicine is credited with saying, "The physician must be experienced in many things, but most assuredly in rubbing." Well, suffice it to say, that an instructor of massage therapy most assuredly needs to be well versed in the knowledge, skills and abilities of rubbing (or massage). But being an expert in the subject does not automatically make someone a good teacher. Let's look at some of the key factors that do.

### **1. Classroom Management Skills**

Good instructors must be able to maintain and manage a class. The diverse population and age spread of the typical massage school demographic makes it more complicated for instructors without these skills to maintain the interest, focus, and attention of a classroom full of students. Good faculty will need to know how to motivate and keep this diverse group of students focused. They need to know how to resolve conflict that arises, and, of course, have really good communication skills.

### **2. Understand the Learning Processes and Teaching Methods Most Effective For Adults**

Teaching children and teaching adults are very different, and, given the primary age demographic of these programs, good massage faculty will be versed in the knowledge and issues surrounding adult learners, including considering their life and work experience, their time constraints, and the issues and feelings that may arise from the age differences and education levels between older adult students and younger faculty members.

### **3. Have a Good Working Knowledge of Multiple Learning Styles**

Good instructors need to be familiar with some of the concepts of multiple learning styles and be able to appropriately adjust classroom activities and student interactions to take advantage of

different learning strategies. Long gone are the days when teachers just lectured and students took notes to memorize. Research into human learning has transformed many of our notions about how people learn most effectively, and good teachers need not only be aware of them, but should also know how to implement them into their approach to teaching.

### **4. Provide Ongoing Feedback and Correction**

Since massage therapy is a hands-on art essentially being passed on from teacher to student, there is the need for a great deal of in-the-moment correction. If an instructor is afraid to correct, or only corrects some students, what gets passed on is a distorted, watered down, weaker version of the technique. Giving accurate feedback and ongoing correction in a compassionate, considerate and supportive way is one of the main attributes of instructor behavior that shapes the student-teacher relationship. This will contribute to creating a classroom environment that is open, safe and receptive.

### **5. Working Knowledge of Instructional Design Methods**

Good instructors understand the principles and process of learning and are able to skillfully translate them into specific classroom materials and activities. They need to be able to adapt learning methods and make curriculum updates and revisions to address the evolving field of massage therapy and the broad diversity of the student population of these programs. They should be familiar with all the ways to enhance the learning experience, including the latest classroom technologies and audiovisual aids like computer presentations with PowerPoint. Students are very used to seeing multimedia presentations, videos, DVDs, or some other kind of presentation that aids in their learning process.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that teaching is difficult, and it should be clearer now why just plucking recent graduates with good grades out of a crowd of alumni and plopping them into a classroom may

not be the best of ideas, and why it generally doesn't work very well for all concerned. Even the best and most skillful of graduates, without at least some of the prior mentioned knowledge,

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skills and abilities, will fall far short in providing the quality learning experience that students deserve and pay for. Some people are simply natural teachers. Most everything they do works

and their students can't say enough good things about them. Unfortunately, most people do not fall into this category.

Ultimately, institutions should have two goals when it comes to their instructors in massage therapy. The first: to attract qualified instructors and get them ready to teach effectively starting from day one. The second: to help facilitate their evolution from new instructors to dedicated massage therapy faculty. There is nothing more stabilizing for a massage therapy program than to have a core of permanent, dedicated, committed and qualified faculty to anchor its curriculum. Good faculty attracts new enrollees to a program like honey attracts bees.