

# Program Directors' Perceptions of Reasons Professional Master's Athletic Training Students Persist and Depart

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**Context:** Student retention is a key issue in higher education. With the increasing number of professional master's (PM) athletic training programs (ATPs), understanding student retention is necessary to maintain viable programs.

**Objective:** Explore program directors' perceptions of the reasons athletic training students persist and depart from PM ATPs.

**Design:** Qualitative study.

**Setting:** Professional master's athletic training programs.

**Patients or Other Participants:** We asked directors from all PM ATPs nationwide to complete an online survey. We obtained responses from 60.0% (15 out of 25) of the population. We also completed follow-up telephone interviews with directors from 8 PM ATPs.

**Main Outcome Measure(s):** Directors of PM ATPs completed an online survey asking for reasons for student persistence and departure. We also conducted follow-up telephone interviews with randomly selected participants. During the telephone interviews, we asked participants for additional detail regarding the enrollment decisions of students.

**Results:** PM ATP directors stated that students persist due to their *commitment to the profession* and the *interpersonal relationships* they build with the program stakeholders. Conversely, students depart PM ATPs due to the *rigor* associated with completion, a change in *career aspirations*, and *financial concerns*.

**Conclusions:** Athletic training educators should strive to keep commitment and motivation levels high while fostering positive interpersonal relationships by providing a welcoming atmosphere and engaging clinical education experiences. Finally, mentors should be available to assist students with program completion, and students should have options available for defraying the cost associated with completing the PM ATP.

**Key Words:** Retention, graduate education, athletic training education

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## INTRODUCTION

Student persistence and retention continues to be an ongoing issue in higher education.<sup>1</sup> Despite increasing college enrollments, retention rates continue to diminish.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, with waning resources in postsecondary institutions, there exists a heightened sense of concern about student retention,<sup>2,3</sup> particularly because retention is becoming a way in which institutions measure program accountability.<sup>4</sup> Institutional retention has been at the forefront of concern; however, shifts have occurred in looking at individual program retention, and consequently, scholars have begun to evaluate factors impacting retention.

Issues of student retention in athletic training education at the undergraduate level have been investigated in the recent past.<sup>5-7</sup> Bowman and Dodge<sup>5</sup> specifically examined students' decisions to persist and found encouraging interactions with faculty, peers, and preceptors positively influenced retention decisions. Dodge et al<sup>6</sup> also examined factors that influenced persistence among students and found student motivation, clinical and academic integration, and a peer-support system as key components. Other recent literature has also reported the benefit of clinical integration on retention of athletic training students.<sup>8</sup> Further, undergraduate athletic training program directors identified career goals, the relationships athletic training students build with others, and enjoyment with and dedication to the athletic training program as reasons for student persistence.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, undergraduate program directors perceived that athletic training students leave due to curricular rigor, a disconnect between expectations, a decline in interest or change in career plans, and financial reasons.<sup>7</sup> Although these studies illuminate retention factors in athletic training, the findings may not be generalizable to graduate professional athletic training programs as these investigators examined undergraduate students only.

Professional master's (PM) athletic training programs (ATPs) have increased substantially over the past several years to the point where 25 such programs existed by the spring of 2011.<sup>9</sup> Given the recent groundswell of support for having athletic training professional education move to the master's degree,<sup>10</sup> the number of PM ATPs is likely to continue to grow. Although it has been recently reported that the athletic training student retention rate at PM ATPs is approximately 89%, 40% of program directors felt that retaining students is a problem facing professional athletic training programs at the master's degree level.<sup>11</sup> We sought, therefore, to address the paucity of student persistence and departure information relevant to graduate professional programs in athletic training from the perspective of PM ATP directors. We chose to seek potential reasons for student persistence and departure from PM ATP directors because we thought they would have experience advising and mentoring a number of students, thus providing multiple experiences.

## METHODS

We chose to use qualitative methods to collect the data for our investigation through 2 separate processes. First, we asked program directors from all Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education accredited PM ATPs to complete an online survey that contained a section of open-ended questions. Second, we completed 8 telephone interviews with randomly selected PM ATP directors to gain additional detail and gather further description of student retention. We developed the survey and the interview guide based on the current literature on athletic training student retention.<sup>5,6,12</sup> We pilot tested both the survey and the interview questions on 3 separate occasions. First, we completed think-aloud pilot tests with 3 athletic training educators. During this process, the lead author met with those completing the piloting and asked them to explain what they thought each question was asking with the purpose of identifying consistency in participant interpretation.<sup>13</sup> After we made appropriate revisions, we sent the survey to 4 additional athletic training educators and also had them respond to the interview questions with the purpose of improving content and clarity.<sup>14</sup> Finally, after we made additional edits, a panel of experts reviewed both instruments in an effort to improve face, content, and construct validity.<sup>15</sup> After minor revisions, the panel of experts approved the survey and interview questions before we recruited participants.

## Participants

For the internet-based survey, we received responses from 60.0% (15 out of 25) of the PM ATP directors nationwide as of January 2011. Towards the end of the internet-based survey, we asked participants if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up telephone interview. Of the 15 survey respondents, 10 answered that they would be willing to participate in a telephone interview. From this subset, we randomly selected 8 participants for telephone interviews using a random number table. The directors held their current position for an average of  $8 \pm 6$  years, and they were on average  $44 \pm 7$  years old. Demographic information for the institutions represented by the survey and telephone interview participants can be found in the Table.

## Data Collection Procedures

Before data collection began, we received Institutional Review Board approval from the host institution. For part 1 of the study, we utilized QuestionPro Survey Software (QuestionPro Inc, Seattle, WA) to distribute the survey and manage the responses. Similar to the techniques of Dillman,<sup>16</sup> we initiated our study by sending our population a personalized e-mail explaining the purpose of the study followed closely by an additional e-mail containing a link to the secure Web site. After sending 2 reminder e-mails, the first 2 weeks after the initial request and the second an additional week later, we made 1 attempt to call all participants who had not completed

**Table. Institution Demographic Information for Survey and Interview Participants**

	Survey		Interview	
	No.	%	No.	%
Carnegie classification				
Research	7	46.7	3	37.5
Master's	6	40.0	3	37.5
Baccalaureate	1	6.7	1	12.5
Special focus	1	6.7	1	12.5
Enrollment				
1000–3000	1	6.7	1	12.5
3000–5000	3	20.0	2	25.0
5000–10000	2	13.3	2	25.0
10 000–20 000	4	26.7	2	25.0
20 000–30 000	4	26.7		
30 000 or greater	1	6.7	1	12.5
Institution type				
Public	10	66.7	7	87.5
Private religious	5	33.3	1	12.5
Athletic affiliation				
NCAA Division I	10	66.7	6	75.0
NCAA Division II	4	26.7	2	25.0
NCAA Division III	1	6.7		

the survey to ask for their participation. We left messages for those who could not be reached. One week later, we terminated data collection.

From the first part of the study, we had 10 PM ATP directors show interest in participating in telephone interviews for the second part of the study. Out of this subset, we randomly selected 8 PM ATP directors to participate in the telephone interviews by using a random number table. We used data saturation as a recruitment guide and terminated data collection after 8 participants as no new themes were emerging from the data. After verifying their willingness to complete this portion of the research, we scheduled a date and time for the interview after receiving a signed informed consent form. We audio recorded the interview and had it transcribed verbatim to facilitate data analysis. A semistructured interview format allowed us to prompt the participants for further clarification or ask additional questions to allow for the gathering of sufficient detail.

### Data Analysis

We followed the principles of grounded theory<sup>17</sup> to analyze our data. We focused our analysis on the survey and interview answers to what aspects of the PM ATP influence student persistence and departure the most. In the survey, we asked the program directors to list the top 3 reasons students typically persist in their athletic training program and the top 3 reasons students typically leave their program. During the telephone interview, we asked participants to give some examples of what aspects of their program influence student persistence and departure the most. We used probes and follow-up questions, such as why, as needed during the telephone interview to reach an adequate level of detail. We combined the data from both sources and analyzed it

together. First, we read through the transcripts several times to gain familiarity with the responses. On subsequent reads of the data, we attached labels to the data during open coding. We reduced redundancy and combined similar codes during axial coding. Finally, selective coding involved developing final themes from the data by further reducing the data to those topics that best illustrated the overall data.

We established trustworthiness of the data through 3 separate processes. First, we used multiple analyst triangulation whereby 2 researchers analyzed the data independently and shared their results. We negotiated over any discrepancies in analysis as well as the coding structure until we reached full agreement. Second, we conducted member checks with 2 participants who reviewed their transcripts and the presentation of the final results to validate accuracy. Finally, we asked a peer to review the transcripts and the presentation of the results. Our peer agreed with the coding structure and the final themes thus adding credibility.

### RESULTS

From the program director's perspective, we were able to identify 2 reasons why students persist in PM ATPs and 3 reasons why they depart these programs. Our participants believed that the athletic training students maintain enrollment due to their *commitment to the profession* and the *interpersonal relationships* they build with the other stakeholders within the program. On the other hand, students depart PM ATPs due to the *rigor* associated with completion of the program, a change in *career aspirations*, and *financial concerns*. The Figure displays the emergent themes, which are also presented in the sections below.

#### Reasons to Persist in a Professional Master's Program

**Commitment to the Profession.** Our participants believed the PM ATP students remained enrolled due to a commitment to the athletic training profession. This commitment was due to students making informed decisions to enter the profession, despite the time and money associated with completion. One director stated:

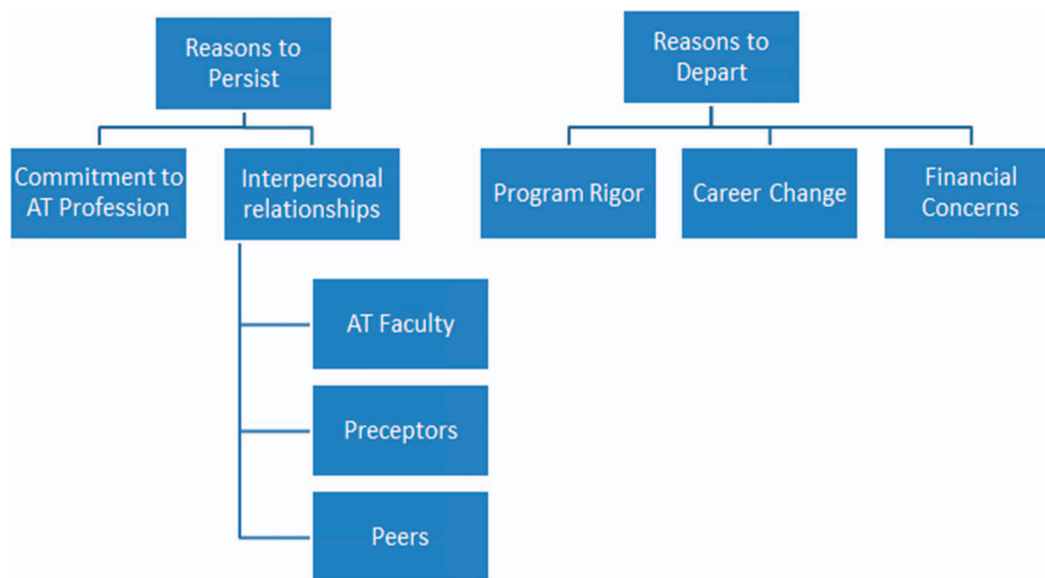
*I would think that master level students or master's professional students, all of them have made a conscious decision to pursue this, to go on for 2 more years. . . to pursue that degree. So I think they're more invested as a result. Whereas, with undergrad, I think that's just natural as far as historically a tradition, undergrad students change their mind. They change their majors.*

One participant compared the program commitments of graduate athletic training students to undergraduate athletic training students.

*Basically, you're dealing with 2 different types of students. In undergrad, you have students who are fresh into college. They may be undecided as far as their major. They may end up changing their major. It's just the nature of the undergrad student. Whereas, with master's students, they've already completed their undergrad degree, and they've made the commitment, both in time and money, to pursue their athletic training education. And so I think, going into it, they're more likely to be retained because of that commitment.*



**Figure. Emergent themes. Abbreviation: AT, athletic training.**



Similarly, another participant shared:

*Not that everybody who comes through a graduate athletic training program is more mature, but most of them, knock on wood, have already sown their wild oats and so they're focused. They're sponges. They're paying almost \$20 000 a year out of state, because I'd say about 75 to 80% of our students are out of state or international. It's a lot of money. They're really focused, and they're driven, and once they make that commitment to be here, they want to get the most bang for their buck.*

The calculated decision to enter the profession is suggestive of professional commitment on behalf of the PM ATP student. However, a different perspective was shared by 1 PM ATP director. She felt that the clinical observation prerequisite allowed for early socialization. During these experiences, students learned about the profession to allow them to make a calculated decision to enter the PM ATP. She explained:

*In terms of persistence. . . I find that the students who have a lot of clinical experience before they're admitted to the program. . . know what athletic training is. They know what the daily lives of an athletic trainer are like. They're comfortable in the clinical environment, so that when we do bring them into the program, and then put them into their clinical assignments, they're just like a fish to water. They understand what it's all about and what's expected of them. With that being said, though, we do spend a lot of time with them in the first semester. Like I said, we bring them in the summer and do a lot of orientation. We make sure that they are comfortable doing basic clinical skills at that time. We evaluate all their skills that we expect them to have at that point in time. So we do expect them to come into the program with a certain level of clinical proficiency, so I think that helps immensely with attrition and retention. Because again, we only have students here who understand what they want, and they understand what they're doing, and they are committed to becoming athletic trainers for a career—for a profession. So I would say that our retention just starts before they're even admitted.*

Similarly, another participant stated that PM ATP students understand what they are getting into because “the majority [of PM ATP students] have researched the field and are committed to completing the degree.”

One participant summed up this theme by alluding to the fact that PM ATP students have a better understanding of the profession compared to undergraduate athletic training students by stating:

*From my experience, I find that the students who we get are here because they want to be here, and they know what they're getting themselves into. And so in terms of losing students because they changed their minds or those kinds of things, I don't see that at my level.*

Other participants articulated that PM ATP students persist because they have a strong desire to enter the athletic training profession. For these students, a PM ATP allowed them to prepare for their career of choice. One director stated that athletic training students persist in her program because they are “dedicated and committed to becoming AT [athletic training] professionals” and have an “expectation to practice as an AT.” Another participant agreed responding, “they want to achieve their goal of becoming a certified athletic trainer.” Other similar responses to why PM ATP students persist to graduation included, “they are committed to the profession,” “knowing they are receiving preparation for their career of choice,” and “dedication to becoming an AT.”

**Interpersonal Relationships.** The bonds that form between students, faculty, and preceptors helped provide a supportive atmosphere for PM ATP students according to the directors with whom we spoke. This theme manifested itself in 2 distinct ways. First, our participants believed the students in the PM ATPs developed positive interpersonal relationships due to the small class sizes. One director who led a new PM ATP stated that because the program he leads is so small, the students get substantial individual attention leading to more opportunities for learning. He explained why students persist in the PM ATP he leads by stating:

*I think there are a couple things there. The things I've mentioned previously—the comfort level, the trust, that we are very—we try to be very helpful and hands on with showing students how to succeed. But with the 3—again, we have a small program. We have 3 students in the program right now. They get a lot of individual attention, and they get a lot of hands-on practice, so they are very, very—I think they're very comfortable with the fact that they're getting maybe extra hands on, because they don't have to fight with 3 other students or 6 other students for patients or opportunity. So right now, I think that's very important to them.*

Another participant had a similar response, but focused more on the availability of the faculty. He said:

*Even though we don't have enough faculty, we're very available. . . we're always there to help, when it comes to outside the classroom. I get a lot of feedback from students as they're graduating and leaving, and sometimes even after they've been gone for a while, they circle back and say wow, you guys were really great. You were very attentive. You really helped me. Then sometimes, later, they share with us that they were thinking of quitting, and then next thing you know they didn't, and it's because of a conversation they had with me or 1 of the other faculty members, and sometimes their preceptors, too. So I think in that sense, like I said, even though we don't have enough faculty members, we're still very available. We're accessible to them.*

Several directors mentioned the bonds that athletic training students form with their peers as particularly rewarding, leading to positive interpersonal relationships, and thus, increased retention. One director summed this finding up by stating:

*I think the second thing that influences it is probably social support, peer pressure, you name it. The students, while they all may not get along all as a group, they do develop some pretty strong social networks within the program, and I think that a lot of them persist because of social support they get from their friends in the program. When they start to struggle a little bit, I think the students in the program are very understanding of that and do make an effort to try to help the students through.*

Also, providing engaging clinical education experiences fostered the development of many of the relationships that students enjoyed. Many of the PM ATP directors spoke about the preceptors' ability to be mentors and positive role models for the students in the program. One director provided an excellent description of the ability of preceptors to influence student persistence. She said:

*Well, first and foremost preceptors influence them to stay big time. Honestly, I think that almost every single one of our preceptors does a good job of modeling behavior and does a good job of keeping the students enthusiastic about what they're doing and why they're doing it. In particular, we have a lot—we use a lot of high school clinical sites here, and the high school preceptors are just phenomenal. They are amazing—just great mentors for the students, and the students—even the ones who don't want to do high school and dread their mandatory high school rotations—always come away from it saying how much they felt like they grew*

*and how much they appreciated the mentors who they had at the high school. So the preceptor is easily what influences persistence the most.*

A similar response noted the fact that preceptors, as well as faculty, can positively influence enrollment decisions of athletic training students, particularly when students receive the individual attention required for relationships to form. The director stated:

*I would say it kind of goes back to the fact that the preceptors—we've got some great faculty preceptors, and students are able to make those personal connections with. And so I think it all goes back to the people in the program and how much of an asset our faculty and preceptors are.*

Another participant explained what she thought influenced persistence decisions based on her own program and 3 other PM ATPs that she is familiar with from completing site visits. She mentioned providing students with clinical education opportunities where individual attention can occur and having supportive faculty. She explained stating:

*As a site visitor, I've visited 3 other programs and those are the only ones I'm really familiar with. I don't know if I would say the exact same things. I would say probably the common thread would be the clinical experiences. Students really enjoy the clinical experiences that they get. . . I think students definitely enjoy the clinical experience. In places where the ratios are low clinically, I think students are more satisfied, get more out of it. I think the other common theme with student support, in talking to students at the 3 programs that we visited. If they felt like the faculty were there for them, and supported them, and cared about them, they would just rave about the program. Every aspect of it and vice versa.*

## Reasons to Depart from a Professional Master's Program

**Program Rigor.** We were also able to identify several reasons explaining student departure from PM ATPs. First, many directors spoke about the difficulty of completing the graduation requirements. Specifically, our participants mentioned the fact that the classes are difficult, and the clinical education requirements are time demanding. For example, 1 participant stated, "I expect there to be students who we lose simply because of not understanding the academic rigors of the program. . . or time management struggles." A colleague agreed, "The retention issues I see at my level have more to do with them [athletic training students] not being able to academically handle the educational program." This was corroborated by a different participant who explained that "some of our students haven't been able to handle the rigor, so they've chosen not to continue or they were asked not to continue. And so I think, for the majority of it, it's just the academic rigor and the time commitment."

A different perspective came from 1 director. Although she agreed that program rigor was a reason for athletic training student departure, she explained that the reason for the high academic standards of the PM ATP she leads is to be a gatekeeper to the profession. She believed that the demanding

nature of the coursework and clinical education experiences prepared the students for future employment:

*I think the stress from the rigor of it. I certainly think that that influences their decisions. I think—like I said, I think the majority of students who have made the decision to leave have done so because of difficulty handling the stress and rigor of the program. . . I think—honestly, I think it really comes down to the rigors of the program and the stress that they place on themselves. . . I do feel like—and this was true when I started, and this is certainly still true here—one of the things that this program is known for is for really placing the students into these stressful—where time management is really important type positions, so that they are prepared when they go into the workforce, and they're not feeling like it's not something that they haven't been through before. In a sense, I think that aspect is a little unique, in that we really do push our students because we know that the ones who make it all the way through the program, which is the majority of them—we know that the stress in learning those time management skills and learning how to deal with and cope with the anxiety and stress and all of that only helps them when they finally do make it into their first job.*

**Career Change.** Despite perceptions that students entered PM ATPs due to making informed decisions, the attrition that does occur is related to the development of the students' perspective of the athletic training profession. Our participants described a change in career interest for athletic training students often occurred due to a more complete perspective of the profession. One participant noted the fact that an athletic training student's perspective on a career in athletic training is not always positive. One director explained stating,

*I truly think the biggest factor is a perception that the profession is not a 'long-term' profession. They feel that the hours are poor and the pay is poor, and thus they don't see themselves practicing for 30–40 years.*

A similar opinion came from another participant who stated that students “no longer feel that athletic training is a career path that will allow them to be personally satisfied (poor hours, poor pay).”

Other PM ATP directors simply stated that the interests of students changed. A participant stated that students leave when “they realize that athletic training is not the profession they want to pursue.” A similar message came from another director when describing why students leave PM ATPs. He said, “One is the change of heart that they don't want to do athletic training. . . usually it's a change of heart.” Other comments regarding reasons for departure included, “they [athletic training students] decide they do not want to be ATs [athletic trainers],” “change in career plans,” and athletic training students “changed their mind.”

**Financial Concerns.** Our final theme describing why students typically leave PM ATPs centered on financial difficulty. Specifically, our participants mentioned tuition fees as a popular reason for departure. For example, 1 director supported this theme by describing how working while being a PM ATP student is difficult. She said:

*Finances—I think finances these days, and in the past couple years, have played even a bigger role, probably because of the downturn of the economy. But we've had a number of students who we could not retain because of financial reasons. More so than ever, we have students who are in the program trying to work full time, which is way more than what has been in the past. Then, students are finding that they just cannot maintain a full-time position and keep up with the curriculum, in particular, the clinical education component of an athletic training program.*

Other participants noted the fact that the cost of living where the institution that houses the PM ATP is located is very high. One director stated that students often leave because of:

*Money. Money, for sure. It's not even just tuition, it's also where we're located, being in [city name]. If you have a student who's coming from Ohio, like we've had, just even the cost of living—the cost of a gallon of milk is—it's a big difference between there and here. . . Bottom line, I think, is finances the most.*

We received a similar response from a different participant. She said:

*There really haven't been that many—just a handful. But they left because they—like I said, they underestimated how much it would cost to live here. I had 2 students 1 year who were from—I don't know, the Midwest somewhere. I can't remember exactly where—Oklahoma maybe. Within 2 weeks, they had already decided they wanted to leave because the cost of living was just more than they expected and was not—this was nothing like where they came from.*

## DISCUSSION

We were able to identify several reasons for PM ATP student persistence and departure decisions. Our findings add to the current literature<sup>5–7</sup> on athletic training student enrollment behavior by providing the perspective of program directors for graduate (ie, master's degree) professional athletic training programs. We believe these findings are particularly important as the discussion over moving the academic degree level for professional education from the bachelor's degree to the master's degree heightens.<sup>10</sup> Our findings help illustrate the positive influence that the professional master's degree in athletic training can have on persistence, particularly due to a richer understanding of the profession. However, our findings do present similar issues as compared to undergraduate student departure, such as financial hardships and a realization that the role of the athletic trainer is unattractive.<sup>7</sup>

## Persistence

The program directors we spoke to believed that the athletic training students enrolled in PM ATPs persist due to commitment to the profession and the relationships they build with others during their time in the athletic training program. Similar to other professions such as nursing, physical therapy, and physician assistant, in order to gain employment as an athletic trainer, one must graduate from an accredited professional athletic training program at either the undergraduate or graduate level. Thus, many students stay enrolled in these programs as it is the only way to enjoy a



career in athletic training. We believe these findings are similar to those found previously, which linked retention decisions to the motivation levels of athletic training students.<sup>6</sup> With regards to this particular study, we believe our participants mentioned commitment as a persistence factor due to the fact that they interact with PM ATP students. Professional master's athletic training students have specifically chosen to pursue a career in athletic training leading to higher levels of commitment and focus,<sup>10</sup> and perhaps, motivation.

Our participants also spoke of the interpersonal relationships that students build while completing the athletic training program as a persistence factor. Small class sizes and engaging clinical education experiences were the root of these relationships. The family atmosphere of programs where faculty and preceptors are available for extra mentoring and assistance facilitated persistence due to the supportive environment. Engaging clinical education experiences facilitate socialization by giving students an idea of what professional practice will entail.<sup>8,18</sup> Athletic training students also enjoy experiences where they get to practice their skills, which helps to keep motivation and commitment levels high while helping them form a bond with their preceptor. The engaging experience is also critical to foster the mentoring relationship between the athletic training student and preceptor.<sup>19</sup>

Mentoring relies on the availability of faculty or staff for the students.<sup>19</sup> The availability of faculty and their willingness to support students was identified as a reason for student persistence in our study. This finding is similar to that of Mazerolle et al<sup>20</sup> who found clinical instructor support as a reason students persisted in the profession of athletic training after graduation.

## Departure

The curricular rigor, a change in career interest, and financial concerns were reasons our participants believed athletic training students depart PM ATPs. The demands of completing an athletic training program can lead to students feeling overwhelmed and frustrated.<sup>21,22</sup> Also, prospective athletic training students typically do not have a complete understanding of the profession,<sup>23</sup> which can lead to departure and pursuit of a different career. We believe anticipatory socialization is vital for PM ATP students as these programs typically do not use a secondary admissions process.<sup>11</sup> A majority of undergraduate athletic training programs use a secondary admissions process where prospective students are often required to take introductory coursework and complete observation hours at the institution prior to becoming formally enrolled in the program.<sup>24</sup> Because such a socialization period is difficult at PM ATPs, other socialization tactics should be utilized such as orientation sessions, introductory courses, peer mentoring, and social gatherings.<sup>25</sup> Allowing for anticipatory socialization may help improve retention rates for PM ATP students by allowing a clear depiction of programmatic expectations and professional life.

Previous research has also identified financial concerns as a source of stress for athletic training students.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this stress stems from the difficulty of maintaining employment while enrolled in an athletic training program. We believe this stress may be heightened for master's professional students as

they have already taken on the cost of their undergraduate degree and added the expense of a master's degree. Adding an additional expense to pursue a career in athletic training may not be cost efficient and may not translate to higher salaries for professionals.<sup>10</sup>

Our findings revealed that, despite making informed decisions to enter an athletic training program, students depart and change career paths because of the fuller understanding they gain of the profession once in the program. Unfortunately, from the perspective of program directors, the students' perceptions of the profession is not always positive, and this is largely due to low pay, long hours, and a change of heart that athletic training is not well suited for them. These reasons correspond with other research findings indicating that students who recently graduated from an athletic training professional program decide not to pursue a career in athletic training because of its poor compensation and time commitment.<sup>20</sup>

## Limitations

Our study has several limitations that we believe are important to disclose. We asked program directors to explain why they thought students persist and depart from PM ATPs. Although we believe the perceptions of program directors are important, they may not align with the thoughts of athletic training students. We believe garnering data from multiple stakeholders, primarily students, to further clarify reasons for athletic training student persistence and departure is an important topic for future research. The generalizability of our results are also a limitation. We spoke to program directors from a diverse range of PM ATPs; however, our results may not translate well to other programs. Future studies should try to capture the perceptions of directors from a wider range of PM ATPs. However, we believe our findings are an important first step in exploring the experiences of students in PM ATPs.

## CONCLUSIONS

We were able to identify several reasons for PM ATP student persistence and departure. Our participants believed that the athletic training students in the programs they lead persist because of their commitment to entering the athletic training profession and because of the interpersonal relationships the programs foster between students and the other stakeholders. Athletic training students depart due to the rigor associated with earning a degree in athletic training, a change in career interest, and financial concerns. Athletic training educators should strive to keep commitment and motivation levels high while fostering positive interpersonal relationships by providing a welcoming atmosphere and engaging clinical education experiences. Finally, mentors should be available for athletic training students to assist them with program completion and students should have options available for defraying the cost associated with completing a PM ATP.

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