

Role of Clinical Education Experiences on Athletic Training Students' Development of Professional Commitment

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Context: Limited evidence exists on the role clinical education can play in the development of athletic training student commitment for the profession.

Objective: Investigating the role clinical education experiences play on the development of passion for athletic training.

Design: Exploratory qualitative study.

Setting: Athletic training education programs.

Patients or Other Participants: Seventeen students (8 males, 9 females) volunteered. Students represented both junior (13) and senior (4) levels, were engaged in 23 ± 5 hours per week of clinical education, and were 20 ± 2 years old.

Main Outcome Measure(s): One-on-one, in-person interviews following a semistructured format. Multiple analyst triangulation and member checks were included as steps to establish data credibility.

Results: A positive clinical education experience as described by this cohort of students was inclusive of strong *mentorship*, *realism*, *professional commitment of the preceptor*, and *clinical skill integration*. In combination, these attributes appear to help students develop their professional commitment for athletic training. Preceptors who provided mentorship by modeling appropriate professional behaviors, providing a realistic perspective to their role, and showing enthusiasm allowed the students in this study to gain an accurate understanding of the profession. Opportunities to develop clinical skills with feedback for improvement demonstrated the preceptors' commitment to the profession and the student and was valued as contributing to the overall experience.

Conclusions: The development of the athletic training student's commitment to the profession is directly related to a positive clinical education experience facilitated by a preceptor who is also passionate about the job. Preceptors are encouraged to provide the athletic training student with a realistic impression of the clinical setting in which they are gaining experiences in order for them to fully understand their future role and responsibilities. Maintaining an optimistic but pragmatic attitude is also valued by the athletic training student.

Key Words: Mentorship, socialization, engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Retention, a concept that centers on an individual's persistence to a particular task, job, career, or educational program, has received considerable attention within the academic and organizational literature.¹ The term retention is often interchanged with persistence, commitment, and perseverance, but ultimately refers to maintaining or completing responsibilities or roles. The interest in student retention is stimulated by the costs associated with turnover, the competitive nature of the admissions process at many colleges and universities, and the statistics that demonstrate the high number of students who enter higher educational institutions who fail to complete degree requirements.¹ Professional commitment, or attitude toward an intended profession, has been 1 factor linked to retention and degree completion.² A student who demonstrates greater professional commitment due to academic and social integration within the educational program is more likely to persist to graduation.³

The topic of retention has recently begun to receive increased attention within the athletic training literature, as turnover is a concern in both the workplace⁴ and the educational setting.⁵⁻⁷ At the professional level, retention factors include job satisfaction, financial benefits, time for family, and fulfillment of work and life balance.^{4,8,9} An athletic trainer who feels professional enthusiasm and commitment due to attainment of the aforementioned factors is more likely to persist in the current clinical practice setting. Comparably, the athletic training student who is motivated and committed to his or her professional development as an athletic trainer is more likely to persist to graduation and into the workplace.^{5,6} Other factors contributing to athletic training student retention include positive interactions and mentorship received during educational training, interest in coursework, interest in helping others, and actualization of their role as an athletic trainer.⁷ The heightened focus regarding retention within athletic training programs (ATPs) centers on maintaining credibility and reputation of the program, as well as continuing to assure high-quality students persevere to graduation to help advance the profession and standard of care.⁶

The socialization framework is often used to examine issues related to professional development, attractors and facilitators to athletic training, and persistence within the field.^{5,6,10-12} Professional socialization is often described as a 2-pronged developmental process characterized by educational training (anticipatory socialization) and real-time or workplace training (organizational socialization). The theory is founded by the principles that learning is social and is enhanced while the individual is able to observe as well as engage in their future roles. Socialization is often viewed as a key constituent in the professional preparation and continued development of athletic trainers, as they are able to either formally or informally gain understanding of their roles, accepted practices, and demands of their work.^{10,11} Typically, the academic

portion of professional socialization includes the more formal introduction to the student's future role, which includes curricular work that is combined with clinical training. Entrance into the workplace upon completion of degree work can be perceived as the more informal training and prologue to clinical practice. Moreover, it is through the socialization process that the individual is able to develop his or her own personal impressions of the negative and positives of his or her future role as a health care professional,¹¹⁻¹³ which can be critical in the development of professional commitment among these future professionals. Mentorship received both during the anticipatory and induction phases of socialization has been viewed as a necessary socializing agent as the role modeling provided by the mentor provides the mentee with first-hand experience and knowledge regarding expected practices, expectations, and skill implementation.¹⁴ Mentoring can help facilitate the socialization process for students as well as the working professionals as it allows them to gain insights on the organization's values, attitudes, and expectations.

Athletic training students value working with preceptors who demonstrate appropriate professional roles¹⁵ and promote a positive learning environment.⁷ They also expect their mentors to not only demonstrate a strong knowledge base and facilitate learning, but to display professionalism and exhibit and encourage positive professional perspectives.¹⁶ Positive mentorship has been reported as an important influencing factor for senior athletic training students when making postgraduate decisions, and in many cases leads to continuation into the profession.⁷ The role the preceptor plays in facilitating the professional development of the athletic training student is well established; however, what is missing from the literature is the ways the preceptor promotes and enhances the athletic training student's professional commitment toward a career in athletic training. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role the preceptor can play in fostering a positive clinical education experience, which may bolster an athletic training student's perceptions of professional commitment.

METHODS

Participants

Seventeen students (8 males, 9 females) from 2 Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) programs volunteered for this study and completed individual phone interviews. They were recruited based upon a criterion sampling procedure,^{17,18} which included being enrolled in a CAATE accredited program, engaged in a clinical rotation experience at the time of the study, and supervision during the experience by an preceptor. An assessment of professional commitment was not an inclusion criterion for the study, but rather a part of the investigation. The students represented both junior (13) and senior (4) levels, were engaged in 23 ± 5 hours per week of clinical education, and were 20 ± 2 years old. The students were also relatively distributed between on-

Table. Interview Guide

What excites you about the athletic training profession?
What are your career goals? Why do you want to pursue a career in athletic training?
What is your current rotation?
What are the positives (what excites you) about this current rotation?
What are the negatives about this current rotation?
How would you assess your preceptor's level of excitement with his/her job?
Is your preceptor enthusiastic about his/her job?
Is your preceptor a good mentor? Please explain.
In what ways does your preceptor provide you with mentoring?
Does it appear that your preceptor enjoys his/her job?
How does your preceptor model his/her passion for the athletic training profession for you?
Think about your best preceptor. How did this preceptor model his/her passion for the athletic training profession?
Think about your worst preceptor. How passionate about the field of athletic training was that person?
How has this rotation shaped your views about the field of athletic training?
How has this rotation elevated your enthusiasm and passion for the field of athletic training?

campus (6) and off-campus (11) clinical sites. Data saturation guided the final participant recruitment.¹⁷

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected via semistructured interviews conducted by the authors. At the outset of the study, the 2 authors developed an interview guide (Table) for semistructured interview sessions. The questions were open ended and designed to obtain detailed information about the athletic training students' perceptions of athletic training, their clinical education experiences, and the role their preceptors play in clinical education. Data regarding how athletic training students perceive their preceptor's professional commitment and enthusiasm about the athletic training profession and how that enthusiasm is modeled for athletic training students was also collected. Basic demographic data including age, semester standing, number of clinical hours, and current clinical education experience was also collected during their interview session.

To ensure the content contained in the interview guide was accurate and reflective of the study's purpose, a peer review was conducted. One athletic training scholar and educator knowledgeable in qualitative methods and the socialization theoretical framework evaluated the guide. Grammatical edits and ordering of questions was addressed after the peer review. The semistructured interview was piloted prior to data collection with 3 athletic training students who were not included in the research study. The pilot allowed the authors to ensure consistency with the interview session and content of the questions based upon the research agenda. The authors followed the same procedures in the pilot as the data collection procedures. No alterations were made to the interview guide, and the information collected in the pilot was not included in the final analysis.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim in preparation for coding. Member checks were conducted in 2 phases: (1) after transcription and (2) after coding procedures. The transcripts were shared with each individual participant in order to ensure that they were accurate and reflective of the interview session. Participants were asked to review the transcript for content and accuracy of their thoughts and experiences. Following data analysis, the central themes derived from the

data were shared with 2 of the senior and 2 of the junior athletic training students in order to ensure that they were reasonable. Selection of the participants who verified the central themes was based on convenience and willingness of the participants to evaluate the presentation of the findings. Feedback from the participants was digested by the researchers and applied where appropriate.¹⁷

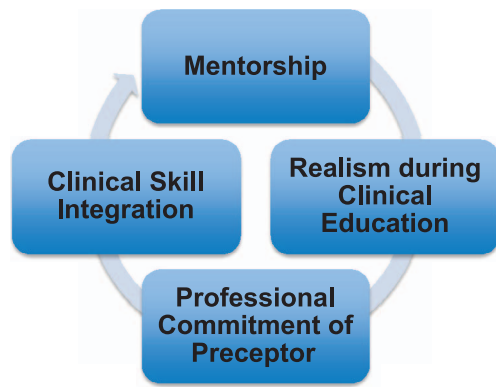
Data Analysis

The researchers coded all transcriptions independently following a grounded theory approach.¹⁶ In this approach, focus is placed on understanding social phenomena, which makes the analysis procedure appropriate for a study of this type.^{19,20} Data analysis took place in 3 distinctive steps. First, open coding was used to break down data into discrete parts and compare the data for similarities. The second step, axial coding, consisted of connecting the data from the open-coding process in order to identify major categories and subcategories. Finally, selective coding was used to connect major categories to one another with the intent of identifying central categories and themes.^{19,20} These steps were conducted simultaneously, but independently by the primary researchers before a comparison of findings were made. Central themes, once established by each researcher, were discussed until 100% agreement was reached. Our peer was also used to confirm the finalized themes as agreed upon by the independent coders. All findings were supported by all members of the coding team.

RESULTS

An athletic training student who can envision themselves assuming the role of a certified athletic trainer is more likely to persist to graduation.⁸ The preceptor helps athletic training students visualize their future role by providing mentorship during clinical education experiences, which allows the student to gain first-hand knowledge and understanding of the responsibilities of the role. It is through the clinical education experience that the student can acquire an interest or commitment to their intended career.^{5,6,8} For this cohort of athletic training students, a positive clinical education experience was inclusive of strong *mentorship* that provided *realism* throughout, *professional commitment of the preceptor*, and *clinical skill integration*. In combination, as highlighted in

Figure. Factors influencing professional development and commitment for the athletic training student.



the Figure, these attributes appear to help the athletic training student develop his or her professional commitment for athletic training. Each theme will be discussed and supported by participant quotes subsequently.

Mentorship

As discussed by the athletic training students, mentorship took a number of forms during clinical education. Primarily, students looked to preceptors to identify and/or create learning experiences that were characterized by appropriate levels of autonomy. For example, when asked about the mentoring strategies employed by his preceptor, Matt stated:

I like to operate individually. When I step in, I expect to operate on a certified level. I hate nothing more than having to ask questions or having her step in to do something that I can't do yet. Working with [my preceptor] is a really good mesh of letting me be very individualistic, but then knowing exactly when to step in, give me guidance, or ask a question leading me somewhere.

This sentiment regarding graded autonomy was echoed by Bob, who indicated that, when working through problems, his preceptor would “talk us through everything and explain it all. She doesn’t just do it herself. . . she helps us work through things.” Additionally, the athletic training students felt that mentorship provided by an enthusiastic preceptor often motivated them to be self-directed learners. Parker stated that his preceptor often “inspired a yearning to learn” by encouraging him to seek out articles on various topics and present the information to other athletic training students.

The athletic training students also benefitted from their preceptors taking time to get to know them and discussing general student life, career intentions, and goal setting. Though these topics are somewhat diverse, there was an appreciation on the part of the athletic training students when their preceptor would make efforts to listen to whatever was on their mind. For example, when asked about the discussions that occur with her preceptor, Jane stated that:

It's not just [athletic training] all the time; we can talk about other things. For example, when there was an attempted suicide on campus, we talked about that. Our personal

interactions are not just about the business of taking care of athletes.

Melissa was confident in stating that she would be “comfortable asking my preceptor anything, [athletic training] or otherwise” and that her preceptor “really wants me to pass my [Board of Certification] and go on to a successful career.” Therefore, the mentoring relationship between athletic training students and preceptors appears to be characterized by openness, constant assessment of the learning experience, and dynamic interaction.

Realism

During the interview session, the athletic training students described having a positive clinical education experience, which was the major catalyst to their development of enthusiasm and passion for their intended career. The positive experience was facilitated by the mentorship they received from their preceptors, which provided a very realistic impression of the roles and responsibilities associated with the preceptor’s position. John shared, “My preceptor was a good mentor. He told me just a lot about the profession from his point of view. It was good to see that, not just the good stuff. He was very open.” Steve, a junior athletic training student working with soccer, commented on the abilities of his preceptor, “She is someone who can set a good example of the professional role and the social role [I can see both sides of the job], which is helpful as I develop professionally.”

The importance of learning professional roles through modeling was important to this group of athletic training students. They valued the time the preceptor spent mentoring them on their upcoming functions as an athletic trainer, especially patient interaction. Nicole shared, “I think she is a great role model. She is showing us how to interact with peers and superiors and how to get respect from them.” Rose, a junior athletic training student, valued the opportunity to have open discussions with her preceptor regarding all aspects of the job. She said:

Honesty is very important. As [a] preceptor, you don't want to throw someone out there and say, “Oh, yeah, it is a perfect job. Nothing ever goes wrong.” You want make sure they see it all during their clinical experience, so they don't get thrown into it on the job. It is important to have a realistic experience, both pro and the cons.

The preceptor, by providing the athletic training student with an accurate description of the responsibilities of the athletic trainer, which is inclusive of both the positive and negative aspects, is able to help the student gain a full appreciation of the job.

Professional Commitment of the Preceptor

Demonstration of commitment to their role as an athletic trainer and preceptor was viewed by this group of students as important to their development of a similar level of dedication. The preceptor modeled this professional steadfastness through their interactions with their patients, athletes, coworkers, and athletic training students. Caroline valued the positive attitude displayed by her preceptor regarding her job. She said, “My preceptor is positive; constantly having an upbeat attitude about athletic training.” Ken, a senior athletic

training student, summed it up best, sharing, “[M]y preceptor is serious about the profession, but they’re not 100% serious. They take athletic training very seriously. They all love their profession, which helps reinforce my stature in it, but they can have a good time and enjoy what they do, too.” Jake had a similar experience to Ken, saying:

[M]y preceptor is always outgoing. She is here early, willing to do anything for the athletes. She will stay late, answer their questions and she is very well educated. She really wants to educate her athletes as well as her students. That in turn really motivates me.

Like their demonstration of professional commitment for their role as an athletic trainer, exhibition of dedication to the role of preceptor was also attributed as a means to promote commitment for the profession. Caroline said, “My preceptor is friendly and is a good teacher. It’s hard to describe, but she is willing to answer my questions and guide me, teach me, and talk to me. She is dedicated to my learning.” One athletic training student Tom valued his preceptor’s willingness to teach and receive feedback to improve the experience for the student. He said:

She [my preceptor] is a big feedback person. Before we did our midterm, we had a conversation, and she told me that things were going really well. She wanted to know if there was anything that she could do differently. I think, when you are spending that much time with your preceptor, if they are not willing to develop that relationship with you, then it will just be a horrible awkward season and stressful. She isn’t just a teacher. . . she is a real person, and she interacts with us on a level that is not condescending and is very understanding. It is very helpful.

Mike discussed the vigor his preceptor had for her job as well as helping him learn that in turn fueled his desire to learn. He said:

[She] definitely [brings] a lot of energy. My style of learning is to do things by myself and then have the preceptor step in when I get in trouble. She is spot on with knowing when I am blanking and hitting a wall. She will start edging closer and pointing me in the right direction at that moment, but not give me the answer. I really like that part of it. I am a real figure-it-out-myself kind of guy. She is great though, when we have questions; she is always like, “Let’s do it! Let’s go over every possible scenario we can!”

Another junior athletic training student discussed the contagious nature of a preceptor who demonstrates commitment for athletic training, personal and student learning. Allie shared:

Oh, definitely, yes, my preceptor is upbeat and has lots of energy. And with anything, really, if someone else is excited about something, it’s just a natural reaction for the people surrounded to be/get excited about it, [too]. So it’s definitely made me a lot more enthusiastic about my clinical rotation and going to clinical in general, especially if I’m tired on 1 day. I’m learning a lot, and 1 that I’m cementing all of my skills and definitely reaching the goals that I set for myself at the beginning of the semester, and I think having a little fun in there too, so it fuels my fire.

The athletic training students, when surrounded by preceptors who are committed to their role as an instructor and athletic

trainer, are more dedicated to their development professionally, as it inspires them.

Clinical Skill Integration

Athletic training students, when allowed to integrate their knowledge and clinical skills learned in the classroom in the real-time setting, were able to stay motivated, gain more confidence, and gain a sense of professional responsibility. The opportunity to become amalgamated into the role has been identified previously as a means to provide legitimation to their experience,²¹ which can foster commitment and visualization in the role of an athletic trainer. Rose said:

He [my preceptor] gives me a lot of trust. He allows me to do evaluations. He put me on the spot for a lot of them, which I think is important, because if he gave me time to prepare for it; it’s not a real-life situation. I think that’s important, even though it can be stressful to be put on the spot. I’m gaining more confidence in my abilities because of it.

Mike shared:

I feel like I am taking more of a “certified” role. I am doing more now; I can take more of a position in the forefront. I am doing lots of evaluations and making suggestions for rehab programs and treatments. I am more of an active player on the sports medicine team. I started working with this 1 athlete with a laundry list of problems. I helped diagnose her in preseason, and I did another evaluation on her the other day. I am helping her with rehabilitation and a lot of other things. I am really experiencing what an athletic trainer is [responsible for daily].

Al, like Mike, was appreciative of assuming a more active role as he prepared to become a certified athletic trainer. His preceptor was able to facilitate this transition by affording him autonomy with his clinical skills. Al said:

You are going to be a certified athletic trainer in less than a year, so you have to start getting the feel for this on your own. But at the same time, she is right next to me watching me. If there’s anything, she’s like, “Oh, do this instead. You have the right idea.” So I’m getting the feedback, but at the same time, she [my preceptor] realizes that she can’t just keep looking after me. She realizes I have to go out on my own. So my preceptor is giving me the balance of teaching me but, at the same time, letting me refine my own skills, realistically.

Tom, too, enjoyed the autonomy provided by his preceptor to gain his bearings as an athletic trainer. He said:

I get to do a lot of stuff, and my preceptor is pretty lenient [with allowing me to do things]. She lets me run my own stuff, but with supervision. I get to do different rehabilitation programs and [implement] modalities as well as do a lot of injury evaluations. The other day, I was pretty excited; she said that, if we ran out on the field, I would take the lead, but she would be there if I had questions. I like that, not taking a back seat all the time.

Facilitated autonomy benefits developing athletic training students by giving them a true sense of the role the athletic trainer. Moreover, it gave them ownership over their learning and performance in the role of the athletic trainer. Gaining a sense of legitimization aids in learning and, for this group,

helped them feel committed to their development professionally.

DISCUSSION

The athletic training student socialization process is critical, as it allows them to gain a better appreciation of the roles, responsibilities, attitudes, behaviors, and values associated with being an athletic trainer.^{10,11} Research examining the socialization framework has been able to identify initial attractors to a career in athletic training,¹² retention factors,⁶ and important socializing factors during education experiences.²¹ The scholarship is rich in these areas, and reveals that the athletic training student who is motivated, receives a strong clinical education experience, and feels vested in the experience is likely to persist in the pursuit of a career in athletic training. The purpose of this study was to investigate the role the preceptor can play in the athletic training student's development of professional commitment to a career in athletic training. Our results support the work of Klossner,²¹ which illustrated the importance of the athletic training student gaining acceptance and affirmation through their clinical education experiences by assuming a progressively more active role during those experiences. Our findings also continue to support the literature that highlights the importance of mentorship during the socialization process.^{14,16,22} The findings of our study help to contribute to the socialization and professional commitment literature by highlighting the impact of an authentic clinical educational experience which presents both the positives and negatives of the role of the athletic trainer.

Mentorship

Athletic training students indicated that preceptors provided mentorship in a number of ways, including career advising, goal setting, and skill instruction. Research has identified individualized instruction and interpersonal relationship building as common and effective mentoring strategies employed by preceptors.¹⁴ It appears that development of interpersonal relationships between student and preceptor allows preceptors to understand the educational needs of individual students and adjust the learning experience accordingly. Furthermore, when students positively evaluate their interactions with faculty and instructors, they demonstrate greater professional commitment² and are more likely to complete their degree programs⁶ and seek employment within their career field.⁵

A major factor in the development of the mentoring relationship is a willingness on the part of the preceptor to engage the student in conversations about many topics. As preceptors often experience role strain, they might experience difficulty finding the time to communicate effectively with students. However, it has been noted that preceptor responsiveness is essential for proper mentoring of athletic training students.²³ Students in the current study indicated that their preceptors not only challenged them clinically with frequent questioning, but also took the time to discuss matters that were not always related to athletic training. It appears that a willingness on the part of the preceptor to listen to his or her students and provide mentoring helps students develop a better understanding of athletic training and, in turn, a stronger professional commitment. The

investment shown by the preceptors toward the athletic training students' learning, personal growth, and professional growth was important for this cohort's retention and commitment toward the profession, again, a finding that supports previous professional commitment and retention literature,^{5,8} as it demonstrates the importance of faculty/instructor support and interaction, which must be positive and meaningful.

Realism

Depending upon their clinical setting, athletic trainers' professional role can be complex, as they often have to balance patient care, administrative paperwork, teaching, and various other tasks.²⁴ Formal role preparation and orientation¹¹ has been found to be an effective means to help athletic trainers gain the appropriate knowledge and skills to manage their competing roles. This preparation appears to be essential for the athletic training student as he or she begins to acquire professional commitments and enthusiasm for the profession. Clinical education experiences have been the foundation for ATPs to provide students with the chance to develop their professional skills through structured, real-time learning. Clinical education is also the time for athletic training students to learn the attitudes and values of the athletic trainer in a particular clinical setting¹⁰ and the expectations of the particular workplace.²⁵ Athletic trainers who feel adequately prepared to handle the roles and responsibilities assigned to them in their job do so because of previous exposure and educational training²⁶; explaining why this group of athletic training students valued the openness of their preceptors and the chance to gain a realistic understanding of all the responsibilities of the athletic trainer.

Positive clinical education experiences have been found to stimulate professional commitment and retention for the athletic training student.⁷ Previous examinations of professional development revealed these experiences to include strong mentorship, opportunities to learn, and a feeling of investment with the experience.^{7,15,21} Our data contributes to this literature by illustrating the need for the aforementioned factors, as well as having a well-rounded, authentic experience that encompasses all aspects of the role or job, rather than an unrealistic version of workplace expectations. The genuine clinical education experience, which allows the athletic training student to determine the positives and negatives of the profession from personal reflection has previously been found to help him or her develop a stronger affiliation to the profession as well as prepare him or her for the impending workforce.²⁷

Preceptors are encouraged to be honest when sharing their job expectations to allow the athletic training student to appreciate what the clinical setting has to offer. Additionally, it allows athletic training students to evaluate whether the clinical setting could provide a viable work environment in the future. Although there will be informal learning processes,¹⁰ once athletic training students accept a full-time position, prior knowledge of plausible and acceptable workplace practices, expectations, and responsibilities will inevitably help them feel comfortable, confident, and enthusiastic for their career.

Professional Commitment of the Preceptor

Role modeling is a powerful educational and mentoring tool used to help allied health care, medical, and athletic training students gain familiarity with the accepted behaviors, attitudes, knowledge, and skills associated with their professional role. Like the existing literature on mentoring and role modeling, the athletic training students valued clinical competence in their preceptors, as well as their personal attributes and teaching skills.^{14,28,29} This group was motivated to learn and developed passion for the profession because their preceptors demonstrated strong clinical competence through their knowledge, patient interactions, and clinical decision making. The athletic training students consistently discussed attributes such as passion for helping others, enthusiasm for practice and teaching, honesty, and openness, attributes positively associated with strong mentorship and role modeling, as critical socializing factors for the preparatory student.²⁹ Also important to fostering motivation for the profession for this group of athletic training students was the preceptors' zest for teaching, demonstration of student-centered approach to learning, and feedback on performance, all factors essential for effective role modeling.²⁸ The demonstration of professional commitment by preceptors, as evaluated by our group of athletic training students, was critical in helping them develop passion and commitment for their future role, a key constituent for retention of an employee, student, and athletic trainer.^{4,6} The preceptors were, with or without their knowledge, providing effective mentorship and role modeling, a known catalyst for retention,⁵ thus demonstrating the need for continued development of effective ways to educate preceptors on effective mentorship and teaching methods.

Clinical Skill Integration

This group of athletic training students appreciated when the preceptor afforded them the freedom to integrate their knowledge and clinical skills into actual practice. Professional autonomy has been viewed as an important retention factor for the full-time staff member, as it provides the athletic trainer with confidence in their abilities, support from their supervisors, and a sense of control over their professional responsibilities.^{4,30} This independence then stimulates the athletic trainer's satisfaction with their role, which promotes or sustains their professional commitment and enthusiasm. Similar comparisons can be made for the athletic training student. Allowing the athletic training student to gain experiences related directly to professional development facilitates their commitment for their impending role as an athletic trainer. Time spent in clinical education has been found to promote athletic training student commitment to their studies and pursuit of the profession,⁶ as it allows them to gain confidence, develop critical thinking skills, and commitment.¹⁵ Mentorship^{5,22} and diversity of clinical experiences²² has also been found to instill confidence in the athletic training student prior to entrance into the workforce, as it provides them with the chance to develop competence clinically as well as an adequate understanding of the professional roles they will be fulfilling. Furthermore, providing athletic training students with the chance to engage in their soon-to-be professional roles by receiving and accepting responsibility with the appropriate support and supervision not only allows them to gain confidence in their

identities as an athletic trainer,²¹ but allows them to gain professional motivation.

Approved clinical instructors following CAATE guidelines regarding proper clinical supervision are encouraged to provide autonomy by integrating the athletic training student into the day-to-day responsibilities; this empowerment is motivating and appears to navigate enthusiasm and retention. The positive learning and work atmosphere created by the preceptor has previously benefited retention in ATPs,⁵ as it ultimately allows athletic training students to envision their future role, take ownership over their learning and development, and feel supported by their preceptor or mentor.^{6,7,21}

RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how athletic training students develop commitment for their professional career, especially during their clinical education experiences. Mentorship received during these formal educational experiences has been found to be an important retention factor for the student into the workforce as an athletic trainer,^{5,6} but limited understanding was available on what specifically stimulated the professional commitment. Our findings illustrate the importance of a realistic, authentic experience that allows the student to gain a holistic understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the athletic trainer, regardless of the negative or positive evaluation. Approved clinical instructors are encouraged to be as honest as possible when discussing their role within their particular clinical setting and realize athletic training students value honesty and inclusion. Allowing the athletic training student to be part of the team by permitting him or her to take responsibility for patient care and interactions is very helpful in the development of professional identity and commitment. The preceptor is encouraged to reflect on his or her mentorship style, take the time to teach and provide feedback to the athletic training student, and exhibit a positive attitude.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

The current research study presents the opinions and experiences of athletic training students from only 2 CAATE accredited ATPs. Although the sample size is moderate for a qualitative research study, the results cannot be generalized to all athletic training students. The authors believe, however, due to the steps taken to ensure data rigor and the involvement of both junior and senior level students, that the findings are plausible, regardless of CAATE program. Also, the purpose of the study was to evaluate how current athletic training students' clinical education experiences inspire commitment to the profession in the present time. The results, therefore, may only reflect 1 specific clinical education experience and not the athletic training student's entire education experience. Many of the participants appeared to speak globally about their clinical education experiences, but many of the interview questions were structured to evaluate the athletic training students' current preceptors and learning experiences; therefore, this could influence the outcomes. Future studies should first evaluate the athletic training student's development of commitment for the profession from a larger cohort of students and programs. The data collected from this larger study will hopefully confirm the findings of this study.

Moreover, the athletic training students' level of professional commitment was not measured quantitatively within this study, but rather discussed in a more causal setting. Although their commitment was implied and none of the participants discussed cessation of their education in athletic training, it is important for future investigations to ensure that positive clinical education experiences truly stimulate professional commitment. Secondly, a future study should examine the development of passion and enthusiasm for the profession from the initiation of clinical education experiences to graduation. The longitudinal data could be helpful to gauge whether time of year (midterms, finals, etc), different preceptors, placement sites, level of collegiate athletics, or other factors influence this development by the athletic training students. Each clinical site can have varying levels of stressors, resources, and other factors that may influence the athletic training student experience and retention factors, thus also worthy of investigation.

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