

Who Should Mentor Me? Giving a Voice to Black Women Athletic Training Students

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Context: Black women are dramatically underrepresented in the health care profession of athletic training. It may be theorized that one of the reasons more black female students are not entering into the profession of athletic training is that they do not have adequate mentors to successfully guide them.

Objective: The purpose of our qualitative study was to examine the perceived effects of mentoring on the retention and credentialing of black women athletic trainers.

Design: Qualitative.

Setting: Clinical settings.

Patients or Other Participants: Ten certified athletic trainers who self-designate as black women.

Main Outcome Measure(s): We conducted one-on-one phone interviews and follow-up on personal case study interviews, which were transcribed verbatim. We performed constant comparative analysis of the data and established trustworthiness via member checks and peer review.

Results: (1) Mentoring promotes matriculation and successful college completion and credentialing of black women athletic training students, and (2) although shared race and gender are favorable mentor characteristics, accessibility and approachability are more essential traits of mentors.

Conclusions: These findings offer athletic training educators potential insight into ways to improve the athletic training educational success of black women enrolled in athletic training education programs that may lead to their increased participation/advancement in the athletic training profession.

Key Words: Mentoring, ethnically diverse, retention, black women professionals, athletic trainers

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnically diverse women are significantly underrepresented in the profession of athletic training.¹ Eighty-three percent of certified athletic trainers (ATs) employed in the college and university setting are white.¹ Failure to introduce black women to the profession of athletic training and failure to introduce their perspective into the literature may result in their continued absence from the profession. The information gathered during our study will contribute to the information available to—and possibly initiate—the individuals responsible for the recruitment, retention, and successful education of ethnically diverse athletic training students (ATs). Furthermore, this information can be used to assist athletic training educators to better guide black female ATs (and perhaps other ethnically diverse students, male and female) to professional success in athletic training academic programs, which are directed and influenced heavily by white ATs.

The makeup of athletic training education leadership may be one of the reasons more black students, specifically black women, do not enter into athletic training education programs (ATPs) and matriculate to the point of graduation and credentialing. They may not see examples of ethnically diverse women who are ATs, and there are few adequate mentors to guide them successfully through this area of study.^{2–5} Since 2003, 10% to 12% of the total membership of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) has consisted of ethnically diverse persons, 2% to 3% of whom defined themselves as *African American*. The number of women ATs has hovered at approximately half of the total membership of the NATA for the last decade, while black women have accounted for only 2% to 3% of the total female membership.¹ These data are similar to the demographics associated with sister allied health professions. In 2010, the American Occupational Therapy Association consisted of 92% women and 12% ethnically diverse members, with 2% indicating their status to be African American/black.⁶ In the same year the American Physical Therapy Association reported membership consisting of 68% women and 7% ethnically diverse members, with just over 1% indicating their status to be African American/black.⁷ In 2008, 94% of registered nurses were women, 17% being ethnically diverse, with 5% indicating their status to be African American/black.⁸ The Figure summarizes these diversity demographics.

Research in higher education has identified a plethora of reasons for poor recruitment and retention of ethnically diverse students in higher education, including those enrolled in allied health professional programs, with the marked exception of athletic training. The rationales included underpreparation for college,^{5,9–13} racism,^{5–13} lack of comfort and confidence with the health and science fields,⁵ and stereotyping.^{9–13} A common factor appearing in several of those studies^{11,14–18} was the lack of adequate mentorship of ethnically diverse students in postsecondary educational settings.

Compounding the lack of mentoring is the hesitancy and/or inability of white health care educators to serve successfully as mentors for ethnically diverse students pursuing education in the health care professions.^{19,20} The profound absence of ethnically diverse ATs in the profession of athletic training and in ATPs results in an equally profound absence of same-race mentors for ethnically diverse ATs.

The process of mentoring, with its benefits in terms of the successful education and career development of young professionals, has long been used in professions from education to business.^{3,21,22} In efforts to recruit and retain ethnically diverse students at predominantly white institutions and historically black colleges and universities, the persons responsible for recruitment and retention have recognized the valuable potential of mentoring in achieving successful outcomes for their efforts. Formal mentoring programs have demonstrated a positive effect on the retention and graduation rates of ethnically diverse students across several disciplines.^{23–27} In her assessment of a formal mentoring program at North Carolina State University, Lee²⁴ found that ethnically diverse students participating in the mentoring program adjusted more successfully to college and were more likely to persist in the field. Strayhorn and Terrell²⁷ found that a black student's establishment of a meaningful mentoring relationship with a faculty member had a positive influence on that student's satisfaction with college.

Young ethnically diverse women in athletic training education programs share very similar challenges when compared with their counterparts in other athletic disciplines, such as coaching and athletic administration. The lack of same-race, same-gender role models and mentors with diverse young women aspiring to careers in athletic administration and coaching is shared by ethnically diverse women in the field of athletic training education.^{2,28,29} Abney and Richey²⁸ cited barriers such as racism, “womanism” (the act of women hindering the success of other women), class oppression, inadequate or biased counseling at the educational level, and the lack of ethnically diverse women to serve as role models and mentors. The lack of ethnically diverse role models and mentors has had a profound negative effect on the inclusion of ethnically diverse women in the sports professions. The lack of visible ethnically diverse role models and mentors in the sport professions has led ethnically diverse young women who otherwise would have pursued careers in the sport professions to receive negative messages that such positions were not attainable, appropriate, or valued careers; they have also received the message that they were not welcomed or supported by the white individuals in those professions.^{2,4,28–33}

The purpose of our study was to examine the perceived effects of mentoring on the retention and credentialing of black women ATs in order to understand the impact of mentoring on the academic and professional success of black women ATs in ATPs. Mentoring is a relationship between a

knowledgeable and experienced senior person in a particular culture and a junior person who desires to successfully participate in that same culture.³⁴ In order to achieve this purpose, we formulated 2 research questions to guide our study:

1. What are black women ATs' perceptions of the effects mentoring has on the retention of black women ATSS and their attainment of the Board of Certification (BOC) credential?
2. What are black women ATs' perceptions of the effects a mentor's race and gender have on the successful mentoring of black women ATSS?

METHODS

We investigated the experiences and perceptions of black women ATs in order to gain new and deeper understandings of mentoring experiences that lead to persistence within and graduation from an accredited ATP. Thus, the design of our study was qualitative. Demographic data were collected via a personal survey. We used this data along with the information procured from the participants' interviews during analysis, which contributed to the validity of our results. Qualitative data were collected through personal interviews conducted by telephone.

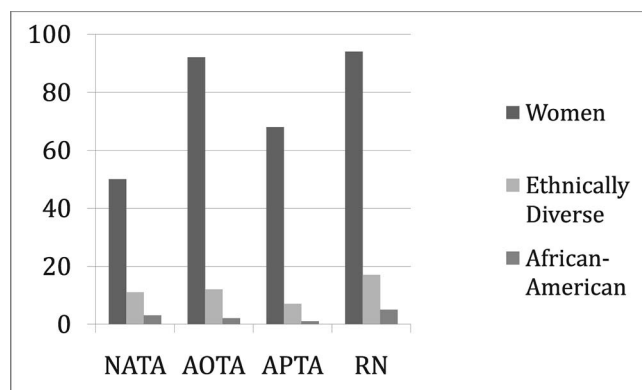
In addition to interview methodology, we also used case study methodology. Our intention was to acquire in-depth descriptions of the lived experiences of our participants in order to answer questions about the effects of mentoring that contributed to the participants' persistence in athletic training education. We used the case studies as a follow-up technique designed to delve further into the results revealed by the phone interviews and to validate the knowledge acquired in those phone interviews. Three of the original participants were selected for the case study follow-up in order to explore more deeply the unique experiences of these participants, who had dealt with more excessive occurrences of racism and sexism as athletic training students. New open-ended, semistructured questions were created for the face-to-face interviews with the case study participants.

Interview Schedule

Our interview schedule was modified from one designed and used by Dr Robertha Abney in her doctoral dissertation.² Abney's interview schedule provided a reliable instrument for the replication of her study of black female coaches and athletic administrators with our study of sister professionals in athletic training. The instrument in our research was slightly modified in that we directed the questions and terminology to ATs instead of coaches and athletic administrators, which allowed us to measure the perceived experiences of black women ATs with mentoring and its influences on career development.

To ensure that the interview schedule modified from Abney's original instrument met criterion-related validity for our study, each interview question was connected back to our research questions. Additionally, the modified interview schedule was assessed for face validity by conducting the interview with 2 sample participants who were not included in our study. This process ensured that the instrument and its

Figure. Demographic summary of allied health professions. Abbreviations: NATA, National Athletic Trainers' Association; AOTA, American Occupational Therapy Association; APTA, American Physical Therapy Association; RN, registered nurse.



administration were appropriate for the participants and the lead investigator and that the questions were clear and logically sequenced and did not lead the participants. Table 1 outlines the interview schedule of questions.

Participants

We used criterion sampling in order to select participants who were most likely to possess and be willing to provide pertinent information, perspective, and experience with mentoring they experienced while matriculating through their ATP. Our participants met the following inclusion criteria:

1. Self-identification as female and black or African American.
2. BOC certified as an AT.
3. Employed or had been employed as an AT.

Following institutional review board (IRB) approval, we shared the aforementioned criteria with the current and former chairpersons of the Ethnic Diversity Advisory Council to the NATA, who assisted in identifying potential participants for our study. Both chairpersons were black women ATs with intimate knowledge and familiarity with other ethnically diverse colleagues and peers. As such, they served as experienced and knowledgeable experts and identified 10 participants who met our delineated criteria.³⁵ The participants were contacted by the primary investigator by telephone and invited to participate in the study. At an agreed-upon date and time each participant was called and the semistructured interview was conducted via telephone and recorded per IRB procedural specifications. The average time for completion of the phone interview was 1 hour and 30 minutes. Recordings of each interview were transcribed and the resulting document returned to the interviewer. We believe the end of the final and 10th interview achieved content saturation.

Our 10 participants had diverse educational and professional backgrounds. Their average age at the time of the interviews was 36 years. Five of the participants graduated from accredited ATPs; the other 5 became BOC certified through the internship route. All participants were BOC certified between 1976 and 2004. Although several of the participants held dual credentials, all were BOC certified at the time of the

Table 1. Interview Schedule

1. Would you please tell me about your current job?
 2. How does it feel to be a certified athletic trainer? What does it mean to you?
 3. What has been most satisfying about your career as an athletic trainer?
 4. How did you select athletic training as your career (ie, preplanned, accidental)?
 5. Was your athletic training education at the undergraduate or graduate level?
 6. Was your athletic training program accredited or an internship route at the time?
 7. What do you remember about your experiences as an athletic training student?
 8. What problems or obstacles did you encounter while pursuing your athletic training education?
 9. Was there anything in particular that helped you become a certified athletic trainer?
 10. Was there anyone in particular who helped you become a certified athletic trainer?
- Role model definition: Individuals showed specific behaviors, personal styles, and specific attributes you tried to emulate.
- Mentor definition: Individuals who gave you special assistance and guidance in reaching your career goals.
11. How available were black women to you as role models during your AT education?
 12. How available were black women to you as mentors during your AT education?
 13. Please tell me about the individual(s) who directly influenced your career in athletic training.
 14. What assistance or guidance did you receive from that relationship? Can you give examples of ways in which you were helped?
 15. How often did you see that individual?
 16. How did this relationship affect your career in athletic training? What do you think would have happened if you hadn't had that person in your life as an athletic training student?
 17. Have you ever assisted/mentored someone with his or her career? In what ways have you assisted/mentored him/her?
 18. How important is it for a young black woman beginning her career to have a mentor? Why?
 19. Very few black women are athletic trainers. Why is this so?
 20. What do you think has to happen in order for this to change?
 21. Who do you think should be a mentor for black women? Why?
 22. What possibility of advancement for black women do you foresee in the future of athletic training?
 23. What would you like to add?

interviews and practicing athletic trainers within their respective employment settings. One participant held dual credentials as an AT and a physician assistant. Another participant held dual credentials as an AT and a physical therapist. One other participant was an AT and teacher in secondary education. She and 2 other participants worked as ATs in the secondary education setting. Five of the participants were employed at the college/university setting. Two of the participants worked in a clinic/hospital setting. Table 2 summarizes the participants' demographic information.

After we conducted analysis of the data revealed in the phone interviews, topics for further discussion were identified to serve as guides for open-ended, semistructured, face-to-face

interviews with the participants selected for case study. The 3 case studies were conducted in order to explore more deeply the unique experiences of the participants who dealt with more excessive occurrences of racism and sexism as athletic training students. Questions were developed with the objective to seek richer, more in-depth descriptions specific to the data revealed by the phone interviews in an attempt to better understand and gain greater comprehension of the perspectives detailed by the participants. Additionally, the questions posed to the case study participants sought to validate the information revealed through the phone interview process.

Each of the 3 participants selected for the case study shared common criteria leading to their selection as a case study

Table 2. Participants' Demographic Information

Participant Pseudonym	Internship or Approved/Accredited	Decade of Board of Certification	Highest Degree/Other	Employment Setting
Theodora	Approved	1970s	Bachelors	College/university
Gabriella	Internship	1980s	Physical therapist	Hospital/clinic
Hanna	Approved	1980s	Doctorate	College/university
Phoebe	Approved	1980s	Physician assistant	Hospital/clinic
Bernice	Approved	1990s	Masters	High school
Damara	Accredited	1990s	Masters	College/university
Moriah	Internship	1990s	Masters/teacher	High school
Deborah	Internship	2000s	Masters	College/university
Elisha	Internship	2000s	Masters	High school
Grace	Internship	2000s	Masters	College/university

participant. The 3 case study participants had shared the most significant quantity and quality of experiences from their undergraduate athletic training experiences. The interviewer believed she developed the strongest rapport with the 3 women selected for case study, had earned their trust and confidence, and would be able to draw even greater detail from their stories and experiences to enrich the content of this study. Perhaps most important in the selection of 2 of the women in particular was their more extreme, salient experiences with racism and sexism as athletic training students.

Analysis of Data

In order to identify similar or consistent themes within the responses to the questions, the lead investigator reviewed each transcript. An analysis of themes was accomplished by following the 4 steps in classifying data described by Gay and Airasian:³⁶ reading/“memoing”, describing, classifying, and interpreting. ATLAS.ti 5.0 (2nd edition) was used to identify codes, which were organized against the research questions according to the Code Mapping method of Anfara et al.³⁷ Through constant comparative analysis, relationships were identified between themes to create our qualitative findings. The code map added to the organization and validity of the analysis.

Trustworthiness of the data was established via member checks and peer review. The lead investigator read all the transcripts of the individual and case study interviews while simultaneously listening to the audio recordings in order to check for accuracy of the transcripts against the interviews. The transcripts were then sent to the corresponding participants to review for accuracy. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, a researcher with experience in qualitative research verified that the code mapping and analysis were completed following sound methods and that the findings were logical and true in comparison to the interview transcripts.

The methodology used in this investigation required an approach that would not objectify the experiences of the participants but rather bring voice to a traditionally silenced population of women. Thus, a black feminist theoretical (BFT) framework guided our study through data collection and analysis. Black feminist theory is the study and articulation of the experiences of black women who are simultaneously situated politically and historically in society at positions based upon their race (black), their gender (female), and their class (disadvantaged).^{38,39}

We incorporated a second theoretical framework and standpoint epistemology, Critical Race Theory (CRT), to guide the analysis of data. Critical Race Theory was developed by persons of color who wished to expose the flaws of racial neutrality and color-blindness in predominantly white US institutions such as administration, economics, politics, sociology, and education.^{40,41} Critical Race Theory is a form of oppositional scholarship that wishes to transform systems that oppress the ethnically diverse while continuing to advantage white, dominant society. The primary tenets of CRT drive the research:^{42–46}

1. Racism is permanent and embedded in all aspects of US society. The dominant society (white) does not recognize

or acknowledge the persistent presence of racism in the greater society. Individuals in the nondominant society experience the world affected by racism.

2. Experiential knowledge of ethnically diverse persons is collected through the qualitative method of storytelling. These stories serve as evidence in opposition to the dominant perception of the world.
3. Traditional liberal practices such as objectivity, neutrality, color-blindness, and meritocracy are ineffective in challenging institutionalized racism.

By embracing BFT as the guiding philosophy of our study and incorporating the tenets of CRT into the overall framework, we intended to give voice to the black women who shared their unique experiences as ethnically diverse female ATs in a predominantly white profession educated and trained in a predominantly white educational system. By placing black women at the center of the analysis and recognizing the intersection of race, gender, and class in their experiences, black women were brought from the indiscernible margins to the center of attention so that their voices could be recognized and heard. Bringing voice to the marginalized cultivates resistance and brings power to the silenced.⁴⁷

Specific to our study, the participants were educated in historically white male-dominated ATPs and now work in a historically white-dominated athletic training profession. We hope that bringing voice to these black women ATs will result in the successful understanding and appropriate alteration of existing oppressive social structures and generate momentum toward educational transformation that values black women as equally proficient and valued students and colleagues.

RESULTS

Table 3 provides a summary of the following results. We have organized our results according to each research question.

Research Question 1: What Are Black Women ATs' Perceptions of the Effects Mentoring Has on the Retention of Black Women ATs and Attainment of the BOC Credential?

Based upon the experiences of our participants, most perceived that having a mentor was advantageous for black female ATs and that they needed to access and take advantage of those mentorships. The participants noted the benefits of having mentors and found them valuable and influential to their academic and professional successes.

Mentoring is Desirable and Valuable. Hanna moved away from home in order to pursue athletic training. Having a mentor available to her that she trusted helped her to successfully complete the program. “Well, I think it’s important for everyone . . . it’s really, really important just to touch base with somebody to bounce stuff off of.” Gabriella agreed, “I think it’s desirable. I think it’s always good to be able to have someone you can share with, or bounce things off of.” Bernice added,

I think it’s, it’s a challenge, but I think it’s very important, because they need somebody who’s been through the process to help them know the steps and to guide them when necessary if they go astray or feel they can’t do it or they fail to see it, just to give them that extra boost along the way.

Table 3. Results Summary

Research Questions	Category	Subcategory
Research Question 1	Mentoring is desirable and valuable.	Mentoring is effective. Mentoring promotes efficient matriculation. Mentoring encourages student confidence, independence, and validation. Mentoring creates a sense of safety, welcoming, and belonging.
	The absence of mentoring has the potential to contribute to discontinuation. The activities associated with mentoring contribute to successful matriculation, professional advancement, and credentialing.	Advisement and guidance Career planning and job placement Professionalism and networking
Research Question 2	Mentor race and gender are less relevant criteria for effective mentors.	Black female mentors are not necessary. Black female mentors would be nice. Female mentors are preferable. Qualities of effective mentors are most important.

In addition to helping students matriculate successfully from point A to point B, Deborah thought that a mentor would be helpful in preventing black women from quitting athletic training before they gave it a chance.

I think that it's mandatory, to put it like that. I think that a mentor encourages you, because a lot of times you're just going to be like "I quit! I hate this. I don't want to do it anymore."

Mentoring is Effective. Several of our participants shared examples of the positive effects of mentoring that contributed to their educational successes. One way that mentoring was effective was specific to the efficient and timely college matriculation some of the participants felt they experienced with the help of their mentors. Another way that mentoring was effective for the participants was in how it helped them to gain confidence in their knowledge and skills and become independent practitioners. Additionally, mentoring was effective in how it created a fun learning environment for the participants and a sense of belonging in a predominantly white environment. Finally, mentoring was effective for many of the participants in that it created a sense of safety in the learning environment that allowed them the freedom to learn and practice their new skills.

Mentoring Promotes Efficient Matriculation. Mentoring may have helped some of our participants to navigate through college with greater efficiency and opportunities and with fewer problems. Elisha stated,

I think that guidance was very helpful in preparing me for things, specifically what I wanted to do or what goals I wanted to achieve. I'd probably still be an undergrad somewhere now, trying to decide what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. But I think for that it's helpful.

Efficient matriculation was not isolated to the classroom but was also useful in their clinical experiences. As noted by Grace, "She [my preceptor] just gave us opportunities to do whatever we wanted to do. She never stifled us; she just said if you want to do something, get in there, jump in, get involved."

Deborah felt her mentor helped her stay on track with her plan to graduate on time. She said,

... basically, to get from A to B, I think that without a mentor, you're gonna go all over. You're gonna roll back down the hill without getting to the top, so I think that mentoring is necessary. Absolutely.

Mentoring Encourages Student Confidence, Independence, and Validation. Many of our participants felt that mentoring was instrumental in helping to build their confidence in athletic training and their independence as future practitioners. Gabriella's mentor began to help her develop her confidence early. She said, "I think for the role model or mentor, her job was just, uh, instilling the confidence of 'Yeah, you can do this,' you know; 'Yeah, you should be able to do this.'" Grace echoed those ideas when speaking about her mentor in the clinical education setting. "I was like okay, I know I've seen this, or I know I've done this already, so I can just go ahead and do it. So, I think, if nothing else I got more confidence out of my program than some people do." Moriah appreciated her mentor and clinical supervisor allowing her to practice her skills and build her confidence: "She made us feel important. And I really, really liked that, how she made us feel important." She added, "It is just so important to have that mentor there to just tell you when you're messing up, tell you when you're doing a good job, and to really give you a lot of, just advice but also to listen."

Mentoring Creates a Sense of Safety, Welcoming, and Belonging. Moriah's mentor created an environment in which her students had fun while they learned in the clinical environment. "Oh my goodness, she was awesome, I mean, we had a lot of fun with her. She made athletic training fun." Gabriella's first experience entering the athletic training room as a freshman made her feel comfortable because of her mentor's welcoming attitude. "I remember her being very excited and wanting to work; she was welcoming, and she was encouraging, and she would just teach me whatever she could teach me along the way." As the only black student in a class of 80 white freshmen athletic training majors, Bernice asked the professor on the first day of class if there was a place for

her in athletic training, “and she told me there was very much of a need for us to get involved. So after that, I felt comfortable. Just knowing that there was a place.” Deborah’s mentor knew that several black women had struggled with sexism while assigned to work with the men’s basketball team at her institution, resulting in their failure to complete the ATP. Her mentor tried to protect Deborah from the same fate:

Now, she straight came out and told me, she was like ‘I’m not putting you in men’s basketball for that fact.’ Simple. Plain. Flat out. That’s it. And at first, I was upset, because I really wanted to work with basketball. But then I got to thinking, I’m like, well wait a minute—she’s not trying to be mean, she’s just, she’s seen it before. And she doesn’t want that to happen to me. You know? And so things like that, she kinda guided me and protected me in that kind of way.

The Absence of Mentoring Has the Potential to Contribute to Discontinuation. Many of the women were able to describe what they felt could have happened to their future in athletic training had they not experienced the benefits of mentoring as ATs. Without the benefits of positive mentoring, many of our participants felt they would have:

1. Been distracted from matriculating through the program in a reasonable amount of time;
2. Quit their athletic training program/major;
3. Transferred to another institution;
4. Not taken the BOC examination, thus not becoming an AT; and/or
5. Not practiced as an AT despite earning the credential.

Without the benefit of a mentor, Deborah felt she would have made it through athletic training, but she wouldn’t be where she is today. “I probably would still be an athletic trainer, I mean I definitely would be. But I just probably would have made a lot of bad decisions.”

Elisha is not sure she would have remained in athletic training without the guidance of her mentor. “Truly I don’t know. I think that she was very influential in terms of guiding me towards what specifically my career goals were.”

Moriah’s mentor guided her through a situation involving sexual harassment by a coach. Without that mentor’s guidance and support, she was not sure she would have remained at her school or even in athletic training. She stated, “Believe it or not, I probably would have left the school. Would I have stayed in athletic training? I don’t know.”

Theodora was cut from the women’s basketball team by the new coach at the start of her senior year. Although she was on target to graduate with a degree in Physical Education, she was lost without basketball. The head AT, who had taken care of her as an athlete, became her professional mentor, introducing her to the ATP, helping her find direction, and initiating a future in the athletic training profession (that has lasted over 30 years). She said, “[Without this] I wouldn’t be an athletic trainer.”

Hanna became ill at the end of her academic career. During that time, she lost her confidence and focus, feeling that she

would not be able to take the BOC examination. Her mentor encouraged her to not give up and to finish the process to become an AT. Hanna stated,

I wouldn’t have, I wouldn’t have started to take the exam. A lot of times we don’t, we don’t want to pursue something ‘cause we’re afraid of failing, so if we don’t pursue it we won’t fail. So, I mean, I was ill at the, at the end of my getting my degree, and I was just, I was just tired, you know? And he said, “Well, you can do this,” and we developed a strategy. But I don’t think I would have done it if I didn’t have his support at that particular time.

Damara’s mentor and her network opened doors of opportunity for Damara that she would not have had access to without her mentor. “I don’t know, had she not been there, if I would have gone through the master’s program at [institution].”

The Activities Associated with Mentoring Contribute to Successful Matriculation, Professional Advancement, and Credentialing. Many of our participants cited activities specific to mentoring that they found particularly helpful. Even though most college students are assigned an academic advisor, the participants’ assigned advisors may or may not have been effective. Some of our participants felt that the advisement and guidance provided to them by their mentors was especially helpful in the successful matriculation through college. Beyond advisement, many of our participants benefited from career planning, job placement, and employment assistance offered by their mentors. Some of our participants felt that their mentors helped create opportunities for them and introduced them to the tenants of professionalism and professional networking, which empowered the participants to guide their own future careers.

Advisement and Guidance. Deborah remembered being more comfortable going to her mentor rather than her assigned academic advisor for advisement and guidance in undergrad. She stated, “Pretty much, after I got into the program like my, I would say like around my junior year I pretty much stopped going to the regular advisor’s office, and I would, just have her help me with what I should take and stuff.” Deborah’s mentor also assisted her with problems she faced in her daily life as a student. She added, “D was my mentor, and every time I would have some sort of mini-crisis, I would always go into her office, and she would be glad to help me and chat with me and help me out. Do this, or make phone calls or whatever.”

Career Planning and Job Placement. At the end of Theodora’s time in the ATP, her mentor aided her in securing her first job even though the employer wanted a male athletic trainer. She remembers,

Well, he assisted me after I finished the program that summer; he got me a job at the local high school. He recommended me; they kept looking; they were looking for a male to be their trainer for football, and, uh, he recommended me, and I know he was instrumental in me getting that position.

Professionalism and Networking. Elisha’s mentor, a dean, was instrumental in acculturating her to the ideals of professionalism and networking. “She actually enrolled me in a program called MENS, and it was Mentoring Minorities in

Nutrition and Exercise Science. And just being a part of that program, it taught me a lot of the fundamentals of things.” Moriah’s mentor exposed her to educational opportunities beyond campus:

You could go to her and talk to her about anything, and, and she gave you good advice back. Plus she got us exposed to a lot of athletic training camps, so she, she put us in camps, and we had a chance to be around other kids, be around other trainers.

Research Question 2: What Are Black Women ATs’ Perceptions of the Effects a Mentor’s Race and Gender Have on the Successful Mentoring of Black Women ATSSs?

Mentor Race and Gender Are Less Relevant Criteria for Effective Mentors. The majority of participants felt that, based on their experiences as ATSSs, having female mentors, especially black female mentors, was preferable. However, they also believed that it was more important that black female ATSSs have access to effective mentors who could help advance their careers as students and professionals than to have no mentor at all. In summary, effective mentors were more important than mentors who shared race and gender with their students.

Black Female Mentors Are Not Necessary. Many of our participants felt that mentor race and gender were less important than mentor effectiveness. Hanna, who has worked as an ATP program director herself and who currently works as a college professor within an ATP, felt that shared race between students and mentors was not a critical factor. Her professional mentor was a white male.

I think anybody could be a mentor. I mean, I think you, you need to mentor. You know once you become involved, it should be somebody who you, you want to emulate their qualities, and their professionalism. And I don’t think it has anything to do with race. Just because they look like you doesn’t mean they’re a good role model or a mentor.

Theodora’s first mentor in athletic training was a white man who was later inducted into the NATA Hall of Fame. She felt that his care and attention to her as a student was valuable to her future and career as an athletic trainer and that his being white did not affect his ability to be an effective mentor to her.

Anyone who has the ability to be positive and be constructive, and who is willing to respect and listen to you. I don’t think it’s necessary—obviously for me it didn’t have to be another black person. It just has to be somebody who cares, who is willing to help. You know, most of my mentors have not been black.

Phoebe’s mentors were all white males. “I think you do need a mentor; I don’t know that that mentor has to be any specific race or gender.” Gabriella agreed that race was not a primary criterion for an effective mentor. Both of her mentors were white women. “I would say any individual that individual feels close and confident with, I don’t, I really don’t think it had to be another black woman by any means.” Grace’s mentor was a white woman.

You shouldn’t just choose a mentor because they look like you, I don’t think. I think you should choose someone because

you work well with them, and because they can give you appropriate guidance, and help you along your path.

Black Female Mentors Would Be Nice. Elisha’s mentors were a white woman and a black woman. She felt that it would have been nice for black female ATSSs to have a black female mentor, but she did not think it was a necessity. “I think that in terms of mentors for black women, it may not necessarily encompass the characteristics of ethnicity, but more so personality traits. Someone who is sympathetic to the issues and concerns that we face culturally and socially, professionally.” Although Gabriella did not think it was necessary to have a black female mentor, she recognized that it would be an advantage to a young black woman. She stated, “I think—again, it’s desirable and it’s nice, ‘cause it’s nice to see, uh, that someone either has done it or is doing it, you know, and they’re kind of like you. But I definitely don’t think it’s a necessity.”

Damara felt that black female students would relate better to a black female mentor and benefit from her experiences; however, shared race and gender should not be the only criteria for a mentor. Her professional mentors were a white woman and a black woman.

I think obviously other black women are going to be able to relate a little bit more to some of the situations that black women face, but anybody that takes an interest, a pride in their profession, and just a genuine concern that they care about other individuals can mentor black females. It doesn’t have to be only us that mentor each other.

Female Mentors Are Preferable. Despite the fact that the majority of participants felt that mentor race and gender were less important criteria for their mentors than was effectiveness, some of our participants did state a preference for their mentors being a woman. Bernice was the most emphatic participant who felt that the mentors for black female students should only be women:

I pretty much—I think any, any woman really should be a mentor. I mean, you know, any array of color—it doesn’t really matter. Just, it has to be a woman, because we all are minorities here compared to men.

Phoebe agreed that mentors for black female students should be women, despite her mentors being all men. “I think it should be a woman. Because they are best gonna be able to relate and understand.”

Moriah’s mentor was a white woman, and she felt that women were better able to mentor young black women through the challenges of being a woman in the profession than are men.

Gender-wise, he may not understand all the aspects that I will be faced with, so that’s why I say ‘yes’ and ‘no’ as far as gender. Being a woman in itself is just way different. You need to see a woman mentor. You need to see that woman being a college trainer working with women’s basketball and being pregnant, and being married. Because that lets you know if she can do it, then you can do it.

Qualities of Effective Mentors Are Most Important. Many of our participants valued the accessibility of their mentors. Hanna saw her mentor “. . . on a weekly basis, if not

more than that. Whether it was just in class, or going to a meeting in his office, or just passing by in the athletic training room.” Gabriella saw her mentors every day. “They both were immediately accessible. I mean, I was in the training room every day. They were very, very accessible.” Bernice, Moriah, Phoebe, and Theodora had daily access to their mentors as well. Bernice stated, “Well, I had her for class most of the time. At least on a regular basis, at minimum twice a week.” Moriah said, “Oh Lord, I saw that woman every day.” Bernice agreed that accessibility was helpful in forming her mentoring relationship with her mentors: “Other than being there and being willing, just access, access to them was very important.” Damara’s mentor was very accessible to her in several ways. She stated, “She was very available. She put a lot of time into that program, and it wasn’t just for me; she was available for everybody. So she was definitely accessible.” Despite being a dean, Elisha’s mentor was accessible to her quite frequently through the MENS program. “During the semester that I actually took the course, we met once a week. After that, I think we probably corresponded by e-mail once a week or once every 2 weeks until I graduated from college.”

Gabriella valued her mentor’s ability to make her feel welcome. Her mentor met her with a welcoming approach the first day they met. “She was welcoming from day 1, so that was, you know, it doesn’t seem like that—how could that make such a difference, and as a black freshman in, in a different area and a new environment, that was, that was key.” Theodora valued her mentor’s support. Her mentor was very supportive when it felt like everyone else had given up on her. “And he’s just always been supportive—he was always very supportive.” Moriah’s mentor provided not only academic support but also financial and emotional support after the death of Moriah’s mother during her final year of college.

She helped me out with clothes. Sometimes, I just didn’t have enough money to buy certain things, so she would, you know, for instance if they, if the program said that you need to be in a college shirt, well, she knew I couldn’t afford some of those college shirts that they wanted the kids to buy, so she would just give it to me as a Christmas gift, or birthday gift.

Hanna also felt supported by her mentor when facing a personal challenge with her health. “My mentor, he was my advisor, and he, he just, just gave me his time, his door was always open. Because I was a long ways from home too, so, my mentor, my advisor and mentor was there for me.” Elisha felt supported by her mentor as she dealt with various problems that she faced as a student.

Yeah, it—it was, and she helped me out a lot, even when I was having problems with the university as far as you know, getting my financial aid and making sure everything was right as far as my program was concerned, you know, she was always going to bat for me.

Phoebe appreciated that her mentor was not only accessible to her but also valued that he listened to her and took the time to advise her, even after she graduated:

He was a great listener. And, uh, family man and uh, like I said, because our group was so small, and he was vested in each and every one of us. And he always had really great, sound advice and good things to say and encouraging words.

Grace valued the fact that her mentor was interested in mentoring her and skilled at serving as a mentor. She stated, “Whoever can, whoever’s capable of mentoring you appropriately. I think you should choose someone because you work well with them, and because they can give you appropriate guidance, and help you along your path.”

DISCUSSION

In light of the stories shared by our 10 participants, and those elaborated on by Deborah, Gabriella, and Moriah in their individual case studies, there are several results that reveal answers to the 2 research questions posed in our study:

1. Mentoring is desirable, promotes efficient matriculation, and contributes to successful college completion and credentialing of black women ATs. Not only does mentoring promote black women ATs, it also serves as protection against racism, sexism, and classism.
2. Although shared race and gender are favorable mentor characteristics, accessibility and approachableness are more essential traits.

Mentoring Is Desirable, Valuable, and Effective

Based upon their experiences, Hanna, Gabriella, Bernice, Damara, and Deborah agreed that mentoring was a desirable and valuable process for promoting academic and professional success. Additionally, Elisha, Grace, and Deborah believed that having positive mentoring provided them with a more efficient matriculation process through college and the ATP than if they had not been mentored. Having mentors available to them to offer guidance, direction, advisement, goal setting, and opportunities helped them to avoid the obstacles that could potentially have led to their academic attrition. Perhaps of even greater criticality, having mentors also helped to promote their successful and timely progress to the point of graduation and postgraduate appointments.

Several studies examining recruitment and retention of ethnically diverse students at both predominantly white institutions and historically black colleges and universities have recognized the value of mentoring in achieving successful graduation outcomes, which is in agreement with our findings. The implementation of formal mentoring programs has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on the retention and graduation rates of ethnically diverse students.^{20,24–27,48–53} In athletic training, several researchers^{54–57} reported that mentoring was a desired and critical tool for supporting, promoting, and acculturating ATs and young AT professionals.

The shared experiences of Hanna, Gabriella, Grace, and Moriah revealed that the process of mentoring helped to build their professional confidence and independence as novice ATs, offering a sense of validation in the proficiency of their AT knowledge and skills, thus propelling them into future successes. Consistent with this finding, Curtis et al⁵⁴ found that ATs desired confidence-building behaviors and sense of autonomy through mentoring from their supervising athletic trainers. They wrote, “Acknowledgement and validation from their supervisors of their knowledge and skills set a positive tone for a productive clinical experience.”^{54(p252)} Pitney and Ehlers⁵⁷ found similar results from their study that revealed how mentoring in ATPs encouraged confidence in ATs. A

Table 4. Beneficial Characteristics of Successful Mentors

Accessible	Respectful	Confident
Approachable	Attentive	Encouraging
Supportive	Caring	Sympathetic
Interested	Helpful	Culturally sensitive
Professional	Engaged	Welcoming
Constructive	Nurturing	Appreciative of mentoring
Trustworthy	Knowledgeable	Networked/connected

study by Mensch and Ennis⁵⁶ revealed that purposeful teaching and mentoring offered by clinical instructors/preceptors created a greater sense of independence that enhanced confidence in ATSS.

The perspectives of Moriah, Gabriella, Deborah, and Bernice revealed that the process of mentoring could create safe, welcoming environments and a sense of belonging. This finding is consistent with literature^{20,24–27,48–53} that describes mentoring as an effective method of support for ethnically diverse students. Several researchers^{54–57} in the field of athletic training have also cited the benefits of mentoring on the success of ATSS. Mensch and Ennis⁵⁶ found that it was important for the faculty and clinical instructors/preceptors to create a positive educational environment within the ATP for ATSS. This was accomplished by establishing positive mentoring relationships.

The Absence of Mentoring Has the Potential to Contribute to Discontinuation. The perspectives described by Deborah, Elisha, Moriah, Theodora, Hanna, and Damara lead to the finding that an absence of mentoring has the potential to result in college and professional discontinuation. These participants were able to place such value on the benefits of the mentoring process that they believed that the absence of mentoring could have resulted in significant detrimental effects to their successful college matriculation and entry into the athletic training profession. Both Theodora and Hanna believed that without mentoring at a critical juncture in their college careers they would not have gone on to become ATs.

In Abney's 1988 study² on the mentoring with black women coaches and athletics administrators, the participants who did not experience the guidance of mentors during their career development felt that they could have benefited from the guidance of mentors and that their career development would have been better as a result.

Our findings are consistent with those of other reports^{24–27} that found that mentoring had a positive effect on graduation outcomes. Aiken et al⁹ found that a lack of mentoring among nurse participants led to significant frustration, alienation, and difficulty successfully completing the nursing program. In the field of athletic training, Malasarn et al⁵⁵ and Pitney et al⁵⁸ found that mentoring contributed to the successful support, socialization, and acculturation of young ATs entering the profession.

The Activities Associated with Mentoring Contribute to Successful Matriculation, Professional Advancement, and Credentialing. Another finding of our study

was the participants' identification of specific mentoring activities that contributed to their successful completion of an ATP and entry into the AT profession. These findings were consistent with those of other studies^{25,48,49,52,59} that identified that successful mentoring had a positive effect on ethnically diverse students' college retention and professional success.

FINDING 2

Although Shared Race and Gender Are Favorable, Specific Mentor Characteristics, as Well as Accessibility and Approachability, Are More Essential Traits

Mentor Race and Gender Are Less Relevant Criteria for Effective Mentors. From our participants' perspective, and based upon their lived experiences as black women ATSS enrolled in ATPs, our findings revealed that although shared race and shared gender are preferable mentor characteristics, the participants believed that having accessible and approachable mentors was more important. Elisha, Gabriella, Damara, and Deborah all noted that it would be preferable to have black women ATs serve as mentors for black women ATSS. Elisha believed that a black woman Certified AT would be better able to understand the challenges that face black women ATSS. Gabriella felt it would be nice as a black woman to see another black woman in the profession that you aspire to join. Damara felt that black female students would relate better to black women mentors, because the experiences of black women are unique.

Bernice, Phoebe, and Moriah believed that black women ATSS would benefit more from having a woman as a mentor. Bernice was very adamant that black female students should only be mentored by women, because she did not feel that men had the nurturing ability to successfully mentor female students.

Ultimately, almost all of our participants believed that although shared race and shared gender with mentors were preferable, these shared characteristics were less relevant criteria for effective mentors. Hanna, Theodora, Phoebe, Grace, Elisha, Gabriella, Damara, and Deborah all agreed that it was more important that black woman ATSS (1) have mentors and (2) have mentors who brought several other characteristics and benefits to their students. Table 4 lists some of these characteristics and benefits, as noted by our participants.

The findings from the qualitative portion of our study are consistent with information provided by the same participants from the Personal Data Survey. Seventy-one percent of our participants' mentors and role models who influenced their educational experiences were white, and 66% were women. Fifty-two percent of the key individuals were white women, and only 14% were black women; however, none were ATs. The participants in our study did not have the opportunity to be mentored by black women ATs because none of the participants had access to a black woman AT during her athletic training educational experience. As such, our participants only had the opportunity to be mentored professionally by ATs who were white. These positive experiences with white

mentors helped to form the perception that race and gender were not critical criteria for successful mentors.

Our findings are consistent with a qualitative study conducted by Lee,²⁴ who concluded that shared race between students and faculty was less important than the quality of the faculty interaction and that ethnically diverse students preferred mentor relationships matched by academic career paths. Our findings also are consistent with several other studies^{50,53,59–63} of ethnically diverse college student participants that found that same-race mentoring was welcomed when opportunities were presented but was not as critical as was benefiting from quality, networked mentoring.

In the field of AT, several studies^{54–57} agree with our findings that ATSSs perceive it to be important and desirable to develop a positive, meaningful mentoring relationship with ATs and that their mentor should be accessible, approachable, nurturing, and competent, with the students' best interests (academic and professional) at heart.

IMPLICATIONS

Our findings have several implications that potentially offer athletic training educators ideas that may improve the athletic training educational experiences of black women ATSSs and lead to their increased retention in the athletic training profession. Athletic training educators should consider offering or providing the process of mentoring through either formal or informal programs because it may be a desirable, valuable, and effective method of retention for many black women ATSSs. Additionally, by offering the benefits of mentoring, AT educators may be able to offer protection against the persistent barriers of sexism, racism, and classism that threaten the academic and professional success of the black women ATSSs who matriculate through our ATPs. This "protection" may come in the forms of (1) preventing at-risk situations, (2) offering advisement when negative situations do occur, and (3) demonstrating/modeling strategies for handling negative situations in a professional manner.

Athletic training educators should not hesitate to serve as a mentor for black women ATSSs, even though they may not share race (or race and gender). Shared race is not a requirement of effective mentoring for all black women in ATPs; effective mentoring is a requirement of effective mentoring. By offering effective mentoring to black women ATSSs, we create the opportunity to increase their college completion, BOC credentialing, and job acquisition, thus maintaining and perhaps enhancing the number of black women ATs in the profession of athletic training.

The NATA Ethnic Diversity Advisory Committee (EDAC) offers several enhancement grant opportunities that may be pursued to improve the recruitment and retention of ethnically diverse students in ATPs. The EDAC also sponsors a mentoring program for prospective students and students already enrolled in ATPs.⁶⁴ Athletic training educators should introduce ethnically diverse students enrolled in their ATPs to the EDAC and encourage their students to participate in the activities and opportunities sponsored by the EDAC. ATPs also should pursue EDAC grants to initiate and support future recruitment and retention activities of ethnically diverse students.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations of our study that warrant discussion. The methodology of our study was predominantly qualitative, with significantly low triangulation courtesy of a quantitative survey that served to collect demographic data of the participants, thus offering relatively limited validity to the qualitative section. However, the demographic data do present information that enriches the introduction and familiarity of the participants.

Qualitative design and the nature of that design allowed for a relatively small number of participants to be selected for in-depth study ($n = 10$). Therefore, the experiences of the participants may not be representative of all black women ATSSs or generalizable to the total population of black women ATSSs enrolled in ATPs. In addition, black women experience the world from the unique standpoint of being black and female. Their experiences may not be generalizable to other students who are ethnically diverse or to black men. Athletic training educators should contemplate the findings and determine for themselves how those findings and implications inform their educational policies and practices in the classroom and the clinical settings to the benefit of their programs and students.

The first 10 participant interviews were conducted via phone interview. This may have limited the data collection process. A one-on-one interview in person may have allowed for more interpersonal exchanges between the participants and the primary investigator. The phone interviews did not allow for eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, and visual affirmation of the content being exchanged or shared. In one case, the primary investigator conducting the phone interviews was not clear in her introduction and inadvertently left the participant under the assumption that she was a black woman, creating an awkward moment when she had to tactfully inform her that she was actually white. The purpose of qualitative research is to seek deeper, richer, broader experiences in order to reveal the complexity of those experiences and to offer counter-stories from the margins. More time, opportunity, and resources to conduct all interviews and case study interviews in person with the participants in their own environments may have allowed us to learn even more from the participants that would have revealed greater complexity in the results.

Another limitation of our study was that half of the participants matriculated through the internship route to BOC certification, while the other half were enrolled in accredited ATPs. As such, some of the experiences of the 5 internship-route participants specific to internship processes, challenges, and benefits may no longer apply for black women ATSSs enrolled in the current accredited program system.

CONCLUSIONS

The participants in our study believed that mentoring is a critically important and efficient activity and relationship that positively and powerfully contributes to the retention, promotion, and protection of black women ATSSs. Athletic training educators have the responsibility to consider mentoring and all of its benefits for the success of the black women ATSSs enrolled in our ATPs.

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