

Retention Initiatives Used by Professional Master's Athletic Training Program Directors

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Context: Many professional master's athletic training program directors believe retention is a problem facing athletic training education. However, it remains unknown what steps, if any, are taken to improve retention.

Objective: To inquire with program directors about their respective methods and interventions aimed at increasing retention rates.

Design: Qualitative study.

Setting: Professional master's athletic training programs.

Patients or Other Participants: Fifteen program directors out of 25 responded to an online survey invitation for a response rate of 60%. We also completed follow-up telephone interviews with 8 randomly selected program directors to gather greater insight into the ways they improve retention.

Main Outcome Measure(s): We asked directors of all 25 professional master's athletic training programs in the United States to complete an online survey. We also asked 8 program directors from those who responded to complete telephone interviews. Grounded theory guided data analysis and we secured credibility through the use of multiple-analyst triangulation, member checks, and peer review.

Results: We identified 3 themes of ways program directors help improve student retention rates. Our participants described adequately *screening admissions packets*, *providing financial support to defray the cost of pursuing a degree in athletic training at the professional master's level*, and *various student initiatives*.

Conclusions: Based on our findings, we recommend a thorough application process that screens prospective students and identifies those who can complete the program. Program directors should also find ways to help defray the costs of earning a master's degree to allow students to become integrated into the program intellectually, socially, and clinically without increasing stress levels. Finally, providing students with opportunities for early socialization and mentoring should be aimed at explaining program expectations while preparing the students for professional practice.

Key Words: Persistence, socialization, integration

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INTRODUCTION

Student retention has received considerable attention in the athletic training literature in recent years.¹⁻⁴ Athletic training educators seem to be drawn to student retention because it has an influence on the livelihood of the athletic training program itself. This is particularly due to the pressure for the institution to provide financial and personnel support for the program. Moreover, programs strive to retain students in order to continue to prove their worth among other academic majors.¹ Also, with the expansion of the athletic training field into nontraditional settings and an expanding job market even in traditional high school and college settings, there appears to be a need to increase the number of athletic trainers graduating from programs in order to meet the demand for more athletic trainers in the workforce.⁵

Researchers have focused specifically on the complex interaction between academic and clinical experiences and their relationship to persistence in the academic program.^{1,2,4} It appears that students persist in athletic training because of motivation that is shaped by positive educational experiences and, in particular, clinical integration.^{1,2,4} To date, the majority of the studies concerned with student retention have focused on professional baccalaureate programs.^{1,2,4} This focus seems appropriate as the majority of programs exist at the baccalaureate level.⁶ However, numerous professional master's programs are in existence⁶ and the retention of students in those programs seems to be of paramount importance. The importance has recently become thrust into the spotlight with the possibility of the transition to graduate-level education for all athletic training students (ATs).⁷

Professional master's programs often differ from baccalaureate programs in the amount of time that is spent in the athletic training curriculum. Specifically, the professional preparation portion of the baccalaureate program often lasts approximately 3 years. Although some baccalaureate programs only include 2 years of specific professional preparation and clinical experiences, a majority spread professional preparation out over more than 2 years, with approximately 7% of programs lasting all 4 years.⁸ This increased time in the baccalaureate curriculum allows more time for professional socialization of ATs, which is an important factor associated with student persistence. However, retention rates have been found to be higher when students are admitted later, possibly because of the extended time for students to explore other areas of interest and gather information about the program and the role of the professional athletic trainer.⁸ The condensed nature of professional master's programs allows for immediate immersion into the professional preparation portion of education, as opposed to the graded socialization and skill development that typically occur at the baccalaureate level. Because of the decreased socialization time and immediate engagement typically found in professional master's programs, retaining ATs may be problematic.

As athletic training educators are currently discussing moves to professional education at the master's degree level,⁷ it appears that a discussion of retention for professional master's programs is warranted. The differences that exist among undergraduate and graduate ATs provide additional support for investigating student retention issues at the professional master's level. Despite the fact that 40% of professional master's program directors believe retention of students is currently a problem facing athletic training education⁹ and recent research that has sought to identify factors contributing to retention of ATs,^{1,2,8-11} no research to date has investigated specific interventions that athletic training educators have implemented in professional master's programs to enhance retention. Therefore, the purpose of the current investigation is to inquire with professional master's directors about their respective methods and interventions aimed at increasing student retention rates. Through a discussion of these interventions, we hope to identify specific strategies that will help to increase student retention.

METHODS

We chose to use qualitative methods to determine the ways professional master's program directors improve the retention rates in their programs. We used 2 data collection methods, allowing for data triangulation. First, we administered an online survey as part of a larger study⁹ to gain an initial impression of the initiatives used. We used open-ended questions to gain a broader sense of those initiatives. Second, we completed audio-recorded semistructured telephone interviews with directors from professional master's programs to help give a fuller appreciation of the initiatives used to improve retention. We conducted the interviews following the evaluation of the open-ended questions from the online portion of the study.

Participants

We asked directors of all 25 accredited professional master's programs in the United States as of the spring 2011 semester to complete an online survey.⁹ We received responses from 15 program directors, for a response rate of 60%. The average age of the directors who responded was 44 ± 7 years, and the directors had held their current position for 8 ± 6 years. We also completed follow-up telephone interviews with 8 randomly selected participants to gather greater insight into the ways they improved retention rates. We used a random number table to facilitate selection of participants for telephone interviews. Demographic information can be found in the Table.

Data Collection Procedures

We secured institutional review board approval from the host institution prior to initiating participant recruitment for our study. To collect data with the online survey, we followed data collection procedures outlined previously.¹² First, we sent a

Table. Institution Demographic Information for Survey Participants and Interview Participants

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

Abbreviation: NCAA, National Collegiate Athletic Association.

personalized e-mail to directors of all accredited professional master's programs in the United States. One week later, we sent another personalized e-mail to all participants with a link to the online survey. Two weeks later, we sent a reminder e-mail to those who had not completed the survey, followed by a final reminder an additional week later. We terminated data collection 1 week after the final reminder following 3 consecutive days with no new responses. The survey asked participants what they currently do and what they would like to do to improve retention in their respective programs.

At the end of the survey, we asked if participants would volunteer for a telephone interview. Ten of the 15 participants stated they were interested. From this subset, we successfully recruited 8 randomly selected participants to complete the semistructured telephone interviews. We sent e-mails to those who volunteered to be interviewed. After receiving a signed informed consent form, we scheduled a date and time for the interview. The interviews followed an interview guide developed by the authors after pilot testing and were audio recorded and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. We ceased data collection after interviews with 8 participants because data saturation had been reached where no new themes were emerging from the data. We had the recordings transcribed verbatim to facilitate data analysis.

Data Analysis

We focused our analysis for the present study on the answers to the survey and interview questions pertaining to what the participants presently do or would like to do to improve retention. We borrowed the components of grounded theory to analyze our data.¹³ First, in an open-coding procedure we read through the transcripts in their entirety several times to get a sense for the data. On subsequent reads, we started to assign codes to the data on a line-by-line basis. Next, we collapsed the codes into categories by combining similar

topics or ideas. The process concluded by further reducing redundancy by merging categories into the dominant themes that emerged from the analysis.

To maintain methodological rigor, we managed 3 credibility strategies. First, we used multiple-analyst triangulation by having the 2 lead authors independently review and code the data. Once they had finished, they spoke via telephone and negotiated over the coding structure and final themes until full agreement was reached. Negotiations entailed discussions of the coding terminology, not content of the codes. Second, we randomly selected 2 participants to complete member checks. We provided these participants with their transcripts and the final presentation of the results for their review. We asked them to verify the accuracy of their transcripts and the presentation of the results. The 2 participants supported the analysis completed in the multiple-analyst triangulation. Finally, we had a peer with extensive qualitative research experience in athletic training education review our interview guide, transcripts, and coding structure. The peer provided feedback on the interview guide to add clarity and validated the final presentation of the results.

RESULTS

Our participants used 3 primary methods to retain students: adequately screening admissions packets, providing financial support to defray the cost of pursuing a degree in athletic training at the professional master's level, and various student initiatives. The final themes are defined and supported with quotes in the sections below.

Screening Admissions Packets

The majority of our participants noted the fact that keeping retention rates high starts before the student begins coursework. Participants discussed the fact that properly screening

admissions packets allows them to choose candidates who they believe will be successful. One participant explained, stating,

Well, I would say that my retention strategies start before we even admit anyone. So we have a pretty thorough screening process, in terms of our admissions, and we only admit students who we think will be successful in the program and will complete the program. So we look for students who are good academic achievers, and if they are a little low on the academic side, we look really closely at their letters of recommendation, and if we have an athletic trainer [who] says this person will be a great athletic trainer, then we're more likely to admit [him/her], even if [his/her] academic performance isn't the greatest. We do have a little bit of flexibility, in terms of how we admit students, but what we're looking for are people who we think are going to be successful and will complete the program, so I would say our retention begins before we even admit them.

Another described how an on-campus interview before admission decisions are made helps the faculty and staff to decide who is selected for the program. She said,

Well, I think that most of our retention strategies we try to do up front. We have a fairly thorough admissions process. We have them submit their application and their letters of recommendation and a fairly lengthy statement of purpose. After we've had a chance to review the applications, we invite qualified applicants on the campus for an in-person interview. That, to me, does a lot for retention. It gives us an opportunity to (1) see how dedicated they are to coming to our program, and then (2) we get a feel not only for who they are as [people] and applicant[s], but we also have them spend a lot of time interacting with our own students, and they also get an opportunity to interact with other candidates because it's a large—we have all of the interviewees coming in at the same time, so they also get to know each other. It gives us a really nice comprehensive view of who they are, why they're interested in coming here, and helps us make our decisions based upon all of those factors. Not only are they going to be good students here, but also do they display the qualities that we would expect would also keep them here for the 2 years of our program.

Several other participants commented on what they would like to do to improve retention rates and included statements about raising the entry standards. For example, one participant responded that he would like to “improve the admission process to admit students who will be academically successful,” and another stated, “We are attempting to alter the admissions review process and scrutinize academic preparedness.” Overall, the theme of admissions requirements was discussed by many of the directors and was best summed up by the following: “We do nothing specific, only what we can to screen applicants.”

Financial Support

The next theme centered on the fact that participants felt they needed to provide financial incentives to improve retention rates. One participant supported this theme by describing scholarships and assistantships students are eligible to receive. When asked what retention initiatives are used in the program he leads, he said,

Scholarships, that's one. We have secured two departmental scholarships, just to help with the financial burden that the students are having, in terms of that being an influence on retention. So we have departmental scholarships, and then we also award two graduate assistantships, as well. So we've done that to help retain students due to financial concerns.

Another participant told us that although there were no scholarships from the program she leads, the faculty and staff still try to help. She explained, “We provide support for all students seeking scholarship funds by helping them identify possible scholarships, writing letters of recommendation, and reviewing application files.” A final quote came from a participant who stated that the faculty and staff of the program he leads were “starting an endowed scholarship” to help defray the costs of completing the program.

When asked what they would like to do to improve retention rates of the students in their programs, the participants also noted financial strain. One participant stated, “I would like to offer scholarships. Raising money and securing donors for athletic training scholarships is extremely difficult.” Similar popular responses included “offer academic scholarships and graduate assistant positions” and “offer more scholarships and/or financial aid.” Finally, one participant stated that she had submitted a “proposal for more research and teaching graduate assistantships.”

Student Initiatives

The third theme revolved around welcoming students to the program and orienting them to the rigors of the educational process and athletic training profession through mentoring. The orientation was a means to provide immediate information to the incoming students, whereas the mentoring process was a means to provide long-term orientation and socialization. For example, one participant described an orientation process that was initiated before classes started:

We have a very in-depth orientation process in the summer; we make students come during the summer to get oriented. Basically, during that time, we do a lot of team-building activities. We do a lot of group activities that help the students become familiar with each other and with the program and with the faculty. We really work hard to develop a rapport between students, and we team them up so they have a support group of peers to help them through the program, and then we cultivate that throughout the program with lots of small group activities and social activities and things that will help students feel part of what's going on and have ownership in the program. So I would say throughout, we're working in that way, yeah.

It would appear that the goal of such programs is not only to describe program expectations, but also to socialize students and set up mentoring networks.

Peer mentoring was also important for another participant, who made the following statement regarding the potential that peer mentoring can have on student socialization:

The other thing that we've been doing, as well, is we have established a formal mentorship program between upper-level students and lower-level students. That's in an effort to try to help socialize, in a way—socialize new students into the

program and into the roles and expectations, not only in the classroom, but in the clinical setting, as well. We've gotten a lot of positive feedback about that, so we definitely instilled that.

In addition to peer mentoring, program faculty also took an active role in formally and informally advising students and helping them to understand their roles as students and eventually professional athletic trainers. These actions by the faculty were best summed by one participant:

Once they're here, we take a pretty student-centered approach to our advising and things like that. I think the students feel that both I and the clinical coordinator for our program are very open and are willing to meet with them at any time, about anything.

The faculty in many cases took an active role in “fostering relationships with our students, becoming a family atmosphere,” and “ensuring our currently enrolled students are receiving academic help when needed” in order not only to ensure academic success among the students, but also to increase retention.

DISCUSSION

As with baccalaureate athletic training, program directors of professional master's programs in athletic training identify ensuring student retention as necessary for the health and longevity of their programs.¹⁴ The present study identified creating appropriate admissions criteria, ensuring proper financial support, and providing formal and informal orientation and mentoring processes as measures deemed paramount to enhancing student retention.

Screening Admissions Packets

The first theme, associated with screening potential students, seems to be the first essential step in ensuring the academic success and eventual persistence of students in the program. We believe the application process is particularly important at the professional master's level, as prospective students may have very limited interactions with other program stakeholders compared with baccalaureate programs where a secondary admissions process is used. The secondary admissions process in baccalaureate programs typically includes observation hours at the host institution's athletic training clinic, allowing the prospective students to interact with preceptors, peers, and athletes while learning about the profession. Therefore, it would appear that properly screening students and admitting only those who have the potential for rigorous academic work would contribute well to student retention. Professional master's students may benefit from their maturity⁷ and the anticipatory socialization that has already taken place prior to entering the program when considering the potential influence of perceptions of the professional field of athletic training. Admission standards that include prior academic success in addition to observation experiences and documented interactions with practicing athletic trainers seem to be necessary for ensuring persistence.

In considering traditional student retention research¹⁵ and more recent research into ATS retention,² there is a need for students to achieve academic integration in order to persist through their program. Academic integration arises from social interactions with peers and instructors; however,

academic success is also a key component. Setting up students for academic success, therefore, is necessary for eventual student persistence among professional master's students. We believe the first step in preparing students for success is selecting only those who can handle the academic standards and time commitment of clinical education.

Financial Support

Educational costs continue to rise while state appropriations slip, making higher education affordability a continued concern. Currently, postprofessional master's students in the athletic training field often benefit from graduate assistantships or fellowships that defray the costs of their degree. Professional master's students, however, are faced with different financial burdens. Professional master's students may enter their athletic training education with accrued loans from their baccalaureate education and then take on additional loans to fund their master's degree. Therefore, students in professional master's athletic training programs make a considerable financial commitment to their education as athletic trainers compared with those who complete a baccalaureate program.⁷

Based on our results, finances seem to be a primary concern of students completing professional master's programs in athletic training. Research has indicated that finances can be a major factor in retaining students at the university level.^{16,17} Considering the financial burdens of professional master's students and the role that finances play in student retention, it would appear that a focus on financial aid by program directors may enhance retention. Program directors in the current study clearly recognized the role that finances play in retention of their students. Attempts were made to provide financial support for the students in their respective programs. Helping students to reduce their financial load will help them to focus more directly on their studies and achieve integration into the program, which is essential for their eventual persistence.^{2,4}

Student Initiatives

The last theme identified, student initiatives, focused on orientation, mentoring, and advising. All of those variables contribute to properly integrating students into the program. These measures take considerable effort on the part of faculty, preceptors, and students, as the goal is to welcome professional master's students and help them to find their own identities within the program.

Orientation programs are essential for explaining student demands and requirements. Research indicates that properly orienting students to their roles and responsibilities helps them to take ownership of the program and achieve success.¹⁸ Proper orientation of professional master's students would appear to be the next logical step to ensuring their integration into the program and eventual persistence following the screening process. Orientation and socialization in any setting takes on a number of formal and informal procedures.¹⁹ In the present study, however, it appears that program directors are taking an active role in formal orientation of their students. Though such measures may be time consuming initially, they are likely to be worth the effort by enhancing student integration and eventual persistence. Perhaps another

initiative includes the use of a program Web site; a well-designed Web page may help start the orientation process even prior to admission by adequately portraying program expectations, requirements, and distinctions.

Peer mentoring and learning has been used as an effective strategy for achieving positive outcomes in athletic training education for some time,²⁰ including socialization.^{21,22} Program directors identified the positive benefits of formalized peer mentoring on enhancing student retention in the present study. Similarly to directed efforts to socialize students via formal orientation programs, the peer mentoring programs described were essential to helping new students to understand their roles and responsibilities and become integrated into the program early in their education. It has been speculated in the athletic training literature that early socialization experiences such as student observations³ foster persistence. Though peer mentoring is a different type of socialization experience than observation, it is reasonable to assume that any type of experience designed to orient, mentor, or welcome students into the program would work to enhance student retention.

Student advising has taken on many forms in athletic training education. Advising often ranges from standardized academic advising that includes selecting courses and tips for academic success to meetings that range from simply getting to know the students to discussing life and/or career choices. In many cases, it has been documented that athletic training educators often take very active roles in interacting with and advising their students.^{23,24} In the nursing literature, it has been suggested that academic advising that is inadequate can have a detrimental effect on student persistence.²⁵

Limitations

Although we gathered data from professional master's program directors representing a wide variety of institutions, the population has increased since we collected our data. The responses found in the current study may not adequately represent the overall population; however, we believe our findings are an important first glimpse at the perceptions of program directors on how to improve student retention. Future research should investigate the perceptions of students who have departed from professional master's athletic training programs and students interested in attending those same programs to determine ways to facilitate persistence.

CONCLUSIONS

We were able to identify 3 themes explaining the retention initiatives used by program directors of professional master's athletic training programs. Our participants explained that they thoroughly screen admissions applications, provide financial support, and offer opportunities to orient and mentor students as ways to improve or maintain high retention rates. Based on our findings, we recommend a thorough application process where program directors can adequately screen prospective students and identify those who can successfully complete the program. Program directors are also encouraged to find ways to help defray the costs of earning a master's degree to allow students to become integrated into the program intellectually, socially, and clinically without increasing stress levels. Finally, providing students with opportunities for early socialization and

mentoring is of significant importance. These experiences should be aimed at explaining program expectations while preparing the ATs for professional practice.

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