Exploring Senior Level Athletic Training Students' Perceptions on Burnout and Work-Life Balance

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Context: The professional socialization process enables athletic training students (ATSs) to gain insights into behaviors, values, and attitudes that characterize their chosen profession. However, the process often focuses on skill development over professional issues. ATSs may be exposed to burnout and work-life conflict, which may impact their professional perceptions.

Objective: Examine the cumulative impact of professional socialization on the ATS regarding their perceptions of burnout and work-life balance.

Design: Qualitative research.

Setting: Semistructured interviews with 6 individuals and 4 focus groups.

Patients or Other Participants: Twenty-three ATSs enrolled in their final semester of Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education–accredited programs at 5 universities (9 male, 14 female; average age = 22 years).

Main Outcome Measure(s): Data collection occurred from 2 cohorts over a 2-year period. Participants completed focus group or individual interviews following the same interview guide. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. A general inductive analysis was used to evaluate the data. Themes were enumerated by counting the frequency with which a viewpoint was mentioned. Not all students answered each question. Member checks and a peer review established data credibility.

Results: Three major themes emerged from our analysis, where ATSs reported (1) perceiving burnout, (2) recognizing burnout in their preceptors and professors, and (3) that work-life imbalance may be a challenge in the future. Athletic training students described experiencing feelings they attributed to burnout while recognizing similar signs in classmates and preceptors or professors, and acknowledged that having a family could be difficult in the future.

Conclusions: Despite these seemingly negative findings, this group of ATSs was not influenced to leave the profession. Observing their preceptors use strategies and positive behaviors gave them hope for the future. Professionals must understand the importance of appropriate socialization when students are exposed to potentially negative situations so they remain optimistic about entering the field.

Key Words: Education, professional socialization, mentorship

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INTRODUCTION

The National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) membership statistics show a substantial increase in the number of student members, from 5593 at the end of 2009 to 7194 at the end of 2014.[1] This considerable influx of members may suggest that either athletic training education is becoming more popular or more students are encouraged to become NATA members. Regardless of the impetus, these statistics suggest a growing emphasis on professional development and involvement. Though the NATA's student membership numbers are rising, retention of both students and professionals is an increasing concern within athletic training.[2,3] Retaining quality athletic training students (ATSs) is important to both advance the profession and provide high quality care to patients. Simply, those who make the decision to leave the profession, both young professionals[4] and ATSs,[5,6] can negatively impact the profession by diminishing its growth.

Work-life balance (WLB) is one focus for retention research in athletic training, because it is often linked to athletic trainers' departures from the profession.[7–9] Student departure before completing the degree requirements of the athletic training program has also been linked to concerns related to WLB and parenting.[5] Despite this finding, the literature is sparse on the transition from undergraduate education to clinical practice regarding the impact of WLB on career planning, intentions, and ATS perceptions of the impact of professional practice on family life.

Athletic training students can pursue multiple options after graduation, including postprofessional degree programs outside of athletic training and direct entrance into the work force, or they can choose to never enter the profession. Neibert et al[10] found that a majority (86.4%) of ATSs pursue a career as an athletic trainer, a decision often facilitated by mentorship, clinical education experiences, and the desire for continued professional development.[6,10] Professional socialization and exposure to diverse experiences are important to improving professional retention,[11,12] as they allow ATSs to fully appreciate practice complexity[6,13] and realize their own role within the field.[14] On the other hand, many athletic training graduates decide to pursue other professional programs, such as physical therapy, education, physician assistantship, or traditional medicine when they become aware they do not want a career in athletic training.[6] Therefore, it is plausible that the socialization process highlights challenges and concerns that cause students to reconsider their career goals.

Professional socialization is the process in which an individual learns about the responsibilities, roles, values, and attitudes that characterize the profession he or she intends to enter.[15] The socialization framework provides the underpinnings for various studies in athletic training, including attractors to a career,[16] role preparation,[13,15] and retention.[5,6] Opportunities for engaged learning while receiving mentorship and feedback are linked to a positive clinical education experience,[3] an important retention factor for ATSs in athletic training education programs.

Mentoring, an aspect of socialization, is important, as it can profoundly influence the ATS's postgraduation decisions and employment setting selection.[6,12] Furthermore, the relationship between the ATS and preceptor can provide insights to the ATS about his or her future professional role.[17] Mentorship received through clinical education experiences can also lead ATSs away from a career in athletic training,[6,10] especially when they are unable to observe successful achievement of WLB. Hours worked, difficulty with autonomy and work schedules, and concerns about having enough time outside the workplace are cited as reasons not to pursue a career in athletic training.[5,6,10] Although mentoring is thought to positively impact career perceptions, it can also negatively impact athletic trainers' perceptions. For example, a study by Eason et al[18] suggested having a mentor who was able to successfully achieve WLB positively impacted female Division I athletic trainers' perceptions of their own WLB and career longevity, whereas having a mentor who was not able to achieve WLB or not having a mentor impacted their perceptions negatively. Burnout and work-life conflict were only recently examined among ATSs, and research indicated that undergraduate ATSs experience a moderate level of burnout from clinical assignments.[19,20] Additionally, female ATSs were often optimistic that they could achieve WLB, but received little mentorship from those female athletic trainers who successfully balanced the roles of mother and athletic trainer.[12] Issues of WLB and burnout are not isolated to athletic training; in fact, they are common in the preprofessional medical[21] and nursing[22] student populations. Recent studies of nursing faculty members[23] and general internists[24] discovered both burnout and work-home conflict in these professional groups as well.

Athletic training students are exposed to a variety of professionals throughout their educational curriculum, yet often lack a full understanding of the breadth of the full athletic trainer role. No data currently describe the influence socialization has on ATSs' development of professional goals or their perceived ability to succeed despite challenges or barriers they may observe related to burnout and WLB. Upon graduation, the culmination of these factors may impact ATSs' perception of their ability to succeed and their desire to continue in the field of athletic training. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore ATSs' perceptions of burnout, the factors that influence these perceptions, and their perceived ability to achieve WLB.

Our investigation was guided by the following questions:

1. Do ATSs perceive they experienced burnout during their academic studies?
2. Do ATSs believe that WLB is a concern as they embark on their professional career?

Table 1. Athletic Training Student Demographics

	Name	Sex	School	Age	BOC Examination Status	Immediate Postgraduate Plans	Year Interview Conducted	Interview Type
Individual 1	Aaron	M	A	21	Passed	Graduate school	2013	Face-to-face
Individual 2	Brent	M	A	21	Passed	Hopes to work as high school athletic trainer	2013	Face-to-face
Individual 3	Catie	F	B	22	Passed	Internship (Division I)	2014	Phone
Individual 4	Don	M	C	22	Not taken	Athletic training residency	2014	Phone
Individual 5	Evan	M	D	23	Not taken	Hopes to work	2014	Face-to-face
Individual 6	Faith	F	A	22	Passed	Internship	2014	Face-to-face
FG 1	Gail	F	A	23	Awaiting results	Graduate school	2013	Face-to-face
	Heather	F	A	21	Awaiting results	Graduate school	2013	Face-to-face
	Isaac	M	A	21	Passed	Graduate school	2013	Face-to-face
	Jake	M	A	21	Passed	Graduate school	2013	Face-to-face
	Kelly	F	A	22	Passed	Hopes to get a job	2013	Face-to-face
FG 2	Lacey	F	A	21	Passed	Graduate school	2014	Face-to-face
	Melanie	F	A	22	Passed	Graduate school	2014	Face-to-face
	Natasha	F	A	21	Awaiting results	Graduate school	2014	Face-to-face
	Owen	M	A	22	Passed	Graduate school	2014	Face-to-face
FG 3	Penelope	F	E	22	Awaiting results	Going into the military	2013	Phone
	Renee	F	E	21	Not taken	Planning to attend graduate school	2013	Phone
	Sam	M	E	22	Passed	Planning to attend graduate school	2013	Phone
	Tara	F	E	21	Passed	Planning to attend graduate school	2013	Phone
FG 4	Ursula	F	B	21	Not taken	Graduate school	2013	Phone
	Valerie	F	B	22	Passed	Unknown	2013	Phone
	Wendy	F	B	21	Will not take	Hopes to attend physical therapy school	2013	Phone
	Wilson	M	B	22	Failed	Internship (Division I)	2013	Phone

Abbreviations: BOC, Board of Certification; F, female; FG, focus group; M, male.

3. Do ATSs perceive that balancing the responsibilities of being a parent are more challenging in the athletic training than in other professions?

METHODS

A qualitative research design[25] was chosen for this study because our purpose was to better understand, through the students' perspective, how their perceptions of WLB and career intentions were shaped by their interactions with classmates and preceptors. One-on-one focus group and individual interviews with senior ATSs in their final semester were conducted to allow participants to express their opinions related to their clinical experiences and how these interactions may impact their transition from ATS to working professional.

Participants

Recruitment was guided by data saturation. Both males and females were recruited, regardless of their postgraduation professional plans (enter profession or leave profession). The researchers' intent was to gain maximum variation in the sampling procedure to attain a holistic impression of ATS experiences while engaged in professional, educational training.[25] After securing institutional review board approval, we recruited undergraduate ATSs enrolled in their final semester of academic study from 5 Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education–accredited professional programs. After consent was obtained, a mutually convenient interview time was established.

A total of 23 ATSs (9 male, 14 female) who were enrolled in their final semester of their academic studies were interviewed. Their average age was 22 ± 0.6 years, and a majority (n = 13) had taken and passed the Board of Certification examination. The remaining participants were either awaiting examination results (n = 4), had failed (n = 1), or had not yet attempted or did not plan to take it (n = 4). Ten ATSs confirmed plans to attend graduate school, 4 were taking internship or residency positions, 4 were hoping to attend graduate school or obtain a physical therapy degree, 3 indicated plans to enter the field, 1 was going into the military, and 1 was undecided (Table 1).

Data Collection

Data collection occurred from 2 participant cohorts over a 2-year period. We used both in-person focus and telephone group and individual interviews to collect data, depending on geographical proximity of participants to the researchers. The 2 methods of collection allowed us to triangulate our findings during data analysis.[25] When a group of ATSs from the same

Table 2. Interview Guide

1. What are your immediate plans upon graduation (ie, graduate school, etc)?
2. What influenced your decision to study athletic training? Do you still find the same topics appealing in athletic training as you did originally? (eg, game-day rehab, research?)
3. Have your perceptions of the athletic training profession changed after completing your undergraduate education (or at any time during your education)? Did you discover new things that you didn't know about the profession? What do you enjoy/don't enjoy about the profession?
4. Looking back on the past 4 years in college, have you ever considered leaving athletic training? What reasons would make you want to change your major/profession?
5. Have you ever experienced burnout over your college career? Have you seen burnout in your clinical instructors/professors/classmates?
6. Have you ever found it difficult to manage classes, clinical hours, family/friends, hobbies, etc? Do you think balancing work and life could present a problem as you start your professional career?
7. Please reflect and discuss your past clinical rotations and instructors? Did your clinical instructors have children and families? Do you think maintaining a career in athletic training and a family could become difficult?
8. What are your postgraduation plans (graduate school/working/leaving athletic training)? Have they changed over the course of your education? If yes, what factors contributed to the change?
9. Reflecting back on your education and before entering college, do you feel you had an exact idea of what the athletic training profession involved (roles and responsibilities, etc)? (What was your original perception of this profession?)
10. Have you heard the term "work-life balance"? Please describe what this term means to you. Has it changed since you first entered your athletic training education?
11. As an athletic trainer, do you believe it would be more difficult to balance the responsibilities of being a parent than it would be in other professions? Please discuss your thoughts.
12. Do you feel your education and clinical experiences have prepared you enough to succeed as an athletic trainer? Do you feel you have gained enough insight on how to work as a full time athletic trainer balancing job and life responsibilities?
13. Looking back on your clinical rotations, which setting do you want to pursue your career in athletic training? Do you think certain settings provide better work-life balance?

athletic training program volunteered to participate, we grouped them together into small focus groups; this method yielded 4 such groups. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and was held in either a closed-door room at the ATSs' university (n = 2) or via telephone (n = 2). The focus group sessions were kept small to facilitate discussion among the group members and create an open environment in which they felt comfortable sharing their opinions and experiences. Grouping ATSs from the same athletic training program also potentially improved discussion and made the process less threatening because of the students' familiarity with one another.[26] Individual interviews were also conducted with several ATSs to help establish consistency with prior findings. Unlike the focus group sessions, however, one-on-one interview sessions lasted approximately 30 minutes and lacked interparticipant interactions that might have influenced responses. Two of these sessions were completed in person in a closed-door room at the ATS's university, and the remaining 4 were conducted via telephone.

Both individual ATSs and focus groups participants responded to the same set of questions (Table 2); using multiple modes of collection aided in methodological rigor. All interview sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by an outside transcription company. The interview sessions were semistructured in nature to both provide a consistent framework and be adaptable to allow for discourse among participants and between participants and researchers. Open-ended questions were crafted by the researchers to reflect the objectives of the study and were reflective of the existing WLB literature in athletic training,[7,27,28] as well as burnout[6] and socialization.[15,29] Before data collection, the interview guide

was pilot tested with 2 ATSs for clarity, and no changes were made.

Data Analysis and Credibility

Throughout the data analysis process, researchers wrote reflective memoranda regarding the data and codes to frame the emergent themes.[30] This strategy was helpful to contextualize the data and create connections between the research purpose and data, and was done during the coding process for all of the individual transcripts. A general inductive analysis, as described by Thomas,[30] was used to evaluate the data. This structured approach included several read-throughs of the transcripts, each with an intended purpose. The first included a holistic evaluation of the data with only notations recorded within the transcripts. An open coding procedure followed to identify generalities. The third read included the assigning of codes/categories to the data to reflect their meaning. On the fourth and final read, all similar codes/categories were grouped together and assigned a label. Themes were established by counting the frequency the topic/concept was discussed within the transcripts. The quantification process allowed us to provide context, frequency, and meaning to the data and key findings. Not all participants in each focus group answered every question.

The use of multiple data collection methods in concert can help compensate for their individual shortcomings and exploit their respective strengths. In our case, we capitalized on focus group and individual interviews. Triangulation is commonplace in qualitative methodology, and is helpful in establishing data credibility and trustworthiness.[31] Triangulation is also useful in confirming the findings yielded by data analysis. To

Table 3. Frequencies of Responses by Themes for Athletic Training Student Perceptions

Theme	No. (N = 23)	%
Students reported experiencing burnout	15	65
Witnessing burnout among preceptors	10	43
Challenges and work-life balance	12	57

this end, a peer review was conducted. The peer was a seasoned qualitative researcher with a strong background in concepts related to athletic trainer socialization and WLB. The peer provided feedback on the interview guide developed at the onset of data collection, the data collection procedures, and the analysis procedures used to evaluate the textual data.

RESULTS

Three major themes emerged from our analysis (Table 3): (1) *perceiving burnout;* (2) *recognizing burnout* in their preceptors and professors; and (3) that *work-life imbalance* may be a challenge in the future.

Perceived Burnout

The ATSs discussed experiencing burnout throughout their undergraduate education, and perceived that their overall educational training facilitated it. Analysis of their responses demonstrated the recurrence of key words such as "stressed out" and "overwhelmed." As one student, Brent, stated, "I've definitely had lulls where I was just like overwhelmed." Penelope added, "It was really stressful for me to have to figure out how to get everything done." Many ATSs indicated their busy schedules were the primary reason they experienced burnout. Kelly stated,

I would say I've definitely been burnt out. It's just hard—it's like almost too much of a good thing and it's hard to like continue that passion towards something if you're just being pulled in 50 different directions.

Catie had a similar experience during her undergraduate studies, saying, "It was always that last few weeks [of the semester], just like everything ends up being due on the same day like usual." When asked if he had experienced burnout, Don replied,

Oh yeah, definitely. I got very involved. And then we also try and be an athletic training student and you're working 20 to 25 hours per week on top of your class load and on top of clubs and activities and everything. And then on top of that trying to have a personal life, social life. So you can experience burnout pretty quick.

Summing up the collective experiences of his classmates, Sam said, "I think we all definitely experienced burnout sometime within our college careers."

During both the focus group sessions and the individual interviews, 5 of the 15 students who experienced burnout themselves reported perceiving burnout in their classmates as well. Faith gave the example of witnessing peer burnout: "Well like my classmates, at some point in time, I feel like we

all get to the point where we are just like I don't know what to do anymore." Lacey discussed her classmates, saying,

I saw it in some of my classmates who don't necessarily want to go on with athletic training. I feel like they're the ones who struggle a little bit more [be]cause they know this is not what they're going to be doing.

One student who did not feel he personally experienced burnout, Brent, did believe he observed burnout in his classmates. Brent said,

I never actually became burnt out where I needed to leave the program…but my peers…some people I've noticed have really not cared very much about doing anything that wasn't academic because they felt like they were burnt out with their clinical and with studying I guess.

Recognized Burnout in Professionals

Burnout was also perceived as occurring in the educational setting, where the ATSs reported they felt their preceptors and/or professors were experiencing burnout. Tara indicated, "I've definitely noticed it within my preceptor who I'm with now." Many ATSs who reported experiencing burnout themselves also indicated seeing it in either preceptors or professors. Discussions in focus group 2 focused on witnessing burnout in the clinical education setting. For example, Natasha reflected, "Yes, definitely [I have seen it], through a preceptor I've seen burnout." Owen echoed, "I've definitely seen it in my preceptors and classmates." Jeremy agreed with Owen, stating, "I've definitely seen it in my preceptors and classmates. In the preceptor role, I think my workload increased as they felt more frustrated with their position."

Other ATSs acknowledged that burnout in their preceptors could have an impact on their clinical education. Two ATSs in focus group 4 relayed similar experiences, where they perceived burnout of their preceptors led to them being treated differently. Holly stated,

I had one preceptor who was extremely busy with all of the other things that he was involved with outside of being a preceptor and I had to cover games and practices by myself with things that he trusted me to do.

Her classmate, Valerie, added, "In the burnout cases that I've seen with my preceptors, I feel like when they do burnout, their actions and the way that comes out is always lashed out on the student itself." Students from other focus groups were also sensitive to the changes in professionals from burnout. Penelope said she had seen burnout, "especially one of our professors, because she's very all over the place." Similar to Penelope, Heather, in focus group 1, stated,

I would say that any time there's like a big grant proposal or something like that coming up, then they tend to seem a little more busy—a little more burnt out than normal or if there's like outside—like family stuff going on at the time, then yeah.

Overall, ATSs perceived their preceptors and professors were experiencing burnout, and described how interactions with their professors and expectations of their preceptors changed dramatically because of what they perceived to be burnout.

This impacted the ATS both in the classroom and at the clinical site.

Projected Work-Life Imbalance

Students understood the paradigm of WLB, and throughout the interviews, it was apparent that they were aware of the difficulties an athletic trainer may face when finding and maintaining WLB. For example, 9 of the ATSs mentioned preceptors with families or children. Each of them, as well as others, indicated they understood there could be specific challenges for these athletic trainers to achieve WLB. Students also described positive strategies preceptors used to achieve WLB. This theme is further broken down into 2 subthemes: challenges and strategies.

Challenges in Achieving WLB. Athletic training students acknowledged that, based on observations of their preceptors at different clinical education experiences, having a family could be difficult for them in the future. They specifically identified work-hour expectations and scheduling as the primary conflicts to maintaining WLB. As Faith said, "I feel like being a parent, regardless of gender, or institution, it's just challenging because you dedicate so much time to your team and a lot of your schedule is based off of games." Don had a similar perception; he identified feeling as though scheduling could be a barrier to successful WLB when he said,

I believe that what is known as traditional, the 9 to 5 job where you can come home and watch the kids play and be involved with after-school activities and the more life aspect of work-life balance is severely affected because sports takes part in the afternoon time and that's when most of our job is.

Isaac, too, believed the demanding schedule would prove to be a challenge to WLB when he said,

We're pretty much at the demands of the coach and the team, like when their practice schedule is … it could be early in the morning or late at night. So we're pretty much at the hands of the teams.

Aaron discussed a specific preceptor by saying,

I know a single mother, who is an athletic trainer … she was working Division I and she left it to work at a high school thinking that she'd have more time to spend with her daughter and found out that she was wrong.

Such conflicts were echoed by Gail when she said, "I have definitely seen more often than not that the athletic trainers do not have families. They don't have the time to put into a relationship." Unfortunately, our participants' experiences demonstrate that they were exposed to the negative aspects of not having WLB and the impact it had on their athletic trainers.

Strategies to Achieve WLB. Though ATSs identified undesirable experiences, not all observations of WLB were negative, with many sharing a number of positive interactions. For example, Faith was in awe of her preceptor, stating,

I think she's like superwoman honestly. I don't know how she does it, especially because she's working track. She's juggling coaches, hundreds of athletes, her own kid, her own family, right. I think it's amazing what she does.

When describing these positive observations, the ATSs also elaborated on a number of strategies they saw their preceptors

use, such as setting priorities to help them address WLB challenges. Lacey mentioned,

One of the athletic trainers was very verbal about what she was going to do to. If she had to go bring her daughter somewhere, she was going to go do it. And that's part of her job. And she has a job as a mom and a job as an athletic trainer, and sometimes you had to choose.

Other ATSs provided specific examples of using a strategy that involved helpful coworkers, such as Faith in describing her preceptor, "Everybody really helps her out because she's always just so helpful to everybody else. So it's almost like them giving back to her." Gail described a similar situation with one of her preceptors by stating, "One of them is a Division 1 athletic trainer, but she has a system where she's worked out with a GA [graduate assistant]." Another successful strategy students observed their preceptors using was having the support of their spouses. The importance of helpful spouses was discussed by Melanie, who said,

My internship, there was someone who had a husband with kids and she … it was a little bit difficult trying to balance just because there was a lot of hours that needed to be put in. But they were able to balance it well.

Faith agreed, describing a similar situation: "They've worked out a method with their spouse as to how to handle having children and being able to stay in the profession."

Seeing successful application of a variety of strategies gave the ATSs hope for their own future and belief that achieving balance when working as professional athletic trainers is possible. Aaron felt confident that balance could be achieved; he stated, "Especially since I've seen it done, I know that it can be, so it'd be a little bit easier motivationally that way." Though identifying that it would be difficult, Catie agreed, saying, "And I think it's hard, but I still … you can see people doing it, so it's definitely possible." Lacey also had a positive outlook based on what she had seen from her preceptors, when she said,

And I think that kind of showed me that all of these different types of people made it in their profession with families and with obviously life … like normal life tasks that they had to get through with their children.

Overall, the ATSs understood WLB and its challenges and realized the importance of their clinical experience. As Lacey said, "I also think that internships are huge when it comes to developing yourself as an athletic trainer because the experience[s] you have outside of the classroom are almost incomparable." Students witnessed the experiences of preceptors and the difficulties that being an athletic trainer can pose to family life. However, they also saw preceptors develop and demonstrate positive strategies to be successful in both endeavors. Although the students identified WLB as a future challenge, they were optimistic in their ability to succeed in the field.

DISCUSSION

Professional socialization is a process necessary to allow future professionals the chance to obtain knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in their selected trade. This process in athletic training, which can be both formal and informal, is driven by the acquisition of clinical skills and developing

competence in decision making through mentorship in the clinical education setting.[11,32] Unfortunately, the values and beliefs that accompany a professional role are overlooked at times within these educational experiences. Young professionals may be vulnerable to stress and anxiety if they transition into their new credentialed role without a full understanding of their professional responsibilities.[33] Professional issues such as burnout and WLB not only are concerns for athletic training professionals,[34,35] but also are factors influencing ATSs to transfer to other professions or degree programs.[5,6] Knowing this, we wanted to investigate the impact the socialization process may have on ATSs developing an awareness of these issues. We also sought to determine if students perceived these issues to have an impact on their commitment to the profession. Our findings illustrated, like those of others before us, that WLB and burnout occur.[6,34,35] However, our sample's commitment to the profession was unique and not negatively influenced by their experiences or observation of professionals' struggles related to burnout and WLB.

Our findings that ATSs experience burnout were similar to those of other researchers,[19,20] as they perceive that high demands are placed upon them regarding academic standards, clinical hours, and normal college-student expectations. Similarly, Riter et al[19] discovered ATSs suffer burnout related to responsibilities associated with clinical education, and Mazerolle and Pagnotta[20] determined that role strain and time are 2 primary factors that lead to student burnout. Though we did not specifically measure burnout, this group of ATSs identified time and scheduling as the contributing factors in their perception of burnout experiences. Burnout and conflict between work and family have previously been found to occur in athletic trainers.[27] This group of students observed both of these phenomena in their preceptors, as well as their use of coping strategies, such as setting boundaries and priorities, accommodating coworkers, and supportive family, to achieve WLB. Such strategies are similar to those outlined by Mazerolle et al[27] as tactics used by Division I athletic trainers to attain WLB, and gave these students hope that WLB could be achieved.

Athletic training students described experiences they considered as burnout in themselves, as well as perceiving burnout in their classmates, preceptors, and professors. Additionally, ATSs understood WLB and knew it would be a challenge in the future. However, this did not influence this group of ATSs to consider leaving the field of athletic training. Interestingly, these experiences, which could have persuaded them to find an alternate career path as they had for others,[6] did not seem to concern our participants. It is possible that they have either a more optimistic outlook or a positive affective attitude, both of which could allow the student cope with stress more effectively. This is hypothetical, however, as, unlike in other fields,[36] there is currently no evidence in athletic training to support the relationship between personality traits and characteristics and professional commitment, burnout, or WLB. Another possible explanation for our findings is that, despite being exposed to the challenges associated with a career in athletic training, our sample has not yet realized their personal goals. Loosely using the life-space theory,[37,38] individuals assume different life roles that are often influenced by their current stage in life; thus, those roles often take precedence. Using this theory, career planning is most critical for our cohort, making obtaining employment in their intended field the priority. Simply put, the role that is more demanding or viewed as necessary takes priority, and at this stage, marriage, family, and personal interests are likely an afterthought. A final explanation could center on the premise that, despite seeing or experiencing burnout or life balance challenges, our participants were also able to see management strategies in action. This is supported by previous research that indicates that realistic, honest clinical education experiences can promote professional enthusiasm,[39,40] and that role modeling and mentoring can positively impact the ATSs' future outlook by allowing them to visualize their role.[3]

Faculty and preceptors play a critical role in student development when they model positive behaviors related to WLB.[6,11] This group of students indicated that the behaviors modeled gave them hope for the future and showed them specific coping strategies to use. Both preceptors and professors can further improve student socialization by describing workplace expectations and additional methods to enhance WLB.[11] Similarly, research suggests that mentors expose students to professional viewpoints and conduct by demonstrating both positive and negative aspects of the profession.[11,12,41] Although some of our students identified negative experiences, they did not indicate that those experiences would lead them to doubt their future or change their career goals. This seems to challenge Kahanov and Eberman's[4] theory that burnout and professional expectation misunderstandings are related to decreased numbers of practicing female athletic trainers at age 28. Similarly, Bowman and Dodge[3,14] found that athletic training graduates questioned entering the profession because of anxiety about finding WLB. Our findings do not concur; rather, the students in this study mirrored the findings of Mazerolle et al[42] and felt they had the tools to effectively balance their future professional and private lives like their preceptors had.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study is not without limitations, as we did not measure our participants' levels of burnout or WLB. Instead, our focus was to obtain an initial impression of student perceptions of these constructs as witnessed or experienced during clinical education. Therefore, future research should use both measures to triangulate our findings. We also recognize that we interviewed senior undergraduate students during their final semester before entering the workforce, and consequently cannot verify that their current perceptions of burnout, WLB, and professional commitment will be sustained and not influence future career planning. We also do not know if these perceptions are similar to those of professionally prepared master's students in their final semester. As the profession shifts from undergraduate programs to graduate professional degrees, this may be another important question to explore. In this study, we did not ask students why they selected athletic training or if they intended to use it as a stepping-stone to another profession after graduation, which may influence their perceptions of the profession. Future research could also further investigate the concept of role occupancy and career planning as it relates to age, life stage, resiliency, and personality. It is also possible that the clinical education setting (Division I, high school, clinic, etc) may affect ATSs' perceptions of burnout and WLB; thus, future studies might compare the impact of clinical education settings on these issues.

We used focus groups to collect a portion of the data, which could have influenced some ATSs to agree with the group's dominant opinion, rather than offer one of dissent. Although group participation was encouraged and the interviewer was a trained qualitative researcher, undetected group coercion could have occurred. To avoid having either of these events happen, we purposefully included ATSs from the same program in each focus group; however, without a previously established relationship with the participants, it was impossible for the interviewer to fully ascertain the groups' dynamics.

CONCLUSIONS

Upon graduating, ATSs have already experienced burnout, are aware of its presence in the profession, and acknowledge there could be some difficulty in raising a family while working as an athletic trainer. However, the successful WLB strategies they observed in their preceptors gave them hope. Though ATSs are cognizant of the challenges they may face, they do not see them as barriers to success or reason to alter their goals to continue in the athletic training profession. It is also important for all athletic training educators to realize that their impact on student socialization is significant. Because it is clear that students place value on and learn from their observations of the faculty and preceptors with whom they interact, program administrators should know their program's educators' levels of burnout and/or dissatisfaction with WLB and provide training on management strategies for each to ensure they are positively modeling this critical student socialization component.

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