Formal Mentoring in Athletic Training Higher Education: Perspectives from Participants of the National Athletic Trainers' Association Foundation Mentor Program

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Context: Formal mentoring programs can help to socialize new faculty members in higher education and orient them to faculty life. Organizations may implement formal mentoring programs to create connections between professionals, and formal mentoring is occurring in athletic training.

Objective: To explore the experiences of athletic training faculty as they participate in a formal mentoring program.

Design: Qualitative phenomenology.

Setting: Higher education institutions.

Patients or Other Participants: Ten members of the 2015 National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Foundation Mentor Program, 6 mentees and 4 mentors. *Mentees:* 2 male and 4 female with an average of 3 years (±4; range, 1–12) in their current position. *Mentors:* 2 male and 2 female with an average of 10 years (±3; range, 6–12) of experience in their current positions.

Main Outcome Measure(s): Participants completed 1 telephone interview prior to starting the NATA Mentor Program and completed 1 telephone interview upon completion of the mentor program. Participants also completed 3 online structured journals at 3-month increments while participating in the program. Two investigators independently analyzed data with a phenomenological approach, and a third investigator reviewed findings as a peer reviewer. Trustworthiness was addressed with member checking, piloting, and peer review of the interview guides, and multiple analyst triangulation.

Results: Mentors completed the program as a way to stimulate collaboration and give back to the athletic training profession. Mentees sought out the program as a means to gain support in their research endeavors and to stimulate networking opportunities.

Conclusions: The NATA Foundation Mentor Program offers a mutually beneficial experience for mentors and mentees, and participants were satisfied with their experiences. Mentee participants recognized the program gave them a chance to gain an external perspective and advance their research agendas, while mentors learned from their mentees and were able to use the program as a means to gain professional service.

Key Words: Professional development, socialization, role transition

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KEY POINTS

- Formal mentor programs provide the mentee with the ability to gain the valuable perspective of a mentor external to their employing institution.
- Mentors can utilize formal mentor programs for their own continued faculty development as well as for professional service engagement.
- The National Athletic Trainers' Association Foundation Mentor Program could take a more active role in facilitating and encouraging ongoing communication between the mentor and mentee to enhance the relationship and ensure positive outcomes for the participants.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is an inherent aspect of a faculty member's role in higher education, not only to the students they advise and teach, but also among their peers.[1] Many definitions exist regarding mentoring within higher education, but the realities of the relationship are fundamental whereby a more experienced faculty member, a mentor, engages in a modeling, supportive, and developmental relationship with a less experienced faculty member, the mentee.[2–4] Development, transformation, and guidance are the main aspects of the relationship, and for the faculty member, it can serve as the bridge from professional to organizational socialization.[1]

Formal mentor programs can serve as an important way to help socialize new faculty members into higher education, as well as help them avoid the sink-or-swim mentality of orienting into faculty life.[5] Formal mentor programs are most often offered by the faculty member's institution, whereby junior faculty who have less than 3 years of service to the college are paired with a senior level faculty member with the purpose to retain the faculty member (through satisfaction in the workplace) and support their development as a junior faculty member (guidance, advice, role modeling).[5] Often the focus of the relationship and intended outcome of the program is to help the junior faculty member cultivate time management skills, develop a strategy in regards to priorities in task completion, help them understand the institutional policies and expectations regarding tenure and/or promotion, and eventually acclimate and transition into the climate of the institution.[6,7]

As formalized by Kram[8] and others,[3,9] the mentor relationship is intentional in the attempt to provide career (ie, networking, teaching, feedback) and personal (ie, role modeling, attitudes, behaviors) support. Formal mentoring programs are often an approach used by organizations to cultivate connections between professionals who may not always have the chance to be connected and collaborate, in an effort to provide support and widen the base of knowledge among individuals with similar roles and responsibilities.[10,11] Academic mentoring has emerged as a necessary component of role transition and inductance for nursing, physical therapy, and athletic training faculty members as they often are experts in the clinical aspects of practice, but may lack experiences directly related to academia.[6,7,12] Formal mentoring can assist mentees in the acclimation process, particularly when mentors are knowledgeable about institutional policy, expectations of tenure, and the culture and climate within the organization; these benefits have precipitated some institutions to adopt the use of formal mentoring for their faculty.[6,7,13]

Nick et al[7] reported that formal mentoring could help integrate nursing faculty into the academic community as well as develop their teaching and research skills. Other disciplines such as pharmacy and physical therapy acknowledge the direct benefits for formal mentorship.[6,12] Although formal mentoring programs are purposeful and designed to link individuals together, their intended purpose is not to replace the organically occurring development of professional and personal rapport between the mentor and mentee. In fact, it is suggested that formal mentoring programs can provide the springboard for the development of successful, informal relationships between faculty members.[10]

Formal mentorship programs described in the literature are often directed by the individual faculty's institution, and very rarely are there formal mentoring programs outside of the institution.[2,11–14] For example, the Education Section of the American Physical Therapy Association Conference is committed to excellence in education by offering support to educators. The format, however, is professional development based and not designed to be ongoing. This in some ways can compare to the Athletic Trainers Educators' Conference, which is designed to provide a formal format to support continued professional development, but in a singular moment. Beyond faculty development-based mentorship within conferences and workshops, we are not aware of other formal programs that are designed to pair individuals with similar research interests and/or needs as a faculty member external to their current place of employment.[11–14] We are aware that mentoring is occurring formally and informally among athletic training faculty,[13,14] but most of the literature has examined it from an informal lens. The purpose of our study was to explore the experiences of athletic training faculty members as they participate in a formal mentoring program offered by the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Foundation. Formal mentoring may offer different benefits or experiences, as compared to organically occurring mentoring, especially since it requires commitment and willingness to participate.[15] Our study was specifically guided by the following research questions: (1) What factors are involved in motivating a faculty member to participate in a formal mentoring relationship? and (2) What aspects of the formal mentoring program were important to the faculty member? These research questions were examined as a portion

of a larger study investigating the 2015 NATA Foundation Mentor Program.[13,14]

METHODS

Research Design

Our study followed a longitudinal phenomenological design,[16] whereby we examined the experiences of athletic training faulty engaged in a formal research-mentoring program sponsored by the NATA. The theoretical framework of a descriptive phenomenological paradigm allowed us to collect data regarding the development of a mentor relationship during the course of a formal mentor program, as experienced by the mentors and mentees. The longitudinal aspect of the study design was purposeful, as it allowed tracking of mentoring relationship though its duration; the NATA program is conducted over a 1-year period.

The Mentor Program Structure

The NATA Foundation Mentor Program is a 1-year formal mentoring program that offers young investigators the chance to gain mentorship from a mentor (an experienced investigator) on areas of research projects, grant writing, and manuscript development. The mentor is an athletic training researcher who is paired with the mentee based upon research interests and identified areas of expertise. The partnership is geared toward developing the young investigator in the research realm of higher education and also gives the experienced researcher the chance to guide and counsel their mentee. The first cohort was accepted in 2012, and the program has continued to run each year since.

Interested young investigators apply to the NATA Foundation, providing a current curriculum vitae and application form during the spring prior to the start of the program. A NATA Foundation representative reviews applications and then pairs the young investigator with an experienced researcher. The experienced researcher, at the current time, is not required to apply to the program, but rather is recruited for participation by the NATA Foundation. The program begins at the NATA Annual Meeting and Clinical Symposia, when the participants attend a kick-off luncheon as a means to formally begin the program, and then it concludes in early May when the academic year ends.

Participants Recruitment and Sample

Our sampling was purposeful[16] and based upon recruiting athletic training faculty members who were participating in the NATA Foundation Mentor Program in 1 of 2 roles. To participate in the program, a young investigator (mentee) must meet the following criteria: (1) completed doctoral training, (2) working in a research capacity, (3) an academic rank no higher than assistant professor, (4) has first authorship on a research publication, (5) commitment to the NATA Foundation Mentor Program, and (6) current NATA member and Board of Certification certified athletic trainer (AT) in good standing. Criteria for an experienced researcher (mentor) included: (1) completed doctoral training, (2) working in a research capacity and faculty role, (3) academic rank at associate or full professor, (4) current member of the NATA, (5) commitment to complete the NATA Foundation

Mentor program, and (6) current NATA member and Board of Certification certified AT in good standing.

Ten of 12 members of the 2015 NATA Foundation mentor cohort completed our study, 6 mentees and 4 mentors (Table 1). Of the mentee group, 2 were male and 4 were female. The mentees were all in tenure-track faculty lines and had an average of 3 years (±4; range, 1–12) in their current position. All mentees had graduated from their doctoral preparation programs within the last 4 years. Of the mentor group, 2 were male and 2 were female. All mentors were tenured faculty members with an average of 10 years (±3; range, 6–12) of experience in their current positions. All participants held PhDs.

Data Collection Procedures

Once institutional review board approval was obtained, we were able to recruit our participants from the 2015 NATA Foundation mentor cohort. Prior to their consent and agreement to participate, we explained the longitudinal nature of the study, which included 2 phone interviews and 3 journal entries that were conducted at 3-month intervals (Figure 1).

Instrumentation. We developed 2 semistructured interview guides (Tables 2 and 3), based upon the purpose of the study[17] as well as the timing of the interview (*initial, final*) and the participant's role in the program (*mentor, mentee*). The founding principle of a phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of the individual without influencing them; thus, questions were derived to be open ended and unbiased.[16] Developing interview guides that allow for a broad understanding of the phenomenon allowed us to bracket our biases and personal experiences in an attempt to improve the credibility of our findings.[16] In addition to the interview guides, we also developed a series of structured questions the participants responded to at 3-month intervals (Table 4) during the 11-month program. Prior to data collection, 3 experts in qualitative research completed a peer review of the interview guides and journal questions to help improve credibility and trustworthiness. Minor edits and formatting issues were addressed during this process.

Procedures. All participants completed a 1-on-1 semistructured phone interview at 2 time points (early June, prior to engagement in the program, and mid-May, upon completion of the program). The initial and final interviews lasted 45 minutes and, for consistency purposes, were conducted by the same researcher. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participants were asked to complete a member check upon completion of the final interview. The initial interview was done prior to the start of the formal aspect of the program after pairing of the mentor and mentee had been complete. The final interview was done at the completion of the program. Our selections of time points for the interview was planned, as we wanted to first gain preliminary reflections and expectations about the program (Table 2) and then to follow up and discover their personal evaluations of the program (Table 3). We also had participants respond to a series of questions in a journal entry format (Table 4) designed to assess their experiences throughout their mentoring relationship. The journal prompts were sent via e-mail every 3-months, and responses were stored on Qualtrics (Provo, UT). All of our participants completed all phases of the study.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Sex	Current Position	Years in Current Position	Carnegie Level of Employment Position
Mentee				
Reggie	M	Assistant professor	3	Master's colleges & universities: small programs
Arnold	M	Assistant professor	1	Doctoral universities: higher research activity
Danica	F	Assistant professor	1	Doctoral universities: higher research activity
Rachel	F	Assistant professor	1	Doctoral universities: higher research activity
Adrienne	F	Program director	12	Baccalaureate colleges: diverse fields
Amanda	F	Visiting assistant professor	1	Doctoral universities: highest research activity
Mentor				
Emily	F	Associate professor, clinical coordinator	6	Doctoral universities: highest research activity
Daniel	M	Associate professor	11	Master's colleges & universities: medium programs
Greg	M	Associate dean	12	Doctoral universities: higher research activity
Erica	F	Professor	11	Special focus four-year: medical schools & centers

Abbreviations: F, female; M, male.

Analysis

Prior to beginning the data analysis process, S.L.N. and S.M.M. established the procedures to be followed when coding the data. Each researcher coded the data independently, prior to sharing their findings and analyses. Our initial analysis began with a general assessment of the raw data and the experiences and reflections of our participants. This included an examination of the initial and final interviews, along with the journal prompt responses collected during the year. The initial evaluation of the data was purposeful and meant to identify relevant and key themes.[16,18] On subsequent evaluations of the data, we began to label key phrases and experiences. Those were then clustered together by commonalities and likeness that developed into categories. Then we extracted phrases and key sentences that shaped our labels and categories. Any data that did not fit or appeared to be irrelevant were removed and not included in the final presentation of the data.
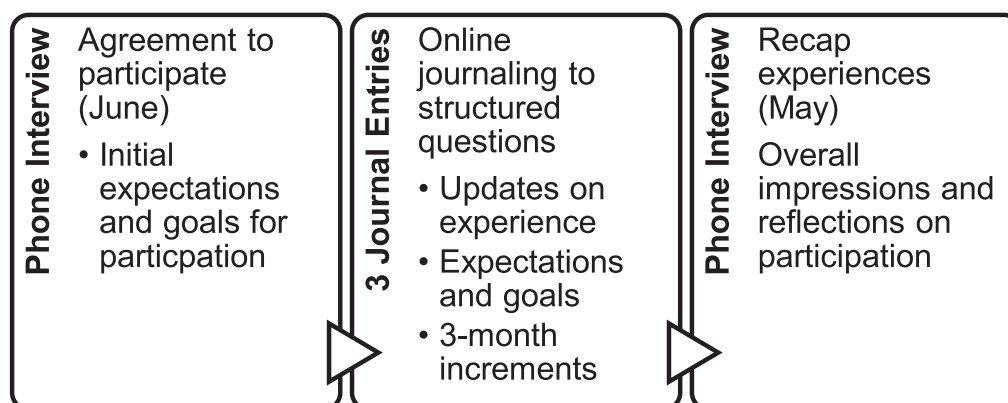
Credibility

Prior to analysis, we had each participant review their final transcribed interview for accuracy and clarity. We asked them to ensure that the transcription process captured their experiences and the information they conveyed in the interview session. The member check[16] was completed by 3 of our participants, whereby they responded and provided updated transcripts. We felt this was an important step to complete prior to analysis, as it allowed for us to ensure authenticity of the raw data.[16] Our second strategy for credibility included research triangulation, whereby S.L.N. and S.M.M. coded the data independently following the steps previously described. We discussed the coding strategies prior to completing the process and then, upon completion, shared our findings. We exchanged coded transcripts and summaries of the findings with the raw data and then discussed our overall impressions of the key results. Once the results were finalized through the researcher triangulation process, we presented our summary to a peer reviewer. We selected our peer based upon their knowledge of qualitative analyses, experiences as a researcher, and understanding of the mentorship process in higher education. Our peer was able to affirm our findings.

RESULTS

Our analyses revealed that mentors and mentees participated in the NATA Foundation Mentor Program for 2 reasons (Figure 2). Factors were evaluated as not necessarily interconnected but relatable to the role examined (ie, mentor versus mentee). We also uncovered strengths and areas of improvement (Figure 3) within the formal mentoring program, as experienced by our participants. We present our findings next with data from our interviews and journals.

Figure 1. Stages of data collection.

Phone Interview — Agreement to participate (June)
• Initial expectations and goals for participation

3 Journal Entries — Online journaling to structured questions
• Updates on experience
• Expectations and goals
• 3-month increments

Phone Interview — Recap experiences (May)
Overall impressions and reflections on participation

Table 2. Initial Interview Guides

Initial interview—mentees

1. Can you summarize your doctoral training program?
   a. Degree type, coursework, dissertation topic? Doctoral advisor? Assistantship?
   b. How many years out of your doctoral program are you?
2. Can you describe your current faculty position?
   a. Research expectations, teaching load, tenure-track process?
3. How many years have you been in this position?
4. Can you describe your level of comfort/confidence with fulfilling job expectations?
   a. Describe your level of preparedness for your current position?
   b. Specific to your promotion/tenure reappointment?
5. How did you learn about the foundation research mentor program?
6. What were initial attractors to becoming a part of the research mentor program?
7. What are your goals and expectations of being part of this program?
   a. What do you hope to gain from your participation?
   b. Has this changed now that you know who your mentor is?
8. Do you currently have a mentor? If so, please describe that person.
   a. How did that mentoring relationship develop?
   b. Is this mentor your doctoral advisor? Someone at current location?
      i. If doctoral mentor, how do you envision this relationship continuing (if recently graduated), or how has this relationship continued (if >1 year graduated)?

Initial interview—mentors

1. Can you describe your current faculty position?
   a. Research expectations, teaching load, tenure process
2. How many years have you been in this position?
3. Did you know about the foundation research mentor program prior to being asked?
4. What attracted you to becoming a part of this program once you had been asked?
5. What qualities do you believe are necessary to be an effective/good mentor?
6. What expectations do you have of your mentee?
7. Can you describe your previous or current experience with mentoring?
   a. How have those relationships developed?
   b. Please describe your previous and/or current mentees (general number and description).
8. What are your goals and expectations of being part of this program?
   a. What do you hope to gain from your participation?
   b. Has this changed now that you know who your mentee is?
9. Have you had any formal training in mentoring? If so, describe.
10. Do you feel prepared to mentor a promising faculty member? Explain.
11. Can you describe your level of comfort/confidence with starting mentoring role?

Participation in the Program

Mentors: Collaboration. Our participants perceived mentoring relationships to be mutually beneficial, a primary reason they accepted a role within the program. Erica, in her final interview, reflected on her participation in the program: "I also think that it's great to be in the program because, if you get a relationship with the one that I did with my mentee, it was valuable to me, too, because I learned from her as well." Throughout the study, many of our participants discussed their satisfaction with the mentor program, as they viewed it as mutually beneficial and collaborative. Comments included: "learn from one another," "helped each other," and "mentor and mentee can grow professionally." Our participants believed involvement benefited them by collaborating on research ventures (mentoring increases productivity) and learning new and different ways to approach things. Greg, in his final interview, shared his thoughts on his experiences over the year saying:

> It's a great experience on both sides, mentor, mentee. I think it's a great thing for the NATA as well because, you know, this is in most situations, I think both the mentor and mentee

are going to grow professionally, which is going to help to freshen academic training as well. So, yeah, absolutely, I would recommend it.

It was unmistakable that Daniel was very content with his experiences as part of the mentor program. During his journal entries, he reflected on the success they were having as a mentoring pair. An early journal entry illustrates collaboration: "it is going quite well. We've both helped each other out with different projects." In a later entry, Daniel reflected: "[W]e have similar interests and her background has been very helpful."

Mentors: Professional Service. Our mentors also discussed wanting to "give back to the profession" or "pay it forward" due to previous mentoring they received as young faculty members. Daniel's motivation to participate in the program was based upon the chance to give back to the profession and support a young faculty member. Daniel shared in his first interview:

> Hopefully, I could be somewhat helpful to the junior faculty member who I will be placed with. Hopefully, there is something that I could help that person with, and you know, I

Table 3. Final Interview Guides

Final interview—mentees

1. Reflect upon your experiences participating in the mentor program this year.
2. Summarize your interactions with your mentor over the year.
   a. Quantity and quality of interactions?
3. Do you believe your mentor had an impact on your professional development? Describe.
4. Do you believe your mentor had an impact on your transition into higher education?
   a. Can you describe your response?
5. Did you face challenges working with your mentor? If so, please describe.
   a. How did you handle them?
6. Were your expectations for this program met? Why or why not?
7. Looking back if you could change anything about your mentoring relationship what would it be and why?
8. Do you believe your mentoring relationship will continue after this year?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. If this relationship isn't continuing, can you explain why?
   c. Do you plan to pursue other mentor(s)?
9. Can you reflect on the initial guidelines given and the ongoing support the foundation provided?
   a. Did these adequately support the development of your mentor relationship?
10. Do you believe the NATA Foundation was involved enough to help you successfully develop your mentoring relationship?
    a. Why or why not?
11. What is your level of satisfaction with this program?
12. Would you recommend this program to colleagues? Why or why not?
13. Do you see yourself becoming a mentor in the future?
    a. In general?
    b. Specific to this research mentor program?
14. Did your participation in the mentor program influence your teaching? Describe.
    a. Your research and scholarship? Describe.
    b. Your ability to perform administrative tasks? Describe.
    c. Your service to the profession? Describe.

Final interview—mentors

1. Reflect upon your experiences participating in the mentor program this year.
2. Summarize your interactions with your mentee over the year.
   a. Quantity and quality of interactions?
3. Did you learn anything from the experience of participating in this program? If so, what?
4. What strategies have you utilized to navigate your relationship with your mentor?
5. Do you believe that your interactions with your mentee helped them succeed in his/her current role?
   a. Did this extend beyond the research aspect of their job?
6. Did you face any challenges working with your mentee?
   a. How did you overcome them?
7. Looking back if you could change anything about your mentoring relationship what would it be and why?
8. Do you believe your mentoring relationship will continue after this year?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. If this relationship isn't continuing can you explain why?
9. Can you reflect on the initial guidelines given and the ongoing support the foundation provided?
   a. Did these adequately support the development of your mentor relationship?
10. Do you believe the NATA Foundation was involved enough to help you successfully develop your mentoring relationship?
    a. Why or why not?
11. What is your level of satisfaction with this program?
12. Would you recommend this program to colleagues? Why or why not?
13. Do you see yourself continuing to be a mentor in the future?
    a. In general?
    b. Specific to this research mentor program?
14. Do you envision applying your experiences here to your other mentees/doctoral students (if applicable)?

Abbreviation: NATA, National Athletic Trainers' Association.

think that it is good anytime you can give back to the profession in any way*.

Much like Daniel's motivation, Erica also agreed that she participated in the program due to the desire to engage in a professional service activity that supported a young professional. Erica stated the factors linked to her involvement in the program centered on: "It's always good to give back." She continued explaining in greater detail:

Table 4.   Guided Journal Reflections

1. Can you describe your overall level of satisfaction with your mentoring relationship at this stage?
2. What characteristics do you value in your mentor/mentee?
3. Can you summarize your interactions with your mentor/mentee since you began the program?
4. How frequently and in what way do you interact?
5. Can you discuss what is going well and what areas may need to be improved?
6. Can you describe where you are in the process of meeting your goals of the mentor relationship?
7. What (if any) roadblocks have you faced in achieving your goals and how have you/do you plan to overcome them?

It was my primary reason for engaging in this particular one [role]. It was a chance to give back, plus, with the mentee [I was assigned], I thought it would be a good pair. I think that's valuable. So I would recommend it, and in the sense of being able to give back.

Our participants also discussed engaging in the program because they enjoyed mentoring, which was due to the mentorship they had previously received and the relationships that often are cultivated as a result. Emily had reflected early in the study on the impact her past mentors had, and so when given the chance to serve in the role wanted to pay it forward and continue to be a part of a mentoring relationship. In her first interview, Emily shared:

I definitely highly value all the mentors that I've had in my career, so which is a part of the reason I wanted to participate in it as a mentee several years ago, just looking to, you know, build networks, and then now to provide this and provide insight into different types of faculty positions, different research opportunities for current young investigators.

Greg said:

I love being a mentor. I loved it when I was a faculty member, and as an administrator, that's-that's my number 1 responsibility is mentoring younger faculty, and you know, when you're a faculty to achieve whatever it is they want to achieve, so to be able to give them the resources and the knowledge they need to do what they want to do. So I love that aspect of it, and I know [mentee name], so when I was asked to be a mentor for [mentee name], it was kind of a win-win situation.

His reflections illustrate recognition on his part of the importance of mentoring as well as his willingness to engage in an activity that allows him to support the growth of a young faculty member.

Mentees: Networking. Participation for our mentees was strongly connected to the desire to gain a professional connection to someone outside of their current institutions, and someone who was well connected and established within the athletic training community. Arnold's comments on his initial attraction to the program highlight this finding, as he said: "[T]he idea of branching out further and getting another researcher's opinion or another set of eyes on things, to communicate with, that is why I saw this opportunity as something good." Reggie's reasons, much like Arnold's, were founded on the desire to develop a professional connection to a renowned faculty member. He said: "[T]he ability to develop a relationship with someone who is fairly well established in the field and being able to use them as a mentor was definitely helpful." Reggie, in his final interview, reflected: "I think it was a generally good experience. . . It was nice to know I have someone to share and bounce ideas off of." Danica discussed the importance of the connection to the field of athletic training during her interviews. She acknowledged having an institutional mentor that was critical for organizational success, but also the need to have "an athletic training connection and the content expertise" to thrive as a faculty member as well.

Extending beyond their network was also part of the motivation to participate in the program. That is, our participants wanted to gain perspectives of other athletic training scholars and faculty members in the field. Arnold stated that he continued to maintain a relationship with his former doctoral mentor, but also recognized that adding mentors to his support team would benefit his professional growth and pursuits. He shared:

I definitely think my mentor has definitely helped me through this year, and I will continue to seek that out. By adding mentors, [it] wouldn't necessarily [coincide] with the idea of

Figure 2.   Motivation factors for participation in the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Foundation Mentor Program.
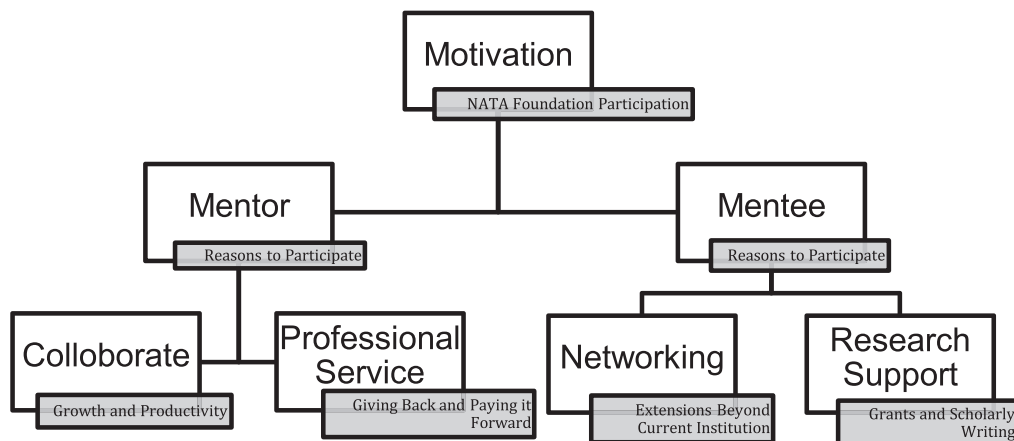
Figure 3. Reflections on the mentoring experience.
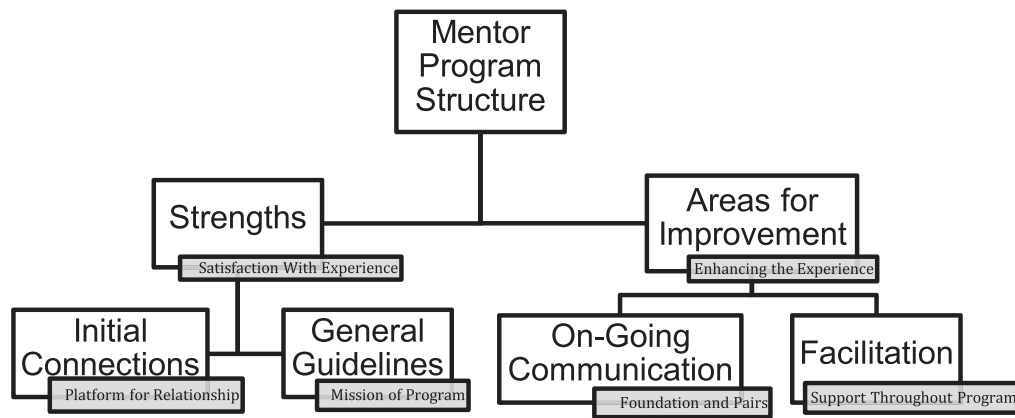
replacing a previous mentor. It would be more or less kind of continuing to start to build a network from either different research interests or just different philosophies or different points in our careers.

Rachel discussed the importance of "getting a different perspective on things and a different outlook" that was beyond that of her doctoral experiences. Her rationale was based upon "wanting to differentiate myself from my PhD mentor and not relying on him for every question that I have."

Mentees: Research Support. Our participants also directly linked their desires to gain more support as researchers as their motivators to participate. Our mentees discussed wanting guidance in scholarly writing, building a research line, and general support in continuing their research agendas. Adrienne, during her first interview, said:

I'm hoping to gain lots of publications from it and then, like I said, just learning more of the ins and outs about research and publications. I have some aspirations to do some grant writing and things, too, so just learning some of those facets, and then if they don't know, then maybe connecting me with someone that does know more about that kind of thing.

Reggie, like Adrienne, wanted a mentor to support his research agenda. In discussing his initial attraction to the mentor program, he shared:

I think grant training is probably the biggest one, and I was just hoping that might be someone who is at a smaller university that has ideas on how to be successful at a smaller university, especially with the whole research aspect.

Other participants discussed getting feedback on manuscripts in development, brainstorming new research ideas, as well as guidance on how to manage current grants. The focus for our mentees was gaining the continued support as they ventured into the researcher's role independently for the first time. Amanda shared her reasons for participating:

So I was really looking for an additional mentor to try and work with me with [my area] and being assigned someone that really could help me with that. So that really attracted me to it. Just having another person to talk about kind of the process of, you know, being a junior faculty member kind of, you know, being able to talk with them about that, a possibility of collaboration with them, maybe on a project especially with similar research interests.

Experiences in Mentor Program

Strengths of the Program: Initial Connections and Overview of the Guidelines. The NATA Foundation Mentor Program begins during a luncheon hosted by the foundation during the NATA's Annual Meeting and Clinical Symposia. Our participants acknowledged that this served as the platform for developing a relationship with their mentor/mentee. Amanda, a mentee, and Greg, a mentor, both recognized the luncheon as the start of the relationship. Amanda shared: "At the research luncheon at NATA, we were able to talk in person and come up with a plan for the year." Greg, too, said: "[W]e met during the-the lunch for this mentor/mentee program. We mapped out some plans, some ideas, some things we wanted to work on." Both articulated the formal luncheon as their start to the relationship, and the chance to meet their mentor/mentee and plan for the experience. The participants spoke of the value they gained from the chance to meet their mentor/mentee in person and discuss their expectations and goals for the year. Greg shared his appreciation for the luncheon during his final interview:

I thought the-the luncheon we had at the annual meeting was great because it gave me a chance to sit down with my mentee, and really honestly, that was the first time I had, I had physically met her. So it was great to actually sit down with her and-and talk about what she wanted to accomplish with the relationship and get to know her a little bit better. So I-I thought that was a, I thought that was a great resource that NATA provided for us.

Emily believed the luncheon was an important part of the development of the relationship; it helped facilitate the direction of the relationship. She shared in her final interview:

I think [the luncheon] is creating sort of the opportunity to have that initial meeting, which definitely helped to facilitate and create an opportunity to meet and briefly chat. I think, in the future, I think if there's any way to like just to have that sort of like lunch or whatever opportunity happen every year, even to continue these relationships.

The luncheon was the formal platform for the development of the mentoring relationship, as it provided a chance for direct communication between the pair, as they did not have a previous relationship. The luncheon was mentioned as important for providing some basic information on mentoring. Amanda discussed that she was clear on the overall

guidelines of the program, which she learned during her attendance at the luncheon. She shared:

I think they were clear. You know, they suggested outlining what our goals are for the year, and I don't think we met every single one of them, but we met a lot of them. I think that having suggestions that were given in the guidelines on, you know, how to have a [meaningful] relationship were clear.

Arnold also believed that, by attending the luncheon, he was able to gain a basic understanding of the direction of the program and what needed to be done. Arnold reflected in his final interview:

From what I remember, they gave some general statements on what they perceived this mentoring looking like and some ideas of how to form some goals to potentially set and some ideas of trying to… I remember from the luncheon of trying to set up meetings throughout the, you know, the year and predetermining those, and you know, more or less, I felt that there was support there.

During the luncheon, the communication by the program facilitators helped provide some direction for our participants. The direction was rudimentary as summarized by our participants and appeared to be focused on "the need to develop a direction, a plan, and something to work towards as a pair."

Areas of Improvement: Ongoing Communication and Facilitation. Many of the participants acknowledged that, despite the program being formal, in terms of pairing the mentees with mentors, there was little structure beyond the initial meeting at the June luncheon. Many participants suggested more ongoing communication was needed from the NATA Foundation. Several suggestions included: "reminders to touch base with your mentor/mentee," "suggestions for dialogue between mentors and mentees," and "an overall check-in process to make sure things are going well and that meetings are happening." Rachel shared: "I think communication throughout the year, throughout the program would be really helpful." Her recommendations included: "just send an e-mail out to the mentees and say, 'Make sure you are checking in with your mentor. Here are some questions you can ask them.'" Rachel's comments reflected that an e-mail would help the mentee understand how to navigate the mentoring relationship, as well as "navigate being overwhelmed." Much like Rachel's comments, many of the mentees wanted support through active communication from the program, simply as a way to better facilitate the relationship and be successful. Danica, during a journaling response and her final interview, shared her desire for more communication from the NATA Foundation. She first wrote: "The only roadblock would be a lack of clear direction." Her solution:

I have overcome this by calling/e-mailing my mentor when I have questions instead of letting the leadership direct that. I think that this process could have been more valuable with periodic check-ins with the leadership.

Danica also, during her final interview, articulated that the program, although formal in theory, was more organic, as once the pairing was complete, it was the initiative of the mentor/mentee to facilitate the relationship. She told us:

I felt like, with the program, it was really left for him and I to make it what we wanted, which, I think, was great at times,

but maybe if there had been a little more guidance of, you know, here are some topics that we could discuss, or maybe him initiating some conversations could have been helpful.

Ongoing communication emerged as 1 area for improvement, along with helping the pair cultivate the relationship. Participants shared having some facilitation by the program on common topics to cover, possible questions that could be discussed between the pairs, or other guiding elements could have helped the pair navigate their relationship and meet the goals first discussed at the luncheon. When asked about the role the foundation played in the facilitation of the program, Adrienne reflected that she wanted a bit more from them. She shared in her final interview: "I think it needs to be [facilitated] by the people [Foundation administration] that want to do it so if you're not willing to put in the effort then you're going to get out of if what you put into it." Rachel's thoughts on the program reflect the need for more communication that can stimulate discourse between the mentor and mentee, as well as serve as a reminder to the mentee to be proactive in reaching out. She shared in her final interview:

I think communication throughout the year, throughout the program, would be really helpful, just e-mailed out to the mentees and say, you know, to make sure you're checking with your mentor or, you know, just like here's a few things that you can ask your mentor, some e-mail that you can just look at and kind of remind you about it because I think, especially in my situations when I was overwhelmed, it wasn't the first thing that I thought of, and it probably would have been a really good resource.

Erica told us during her final interview that she thought the NATA Foundation organizers could have been more active during the program. She shared:

I think [the Foundation facilitators] could be involved more. I don't know what their actual purpose or goal is in the end. I mean, I know from when I did it before, it was supposed to be like this matched pair kind of like, you connect somebody up, and it's like an introduction. Then you click on contact, and either it works out, or it doesn't. So I don't know what the whole outcome of the program is. So depending on what that outcome is, I guess there could be potentially more communication.

Erica's reflections indicate a need for more formal communication about the goals of the program, but also a concentrated effort in directing the mentoring pairs throughout the program.

DISCUSSION

Formal mentoring programs are planned, structured interventions designed to support and develop an individual as they traverse a new role within an organization or profession.[10,11,19] Most formal mentor programs are housed within the human resource department at the institution or organization in question[2,19]; however, the NATA Foundation Mentor Program offers a unique experience that supports mentoring from a professional standpoint. It is an investment in the growth and development of promising young investigators and gives experienced faculty members in athletic training a chance to gain rejuvenation within their professional role (NATA mentor). Our findings help us better understand what reasons athletic training faculty participate in formal mentoring programs outside of their own institu-

tions, as well as what aspects of a formal mentor program were viewed as helpful and positive, as well as areas for improvement.

Motivation to Participate

It is well established that mentoring relationships are important socializing agents for any role, as they provide a benchmark to which one can to aspire to achieve[20,21] as well as appreciate what is considered appropriate and acceptable behavior within that role.[22–24] Mentoring is a positive aspect of the socialization process, and often those engaged in the relationship report its impact, as it allows for an exchange of ideas, which leads to collaboration, feedback, and growth. Our mentor participants were motivated to engage in the program, as they felt it was an opportunity to collaborate as well as give back to the profession, by supporting the growth of an aspiring researcher. Dr. Phillips-Jones, a psychologist and mentoring consultant,[25] suggests that, despite the time challenges associated with being a mentor, it serves an important professional role to cultivate learning as well as a chance to reciprocate and give back to the profession. The collaborations that were discussed by our participants is at the core of a mentoring relationship, and mentors who engage in the mentoring process often reflect on their own research and are able to find a renewed sense of commitment to their research agendas.[26]

The benefits to the mentoring relationship are often described as impacting the mentee; however, there is growing evidence that mentors are positively impacted as well through career development, rejuvenation, and career satisfaction.[11,14] Our findings therefore suggest that those who engage in mentoring are aware of the positive outcomes. Our mentees, who had to actively pursue the NATA Foundation Mentor Program, did so because they recognized the importance of gaining external support through professional discourse and gaining feedback. These findings are supported by a review of literature[27] among mentoring programs in higher education, which describes the importance of having a knowledgeable individual who can provide feedback through both positive reinforcement and constructive criticism.[28] Moreover, advocates and supporters of faculty mentoring suggest that new faculty should seek more than 1 mentor,[1] as it brings diversity and depth in perspective,[29,30] yet being acutely aware of the time barriers that exist with mentoring. We found that our participants recognized that their participation directly supported their needs for more assistance in the research functions of a faculty member, which seems obvious, as this aligns with the program's mission, as well as the literature's suggestion that mentees seek support in career function aspects of the faculty roles.[31]

The formation of the NATA Foundation Mentor Program was purposeful, creating a support mechanism for promising researchers who wanted and needed guidance with their research endeavors and the development of a strong, successful research agenda. Anecdotally, our participants were generally satisfied with the program, but continued efforts need to occur to document the accomplishments of the pairs. Collecting this information can help demonstrate the program's value and help stimulate the interest of future mentees and mentors. The NATA Foundation should continue to support the program, especially by communicat-

ing its purpose. One recent initiative that may help grow the program and provide ongoing support is the inclusion of the NATA fellows. In 2015, the NATA Foundation invited members of the fellows' cohorts to participate in the luncheon, a means to engage and connect successful researchers with those identified as young investigators.

Mentor Program Structure

Mentoring, regardless of the type (formal versus informal), is bound by 1 simple premise, an intentional activity that involves a mentor who actively and consciously nurtures the development of a mentee.[32] Formal mentorship is intended to provide structure for a mentee, whereby the mentoring is planned as a means to help the mentee acclimate to their role and the culture that surrounds this role.[31,32] Coordination of a formal mentoring program is often the responsibility of the personnel of the organization who is supporting it, and in our case was the NATA Foundation. Our participants' reflections reveal that the initial part of the programming was structured and planned, the pairing with a research mentor and the first meeting with that assigned mentor, yet the navigation of the mentoring relationship appeared to be less structured and more organically driven. Inzer and Crawford[33] suggest that, in order for formal mentoring programs to be successful, the organization must be an active participant and facilitator. We did not measure success, but our participants appeared to be satisfied with their experiences overall; however, they did suggest more involvement from the foundation organizers could be beneficial. Based upon the early work of Kram,[34] the NATA Foundation facilitators appear to be more engaged during the initiation phase of the mentoring relationship and allow the cultivation and definition phases of the relationship to be driven by the individual pairs. This again aligns well with the literature that highlights that formal mentoring is a mechanism that allows for growth and development, particularly for newly transitioning professionals, whereas informal mentoring is successful in helping likeminded individuals cultivate a professional relationship that is rewarding and productive.[10,33]

We do believe, however, that some involvement by the NATA Foundation program organizers throughout the mentoring relationship can assist the pair, as challenges often include time (not enough), ambiguity with navigating the relations (ie, frequency of communication, topics to be covered), and uncertainty in how to navigate the relationship.[27] Rockquemore[5] suggests that proactivity is important for navigating the relationship, a characteristic that should be demonstrated by both mentors and mentees.[10,11,31,33] Scheduling regular meeting times can help with this process, being sure to include how the communication will be initiated (phone, e-mail, etc). During our study, we asked our participants to journal to a series of questions every 3 months. Borrowing from this model, the NATA Foundation facilitators can correspond with the pairs in a similar fashion to help encourage communication and achieving their goals. Additionally, the NATA Foundation organizers could provide participants recommendations for discussion topics, such as role balancing, time management, and effective strategies for writing manuscripts and grants.

We did not find that our participants were concerned with mismatching of personalities or professional interests, a

common barrier within formal mentoring.[27] This is likely due to the selection of a mentor based upon research interests as well as the informality of the relationship's initiation (participants meet in person, but discourse was unstructured). Informal mentoring is often reported as more effective than formal mentoring, but a blended approach can help stimulate success and effectiveness.[27,33]

Limitations and Future Research

At the time of this study, the mentor program was titled the "NATA Foundation Research Mentor Program," which was designed to support promising young investigators. Thus, those who participated in the program were focused on research development and growth. Though faculty development should extend beyond research skills and knowledge, our results really only speak to those who wanted assistance in those particular areas of faculty roles. We believe that future research and programming should focus on overall faculty development and support of the transition process to higher education. Additionally, we did not measure or collect any data on outcomes. Our participants shared their satisfaction with the program, but we did not evaluate how productive they were in the relationship (ie, met goals, number of grants or publications submitted).

All of our participants had a PhD and were in tenure-line faculty roles; thus, our findings may not translate to those who have earned an EdD and have clinical or nontenure positions. We believe, to gain a better understanding of formal mentoring on faculty development, additional research needs to include these individuals, as well as a representation of those completing administrative-specific roles (ie, program director), teaching, advising, or other responsibilities such as service on committees.

Although we gained the perspectives of both mentor and mentees engaged in the program, we did not compare responses between the mentoring pairs. Saturation was our guide, but we do believe that, in future research, learning more about the development of the mentoring relationship through the lens of the mentor/mentee simultaneously can be beneficial. Also, we only had 4 of the 6 mentors complete all the phases of the study; thus, we do believe that future studies would benefit from more mentor participants. The NATA Foundation Mentor Program has existed since 2012; therefore, inclusion of more participants is plausible.

Recommendations

1. Mentors should be reminded of the benefits of mentoring, particularly as they continue to develop their own research agendas.
2. Junior faculty should be encouraged to seek external mentors, particularly professional ones, as it can help support continued growth related to their research pursuits and activities.
3. The NATA Foundation Mentor Program organizers should consider expanding the mission beyond just the research experience to other faculty roles and responsibilities within higher education.
4. A formal platform, such as a workshop or orientation session, can help facilitate the successful beginning of the mentor-mentee relationship. This first-time meeting can

allow for the development of the direction of the relationship.
5. Ongoing communication is important for the navigation of the mentor-mentee relationship, and within formal mentor programs, it is important to have a facilitator encourage and remind the pairs to continue to communicate and provide feedback.
6. Formal programs, such as the NATA Foundation Mentor Program, should monitor and collect data on the fruitfulness of the mentoring relationship. Collecting data, such as the number of presentations, grants submitted, and peer-review publications, can help provide validation to the efficacy of the program as well as document its effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from our study suggest that the NATA Foundation Mentor Program offers a mutually beneficial experience for mentors and mentees. Mentors engaged in the program because they believed they could learn from their mentees and felt it was part of their professional service and a way to give back to new, promising researchers. Our participants were overall satisfied with their experiences within the mentor program, as they felt they were able to meet their initial objectives established at the outset of the meeting. Mentee participants recognized that the formal program gave them the chance to gain an external perspective, one that would advance their research agendas, and gain feedback that may not have been provided by an institutional mentor or former doctoral mentor. The NATA Foundation Mentor Program also provided the mentees a connection to a researcher who was successful and knowledgeable in their content areas, which allowed them to continue to develop as a researcher.

As the NATA Foundation continues to offer the mentor program, it is clear that the luncheon is an important medium to allow the newly formed pairs to establish a rapport and communicate their goals for the program. It will be important, however, for the NATA Foundation organizers to communicate expectations and goals for the pairs to allow them to better understand how to succeed in the program. Furthermore, the NATA Foundation may assume a more active role to help the pairs navigate their relationship and achieve the outcomes established at the outset of the relationship.

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