

# Factors Influencing a Student's Choice of a Graduate Professional Athletic Training Program

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**Context:** As the professional degree in athletic training transitions to the master's level, a growing concern for programs is enrollment. Understanding the factors that influence a student's choice of a graduate program in athletic training will provide institutions with vital information for marketing and enrollment management.

**Objective:** To explore factors that influence a student's choice of a professional graduate athletic training program.

**Design:** Cross-sectional.

**Setting:** Online survey.

**Patients or Other Participants:** A total of 52 participants from a convenience sample of 140 graduate students enrolled in a graduate professional athletic training program completed the survey: 43 females (82.7%) and 9 males (17.3%).

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Data collection took place over 4 weeks between April and May 2019. Participants completed an online questionnaire that consisted of 11 demographic items, 6 Likert-scale items about factors that may have influenced school choice, and 2 open-ended questions about career goals and pursuing a doctoral degree. We calculated descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and percentages.

**Results:** Factors ranked as very important in influencing a student's choice fell within the categories of athletic training program and athletic training program faculty. Those ranked as not important were related to ethnicity and gender. Additionally, over half of the participants indicated an intended career path within the college or professional setting.

**Conclusions:** Although a variety of factors can influence a student's choice of graduate school, today's consumer seems mostly interested in program factors such as Board of Certification pass rate, accreditation status, and clinical sites. As programs transition to the graduate level, marketing and recruitment strategies should be designed around these factors to ensure enrollment.

**Key Words:** Enrollment, recruitment, accreditation status

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## KEY POINTS

- When choosing a graduate professional athletic training program, the factors considered most important by students were accreditation status, Board of Certification pass rate, and clinical sites.
- Overall, the category of diversity was highly prevalent among factors that students felt were not important in selecting a graduate program.
- Program administrators should focus marketing their programs to prospective students in areas students deem most important (accreditation status, Board of Certification pass rate, and clinical sites).

## INTRODUCTION

Athletic training programs across the country currently face a crisis in student enrollment. The Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) publishes an annual report based on data submitted by educational programs every year, and since 2015, the report has consistently shown a decrease in applications and subsequent enrollment to professional athletic training programs.<sup>1-4</sup> Student recruitment has been a challenge for both athletic training and other health profession programs for the past 2 decades,<sup>5</sup> and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center has identified that overall student enrollment has decreased by more than 7%, at all university types, since 2015.<sup>6</sup>

The existence of athletic training programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels amplifies marketing and recruitment challenges in that the multilevel existence of programs has the potential to confuse prospective students and parents as they make decisions about pursuing an athletic training degree.<sup>7</sup> Undergraduate athletic training programs will no longer be able to enroll students into bachelor's-level programs after fall 2022<sup>8</sup>; however, even that benchmark is not a guarantee of improved enrollment numbers in graduate professional programs. After the May 2015 CAATE<sup>8</sup> announcement of the required transition to graduate-level programs, the next academic year (2016–2017) saw an increase in the number of master's-level programs; but enrollment in graduate athletic training programs still dropped to 67% of reported capacity<sup>3</sup>; and in 2017 to 2018 it dropped again, this time drastically, to a mere 56% of reported capacity.<sup>4</sup> The trends in enrollment indicate a need for graduate-level athletic training program administrators to aggressively market their programs and recruit potential students to ensure the viability of their programs in upcoming years. However, program administrators may be unsure which attributes of their programs or institutions are most attractive to potential students.

Past research on student recruitment has focused on the recruitment of high school students into undergraduate programs. Programs historically have been advised to consider affective factors such as the desire of students to

help others or the desire to feel a part of a team, as well as external factors such as job opportunities, career advancement, or influence of mentors in the profession during earlier time points.<sup>5,9</sup> Existing recommendations also indicate that accreditation status, credentialing examination pass rates, and employment rates are highly touted attributes that attract potential students to enroll.<sup>5</sup> Little evidence exists demonstrating how recommendations, or how the affective and external factors mentioned above, will parlay to the graduate level as CAATE-accredited professional athletic training programs attempt to recruit undergraduate students from across the country. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence a student's choice of a graduate-level CAATE-accredited professional athletic training program.

## METHODS

### Participants

The targeted population for this study was graduate students currently enrolled in CAATE-accredited professional athletic training programs during the spring 2019 semester. We obtained e-mail addresses for 102 program directors of graduate-level CAATE-accredited professional athletic training programs using the program search function on the CAATE Web site. We asked program directors to forward our survey to their respective current graduate students. One hundred forty potential participants opened the survey. Of those, 52 students completed the survey for a completion rate of 37%. Data about participants' specific graduate athletic training programs were not collected (eg, name of institution). Inclusion criteria were graduate students over the age of 18, currently enrolled in a graduate-level CAATE-accredited professional athletic training program with the program status *active* – *in good standing* on the CAATE Web site ([www.caate.net](http://www.caate.net)). Exclusion criteria were students enrolled in professional athletic training graduate programs with the status *seeking accreditation*, *probation*, *voluntarily withdrawing accreditation*, and *degree change pending*. We also excluded students enrolled in undergraduate athletic training programs. We received Institutional Review Board approval for exempt research; we obtained informed consent with the initial question on the survey, and only those who confirmed consent were able to complete the rest of the survey.

### Instrumentation

We adapted the survey used for this study from a previous study conducted by Askew.<sup>7</sup> The original survey was assessed for face, construct, and content validity.<sup>7</sup> Askew described the validation process which included removing factors of influence that were ranked as not important by more than 50% of the respondents during pilot collection. The survey was then revised based on feedback from pilot study participants, and lastly the revised survey was reviewed by two content experts for face, construct, and content

validity before finalizing the survey instrument. We received permission from the corresponding author to use the survey. The survey consisted of 11 demographic items, 6 Likert-scale items about factors that may have influenced school choice, and 2 open-ended questions about career goals and pursuing a doctoral degree. We uploaded the survey into Select Survey version 4.0.30 (ClassApps, Kansas City, MO) for distribution.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place over 4 weeks between April and May 2019. E-mails were sent to 102 program directors of graduate-level CAATE-accredited professional athletic training programs, asking each program director to forward the e-mail and link to the survey to all graduate students enrolled in his or her professional athletic training program. Included in the initial e-mail were (1) inclusion criteria, (2) aim of the study, (3) estimated time to complete the survey, (4) link to the online survey, and (5) researcher contact information. A follow-up e-mail reminder was sent 2 weeks later, including appreciation for those who had already forwarded the initial e-mail and providing identical information from the initial recruitment e-mail for a second invitation to participate.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25 (IBM SPSS, Chicago, IL). We calculated frequencies and percentages for participant age, dependents, gender, race, marital status, citizenship, state of permanent residence, enrolled in program in state or out of state, and National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) membership. We also calculated frequency distributions and percentages for the Likert-scale item data on factors that may have influenced the choice of graduate school. These Likert-scale items included types of people, nonacademic factors, diversity factors, college/university factors, athletic training program factors, and athletic training faculty factors. For the data obtained from the 2 open-ended questions, we used a general inductive approach and an open-coding process. Each author completed the coding independently. We discussed our initial findings and agreed on the final codes for each question. For the data obtained from the question about a career goal, the final coding categories included high school, college, professional, healthcare administration, military, occupational health, performing arts, physician practice, public safety, and undecided. These categories were then assigned a number from 1 to 10, respectively. The final coding categories for the open-ended question data for whether participants would pursue a doctoral degree included *no*, *yes*, *possibly*, *in future*, and *unsure*. These items were then assigned a numerical value from 1 to 5, respectively. Missing data for both open-ended questions were assigned 0. Finally, we calculated the frequencies and percentages for responses to these questions.

RESULTS

A total of 52 graduate professional athletic training students completed the survey. Forty-three females (82.7%) and 9 males (17.3%) participated. All of the participants were within the age range categories of 21 to 24 years old (71.2%) and 25

Table 1. Participant Demographics<sup>a</sup>

	Frequency, No. (%)
Gender	
Female	43 (82.7)
Male	9 (17.3)
Age, y	
Under 21	0
21–24	37 (71.2)
25–34	15 (28.8)
35–44	0
45–55	0
Ethnic background	
Native American or Alaska Native	2 (3.8)
Asian	2 (3.8)
Black or African American	3 (5.8)
White	41 (78.8)
Multiracial	4 (7.7)
Marital status	
Single (never married)	50 (96.2)
Married, or in a domestic partnership	2 (3.8)
Widowed	0
Divorced	0
Separated	0
Attended AT program	
In state	23 (44.2)
Out of state	29 (55.8)
Member of the NATA	
Yes	46 (88.5)
No	6 (11.5)

Abbreviations: AT, athletic training; NATA, National Athletic Trainers' Association.

<sup>a</sup> N = 52.

to 34 years old (28.8%). Twenty-three (44.2%) indicated they were attending graduate school at an in-state institution, and 29 (55.8%) indicated that they were attending an out-of-state institution. Table 1 summarizes additional participant demographics. The participants rated the importance of 48 factors in 6 different categories that may have influenced their choice of a graduate program in athletic training. For this paper, we focused on the top 3 very important factors and the top 3 not important factors. Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for each influencing factor.

Factors Ranked as Very Important Influencing Students' Choice of Program

Notably, more than 80% (highest of the factors) of the participants identified the program's accreditation status as a very important factor to the selection of their graduate program, closely followed by the program's Board of Certification (BOC) pass rate (72.5% of participants) and the types of available clinical sites (62.7% of participants). The factors considered most important by our participants were most frequently related to the categories of athletic training program and athletic training program faculty. Table 3 displays the frequency and percentage for the top factors that were ranked as *very important* by participants.

**Table 2. Factors for Choosing Graduate Professional Athletic Training Program, No. (%)<sup>a</sup>**

	Very Important	Moderately Important	Not Important	Not Applicable
<b>People</b>				
Parent or guardian	18 (34.8)	14 (26.9)	14 (26.9)	1 (1.9)
Spouse or partner	4 (7.7)	7 (13.5)	6 (11.5)	30 (57.7)
Family member	9 (17.3)	16 (30.8)	19 (36.5)	3 (5.8)
Peer	5 (9.6)	13 (25.0)	24 (42.2)	5 (9.6)
Alumni <sup>b</sup>	3 (5.8)	7 (13.5)	24 (46.2)	12 (23.1)
Undergraduate advisor <sup>c</sup>	6 (11.8)	7 (13.7)	25 (49.0)	9 (17.6)
Undergraduate faculty <sup>c</sup>	9 (17.6)	13 (25.5)	16 (31.4)	9 (17.6)
Other <sup>d</sup>	6 (11.5)	2 (3.8)	11 (21.2)	26 (50.0)
<b>Nonacademic</b>				
Geographical location	21 (40.4)	18 (36.4)	7 (13.6)	1 (1.9)
Distance from home	17 (32.7)	19 (36.5)	11 (21.2)	0
Size of city/town	6 (11.5)	18 (34.6)	22 (42.3)	1 (1.9)
Cost of living	21 (40.4)	17 (32.7)	9 (17.3)	0
Crime rate	7 (13.5)	13 (25.0)	27 (51.9)	0
Weather conditions	7 (13.5)	16 (30.8)	24 (46.2)	0
Campus visit	13 (25.0)	12 (23.1)	15 (28.8)	7 (13.5)
Availability of housing	8 (15.4)	19 (36.5)	16 (30.8)	4 (7.7)
<b>Diversity</b>				
Campus activities related to ethnicity/culture <sup>e</sup>	0	3 (9.7)	22 (71.0)	2 (6.5)
Diversity of student body	2 (3.8)	9 (17.3)	33 (63.5)	3 (5.8)
Faculty similar in ethnicity	2 (3.8)	1 (1.9)	41 (78.8)	3 (5.8)
Faculty of same gender	1 (1.9)	5 (9.6)	39 (75.0)	2 (3.8)
Students similar in ethnicity	1 (1.9)	3 (5.8)	40 (76.9)	3 (5.8)
Campus student life	1 (1.9)	14 (26.9)	30 (57.7)	2 (3.8)
<b>College/university</b>				
Public versus private	7 (13.5)	8 (15.4)	29 (55.8)	3 (5.8)
Cost/affordability	32 (61.5)	14 (26.9)	1 (1.9)	0
Amount of financial assistance available	30 (57.7)	9 (17.3)	8 (15.4)	0
Prestige (general reputation or ranking of college)	19 (36.5)	19 (36.5)	6 (11.5)	3 (5.8)
Type of institution (Carnegie classification)	8 (15.4)	9 (17.3)	23 (44.2)	7 (13.5)
Size of enrollment	14 (26.9)	14 (26.9)	19 (36.5)	0
Prestige of institution's athletics	15 (28.8)	16 (30.8)	16 (30.8)	0
Attractiveness/appearance of institution <sup>c</sup>	7 (13.7)	28 (54.9)	11 (21.6)	1 (2.0)
Campus facilities <sup>c</sup>	16 (31.4)	24 (47.1)	6 (11.8)	1 (2.0)
<b>AT program</b>				
Status of accreditation	42 (80.8)	4 (7.7)	1 (1.9)	0
BOC pass rate <sup>c</sup>	37 (72.5)	9 (17.6)	1 (2.0)	0
Admission requirements	26 (50.0)	19 (36.5)	2 (3.8)	0
Student/faculty ratio or class size	22 (42.3)	20 (38.5)	5 (9.6)	0
Length of program	27 (51.9)	13 (25.0)	7 (13.5)	0
Program that includes summer sessions	13 (25.0)	13 (25.0)	20 (38.5)	1 (1.9)
Clinical sites <sup>c</sup>	32 (62.7)	11 (21.6)	3 (5.9)	1 (2.0)
Student research opportunities <sup>b</sup>	11 (21.2)	15 (28.8)	20 (38.5)	0
Program facilities	27 (51.9)	13 (25.0)	7 (13.5)	0
Prestige of program	26 (50.0)	13 (25.0)	6 (11.5)	2 (3.8)
<b>AT program faculty</b>				
Faculty research interests	5 (9.6)	16 (30.8)	24 (46.2)	2 (3.8)
Faculty research publications	4 (7.7)	13 (25.0)	27 (51.9)	3 (5.8)
Faculty clinical expertise	27 (51.9)	15 (28.8)	4 (7.7)	1 (1.9)
Personal contact with faculty during decision process	26 (50.0)	12 (23.1)	9 (17.3)	0
Positive interaction with faculty during decision process	32 (61.5)	10 (19.2)	4 (7.7)	1 (1.9)

Abbreviations: AT, athletic training; BOC, Board of Certification.

<sup>a</sup> N = 47.<sup>b</sup> N = 46.<sup>c</sup> N = 48.<sup>d</sup> N = 45.<sup>e</sup> N = 27.



**Table 3. Top Factors That Influenced Student's Choice of Program<sup>a</sup>**

Rank	Factor	Category	Frequency, No. (%)
1	Status of accreditation	AT program	42 (80.8)
2	BOC pass rate <sup>b</sup>	AT program	37 (72.5)
3	Clinical sites <sup>b</sup>	AT program	32 (62.7)
3	Cost/affordability	College/university	32 (61.5)
3	Positive interaction with faculty during decision process	AT program faculty	32 (61.5)
4	Amount of financial assistance available	College/university	30 (57.7)
5	Length of program	AT program	27 (51.9)
5	Program facilities	AT program	27 (51.9)
5	Faculty clinical expertise	AT program faculty	27 (51.9)
6	Prestige of program	AT program	26 (50.0)
6	Personal contact with faculty during decision process	AT program faculty	26 (50.0)
6	Admissions requirements	AT program	26 (50.0)

Abbreviations: AT, athletic training; BOC, Board of Certification.

<sup>a</sup> N = 47.

<sup>b</sup> N = 48.

### Factors Ranked as Not Important Influencing Students' Choice of Program

The top 3 factors that were not important to influencing a student's choice of program all related to the diversity of ethnicity and gender. Participants felt that faculty of a similar ethnicity (78.8% of participants), other students of a similar ethnicity (76.9% of participants), and faculty of the same gender (75% of participants) were not important considerations to the selection of their graduate athletic training program. Generally, the participants considered the category of diversity as not important. No other not important categories were highly represented. Table 4 displays the frequency and percentage for the top factors that participants indicated to be not important when choosing a graduate athletic training program.

### Career Goals and Pursuing a Doctoral Degree

Results for the open-ended questions pertaining to participant career goals varied. Over half (67.3%) of the participants indicated the college or professional sports setting as their career goal. Figure 1 displays the frequency and percentage of intended career paths for participants. Lastly, we asked participants if they intended to pursue a doctoral degree upon finishing their master's degree. Thirty-one (59.6%)

participants indicated that they were not planning to pursue a doctoral degree. Only 2 participants reported they were currently planning to obtain a doctoral degree. One stated,

*I am currently considering pursuing a doctoral degree. I would love to pursue a DAT; however, my concern is about what that degree would mean to potential employers and how it will affect my marketability and salary postdoctoral degree (I still want to practice clinically).*

The other participant commented, "I am considering pursuing a doctoral degree (PhD) so that I can dive deeper into research and teach future ATs." Figure 2 displays the frequency and percentages for the participants' intent to pursue a doctoral degree.

## DISCUSSION

### Very Important Factors

Our participants rated items associated with the athletic training program as very important to their selection of graduate school. Relative to the program, our participants were most interested in accreditation status (80.8%), BOC pass rate (72.5%), clinical sites (62.7%), the length of the

**Table 4. Top Factors That Did Not Influence Student's Choice of Program<sup>a</sup>**

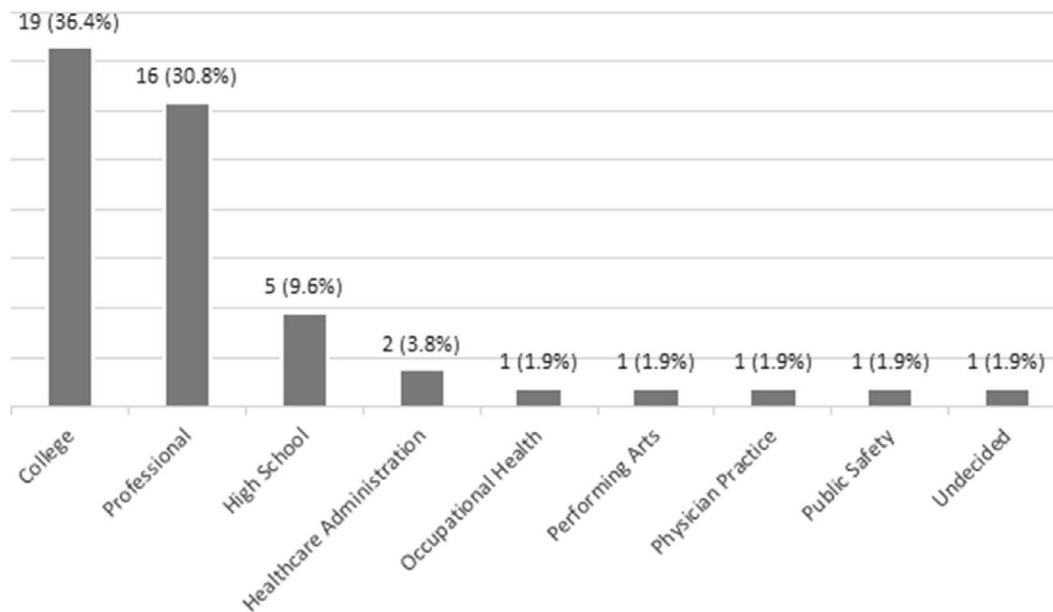
Rank	Factor	Category	Frequency, No. (%)
1	Faculty similar in ethnicity	Diversity	41 (78.8)
2	Students similar in ethnicity	Diversity	40 (76.9)
3	Faculty of same gender	Diversity	39 (75.0)
4	Campus activities related to ethnicity/culture <sup>b</sup>	Diversity	22 (71.0)
5	Diversity of students	Diversity	33 (63.5)
6	Campus student life	Diversity	30 (57.7)
7	Public versus private	College/university	29 (55.8)
8	Crime rate	Nonacademic	27 (51.9)
9	Faculty research publications	AT program faculty	27 (51.9)
10	Undergraduate advisor <sup>c</sup>	People	25 (49.0)

<sup>a</sup> N = 47.

<sup>b</sup> N = 27.

<sup>c</sup> N = 48.

**Figure 1. Percentages and frequency for participant intended athletic training career practice setting. N = 52.**



program (51.9%), program facilities (51.9%), prestige of the program (50%), and admission requirements (50%).

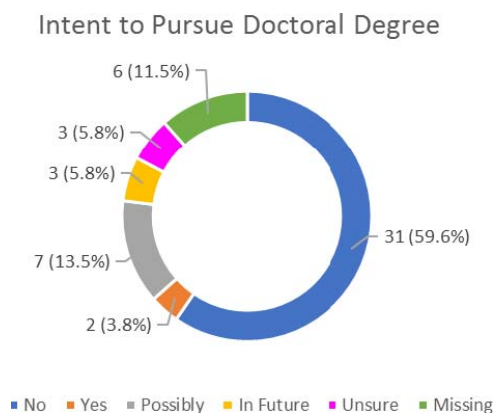
The accreditation status of programs was the most important factor for our participants. Graduates of athletic training programs must graduate from an accredited program to be eligible to sit for the BOC credentialing examination, so the importance of accreditation status is not a surprising finding.<sup>10</sup> According to the *CAATE Policies and Procedures Manual*, the CAATE confers the following statuses of public recognition related to accreditation: Accreditation: Initial or Continuing, In good standing (no progress report due), Accredited-progress report due, Probation, Administrative Probation, Withhold Initial Accreditation, Withdraw Accreditation: Voluntary or Involuntary, and Degree change pending (for programs that have submitted materials to change level of degree).<sup>11</sup> We did not ask our participants which specific accreditation status was most important; however, initial or continuing status in good standing is likely the preferred status for prospective students. The factor of accreditation status has been a consistently important factor for graduate-level healthcare program students, especially for students selecting physical therapy and athletic training programs.<sup>5,12,13</sup> In fact, prospective physical therapy students

indicated that not only did accreditation status influence their selection of which school to attend, but it further influenced whether they would even apply to such schools.<sup>13</sup> Even before the transition to the graduate level, athletic training students at the undergraduate level consistently identified accreditation status as the most important consideration in their program selection.<sup>5</sup> Another study determined that of prospective physical therapy students, women are more concerned than men about accreditation status, and this held true for our participants, with 88% of our female participants indicating it as very important. In comparison, only 44% of our limited sample of male participants felt that the program's accreditation status was very important.<sup>14</sup>

The factor of accreditation status likely poses a challenge for new athletic training programs, which will need to recruit a minimum of 2 cohorts of students before achieving initial accreditation. Marketing strategies for these programs may need to revolve around informing potential students about the process of accreditation, their status of accreditation, and the likelihood of obtaining it.

The BOC pass rate of a program was also a very important factor for our participants in selecting their future program. Graduates of accredited athletic training programs are eligible to sit for the BOC examination.<sup>10</sup> In 2013, CAATE-accredited programs were required to meet a 3-year aggregate minimum of a 70% first-attempt BOC pass rate to maintain their accreditation status in good standing, and programs are further required to publicly post their BOC pass rate within one click of their program's home Web page.<sup>15</sup> The fact that graduate-level professional programs have had consistently higher BOC pass rates contributed weight to the change of professional degree level in athletic training.<sup>16</sup> Likely, the increased emphasis on the BOC pass rate and public availability of the BOC pass rate have resulted in increased awareness of its importance for prospective students. The finding of the importance of the BOC pass rate is again consistent with prospective physical therapy students, as they rated pass rate on licensing examination as hugely influential

**Figure 2. Intent to pursue a doctoral degree. N = 52.**



to their selection of which program to attend.<sup>12,13</sup> This again may pose a challenge for new programs, as it will take a minimum of 3 graduating cohorts of students to establish a 3-year aggregate BOC pass rate for the program, so administrators from new programs may need to focus marketing opportunities toward educating prospective students and parents about the planned preparation for the BOC examination.

The clinical sites that a program has available was also a very important factor for the majority of our participants. Students in athletic training programs are required to gain experience in a variety of clinical sites as a component of their clinical education.<sup>15</sup> Past program graduates have indicated that monotonous clinical experiences throughout the program have left students feeling frustrated.<sup>17</sup> Data collected from physical therapy students upon the completion of clinical rotation demonstrate that student satisfaction with the experience links to the interactions with patients, colleagues, and preceptors at the site, life satisfaction while assigned to the site, and the variety of patients seen at the site while assigned.<sup>18</sup> This study did include variety as a component of student satisfaction; variety alone was not predictive of student satisfaction with a clinical rotation.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, over three-quarters of our participants (76.8%) indicated that their future career goals were to work in college, professional, or high school settings, which seems contradictory to a desire for a wide array of unique clinical experience sites from the school of their choice.

Previous research indicates that the diversity of clinical experiences is a factor that contributes to the growth of athletic training students as they progress through an athletic training program.<sup>19</sup> It is also important to note that historical research, from a time when the BOC exam was delivered in a different format, had identified that the types of clinical experiences a student has do not influence performance on the BOC examination.<sup>19,20</sup> It is possible, since some of our participants (51.9%) also rated program facilities as very important, that the facilities associated with clinical sites contributed to this selection. This area may require additional study to understand better which aspects of clinical sites are essential to prospective students of graduate athletic training programs.

Participants also rated the interaction with faculty that they had during the selection process as very important to their final decision. Half of our participants felt that personal contact with faculty during the decision process was very important. However, even more (61.5%) indicated that positive interactions with faculty during the decision process were very important. Similar findings have been reported in medical education, in which the interactions of residents and faculty were rated as influential in residents selecting to match with a residency program.<sup>21</sup> Trolian and Parker<sup>22</sup> found that opportunities for interaction with faculty significantly contributed to student satisfaction within graduate programs. It is also worth noting that while about half of our participants felt that faculty clinical expertise and interactions with faculty were very important, faculty research expertise was not important to our participants. Many faculty in tenure track positions are obligated to conduct and promote research, sometimes to the detriment of maintaining clinical practice or improving on classroom instruction.<sup>23</sup> Programs may want to

consider highlighting a diverse faculty with a breadth of expertise across both clinical and research foci to attract students to their programs. Additionally, in the absence of clinically active faculty, programs could consider more aggressive marketing of clinical experts who guest lecture or participate in program education to tap into prospective students' interests.

Overall, participants in our study identified several athletic training program characteristics that were very important to their selection of which program to attend. As we stated previously, new programs may be disadvantaged in recruiting students, as their ability to demonstrate their accreditation status or BOC pass rate is limited. Administrators of such programs might find that capitalizing on opportunities for personal interaction in the application and admissions process, and highlighting a variety of clinical sites as well as the program's facilities, entice more prospective students.

### Not Important Factors

A dearth of diversity has long been identified as a detriment to the profession of athletic training.<sup>24</sup> However, our participants did not rate factors associated with diversity as having an important influence on their selection of graduate school. The majority of respondents ranked all of the factors related to diversity, including the diversity of the student body (63.5%), as well as faculty similar in ethnicity (78.8%), as not important to their decision in selecting a graduate athletic training program. These findings support existing data demonstrating that more than half of prospective physical therapy students consider ethnic, cultural, and gender characteristics of an entry-level physical therapy program not influential on their choice.<sup>25</sup>

The findings of both our study and that of Wilcox et al<sup>25</sup> should be considered with caution, though, as it has been identified that diversity as a factor influencing graduate school selection is more important to a subset of the general population.<sup>14,25,26</sup> In fact, diversity has been established as an important factor to ethnic minority students other than African Americans in electing to enroll and matriculate in a given institution or program.<sup>14,26</sup> Considering that our participant sample contained 41 (78.8%) participants who identified themselves as Caucasian and only 8 (15.3%) participants identified as an ethnic minority other than African American, it is highly plausible that this influenced the results in this category. However, our findings do corroborate the existing data indicating that diversity is not a factor that influences the graduate program selection of Caucasian students.<sup>25,26</sup> When we examined the results from our non-white student participants ( $n = 11$ ), more than half of them still identified the diversity of the faculty as not important, but more than a quarter of those same students identified the diversity of campus activities and the student body as moderately to very important. The sample of minority students was small, but it does appear that some aspects of diversity do have some importance to students who identify as a minority race or ethnicity, which is consistent with the existing literature demonstrating that persons of color consider diversity of faculty and student bodies to be a more important consideration in selecting a university than their Caucasian counterparts. Specifically, these studies identify



that diverse students are more likely to consider graduate programs with diverse faculty or diverse student bodies.<sup>14,25,26</sup>

Another interesting result of note was that public versus private school was identified as a factor that was not important to our participants. Retrospective studies on graduate school students have shown that demographic variables, motivation for attendance at professional graduate programs, and the motivation for university selection did not vary between the students who attended public or private undergraduate institutions.<sup>27,28</sup> The studies also indicate that the same students did not vary in their selection of public or private graduate institutions.<sup>27,28</sup> Our findings are consistent with these studies, in that our participants were not considering their choice of graduate school based on the type of institution. Despite ranking the type of institution as not important, cost/affordability and availability of financial assistance were both among the important factors. According to the CAATE 2017 to 2018 Analytic Report, tuition for an in-state student attending a private university is, on average, more than 3 times as expensive as in-state tuition at a public university.<sup>4</sup> This information highlights a need for better education and understanding, potentially in the form of advising, for students to understand the influence of public versus private institutions on the cost and affordability of attending graduate school.

Overall, the category of diversity was highly prevalent among the factors that students felt were not important in selecting a graduate program. At face value, students may not have a preference between public and private institutions but do find importance in the cost of attending such an institution.

### Limitations and Future Research

Our study included a small sample of athletic training students at graduate programs, and as such, this may limit the universal applicability of the findings. Concerning diversity, readers should interpret the inclusion of diversity in the factors that were not important to students cautiously, as our sample was primarily Caucasian, and that may have profoundly influenced the results. Additionally, we excluded programs with the status of seeking accreditation from this study. Therefore, the results showing accreditation status as very important to students may be biased. Future research should consider the opinions of students enrolled in all graduate-level programs regardless of accreditation status. Lastly, we asked students to rate factors as important or not important but did not have follow-up data to determine which aspects of those factors contributed to their rating.

Future research should aim to determine which aspects of clinical sites, program facilities, faculty clinical expertise, and program prestige are specifically important to prospective students in selecting a graduate program. We also need more research to determine the influence of diversity, in student body, faculty, and the general institutional community, in the selection of graduate programs from students of all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

### CONCLUSIONS

Caucasian students rate diversity as not important when considering factors that influence the decision to attend a

specific graduate athletic training program. Students attending graduate-level athletic training programs are well informed of factors that are comparable among institutions, including accreditation status, BOC pass rates, and types of clinical sites. Program administrators who can do so should highlight those areas in marketing their program to prospective students. New programs may be at a disadvantage in recruiting students, as they may not yet possess the factors that prospective students rated as most important.

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