ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Factors in and Barriers to Engagement and Service Within Athletic Training Association Leadership

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Context: Leadership skills are important for all athletic trainers whether or not they hold formal leadership positions. Active engagement by members within professional associations can enhance individuals' leadership skills and aid the growth of the profession.

Objective: Understand common factors in and barriers to athletic trainers' involvement in leadership positions within their state's athletic training association.

Design: Qualitative – Grounded theory.

Setting: Zoom interview.

Patients or Other Participants: A purposeful sampling was performed. Inclusion criteria were met if participants were certified for 5+ years and currently serving on the executive board of their state athletic training association. Fifteen athletic trainers (age = 42.7 ± 7.8 years), predominantly men (73%), were included in this study. Data saturation guided the total number of participants selected.

Data Collection and Analysis: Semistructured interviews were performed using Zoom and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using inductive content analysis. Transcripts were coded and grouped by themes and subthemes. To maintain trustworthiness, peer review and member checks were performed.

Results: Participants were primarily motivated to seek out leadership opportunities in their state association to get involved within the profession. They also received encouragement from influential individuals who helped the participants see their abilities to impact others. The main barrier participants identified was fear. Fear encompassed many aspects, including ambiguity surrounding their role, as they were unsure of their full responsibilities or how to perform the role successfully. Other barriers included time commitment and self-doubt.

Conclusions: Participants' desire to get involved and the encouragement they received helped to increase confidence in their abilities to lead and contributed to their involvement in their state association. By encouraging colleagues, coworkers, and mentees to get involved, as well as by athletic training associations implementing a transition period for newly elected leaders to learn their responsibilities, many barriers athletic trainers identified can be reduced.

Key Words: Professional involvement, transition, encouragement

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KEY POINTS

- Athletic trainers sought out involvement in their state association to get involved and give back to the profession.
- Encouraging others to get involved can help increase their confidence and willingness to be involved.
- Associations should include a transition period for leadership roles to help individuals learn their responsibilities and provide a smoother transition to new leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership skills are important for the athletic trainer and are an integral part of the day-to-day responsibilities and functions of an athletic trainer's role including communicating with patients, staff, and other parties; resolving conflict; identifying and solving problems; and teamwork, no matter if they have a formal leadership role or not.[1] With the transition to the new 2020 Standards for Accreditation of Professional Athletic Training Programs[2] in July 2020, many standards address various qualities and leadership behaviors, including communicating with a variety of individuals, collaborating with others, professionalism, and advocating for the client, the patient, the community, and the profession. The current health care climate and challenges that face the profession are why the need for strong leadership is important. The success of a health care organization is recognized by its effective leadership.[3] Kutz[4] concluded that without regular practice of leadership from a profession's members, the profession will suffer and will not be able to grow. The athletic training profession needs more members actively engaged in their professional associations and other organizations and using their leadership skills to help continue the growth and advancement of the profession.[5]

Regardless of the individual's role or job title within their employment setting, athletic trainers provide help, care, and a service to others. Athletic trainers may also choose to serve in other capacities outside of their employment setting, including volunteering within their community, assisting at association events, serving as a preceptor, or mentoring athletic training students. The act of serving alone does not identify an individual as a leader. The title an individual is given in or outside their organization may not define their influence. However, leadership skills can provide individuals with ways to improve the service they provide. Leadership often transcends organizational boundaries: individuals can be influential outside their work setting.[5] Athletic trainers may not have a desire to lead in a more formal role but can still influence and inspire change in those around them. As for medical and nursing departments, obvious leadership roles are needed; however, leadership by other clinicians with no formal title, authority, or job description is needed for the success of a department and for health care reform.[6] Therefore, athletic trainers may intentionally or unintentionally seek their own ways to develop and grow their leadership skills. One of these ways is by involvement in their state athletic trainers' association. The association may provide various opportunities for leadership growth, including assisting with tasks at a state meeting or other association event, being a committee member or chair, or even serving within the association's executive board.

Though continued leadership is necessary for the athletic training profession, and though it is beneficial, many barriers may exist that prevent athletic trainers from becoming involved in leadership development or within their state association. Many barriers to commitment within various settings such as health care and business have been studied.[7,8] Nurses identified time constraints as a major factor in involvement, and many perceived they needed more leadership training before taking on a leadership role.[7] Many of these barriers, and others such as family support, lack of confidence, and lack of mentoring, were identified by women in various fields of health care, business, and academia.[8] Being able to effectively determine why and how leaders got involved within the profession can help us define better ways not only to integrate leadership content and skills within athletic training programs (ATPs), but to help create leadership programs and content, like the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Leadership Academy, where Ats can develop and hone their leadership skills.[9] Enhancing leadership skills not only is essential to the profession but will help to ensure the longevity and growth of the profession as well as the clinician.[10] Identifying what drives athletic trainers to engage in formal leadership opportunities is paramount to help continue the growth of our profession. The purpose of our study was to gain a better understanding of why athletic trainers got involved in association leadership and how they sought out leadership roles and advancement within the profession. The research questions guiding this study included (1) What factors influence athletic trainers to seek out leadership opportunities? (2) What barriers did they encounter getting into the role? And (3) How did they overcome those barriers?

METHODS

Participants

After the study was approved by the university institutional review board, a purposeful sampling was performed. Although it can be difficult to find informal leaders, participants who chose to lead and serve within the profession in an elected position were identified. Participants were identified by their state athletic training association's website, and 2 random states within each NATA district were initially selected. Participants who had been Board of Certification–certified athletic trainers for 5+ years and were currently serving on their state's executive board in the role of president, vice president/president-elect, secretary, or treasurer for 1+ years were recruited. Five years was selected as the minimum time

Figure 1. Recruitment process.
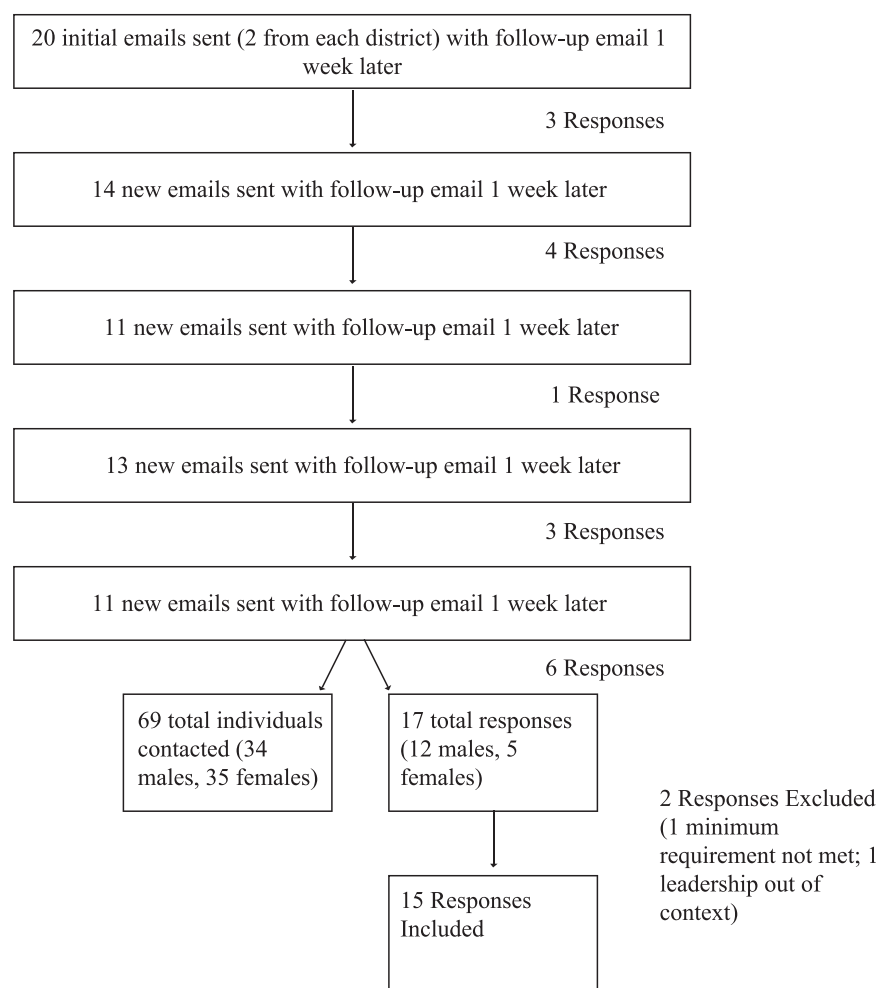
needed to allow the athletic trainer time to establish their professional identity. Participants must have had at least 1 year of experience on the executive board, regardless of role transition. Participants were excluded from the study if the inclusion criteria were not met or the participant declined

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Demographic	Value
Sex, No. (%)	
Male	11 (73.3)
Female	4 (26.7)
Age, y	
Mean ± SD	42.7 ± 7.8
Range	31–59
Current role, No. (%)	
President	7 (46.7)
Vice president/president-elect	3 (20)
Secretary	2 (13.3)
Treasurer	3 (20)
Years certified	
Mean ± SD	18.9 ± 7.2
Range	10–35
Years in leadership	
Mean ± SD	9.7 ± 8.1
Range	1–30

consent to the recorded interview. Interviews were performed until data saturation was reached. Seventeen athletic trainers were recruited for this study; however, 2 were excluded as 1 did not meet the minimum time of 1 year needed on the executive board, discovered during the interview, and 1 discussed leadership out of context to the purpose of this study (Figure 1). Fifteen participants remained to be included in this study (11 men, 4 women; age = 42.7 ± 7.8 years). Table 1 provides participant demographic information and Table 2 details participant characteristics.

Procedures

To ensure representation of participants and experiences across the country, 2 states within each NATA district were randomly selected for identification of participants. Participants were identified from their state association's website, where their email was obtained. A random selection was performed from the executive board and then an email was sent explaining the study's purpose, inclusion criteria, and informed consent form. Participants who replied to the initial email and returned the written informed consent form were scheduled for a Zoom interview. If there was no response from the participant within 7 days, a reminder email was sent. If the potential participant still did not respond after the second 7 days, another participant was recruited by selecting another state within the same NATA district. This process was

Table 2. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age, y	Sex	District	Years in Leadership	Years in Current Role
Brian	37	M	4	1	<1
Kevin	42	M	2	8	<1
Emily	33	F	3	9	2
Pedro	31	M	1	6	<1
Larry	59	M	5	30	4
Fatima	46	F	2	6	2
Greg	34	M	8	4	1
Olivia	47	F	5	5	<1
Heather	33	F	9	2	2
Ian	40	M	5	11	6
Deres	50	M	4	8	1
Charles	49	M	9	9	5
Marcus	50	M	8	27	2
Josh	49	M	7	15	<1
Nate	41	M	5	5	<1

repeated until enough participants were recruited to establish data saturation. All interviews with participants were audio recorded. Before the recording of the interview, the principal investigator reviewed the purpose of the study, reviewed issues related to confidentiality, anonymity, and the handling of the recorded interviews, and informed the participant of the option to cease the interview if needed. Once oral consent was given, the recording was started. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was reached. Some memoing was completed by the primary researcher after the completion of each interview.

Instrumentation

A semistructured interview guide (Table 3) was created addressing the athletic trainer's view of leadership and their motivations to pursue leadership opportunities. It also included questions regarding barriers to participation and how they overcame those barriers. As leadership is defined in various ways, we operationally defined leadership as "motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal."[1] Both investigators established the initial interview protocol, and it was then peer reviewed by another student researcher with no feedback. It was then reviewed by 2 experienced researchers in qualitative research, who found that some revisions were needed. After revisions were completed, the principal investigator (S.L.W.) conducted a pilot study with 2 participants (1 male, 1 female) who had leadership experience within their state executive board. This was performed to see if any questions needed to be added to help answer the research questions. No changes were made to the instrument after the pilot study was completed, and the pilot participants were not included as participants within the study. Because of the semistructured nature of the interview protocol, probing and clarifying questions were asked when necessary.

Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative methods study in a grounded theory approach was used for this study.[11] Interviews were ongoing and

Table 3. Interview Protocol

1. There are a lot of different definitions of leadership. For this study we are defining leadership as motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal. Please tell me what leadership means to you? Why?
   a. Tell me about what qualities and/or leadership styles you look for in leaders or in yourself.
2. In thinking about your journey into leadership, please describe the factors that influenced you in deciding to get involved.
   a. Tell me about your education as an athletic training student. Were there opportunities for you to get involved in student leadership? Do you feel like those opportunities helped prepare you for leadership as a professional athletic trainer? Why or why not?
   b. Tell me about the resources and/or people that helped you transition into your first leadership role.
      1. Describe your transition from your first leadership position to the one you are in now.
         i. Again, tell me about the people and/or resources that helped you along this path.
      2. Has your view of leadership changed from your initial entry into a leadership position until now? If so, how? Why?
      3. Did you have any prior involvement in any leadership training? If so, do you feel like this helped prepare you for your role?
3. Were there any challenges or reservations that you faced getting into leadership? Or along your leadership path?
   a. If so, how did you deal with those challenges? Please provide examples if possible.
   b. How did these challenges make you feel?
4. What is it that you enjoy about being a leader?
   a. What successes have you had as a leader?
   b. How did these successes make you feel?
5. As a leader in the profession, where do you want to go from here? Why?
6. Is there anything else you want to share? Is there anything I didn't ask you?

conducted until data saturation was complete. Data saturation was determined when no more emergent themes were established. When it was believed that data saturation was complete, an additional 2 interviews were completed to ensure saturation. Data collection and coding occurred simultaneously. Once the interview was complete, the audio was transcribed verbatim by the principal investigator. Open coding was initially used, followed by axial and selective coding. Constant comparisons were made throughout the process. Transcripts were reread to ensure understanding of meaning. The codes were then placed in like categories and grouped by emergent themes and subthemes.

Trustworthiness of the data was established by using the following methods: (1) memoing, (2) member checks, and (3) peer review. Some memoing was completed after the participants' interviews. Transcripts were sent to all participants to ensure transcript meaning was accurate and any changes identified by the participant were made. Only minor

Figure 2.   Emergent themes and subthemes.
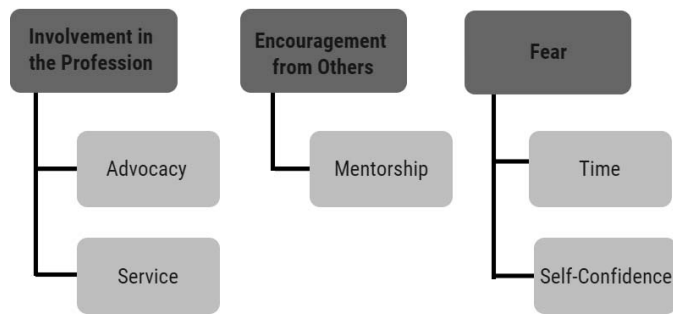
changes from 2 participants were noted upon member checks. These changes were centered around the wording during the transcription process. A fellow student researcher and the second member of the research team with experience in qualitative research reviewed the data and coding to ensure accuracy.

RESULTS

Three main themes emerged from the data influencing athletic trainers' involvement within leadership. The 3 themes were (1) involvement in the profession, which included the subthemes of advocacy and service; (2) encouragement from others, which included the subtheme of mentorship; and (3) fear, which included the subthemes of time and self-confidence. The first 2 themes and corresponding subthemes addressed reasons why athletic trainers decided to get involved in various leadership opportunities, whereas the third theme and subthemes related to barriers that were encountered during that process. No common themes were established for the third research question of how athletic trainers overcame those barriers. Figure 2 illustrates the themes and subthemes and their relationship.

Leadership Defined

Leadership was interpreted in many ways by participants with some responses similar to the definition provided within this study. As Deres stated,

> Leadership means to be able to help direct people in either the direction that they may want to go or maybe the group needs to go or move towards. In my brief leadership experience, it has been more about just kind of corralling the group together and trying to keep focus on the main objectives.

Larry described leadership similarly: "Leadership does involve a lot of motivation. It is helping people find the vision and move toward that vision cooperatively." Although many participants described leadership as working collaboratively towards progress or completion of a goal, other participants described leadership as displaying certain characteristics or behaviors. As Olivia mentioned, "It is being empathetic. It is being a good listener, a team player. Sometimes it is just about being a good delegator." Brian echoed that leadership represented being a good listener. He stated,

> I think a leader's main job is to listen. I think through listening you give your group, your colleagues, your people below you the ability to create their own ways to go about

that mission or that goal. I think the leader needs to define the goal, but they also need to listen.

Although there were certain similarities among some of the participants' responses, each participant had their own view of what leadership was and what it represented.

Involvement in the Profession

The first theme that emerged from the data was the participants' desire to be involved within the profession. This theme included the 2 subthemes of advocacy and service. There was a great desire for participants to give back to others. Involvement in the profession served as a way for the participants to be involved in current issues facing athletic trainers and to create relationships with individuals that could be influential in their growth as a professional. Some participants described getting involved as a way to stop being one to complain about what was going on if they were not willing to contribute to the change. Brian stated,

> What did I need to do to become a better leader and then as I learned those things, I felt I was able to give back more. And that's why I jumped into a leadership position. I wanted to be somebody who can help change and educate those around us. I wanted to be able to help educate the young professionals. And I wanted to be able to educate the ones that are my colleagues that are my age and older. I wanted to say hey listen, we're complaining so much but here's the reason why we need help. And here's the reason why we need to step in.

Being involved gave participants a sense of fulfillment in seeing the change they were involved in. Helping to make change themselves and then convincing others of the importance of the involvement was needed. Other participants described their reasons for getting involved as a way that was almost expected of them for the profession that they loved. As Josh stated, "I was taught when I was being 'brought up' in the athletic training that you need to be involved. And I think that that pushed me to get into leadership roles and provide for our profession." Being involved was also a way to make a difference where they were locally. This could lead to potential future opportunities in other areas within the organization or allow them to continue to move into larger roles within the district- or national-level organizations. As Deres stated,

> It was kind of that inspiration that it's just something that is expected. Maybe as you learn and grow with the profession that you would want to be more involved in the state association and then moving up into the district association and then into maybe the national association.

Getting involved was a step for some participants to take in order to step up and help make change within their association that could lead to better recognition and future opportunities for athletic trainers.

Advocacy. The first subtheme identified within involvement in the profession was advocacy. Advocacy is defined as the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal.[12] Many participants identified getting involved as a way to advocate for themselves and the profession. Some participants did not want to sit back and wait on others to influence change within their organization, so getting involved was a way to personally see that change happen. As Brian states, "I had to come to the realization that the only person that was going to advocate for

me was myself and it's an ongoing lesson that I have to continuously learn." He went on by stating, "You know there's sometimes I don't want to be a confrontational person, but I have to be when it comes to advocating for myself and my family and me and my profession." Participants have realized the benefit of advocating for themselves and how influential it can be. As advocacy has been a big push in the athletic training profession over the past decade, this has prompted more participants to get involved to lead within their state. Even Olivia mentioned,

> And it's probably a catchphrase term right now but advocating for the profession has been a big key of mine and getting people involved somehow, whether sometimes it is just volunteering at a conference and then they kind of get excited about the profession, because they get connected with different leaders of different things.

Getting involved was a way to see how things worked from the inside. The inner workings of many associations were different from participants' initial perceptions. After seeing how the association functioned, participants had a new viewpoint that excited them and strengthened their reasons for getting involved. Participants were able to see the development of change over time and how much something small can impact an organization, even at the state level. Using the given members and resources within the association to take issues facing athletic trainers and make a positive change was eye-opening. The experiences by the participants helped them to see the differences that advocacy can make for themselves and the profession.

Service. An additional subtheme identified within involvement in the profession is service. Many participants identified getting involved in the profession as a way to serve other athletic trainers and athletic training students. They expressed how they had a true passion for the profession and wanted to be able to serve and give back to others. They described how it went beyond the typical day-to-day role of being an athletic trainer. Larry described it as, "This is not just a job. It's a profession that you take care of." Having a passion for being involved and helping other people allowed them to find an opportunity that used their specific strengths and skills to help them grow personally and professionally. Ian stated,

> I think a lot of it is just, having that willingness to step up and serve. Serve others because really it's not a benefit to yourself as being in that leadership position. What can you do for both the overall profession, the overall organization? But if they don't have the opportunity to step up or have that opportunity to kind of showcase their skill set, they're never going to be able to really do anything. So, I think it's, you know, giving them more opportunity to do stuff...and that's kind of the nice thing about our profession where we have such a wide range of things if someone is willing to serve, there's going to be a spot for them for whatever skill set they do have.

For some participants, being a successful athletic trainer went beyond just their clinical skills and experiences. Greg talked about his education as a student and how he initially felt he was prepared to serve clinically, but never learned leadership skills. He had to learn a lot of the skills over time. He stated, "I worked my butt off...and my clinical skills, and I thought that's what made a good athletic trainer, but it's also giving back." Being able to give back to others in the profession not only gave them satisfaction but also helped them to guide

future leaders into various roles by using some of their talents to support others. Creating and showing these leadership opportunities to newer athletic trainers in the profession can help provide a new perspective to a seasoned board.

Encouragement From Others

The second theme that emerged from the data was being encouraged by others. Many participants described their hesitation to get involved as they doubted their abilities. They found it easier to transition into a leadership role when someone acknowledged a skill or trait that they had that they felt would be influential. Pedro explained his experience:

> So, I think for me, I'm always a little hesitant to maybe put that foot forward, but as soon as someone acknowledges that they see something in me and they believe I can do it, I typically run with that. And so I think that is really what held me back from maybe taking on some of those initiatives without that extrinsic motivation from perhaps the mentors who saw some things in me...It was that person saying "You got this like you can do this."

Many participants stated they were not quite sure what other individuals saw in them that would lead them to believe they would be beneficial for a leadership position, but that it did play a role in their involvement in the organization. For some, it took others to point out certain characteristics in them before they started to see that in themselves. As Marcus explained,

> I don't know for sure what each one of those individuals in those different environments, athletic training and otherwise, have seen in me that caused them to make that determination from their own vantage point, but that has been instrumental. Those interactions have been instrumental in driving me to give myself along those lines.

There could be potential for more leaders within the profession if we encourage each other to step up. Being encouraged by others and providing feedback helped give participants the courage needed to step into a leadership role. Furthermore, it was instrumental in helping participants identify additional ways they can be of service.

Mentorship. One of the subthemes identified from the encouragement of others was mentorship. Many participants had mentors during their time as a student or professionally in their careers that modeled service and leadership and what a leader should be in their eyes. During the participants' time as students, faculty who were also involved in a leadership position set a precedent for these students of how and why to be involved in the profession. Some participants discussed how their athletic training faculty were influential in their decision to get involved. Marcus talked about how much of an impact his mentor played in his development as a leader.

> I had leadership modeled by my mentors, throughout my academic times, when I was earning my degrees, as well as by the individuals that were my immediate supervisor early in my career. And I saw the impact and the difference that those folks had not only on others but within themselves and for our profession. And so, recognizing that, seeing that, motivated me to want to emulate that you know, be myself.

Fatima described a similar experience and talked about the encouragement she received from her mentor. Being exposed

to this mentorship as a student played a significant role in her development. As she expressed,

> I guess you know my education, my mentor, and then he was my boss. I've worked with him for 12 years before he retired and that was just what he advocated. You know, give back your time. You can't complain if you're not part of the solution...So it was something that I was exposed to early on, even back in the day stuffing packets for conferences and it was just kind of like okay you're helping us do this.

Mentorship was a crucial part of participants' development within the profession and being able to challenge themselves with new opportunities. Regardless of who their mentor was or when that mentor was influential to them in their career, many participants described how important it is to have a mentor. Mentorship is critical to the development of an athletic trainer's clinical skillset but is often lacking[13] in other areas of professional development, like committee and organizational involvement. Heather discussed how even after getting involved in leadership, she would sit down and mentor others on how to get involved in leadership opportunities. She stated,

> At least here recently it's been a bit more talked about, but there does need to be a level of mentorship in regards to kind of bringing people out into the service side because almost everybody I've talked to has said, "Yeah, I would love to serve. I just don't know where to start."

To be in a position of leadership, one should also mentor others who are considering these types of positions. The process of mentoring can have a profound influence on new leaders who can make substantial contributions to the profession of athletic training.

Fear

When identifying barriers to athletic trainers' involvement within leadership opportunities, the main theme identified was fear. Fear encompassed many emotions and feelings of exposing oneself and being vulnerable, not knowing what to do or how to complete the task at hand, and not understanding the full depth of what is asked of them in their role. For example, Deres described how being a leader resulted in others looking to you. The leader should exemplify someone who is strong and can handle many different situations; however, he felt like it conflicted with his personality type. He stated, "Again, there's the kind of fear that everybody's going to be looking to you to make the decision or to be the really strong personality kind of leader, which that's not my personality at all." Although some participants did not feel like their personality lent itself to being a strong leader, others had preconceived ideas of what a leader does in their role, and this has lent to many individuals not taking a step to be involved. If participants do not understand the full capacity of that role, agreeing to take on a new position makes them vulnerable. Exposing themselves and being vulnerable to new situations where they were unsure what to do was addressed with many participants. For an athletic trainer who may have great clinical skills, learning how to run a meeting or an association is not something that is typically covered in ATPs. Numerous participants described their fear when considering and transitioning to leadership roles. Josh detailed his feelings by stating,

> Fear of not knowing, you know, fear of exposing myself and being known as a very good athletic trainer...and then all of a sudden go into a situation where I'm an infant in knowledge compared to them.... We don't go to college to learn how to be a vice president of an association...I mean, people don't know what a motion is. You know what is the second, what's it called the question, what's an executive session, you know, these are all things that go on. You're in the meeting, you're kind of going, this is like a foreign language.

Many participants had limited knowledge on how organizations ran as the exposure was limited or nonexistent in their formal education. Charles explained his feelings as well addressing the lack of knowledge in what was going on and how long it took for him to feel competent in his abilities:

> And one of the big challenges I faced early on was I had no idea what was going on. It was like this deer in the headlights look...I mean, all of a sudden, you're the new state president, we will see you at the district executive board meeting...and I'm like, what are you guys talking about? I don't have a clue what's going on, you know, all these states, and then we're voting on things and talking about things. I'm like, I don't have a clue what these people are talking about. And I'm voting on these issues.

Regardless of the level of knowledge a participant had, getting involved in leadership opportunities caused many participants to have to face their fear, to get outside their comfort zone. Although many aspects of fear were addressed by participants, Brian discussed how getting over that fear identified for him his readiness to take on a leadership role. He said,

> I think fear drives everything that we do. Whether I was afraid of a time commitment, whether I was afraid of my own ability, whether I was afraid of the individuals in the room...that was always a big limiting factor for me to take that big step... And once I got over that hump of that fear, that's when I really noticed that I was ready for a leadership position.

Regardless of the specific role or level of leadership participants were involved in, fear was a contributing factor. Challenges still were evident during their transition into their new role. Marcus metaphorically explained how he felt during his transition to the executive board. He stated,

> When I started a year and a half ago, I felt like a fish underwater. I felt like a kid that had never been in a swimming pool that was getting asked to swim in the Olympics. And be competitive, but you know, you jump in, to the deep end. And you hope that you swim.

Fear was the main barrier participants described when considering roles in athletic training leadership. The fear identified by participants included a false perception of what a leader should look like or how they should act that was not in line with their personality or leadership style. Furthermore, participants felt that the lack of knowledge of a specific leadership role or how to run an organization was a significant barrier they had to overcome.

Time. One of the subthemes identified as a barrier to involvement within athletic training leadership was time. As many participants had numerous personal and professional commitments, deciding to get involved and when to get involved was a big decision. Finding the right balance among

the various roles and responsibilities participants had was challenging. Being devoted to the various tasks and responsibilities at hand was important for many participants. The participants wanted to be effective leaders, and not giving leadership the time it deserves can be a disservice to the members of the organization.

Athletic training state organizations vary in the term limits for each of the associated board positions. For some states, election to an office would require an extended time commitment to serve. As Deres explained,

> So, you really kind of need to understand that this is not going to be like if you don't like it, you can quit kind of thing. You're in it for 6 years, and people are going to be looking to you to accomplish goals and lead discussions and make plans for the association. That kind of stuff.

Greg echoed the same feelings, stating,

> I think time commitment was a big one for me. I didn't know where I was going to be in 6 years. If I was leaving the state and also just time commitment to do the job well...when I actually kind of dove into this I was like I was told that, oh, that's a couple hours a week, your work. It's definitely not the case. If you want to be good at what you're doing. It takes time.

Many participants wanted to be successful in their role; thus, finding a work-life balance to allow them to effectively manage all the required tasks was essential. Additionally, Ian identified how the time commitment for different levels of leadership roles impacted his decision to be involved. He felt that as the sole health care provider at his school, being involved in bigger roles would require more time commitment and time away to travel to various meetings, which could interfere with the care he was providing to his patients. Participants understood there was a significant time commitment when deciding to volunteer for leadership roles within their organization and that this was a barrier for many participants. Finding ways to have work-life balance within the various work settings the participants were employed in, their role within the state organization, and personal life were barriers they had to overcome.

Self-Confidence. An additional subtheme identified as a barrier to involvement within athletic training leadership was self-confidence. Our participants shared many doubts they had in their self-confidence about their ability to perform the job effectively. Many described how they felt there were better individuals who could fill the role they were nominated for or interested in than them and often questioned the traits people saw that would make them feel qualified to lead. Emily mentioned, "Maybe it's just me, but like a lot of times, I feel like maybe I'm not the best person for this, you know like there's got to be someone out there better at this than me. Why do they not want to?" Participants worried about taking on a role that they felt others were more well suited for. They did not feel competent enough to fill that position. As Heather plainly stated, "It deterred me at first because I thought, you know, imposter syndrome." Participants did not want to feel like frauds. They were perfectly capable of carrying out their tasks; however, many identified that they felt like a leader should have certain knowledge or act in a certain way. Fatima explained,

> I guess in my head I always thought a leader sort of fit this mold like you know, they're...confident, could speak very well, could speak on the spot, can answer questions on the spot, and sometimes you know, I'll get nervous. Like, I hope they don't ask me a question because I don't know... I stammered through that. But then, you know, people give me feedback and say no you handled it well. And I'm like, okay, because I didn't think so. I thought I looked like an idiot.

Although leadership skills and abilities are one of the aspects shared by participants that contributed to decreased self-confidence, another participant shared how her name being not more recognized within her state and district associations influenced her self-confidence and doubt to get involved. As Olivia mentioned, "I didn't know if I was known well enough within the culture of the state or the district to even be recognized as 'Oh, she would be a good leader.' I am not someone that you're going to name drop." Although having name recognition within the association is not required to pursue leadership positions, not being as well-known as some individuals was a deterrent for her as she sought out leadership opportunities. The doubt participants were feeling in the strength their name carried or their ability to take on an essential role was a common barrier discussed.

DISCUSSION

Research to understand the motivators for and barriers of athletic trainers to get involved within leadership positions is limited. Our qualitative inquiry highlights the importance of athletic trainers' desire to get involved within the profession with intention to serve, to advocate, and to give back to others. Moreover, it calls attention to the significance that encouraging words and mentorship can have in athletic trainers' professional career. Findings from this study also identify specific barriers athletic trainers encounter when pursuing a leadership role. Although all the participants within this study served within a formal leadership role, association members are often tasked with voting for their new executive board. Members may choose to elect an individual based on their name or popularity within the profession as opposed to their leadership abilities. Consequently, in other positions or states where it may be difficult to get individuals involved, many run unopposed, leaving that individual to automatically fill the role. Although this may not be the case in all elections, it is an important thing to consider in association leadership.

Interpretation of Leadership

In our study, leadership was interpreted and defined in many ways. This can be attributed to the fact that there is not one agreed-upon definition of leadership that exists in the literature, as the concept can be hard to define.[14,15] Leadership is often defined by behaviors, attitudes, skills, effectiveness, and processes. Additionally, one must consider differences between what leadership is and who a leader is. An integrative definition used by Winston and Patterson states,

> A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization's mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional,

and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives.[14]

Many of the definitions used by our participants encompassed many aspects of this definition by discussing the ability to help others find their motivation to move towards a goal. Having a group work collectively together to evaluate and set a plan in motion requires individuals to be good listeners to all the parties involved. Listening was used to describe leadership by a couple of our participants. Leaders must have the ability to hear what individuals are saying and work collaboratively to come to a solution.

Motivations to Participate

In this study, the primary motivator for participants to choose to get involved in a leadership position within their state association was an innate desire to get involved in the profession. Involvement in the profession allowed them to contribute to change within their state association and subsequently the profession. With approximately 57 000 certified athletic trainers, just under 40 000 of these individuals are members of NATA.[16] Many athletic trainers are required or highly encouraged to become members of NATA during matriculation through their professional ATP, and thus recognize that involvement is a professional obligation. Early membership and involvement can contribute to career development by exposing students to a variety of experiences and resources.[17]

During professional education, participants' faculty members who were members of and actively involved in their association at any level helped to serve as a role model for them to emulate. Membership in various health care professional organizations provides many benefits, including continuing professional development, advocacy, networking, career development, leadership development, and increased awareness of current issues facing the profession.[18–20] Over half of all licensed occupational therapists join their professional association because of their willingness to get involved in the improvement of the profession.[20] Similarly, pharmacy students became involved because of the enjoyment they receive in giving back to others and the leadership growth they obtain by serving in a leadership role.[19] The findings of our study are similar to those of occupational therapists,[20] who thought it was important to be involved and give back to the profession. It also gave the participants a sense of fulfillment.[20] Moreover, starting a leadership role in a smaller capacity allowed athletic trainers to get better acquainted with the roles and responsibilities required of them while gaining valuable leadership experience. The participants' experience can help them transcend into future roles they want to be involved in by providing more understanding of how to run an association and how to be an active member doing so. The foundation provided in an athletic trainers' leadership role helped to give them more confidence in seeking out additional leadership opportunities in other areas of their association. Learning the ins and outs of their leadership role and the function of the board overall provided athletic trainers a new perspective on how their tasks contribute to the mission of the association. As some athletic trainers complain about their association not fighting for a fair salary, being labeled an essential worker, providing member support, or making changes to impact all athletic trainers, many of our participants described how their perception of the association changed after getting involved. For many of them, seeing firsthand how the leadership team addresses issues facing athletic trainers in their state allowed them to see the positive impact the associations are making. Change comes from those who are willing to be involved. As many of the participants in our study chose to serve in a leadership role as a primary way to get involved in the profession, the new perspective they gained and the change that is being made in their association has been impactful in their professional development.

Many of the reasons for involvement given by participants are similar to those constructs identified by Inglis and Cleave,[21] including career responsibility, contribution, professional and social relations, the value of helping others, and the enhancement of growth. Participants' decisions for involvement fell into 4 of the 5 constructs. The first construct, growth, referred to the opportunity to learn new skills.[21] Responsibility reflected the participant's ambitions for a greater role. The construct of contributions allowed participants to have the opportunity to be involved in something and make a difference. Lastly, the construct of relations considered both the personal and professional interactions of working with others. Being able to work and give back to others from this construct provided a high level of commitment and fulfillment.[21]

Encouragement. We found that many participants described how influential it was to their involvement when other athletic trainers, mentors, or colleagues provided them encouragement. The encouragement provided was a valuable tool that allowed them to do something they did not feel they had the knowledge of or skills for. Physical therapy students most joined their professional organizations because of the encouragement they received and their interest in the profession.[18] Some of our participants doubted their ability themselves until someone pointed it out and gave them positive feedback. After this acknowledgment, the athletic trainers began to change their perspective and realized they in fact could be successful in leadership. Being encouraged and providing feedback on the specific characteristic or skill helped give participants the courage needed to step into a leadership role. Furthermore, it was instrumental in helping participants identify additional ways they could be of service. Having a leader who holds high expectations and helps to motivate others contributes to their followers achieving more than what they thought was possible and challenges the status quo.[22] With many describing how impactful encouraging words can be to someone, we can consider how many more people may get involved in their association and be willing to serve within various leadership capacities if athletic trainers encouraged each other when they saw something in someone. As leadership skills should be taught and practiced during a student's professional program, athletic training educators should encourage and motivate students who show promising leadership abilities. There could be potential for more leaders within the profession who could make more of an impact if we encouraged each other to do so.

Mentorship. Mentorship was identified as a contributing factor in participants' decision to get involved in leadership positions. Mentorship is critical to the development of an athletic trainer's clinical skill set but is often lacking in other areas of professional development, like committee and organizational involvement. The process of mentoring has been seen to have a profound influence on new athletic

trainers in their transition to practice;[23] however, research is lacking in determining if mentorship would have the same effect on new athletic training leaders who are ready to make substantial contributions to the profession. With the benefits mentorship provides in students' development,[24] it can allow them to feel more confident and prepared to take on new professional responsibilities. This may reduce the perceived barriers of some individuals who may consider serving in a leadership role. Mentorship provides many benefits to both parties. More faculty and mentors who acknowledge an individual's leadership ability and are encouraging in helping them develop their skills could influence more athletic trainers willing to participate in these types of leadership positions. Although not all mentors are former faculty, mentors can be an individual's former or current supervisor, others within close proximity to their current professional role, or a role model outside of their organization.[23] Regardless of the individual, mentors help to serve as a sounding board for thoughts and ideas and guide them as they are progressing towards their personal and professional goals.[25] Mentors also help to encourage athletic trainers in opportunities that aid in leadership development, such as leadership courses or workshops, various texts and outside resources, or other professional activities such as speaking engagements. Creating and showing these opportunities to newer athletic trainers in the profession can help provide a new perspective to a seasoned board. Without a new perspective, a leadership board may become stagnant by not welcoming fresh ideas and suggestions for enhanced growth and development.

Barriers to Involvement

Fear was a significant barrier that most participants addressed when wanting to get involved in a leadership position. Participants expressed insecurities about their ability to carry out the roles and responsibilities of their position, and therefore feared being perceived as inadequate. With trying to overcome gender stereotyping in today's society, some have the perception that a woman's ability to lead is not as strong as a man's or women have more family responsibilities, which could dissuade women from getting involved.[26,27] Women may feel more pressure to meet the demands of both work and family, and having children can lead to more work-life conflict.[27] This could potentially contribute to the lack of involvement of female athletic trainers in leadership roles. When transitioning into their new role, both male and female participants were challenged as they felt they had limited knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of their newly appointed position. This led many participants to feel incompetent for a period before they really started to understand their role.[28] These feelings are similar to those of newly credentialed athletic trainers when transitioning to practice. Many newly certified athletic trainers lacked confidence in their abilities and skills, and although they knew they were prepared for their role, it was difficult to trust themselves.[28] Additionally, newly certified athletic trainers struggled with role ambiguity regarding what was expected of them, including current policies and procedures for various tasks.[28] Additional leadership and management skills could be added to the current athletic training curriculum to ease some of these fears. This can include and provide more in-depth knowledge and skills within topics such as conflict resolution, communication, strategic planning, and personnel management. Additional-ly, addressing topics such as Robert's Rules of Order[29] and how to conduct effective meetings can be integrated into the curriculum or within student organizational meetings. Athletic trainers are equipped with various clinical skills; however, valuable leadership and management skills such as how to lead others and tasks such as conducting an association meeting are not a standard covered in athletic training education.[1] These are typically learned through experience or through additional education. All athletic trainers, regardless of their position, influence those around them.[1] With most primary leadership behaviors, including credibility, verbal communication, and strategic thinking, being practiced frequently by athletic trainers,[30] some may not make the connection between those behaviors within their current professional role and the implementation of those behaviors in a leadership role. Many courses have been developed by NATA over the years, including the NATA StarTRACKS program that was revamped into what is now the NATA Leadership Academy, that have helped to address these topics. The NATA Leadership Academy is divided into 4 modules, including vision, communication, collaboration, and strategic thinking, and aids the athletic trainer in understanding and implementing these topics into their clinical practice.

Improved education and training for new leaders could also improve newly credentialed athletic trainers' confidence and reduce role ambiguity as they progress into leadership roles. Role ambiguity due to unclear job descriptions, organizational charts, or daily tasks can lead to increased stress and uncertainty, thereby decreasing performance.[31] Those with higher role ambiguity have shown to have lower leadership effectiveness, lower satisfaction, and more variation that the leader represents the collective identity.[32] Although it is up to each state to develop its own bylaws that describe the general roles and responsibilities of the leadership board,[33] policies for training and transitioning the position to the newly elected leader are often not addressed. In order to have an effective board, there must be a continuous plan of succession with regular training and opportunities to grow as a leader.[34] Many participants identified having some ambiguity in their leadership role due to not understanding the full depth of their role or certain tasks or procedures they needed to perform. Only a small number of participants had a transition period of shadowing and training before taking over their role. The remaining participants had limited help from others, and it was more of a "learn as you go" experience. It is recommended to have a transition period where a clear path is identified to be able to take over full responsibilities of the role.[34] Because of the inexperience of new leadership board members and the lack of training many participants had once elected, we could suspect that the effectiveness of the board is stunted. The time taken to develop this knowledge can impact the synergy and progress of the board.

Time Commitment. The time commitment to the role was another significant barrier in participants' decisions to get involved. Participants feared not having enough time to devote themselves to the role. Getting involved in a leadership position within their state association is an important undertaking. Because the leadership board positions are voted on by members of the association, not fulfilling that role to the best of their ability could be a disservice to the membership. Members of a board who can devote more hours to the

association are typically seen to be more actively engaged and have a higher commitment than those who contribute less time. As our participants expressed how they wanted to learn the role and be effective members of the board, they wanted to ensure they could contribute the necessary time. Women are often looking for ways to enhance work-life balance, and devoting more time outside of the home by being involved in their association may hinder their progress. Many women may have feelings of guilt if the majority of their nonwork time is devoted to other areas of development than their family.[26] Furthermore, many state associations have variability in the length of service that is required of them. With some associations requiring as little as a 2-year commitment for a role, other associations may have up to a 6-year commitment. Determining where they would be professionally and personally in a 6-year period proved challenging for some participants. As each athletic trainer's role places certain time commitments and demands on them, personal obligations and commitments also must be considered. Athletic trainers must determine what they want to prioritize, including time for family, social events, and self-care. After prioritization, involvement in the association may not be as important compared with other work or personal obligations, and the athletic trainer may choose to not get involved. Each athletic trainer should decide about any additional commitments based upon their own priorities.

Self-Confidence. Another factor impacting participants' willingness to get involved in a new opportunity was their self-confidence, or how participants perceived their skills and abilities compared with their peers. If participants did not feel competent or comfortable in their skills as compared with someone else, it typically impacted their decision until a friend or colleague encouraged them. Overcoming the feeling of incompetence was difficult as some participants described feeling like an imposter in the role they pursued. Imposter syndrome has been described as the inability to internalize positive feedback, thereby expressing fear of failure, guilt about one's successes, and underestimating oneself while overestimating others.[35] There then is an internal pressure to maintain one's facade and prevent revealing that one is a fraud to others.[35] Some participants felt that they did not have the expert knowledge or were even qualified for the role. Although some feelings of inadequacy are good to help motivate us to continue to improve in our skills, continued feelings of doubt by a decrease in their self-confidence can contribute to those being paralyzed by fear.[36] Within our study, these feelings were addressed more commonly in women than in men. Women may have self-imposed limitations when considering or applying for leadership roles, like when applying for a head athletic trainer position.[26] This could be attributed to the stigma surrounding women in leadership and how women feel the need to have to work harder and prove themselves to others. The gender role stereotypes and early socialization among family aid as potential catalysts as to why women experience imposter syndrome more than men.[35] Some of the primary motivators to get involved, including encouragement from others and mentorship, can significantly contribute to their getting past the feelings of self-doubt and improve their self-confidence.[26] Including a transition period to train the newly elected leader, as mentioned previously, can aid in the reduction of imposter syndrome.

Implications for Practice

Understanding athletic trainers' motivations to get involved in leadership opportunities and the barriers they face can help us identify and implement strategies within a student's professional education and within state and regional associations to foster involvement within their membership. With many associations struggling to find candidates for various leadership positions, understanding these issues is critical for their growth and development. Involving students in association activities, such as board or business meetings, signing of a new state bill, or advocating for new laws, could allow students to see the impact of what is occurring and inspire them to get involved during their professional careers. Additionally, our participants' reports of those who recognized and encouraged their talents and abilities as students and served as mentors for them shows the influence mentors can have. Our findings may suggest more integration of leadership skills throughout the athletic training education curriculum may be needed. Although it is understandable that robust training of these skills may not be feasible by programs because of the limited time available, determining what skills are practiced most often by athletic trainers can be prioritized for integration and implementation within the current curriculum. Additional and more advanced training can be provided within continuing education, postprofessional education, or residency. Moreover, incorporating the basics of conducting a meeting and the common terminology within associations should be addressed. As most ATPs have a student organization, running meetings like those seen in professional associations can be beneficial for students to get insight and practice these skills. State and district associations should enhance the transition of leaders into their leadership roles by creating policies that allow a training period and formal mentorship for individuals to learn and become comfortable in their new roles. Associations should also ensure term limits are placed on all leadership positions to allow other individuals to get experience. New leaders will allow new ideas and perspectives to be shared among the board for the overall growth of the association.

Limitations and Future Research

Although there is limited research within this area in athletic training, our research findings contribute to better understanding the motivations of athletic trainers' involvement in their association. Understanding the full depth of motivators and barriers to involvement in leadership roles is critical to better address how associations can recruit and retain leaders. We acknowledge that there are many athletic trainers who are excellent leaders within their own job setting or community, as the term *leader* is not defined by a title. Therefore, the study findings can be generalized only to athletic trainers who serve within a leadership position on an association executive board. Many athletic trainers are also not members, or active members, of their state-, district-, or national-level associations. Barriers to becoming a member may impede their desire for involvement. The imbalance of gender representation within this study is also a limitation. Future research should identify more participants, including the purposeful recruitment of female leaders, to determine motivators for involvement and barriers to athletic trainers joining their professional association, and to understand if the barriers addressed impact their decision to serve within a leadership role. Furthermore, determining a way for athletic trainers to lead

outside of formal leadership roles on the executive board is needed. In future research, the students' perspectives on leadership involvement and the value it has for them professionally and determining if and how athletic trainers' motivations change over the course of their career could also be beneficial. Finally, determining ways professional associations can promote and develop future athletic training leaders is crucial. This research helps to provide perspective on athletic trainers' leadership involvement and gives a foundation for future studies.

CONCLUSIONS

This study addresses a needed area of research within athletic training leadership. Athletic trainers sought out leadership positions as a desire to be more involved and serve the profession. The encouragement the participants received by others increased their confidence in their abilities to lead. Identifying leadership traits in others and encouraging them to seek out positions that use those skills in areas they are passionate about can help to increase the involvement of athletic trainers within their associations. As the profession continues to grow and more athletic trainers choose to be involved in their state and regional associations, a transition period should be implemented for all newly elected leaders to better understand their role and responsibilities. Additional research within this area can contribute to the knowledge this study has provided on motivators for those to seek out leadership involvement within the profession.

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