

# Lecture-Based Instruction on Salary Negotiation for Professional Athletic Training Students: An Educational Technique

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**Context:** Low salary is a frequently cited reason for attrition from the athletic training profession. Researchers have determined that athletic trainers (ATs) entering the first hiring process, usually newly credentialed graduates of professional athletic training programs (ATPs), are the least likely to negotiate, resulting in lowered earning potential across their careers. It is necessary to instruct athletic training students on the importance of salary negotiation before the completion of their professional preparation.

**Objective:** Describe a lecture-based approach to include salary negotiation content into ATPs.

**Background:** Employing constructivist learning theory, didactic lecture content with applicable strategies for salary negotiation is sufficient for students to understand which strategies can be used to negotiate for a higher salary during the hiring process.

**Description:** Before the didactic experience, second-year graduate ATP students self-assessed their knowledge of, familiarity with, and comfort in negotiating during the hiring process. A single 3-hour lecture on negotiation was provided to students that included reasons to negotiate, financial ramifications of not negotiating, strategies for determining appropriate salaries, example language to use, and a discussion of timing to initiate negotiations. Students reassessed their knowledge, familiarity, and comfort within 1 week of receiving the didactic content. Six months after ATP completion, students reported whether they negotiated during their first hiring process.

**Educational Advantages:** Although not required for professional ATPs, the inclusion of content specific to salary negotiation in the hiring process increases future ATs' understanding of negotiation processes and their comfort level in initiating negotiations earlier in their career.

**Conclusion:** Students' understanding of negotiation during the hiring process and comfort with attempting negotiation increased following the lecture-based technique. If ATs can achieve higher earnings earlier in their career, they can increase their lifetime earning potential, and they may find the profession to be more financially sustainable, thus decreasing professional attrition.

**Key Words:** cost of living, earnings potential, early-career, young professionals

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# Lecture-Based Instruction on Salary Negotiation for Professional Athletic Training Students: An Educational Technique

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## KEY POINTS

- Using the constructivist learning theory, we provided second-year graduate athletic training students lecture-based content on salary negotiation during the hiring process. One lecture on this content was sufficient to significantly increase knowledge, comfort, and familiarity with negotiating salary and terms of employment.
- Following a single lecture on negotiation, students' knowledge about negotiating salary or other terms of employment, familiarity with negotiation processes for salary and terms of employment, and perceived comfort with negotiating salary all significantly increased.
- Six months after graduation, 80% of responding students attempted salary negotiation during their first hiring process with 75% of them having some level of success at doing so.

Athletic training has endured decades of comparatively low salaries when examined in contrast to peer professions.<sup>1</sup> The perpetual challenge of low salaries is cited as one of the contributory factors to professional attrition away from the profession of athletic training.<sup>2</sup> Researchers recently determined that the majority of athletic training clinicians do not negotiate their salary, and the lack of negotiation is related to the number of hiring processes a clinician has experienced, with less experienced clinicians being less likely to negotiate.<sup>3</sup> If fewer employment positions equate to a decreased likelihood for negotiation, it can be presumed that new graduates of professional programs are not likely to negotiate when hired into their first position, thus resulting in a lower starting salary. Unfortunately, this also may increase the likelihood of professional attrition due to poor financial health.

Since 2019, the profession has noted a marked decrease in admission rates into professional graduate athletic training programs.<sup>4</sup> Although admissions rates indicate that that trend may be reversing, the past 6 years of decreasing enrollment rates has had a contributory impact on the body of the profession; creating a potential shortage of athletic trainers relative to the employment need.<sup>4</sup> To decrease professional attrition and increase interest in joining the profession, athletic trainers must proactively advocate for increased wages for the work performed. However, salary negotiation can be an intimidating topic for an inexperienced prospective employee to discuss during the hiring process.<sup>3</sup> Professional athletic training program faculty could consider introducing financial discussions, specifically teaching negotiation skills within the programmatic content. This type of content could serve to fulfill certain Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education Standards, namely those pertaining to effective communication with stakeholders and the ability to advocate for the profession.<sup>5</sup>

The constructivist learning theory postulates that learners develop meaning for themselves when presented with new knowledge.<sup>6</sup> This theory, applied to the concept of negotiations, allows students the opportunity to draw meaning that is relevant to them and their contextual circumstances when presented with a range of options. Theoretically, by presenting the concepts of negotiation and the

rationale for its inclusion during the hiring process and discussing items that might be negotiable, students should be able to draw from those concepts at a later time as they apply to their personal experiences and situations. As such, we aimed to determine if presenting the concepts of negotiation in a single, focused, lecture-based session would effectively improve students' knowledge, familiarity, and comfort with negotiations. If so, athletic training program faculty could incorporate this simple concept into a stand-alone session for negotiations without monopolizing too large of a swathe of curricular time while still achieving the outcome of increasing the likelihood of new graduates attempting salary negotiations to improve their financial sustainability in the profession.

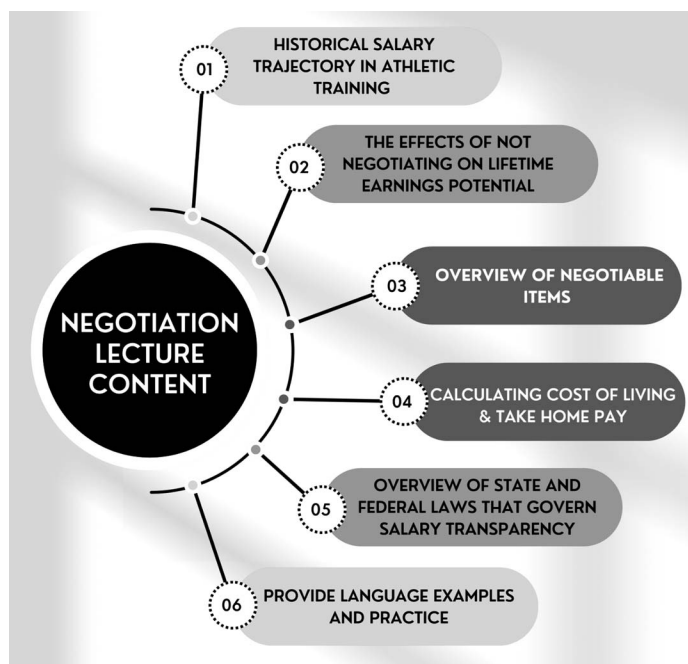
## EDUCATIONAL TECHNIQUE

We aimed to determine the efficacy of a single topic-focused lecture on negotiation during the hiring process for a convenience sample of a single cohort of second-year athletic training students enrolled in their final semester of didactic coursework in a graduate professional athletic training program. The Old Dominion University College of Health Sciences Human Subjects Review Committee determined these data to meet the criteria for exempt status.

For the educational session, 9 students participated in an approximately 3-hour lecture session that included discussion-based prompts threaded throughout. The content was delivered by 2 athletic training faculty members, 1 with expertise in negotiations and 1 with more recent hiring experiences. An overview of the included content is provided in the Figure. First, a historical review of salary trajectories relative to buying power was presented.<sup>7</sup> Then a presentation of available job postings from the National Athletic Trainers' Association were broken down to discuss their financial viability relative to hours, cost of living, and listed salary range. We then presented a chart demonstrating the changes to lifetime earning potential based on initial salary increments; an example of this chart is presented in Table 1. Students were presented with existing research discussing athletic trainers' likelihood to negotiate during the hiring process.<sup>3</sup> Next, we presented an overview of the income-based (eg, salary, stipends, signing bonuses, and guaranteed raises) and nonincome-based (eg, professional organization membership dues, moving expenses, and employment start date) items that might be negotiable and discussed the relative impacts of each. Then, free website resources to assist with cost-of-living calculations and take-home paycheck calculations were provided to students alongside a discussion of the importance of completing such calculations.<sup>8-10</sup> Students were provided a handout and given an opportunity to discuss the state and federal laws that govern pay transparency.<sup>11</sup> Last, timing of initiating negotiations was covered, and example language to use was provided to students.<sup>12</sup> Time was provided at the end of the session for students to ask questions and practice using the provided example phrases.

Before the educational intervention, the faculty (J.M.C., T.R.C.) created an assessment measure intended to determine the efficacy

**Figure. Content included in the lecture on salary negotiation.**



of a single lecture on salary negotiation for professional athletic training students. Another colleague (C.E.W.B.) served as the content reviewer of the assessment measure to determine face and content validity. Nine athletic training students (1 man and 8 women) completed a preintervention survey that included demographic questions, asked students to list terms of employment that they knew to be negotiable, and required students to rate their knowledge of, familiarity with, and comfort with negotiations on a Likert scale. Knowledge of negotiating salary and terms of employment were rated on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 indicating *not at all knowledgeable* and 4 indicating *extremely knowledgeable*). Familiarity with negotiations and comfort negotiating salary and terms of employment were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 indicating *extremely unfamiliar or uncomfortable*, 3 indicating *neutral*, and 5 indicating *extremely familiar or comfortable*). The same survey was used to assess the same content areas following content delivery with the addition of the following 3 questions: (1) 5-point Likert scale rating of the perceived efficacy of the lecture (1 indicating *very ineffective* and 5 indicating *very effective*), (2) open-ended response question regarding which aspects of the

lecture were most helpful, and (3) open-ended response question regarding any aspects about negotiation that were not included in the lecture that should have been. The postintervention survey was sent following the lecture-based educational intervention, and responses were collected for up to 1 week following content delivery. Six of the 9 students completed the postintervention survey.

We used SPSS (version 29; IBM Corporation) to calculate descriptive statistics. Results of the pre- and postintervention surveys are presented in Table 2. There were increases in scores across knowledge, familiarity, and comfort for both salary negotiations and terms of employment negotiations from pre- to postintervention, indicating that the students were able to increase their knowledge and familiarity with the negotiation process and increased their comfort level in engaging in salary negotiations following this single exposure to negotiation content. Students were also asked to rate the efficacy of the lecture on negotiations, and the 6 postintervention respondents provided a mean score of  $4.83 \pm 0.41$ , indicating that the lecture was very effective.

Qualitatively, the feedback on the lecture highlighted that all of the presented content was beneficial. For example, 1 student said, “I thought it had tons of information that was extremely helpful! I really like that you gave us scripts to say when negotiating or accepting job offers.” Another student stated, “The aspects about benefits were especially helpful.” Relative to content that should have been included that was not, only 1 suggestion was provided, as 1 student requested content on “how to read a contract when hired for a new position.”

Further, we followed up with this cohort 6 months after graduation and asked them to complete a previously validated survey regarding clinician negotiation during the hiring process with added open-ended questions regarding how the lecture benefited them during the hiring process.<sup>3</sup> Five of the 9 students (56%) completed the survey regarding their negotiation practices during their first hiring process. Of the 5 responding students, 4 (80%) did attempt to negotiate their salary during the hiring process. Of the 4 negotiating students, 2 (50%) received their counteroffer, 1 (25%) compromised with their employer on final salary, and 1 (25%) was not successful at increasing their starting salary through negotiation. Conversely, 80% of the responding students did not negotiate the other terms of employment during the hiring process. The 1 respondent who negotiated terms was able to successfully negotiate their employment start date. In this survey we also asked them to identify how the lecture they attended affected

**Table 1. Sample Earnings Projections Based on Starting Salary**

Starting Salary	Assuming 3.0% Annual Increase, 5-Year Salary Projection	Assuming 3.0% Annual Increase, 10-Year Salary Projection	Assuming 3.0% Annual Increase, 20-Year Salary Projection	Cumulative Earnings Over 20 Years <sup>a</sup>
\$38 000	\$44 052	\$51 059	\$68 632	\$1 051 706
\$42 000	\$48 690	\$56 444	\$75 857	\$1 162 412
\$45 000	\$52 167	\$60 476	\$81 275	\$1 245 442
\$48 000	\$55 645	\$64 508	\$86 693	\$1 328 471
\$52 000	\$60 282	\$69 884	\$93 918	\$1 439 177
\$55 000	\$63 760	\$73 915	\$99 336	\$1 522 207
\$58 000	\$67 238	\$77 947	\$104 754	\$1 605 236

\$20 000 less in starting salary equates to more than \$1.5 million dollars (\$553 530) less in total earnings over 20 years of employment.

<sup>a</sup> Assumes no other raises, salary adjustments, or ad hoc income increases.



**Table 2. Aggregate Scores From the Pre- and Postintervention Assessment**

	Current Knowledge <sup>a</sup> About Negotiating Salary Mean $\pm$ SD	Current Knowledge About Negotiating Other Terms of Employment Mean $\pm$ SD	Current Familiarity <sup>b</sup> With Salary Negotiation Process Mean $\pm$ SD	Current Familiarity With Terms of Employment Negotiation Process Mean $\pm$ SD	If Negotiating Today, Current Level of Comfort <sup>b</sup> With Negotiating Salary Mean $\pm$ SD	If Negotiating Today, Current Level of Comfort Negotiating Terms of Employment Mean $\pm$ SD
Preintervention survey ( <i>n</i> = 9)	1.78 $\pm$ 0.83	1.78 $\pm$ 0.83	2.33 $\pm$ 1.23	2.11 $\pm$ 1.27	2.22 $\pm$ 1.09	2.22 $\pm$ 1.20
Postintervention survey ( <i>n</i> = 6)	3.50 $\pm$ 0.55	3.17 $\pm$ 0.41	4.17 $\pm$ 0.41	4.17 $\pm$ 0.41	4.50 $\pm$ 0.55	4.17 $\pm$ 0.75

<sup>a</sup> Likert scale rating: 1 = *not at all knowledgeable*, 2 = *minimally knowledgeable*, 3 = *moderately knowledgeable*, and 4 = *extremely knowledgeable*.

<sup>b</sup> Likert scale rating: 1 = *extremely unfamiliar/uncomfortable*, 2 = *somewhat unfamiliar/uncomfortable*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *somewhat familiar/comfortable*, and 5 = *extremely familiar/comfortable*.

their approach to negotiating. Students indicated that the improvement in their comfort was obvious. One student said, “The classroom discussion helped me to be confident in the salary negotiation whether my offer was met or not met. I felt comfortable discussing what my starting salary should be.” Another student stated, “After graduation I felt more comfortable asking for more money, and I attribute that to the negotiation lecture given to us. The negotiation lecture helped me understand my worth and taught me how to be more confident in asking for a higher salary.” One of the students who did not negotiate terms of employment stated, “I didn’t negotiate these, but it definitely taught me how to negotiate for some things other than money.”

## ADVANTAGES

Our experience demonstrates that by applying the constructivist learning theory, salary and benefits negotiation content can be presented to athletic training students in a short, lecture-based approach, and students will in turn construct meaning from that content to benefit their knowledge, familiarity, and comfort with the topic. We demonstrated that a lecture of this nature can improve students’ knowledge on negotiable items, their familiarity with negotiation processes, and their comfort in engaging with negotiations during the hiring process without consuming excess curricular time.

Financial wellness is essentially defined as one’s ability to understand their personal financial situation, develop, implement, and achieve financial goals, and have the resources and knowledge to achieve financial stability.<sup>13</sup> College students historically have struggled to demonstrate financial wellness,<sup>13</sup> and this concern has frequently been discussed in athletic training specific to the change of entry-level degree to the graduate level, increasing student loan debt and cost of entry to the profession without guaranteed improvement in professional salaries.<sup>14,15</sup> Compounding this concern is the relatively low levels of financial literacy demonstrated by college students.<sup>13,16</sup>

Researchers have documented that financial literacy is not linked to endogenous factors associated with an individual, meaning that demographic variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity do not influence financial literacy.<sup>16</sup> Financial literacy is directly linked to effective financial education exposure, whether didactically or experimentally delivered.<sup>16</sup> This same study found that experiential learning opportunities may be most impactful on the development of financial literacy and subsequent financial wellness but noted that formal learning opportunities at the collegiate level have the potential to impact these 2 constructs in a beneficial way.<sup>16</sup> Given the barrier of time within a curriculum to develop, implement, and assess an experiential learning opportunity relative to negotiating during the hiring process, we sought to determine if, through the lens of constructivist learning theory, a single exposure to didactic content would be effective.

To effectively increase financial literacy and professional salaries, especially for early-career professionals, it is imperative that all graduates of professional athletic training programs understand calculating financial needs and have the ability to apply it to salary discussions during the hiring process. Previously, researchers have demonstrated that a majority of athletic training clinicians do not negotiate their salary when hired into a position, and early-career clinicians are the least likely to enter into negotiations during the hiring process.<sup>3</sup> Comparatively, 80% of our responding students did negotiate when hired into a position after attending

a single lecture on the topic. Our findings suggest that although mastery of patient care skills requires multiple content exposures and experiential learning opportunities, a short exposure to concepts of financial literacy and wellness presented with strategies and concepts for negotiating during the hiring process effectively improved students' knowledge, familiarity, and comfort with negotiating.

Athletic training program faculty should consider where negotiation instruction would appropriately fit within the curriculum, although we only evaluated this approach with students in their final semester of a professional graduate athletic training program. The instructor of the content should compile a mixture of evidence to support the need to negotiate and provide examples of what can be negotiated alongside the long-term financial and personal ramifications of each example. Last, students appreciate the provision of sample language that could be used during negotiations, which improved their confidence in initiating such discussions. Faculty could also consider inviting guest speakers from their institutions' student success areas or human resources department to provide their input on such topics.

## CONCLUSIONS

It should be noted that this educational technique included a small sample size of students at a single academic institution. In the future, researchers should determine what educational techniques are being used across different programs and aim to assess those techniques to determine which mechanism is most effective.

Low wages continue to contribute to professional attrition and lack of interest in the profession of athletic training. Negotiating salary and terms of employment could improve the financial wellness of athletic training clinicians, potentially reducing the likelihood of attrition from the profession. To ensure that students can effectively negotiate, education directed toward improving financial literacy is needed. Early-career athletic trainers are among the least likely to attempt to negotiate their salaries and as such are most in need of this content. Faculty in professional education programs could present information to improve financial wellness along with evidence regarding salary and terms of employment negotiation to improve the likelihood that graduates of their program will successfully negotiate during their initial hiring experience. Exposure to a single lecture on this content proves sufficient to improve student knowledge of negotiable items, familiarity with the process, and comfort with initiating salary negotiations.

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