The Effects of the Global Pandemic on Women Athletic Training Students as They Transitioned to Practice

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Context: The transition to practice process is complex and facilitated by many formal and informal processes. The coronavirus disease 2019 global pandemic presented unique challenges for athletic trainers. An identity-specific focus is necessary to understand better the transition to practice process during the pandemic.

Objective: To understand (1) what socializing factors influence a cohort of women athletic trainers who graduated from the same professional master's (PM) athletic training program as they transitioned to practice and (2) the unique challenges the women athletic trainers faced as they sought employment and transitioned into their first professional roles during the pandemic.

Design: Qualitative phenomenological cohort study.

Setting: Semistructured, in-depth, 1-on-1 videoconference interviews.

Patients or other Participants: Six women (24.83 ± .96 years old) who graduated from the same PM athletic training program now working in various athletic training settings.

Data Collection and Analysis: We conducted semistructured interviews via Zoom (Zoom Video Communications). Interviews were transcribed, and a general phenomenological approach to analysis was used. Member checks, multiple analyst triangulation, and peer review were used to ensure trustworthiness.

Results: Three main themes emerged that describe the effects of the pandemic on the transition to practice of women athletic trainers: (1) personal identity, (2) relational identity, and (3) professional identity. Several subthemes were also identified to further illustrate the participants' lived experiences.

Conclusions: Although some of the participants' socialization and transition to practice experiences were similar to other graduates described in the literature, the personal, relational, and professional identities of these women athletic trainers were influenced by the pandemic. The participants purposefully sought women mentors to assist them with navigating the challenges of developing a professional identity during the pandemic. There is a need to create gender-specific networks to support individuals during their growth from novice to professional.

Key Words: career socialization, mentorship, gendered experience

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KEY POINTS

- The pandemic made the transition to practice process different and more difficult for the women in this study.
- The women in this study intentionally sought encouragement and support from same-gendered mentors such as former coaches, PM athletic training faculty, preceptors, and peers, as they transitioned to practice during the pandemic.
- Established support systems and mentorship are necessary early in the transition to practice process.

INTRODUCTION

Career socialization is the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, behaviors, way of dress, and shared attitude of a profession such as athletic training.[1] Weidman et al's[2] *Conceptualizing Graduate and Professional Student Socialization* framework illustrates the fluid and nonmonolithic socialization process and visualizes how the professional, university, and personal communities all influence the experience of the graduate student and new professional.

The socialization process of students and professionals unfolds in multiple phases. In the initial phase, anticipatory socialization, individuals form expectations and attitudes about athletic training before fully entering the field.[3] Anticipatory socialization is characterized by early exposure to professional norms through didactic and clinical experiences and subsequent interactions with peers, professors, preceptors, and other working professionals. The second phase, referred to as organizational socialization, transpires as individuals transition into the actual work environment and the professional becomes a member of the profession.[3] For athletic trainers, the transition to practice portion of organizational socialization was recently defined in the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Transition to Practice Workgroup Report as a

> complex process whereby a newly credentialed athletic trainer, while redefining their sense of self during disruptive life events, develops and is supported from education to clinical practice, regardless of setting.[4]

Many formal and informal processes facilitate the 9- to 12-month transition to practice process in athletic training, including mentoring, orientation, onboarding, and peer interactions.[4–7]

Socialization is a gendered process that magnifies the norms of the majority of the discipline such as the culture of competition and hierarchy within the program.[8] Graduate students learn the expected behaviors for success through the gendered lens of their discipline, and an individual's gender identity can influence their lived experiences within a graduate program and early in their career.[8] Currently, the majority of NATA members are women at both the certified (55.3%) and student (65.7%) member levels.[9] The NATA data are similar to the current enrollment percentages of undergraduate programs. Women students are 58% of the total undergraduate population.[10] The gap between the number of men (19.4%) and women (80.6%) continued to increase in new enrollment in graduate (masters) programs in the health sciences during the fall 2022 semester.[11]

Although Weidman et al's work has served as a foundation for understanding the career socialization process, there has been a continued need for a better understanding of the transformation of graduate students that is more inclusive of the multiple identities and the social capital within institutional cultures.[12–14] Additional inquiry with a discipline and identity-specific focus is necessary to continue to test and understand Weidman et al's[2] and other socialization theories.[12–14] An understanding of the nuanced interplay between gender dynamics and the socialization process is vital for understanding the unique challenges faced by athletic trainers as they navigate their transition to practice.

Given that men and women may have different socialization experiences, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what socializing factors influence a cohort of women athletic trainers who graduated from the same professional master's (PM) athletic training program as they transitioned to practice.[15] We conducted this study in October 2020 during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic. There are a limited number of studies in athletic training that have described the effects of the pandemic on students and working professionals, and none have sought to examine a cohort of women who transitioned to practice during the pandemic.[16–20] Therefore, a secondary purpose of the study was to understand the unique challenges the women athletic trainers faced as they sought employment and transitioned into their first professional roles during the pandemic.

METHODS

Research Design

For this qualitative study, we used a phenomenological approach to gain a holistic and in-depth understanding of this cohort of women athletic trainers' lived experiences.[21–23] We conducted semistructured 1-on-1 in-depth interviews and used the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research checklist to ensure the study's rigor and comprehensiveness.[24]

Participants

After receiving institutional review board approval, we used purposeful, convenience sampling to select women participants who graduated from 1 PM athletic training program in the spring 2020 semester. There were 10 women in the cohort, and 6 enrolled and participated in the study. Similar to a case study design, the participants in this study were bounded by shared characteristics, including gender identity and institution, allowing us to understand their individual and shared

experiences as they pertained to the research question.[22,25] The institution in this study is a public, suburban institution with a total enrollment of approximately 15 000, including about 2000 graduate students. Participants were in their first job at the time we conducted interviews. The Table includes additional demographics on the 6 women, whose average age was 24.8 years (standard deviation = 0.81) and who were employed in a variety of athletic training settings.

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures

First, participants completed a background questionnaire via Qualtrics. The background questionnaire asked participants to report information such as their name, age, race, sex, gender identity, degrees earned, current job setting, and title. We also asked participants to indicate their career goals and whether they completed formal orientation/onboarding in their current role. Next, 1-on-1 semistructured interviews (Appendix) were conducted and recorded using the Zoom platform (Zoom Video Communications, Inc). The interviews took place between October and November 2020 and lasted a minimum of 60 minutes. H.N.W. conducted all of the interviews and then transcribed, deidentified, and checked them for accuracy.

The background questionnaire and the semistructured interview questions reflected the current literature on career socialization in graduate education, athletic training, medicine, and other related professions.[1,2,6,7,16,17] In keeping with a phenomenological approach, we first inquired about participants' past experiences within and directly after completing the PM athletic training program. Next, we aimed to understand participants' present experiences working in the athletic training profession for the first time. Participants completed their PM athletic training program in the spring of 2020 at the onset of the pandemic and subsequently entered the athletic training profession as the pandemic unfolded. Therefore, we purposefully included interview questions that would allow for an understanding of those shared and unique experiences. Before the interviews were conducted, a coinvestigator with expertise in qualitative research design served as the content expert for the review of the interview protocol. No modifications were made.

Data Analysis and Credibility

We began by using a general phenomenological approach to guide data analysis.[21] Two members of the research team independently analyzed the data. They read the transcripts numerous times to gain a holistic sense of the data and understand the overall experiences of the participants. Next, they generated notes and highlighted the transcripts to identify common units of meaning and themes. Clusters of common themes were formed, and this process of reviewing, coding, and generating themes continued until unique codes were identified. Next, the researchers compared themes and codes until a consensus was reached. At this point, we identified the need to request additional information from the participants related to 1 of the themes. Participants were emailed, and their responses allowed us to reach data saturation. Participant transcripts and email responses were sent to a third member of the research team who independently analyzed the data.

Table. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Sex	Gender Identity	Career Goal Before Graduation	Current Job Setting	Job Title
Dylan	26	White	Female	Woman	Collegiate (Division II or III)	Collegiate (Division II)	Assistant Athletic Trainer
Emily	26	White	Female	Woman	Athletic trainer in physician extender role	Athletic trainer in physician extender role	Medical Assistant
Jess	24	White	Female	Woman	Athletic trainer in physician extender role	Middle school	Assistant Athletic Trainer
Kate	24	White	Female	Woman	Military or collegiate (Division I)	Military (Division I)	Athletic Training Fellow
Nicole	25	White	Female	Woman	Collegiate (Division I or II)	Collegiate (Division II)	Assistant Athletic Trainer
Sam	24	White	Female	Woman	Collegiate (Division I)	Collegiate (Division I)	Assistant Athletic Trainer

Data Credibility

Bracketing is a key concept in phenomenology research and involves setting aside the researcher's understanding and experiences of the phenomenon to identify potential biases.[21] Before conducting interviews, the research team reflected on our own experiences, which allowed us to separate our background and understanding from those of the participants. A.G.S. and E.A.D. were educators, clinicians, and preceptors at the same institution as the participants, whereas H.N.W. was completing their master's degree as a graduate assistant athletic trainer. The fourth member of the research team, M.E.K, was a researcher and administrator at another institution. Because this study was conducted during the pandemic, all members of the research team experienced university closures, online learning, and subsequent transition back to in-person events.

We ensured trustworthiness through 3 processes: multiple analyst triangulation, peer expert review, and member checks. Multiple analyst triangulation occurred when the first 2 members of the research team independently analyzed the data and determined themes and codes. The third member of the research team also independently analyzed the data, and we met to discuss the themes and codes until a consensus was reached. After the themes and codes were finalized the final member of the research team served as an expert reviewer to confirm the coding structure and results. The same peer expert reviewed the interview instrument before data collection began. Member checks occurred by providing each participant with their transcript to ensure the information was accurate. No edits were made because of member checks.

RESULTS

The 6 women who participated in this study described their transition to practice experiences amid the pandemic. We identified 3 main themes during the analysis of the interviews that described our participants' experiences. These themes and their subthemes and supporting quotations are presented below and represented in the Figure.

Personal Identity

Many individuals and experiences influence the development of one's identity.[2] As the participants in this study transitioned to practice, they faced unique personal challenges and tough decisions, many of which were the result of the pandemic.

Personal Challenges. Participants described the need to "manage their mental health" and felt they were experiencing burnout. They described the initial months in their new jobs as "a very rough time trying to adjust" and "an adjustment mentally and physically" because of being isolated at home for the first months of the pandemic. Kate described the abrupt change as "going from sitting in your house for 3 months to just getting plopped down in this brand-new space (with) brand new people." Sam expressed how she "pushed (herself) to the back burner" and acknowledged the immediate and future implications of doing so, such as burnout. In addition to managing the mental and physical effects of the pandemic, Dylan experienced the loss of a parent. She said, "I'm dealing with a lot of other things. I guess I wanted to tell you guys...actually, my mom passed in September. So

Figure. Career socialization factors of women athletic trainers transitioning to practice during the COVID-19 global pandemic.
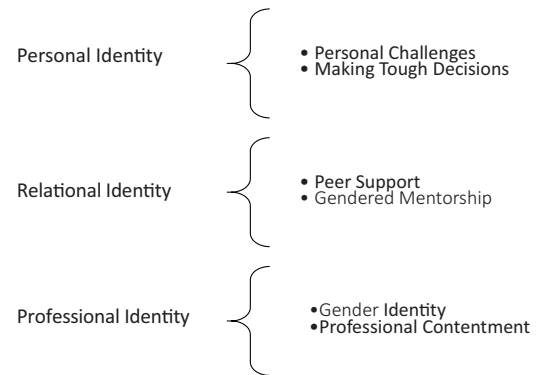
that's been another thing that's been kind of a struggle." She reflected on how she had to "compartmentalize" and prioritize physical activity to promote her positive mental health.

Making Tough Decisions. As the participants searched for jobs, they were faced with limited options because of the pandemic. They weighed their potential options and considered their priorities, such as setting, location, proximity to family and friends, and long-term versus short-term goals. Ultimately, this caused the participants to make difficult personal decisions. Nicole described the internal conflict that many participants experienced when she indicated that she "didn't want to leave the family" that she had spent the pandemic with but "took a huge leap" in taking a job several states away. Realizing that the job market was affected by the pandemic, Jess, feeling "beaten down because (she) wasn't getting anything...ended up just picking whenever the first one was offered..." instead of waiting for a job to open that aligned with her career goals. And Sam, after a "breaking point," enrolled in an online massage therapy program before finally getting a job in the collegiate athletic training setting.

Relational Identity

Identity formation is dependent on social and relational factors.[8] The women in this study navigated the challenges of the pandemic by relying heavily on support from their peers and women mentors.

Peer Support. As the new professionals attempted to settle into their role during the pandemic, many found themselves isolated from their new colleagues due to the social distancing requirements of the pandemic. Yet, the participants often found themselves needing guidance about challenging patient cases, and they sought emotional support in dealing with the challenges of the pandemic. Rather than seek help from their current colleagues, the first people they turned to were peers from their graduating class as well as peers from their graduate university who were in a different cohort. They called one another and used a "group text" to discuss cases and challenges. The participants found support from their peers because they were experiencing similar challenges and could provide one another with helpful advice or even the comfort that they were not alone in their experiences. Sam referred to a peer who supports her and said, "she (also) works in a collegiate setting, she's going through

the same thing that I am…and connecting with her has been great." Dylan discussed 1 patient that she was treating and said, "I'm texting (her) about that because she had so much experience with that in one of her clinical(s).…" Kate described the encouragement and support she received by saying, "on the worst days she'll just pick me up like 'you're gonna be okay. You're gonna be fine. You're doing great.'"

Gendered Mentorship. Former women coaches, PM athletic training faculty, preceptors, and peers were all identified as individuals who served as mentors to the participants in this study. As the participants transitioned to their new organizations and jobs, they faced several barriers, and the desire for women mentors to guide the participants through their transition to practice was evident. Some participants sought out former women mentors during this time. For example, Kate indicated that the first several weeks of her job were very stressful. She indicated that she "held it together" in the beginning, but the challenges she faced in her new job became too much to navigate alone. She reached out to a former woman preceptor/mentor for help and said, "now we talk like once a week, once every 2 weeks…and it's been fantastic." Other participants had yet to connect with former women mentors but expressed the desire to have one. For example, Dylan said,

I definitely feel that I have gained (women) mentors throughout grad school that have helped me navigate through school and the process of finding a job…however, now that grad school has come to an end, I don't see any mentors in my world as a newly practicing, certified athletic trainer…I really was looking to find a place with a mentor too, so that kind of was a letdown…"

Professional Identity

The development of a professional identity includes a process of self-reflection, an individual's interpretation of how they are viewed by others, and a continual assessment of professional values, actions, abilities, motivation, and career aspirations.[26–28] It is also when students understand how their new identity relates to their personal and relational selves.[2,29]

Gender Identity. In addition to providing guidance and support during challenging times, the participants in this study described how their women mentors influenced the development of their professional identity. Sam said, "I don't have 1 specific (woman) mentor, but I think personally I compare myself to other (women) in the field…and this allows me to build a picture of who I aspire to be in my own unique way." When reflecting on how her former mentors have influenced her, Dylan said,

I feel that they, more importantly, effortlessly demonstrated so much passion and pride in both their role as professors and athletic trainers, whether they know it or not. As a new professional, they have really instilled in me the concept of constantly growing, being challenged, and being a better athletic trainer than I was yesterday.

Professional Contentment. As the participants started to settle into their new careers, they expressed how different their current job tasks and environments were compared with their experiences as students before the pandemic. Their fall competitive seasons were replaced with social-distancing practices, and much of their time was consumed with "extra stuff to worry about that you normally wouldn't have to worry about" such as ensuring everyone was always wearing their mask and COVID-19 symptom monitoring. Dylan said, "Works been really slow…the days move slow…I'm ready for it to be over. I'm ready for it to get back to game day…" The participants found themselves doing rehabilitation "with no equipment" and expressed that they were "only evaluating chronic injuries" because contact practices were not allowed, and therefore acute injuries were not occurring frequently. As a result, they felt they had lost some of the knowledge they gained in their PM Athletic Training Program, or as Dylan said, "Everything I've learned it feels like it's either disappearing or it's come to just a complete halt."

During this time, participants evaluated their level of satisfaction with their career and current role. They assessed what they enjoyed about their role, thinking about what they would like to change and trying to determine if they wanted to remain in their jobs and the athletic training profession. Some participants' expectations were exceeded, for example, Emily who said, "I really only thought I would be doing intake…but I do a lot more, I'm like the lead on my team…I'm really happy with where I'm at…." Kate on the other hand articulated how the challenges of the pandemic caused her to contemplate her future. She said,

And it's hard because I can't tell if I'm getting burnt out, if I'm allowed to be burnt out, or what…it's hard to determine, like, is this how this profession is all of the time? Or is this just how it is because of COVID? So it's hard to like discern the 2…do I actually like this or does this year kind of suck?"

Even the participants who noted important, influential experiences in the first months of their careers indicated other goals that would eventually take them down a different path and away from athletic training. For example, Jess shared, "I don't feel like (athletic training) is where I need to be and so I started like I guess like looking more into like PA (physician assistant)." Sam said, "…like if it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out, and like I'll figure it out myself. And I also have massage therapy and I can do that…."

DISCUSSION

Graduate education and transitioning to practice are social experiences influenced by one's identity.[2] Social capital (eg, academic and professional networks) and social comparison influence retention in a program and future success in the profession. Socialization and transition to practice are reflective processes where one considers their relationship to others and their future field.[2] This study, and its gendered focus within the athletic training context during the pandemic, provides an understanding of a specific population within the graduate and novice professional landscape as they transitioned to practice.

Influence of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

As we continue to transition to a postpandemic world, more is being understood about the academic and graduate experiences during the semesters affected by the pandemic. During the pandemic, critical components to academic programs,

such as clinical experience, had to be reimagined because of the health and safety precautions needed. A recent study by Hargrave and Singe found that the loss of clinical experiences resulted in PM athletic training students feeling less confident in their clinical skills, whereas the shift to online learning yielded both benefits and challenges.[17] There were increased distractions and decreased motivation, yet students expressed that online learning was beneficial in terms of information synthesis and their mental health.[17] The transition to online learning influenced the productivity level of graduate students but led to concerns regarding their ability to secure desired professional positions.[30] The effects of the pandemic were personal (eg, feelings of burnout and fear of infecting loved ones) and academic/professional, but despite the negative challenges, graduate students still held positive feelings toward their programs and institutions.[31]

The pandemic presented challenges for all the participants in the current study. As they attempted to adjust to their new positions, the pandemic made it especially difficult for the participants to acclimatize and develop their professional identity. Because of the pandemic, athletics and sports participation halted and intermittently restarted and stopped depending on the number of cases and other public health factors. For athletic trainers, this meant that they were often given new responsibilities of temperature checks, contact tracing, and additional health screenings. Many athletic trainers lacked a "normal" season in which they would travel with their teams, celebrate wins and losses, and evaluate and rehabilitate injuries. With many sports and schools switching to noncontact, nonmandatory practices only and some institutions choosing to cancel seasons completely, the participants noted that there were fewer major acute injuries and more overuse, less severe injuries. This change in exposure to injuries and modalities implemented could influence one's confidence in clinical knowledge and skills as well as lead some early professionals to question if the field is actually a good fit for them.[17]

Every participant presented different personal challenges while settling into their respective organization. From the death of a family member and moving to a different state to managing their mental health, the ability of the participants to settle into their new organization was more difficult because of their personal circumstances. Similar to the cross-sectional study conducted by Winkelmann and Games, the 1 personal challenge that stood out for the participants in this study was the need to manage their own mental health and develop ways of coping with stress, whether that be exercising, talking with family and friends, listening to music, or journaling.[20] Being a new professional in the field is a universally stressful life event, but the challenges of the pandemic made this transition even more difficult as these young professionals had to learn how to build new relationships and nurture existing ones in a remote and socially distant way.

Development of Professional Identity

The personal, relational, and professional identities of graduate students and early professionals are connected throughout the socialization process, each representing and operating in a specific network within the socialization model.[2,28] When identifying the influence of personal identity, characteristics such as race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status are the focus.[32] Relational identity refers to the close relationships of the individual and how they interact within those relationships.[33] Relational identity can exist across multiple networks. Women operate more from the relational identity, which values maintaining relationships, than men who operate in the collective identity.[34] The development of a professional identity is ongoing and includes formal and nonformal experiences.[2] Engaging in and with communities of practice is important in developing a professional identity.[26] The final stage of career socialization is known as organizational socialization. In this stage, newly credentialed athletic trainers begin to work through ordinary and unordinary situations on their own as credentialed, licensed professionals and commit to their professional identity.[2]

As new professionals, they are making decisions with other athletic trainers working around them; however, some of the participants were on their own in their respective settings without a direct colleague or supervisor to lean on or provide affirmation regarding their decisions. Although the participants began to develop their professional identities, the biggest challenge was that they lacked a mentor to turn to for guidance and support. Mentorship is a strong facilitator of the development of an early professional's identity.[7,35] These young professionals felt the need for someone to formally or informally provide them with guidance in specific situations as well as with regular communication to increase their self-confidence and self-competence. Even though the participants had a large support system within their academic program, being put into brand new environments and jobs without this support system was a change and required either adjusting to the lack of a mentor or seeking a mentor on their own.

Gendered Mentorship

Participants in this study identified many women within and outside of the PM athletic training program as mentors. Within the program, participants specifically identified women athletic training faculty, preceptors, and peers. These mentoring relationships were informal and were sustained organically outside of the formal structure of the academic program. The cohort model of the academic program helped develop a peer culture that provided support for the participants as they transitioned to practice. Although the effect of peer culture has been identified in previous graduate education literature and nursing education literature, the influence of peer culture in athletic training has not been explored.[3,9] Peers within the program are often a source of support for graduate students. In their study of the lab rotations of women students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics doctoral programs, Wofford and Blaney found that women cohort members were both a source of support and competition for each other.[36] Using social comparison, women reflected on their own experience within the lab to measure their productivity and satisfaction.[36]

The students in this cohort overwhelmingly felt that their peers did not have a direct influence on their own career goals, rather, they relied on each other for shared support and the storytelling of shared lived experiences. The participants detailed that they often shared clinical stories and anecdotes, which may have given them insight into circumstances they had not personally experienced. At times, students relied on their peers when they were going through a challenging time

with school, clinical, or personal family matters.[37,38] This is when students may become peer mentors to one another. They developed multidimensional relationships offering both a casual and professional source of support. For women athletic trainers early in their careers, serving as a mentor can be just as valuable as having a mentor when navigating gender bias within the profession.[39]

Mentorship with faculty is important to the persistence and success of graduate students across identities and academic disciplines.[40] In their study of gender and relationships of graduate students and their professors, Shroeder and Mynatt found that the differences were more psychosocial than academic and professional.[41] Future exploration is still needed to understand if same-gender mentorship has a significant influence on completion rates and other measures important to graduate education.[42] Women doctoral students are more likely to seek out same-gender mentorship than their male counterparts.[42] Within the athletic training profession, mentored relationships help to navigate gender-specific experiences in the field.[43] However, Mazerolle et al found that support through "encouragement, nurturing, modeling, and feedback" was more valuable than gender to women athletic trainers as they navigated bias and discrimination because of their gender.[39] Although the women in this study did not speak about the need to navigate gender-specific experiences such as bias or discrimination, they intentionally sought same-gender mentors for encouragement and support as they navigated the challenges of finishing school, gaining employment, and beginning their first job during the pandemic.

The importance of having a same-gendered mentor may be influenced by the career, life stage, and needs of the mentee.[41] This study sheds light on the fact that same-gendered mentorship was necessary during graduate school and at the onset of participants' transition to practice. We recognize that the unique circumstances of the pandemic may have contributed to employers being unable to provide formal mentorship for the women in this study. However, the women in this study strongly desired support and sought it out of necessity. We do not know if the women in this study remain in the profession, but it is alarming that a "significant absence" of women mentors exists in athletic training due to a lack of tenured women in the profession and a limited number of women in leadership positions.[43] Before the pandemic, women represented 42.9% of the athletic training profession in the 22 to 28 age range but tended to leave the profession between the ages of 28 and 35.[44] The 2023 NATA Salary Survey Subsections Report included similar data as the prepandemic numbers in terms of a lack of women who are in midcareer, but more robust data will need to be collected.[45] The lack of women mentors is a barrier to women athletic trainers who aspire to future leadership roles such as head athletic trainer[46] and to those who need assistance in navigating "gender-specific challenges and demonstrate(ing) successful work-life integration."[43] Increasing the longevity of women's careers in athletic training is necessary to "increase the pool of adequate mentors that other (women) can benefit from down the line."[43]

Transition to Practice

Transition to practice is the period after the initial anticipatory socialization phase during organizational socialization. This is when newly graduated professionals are in search of their first jobs in their chosen career.[4] Additional studies specific to the transition to practice of graduate athletic trainers are needed to better understand the barriers and sources of support during this time.[47] For the participants in the current study, this time of transition was made more difficult by the pandemic, which influenced the way they sought out positions, applied and interviewed for positions, and were onboarded once hired. Participants sought entry-level jobs when hiring freezes and layoffs were common. This required them to be more adaptable in their job search process. They expanded their search based on setting, location, and pay. Although not all were able to get their first choice in position, their long-term goals remained unchanged. Novice professionals transition to practice and form their professional identity in a supported environment of colleagues and mentors.[2]

Typically, when not in a pandemic, students would be searching for jobs while surrounded by their peers, faculty, and preceptors, allowing them to lean on those networks for support. Transitioning to practice during a pandemic caused the participants in this study to rely more heavily on the support of their family and friends to help them make career decisions and complete the job search process. Because of the pandemic, students moved home halfway through their last semester and finished their program online. This transition to an online format created an additional challenge for the participants of this study as they transitioned from the graduate program to the professional field. The orientation and onboarding programs new professionals rely on to acclimate to their new organization and roles did not exist or were also moved to online delivery. This influenced the confidence level of our participants. Instead of developing new support networks of peers in their new organization or networking with new colleagues, our participants relied on previous and more familiar relationships with colleagues from the graduate program and former preceptors, including faculty members. The participants in this study did not have the coworkers and an established work environment like those of more seasoned athletic trainers to help with the psychosocial stress of the pandemic, further emphasizing the need for established support systems and mentorship early in the transition to practice process.[16] From the change in delivery of their education to the challenges in the job search, these students had a different and difficult transition to practice, which has not been described in the current athletic training socialization literature.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This qualitative study explored the experiences of 6 women athletic trainers, who graduated from the same PM athletic training program and transitioned into practice during the pandemic. Thus, our findings speak to a limited number of athletic training professionals during a specific period. The women in this study were chosen purposefully to allow for an understanding of their shared and unique experiences during the pandemic. Although the results of our study were based on data saturation, we cannot assume that the results are directly transferable to other PM programs and women athletic trainers in all employment settings. Future studies could retrospectively examine a larger number of women athletic training students and professionals and compare the experiences of individuals of other gender identities during the same period. All the women in this study were white; therefore, our results do not allow for generalizability to students and

professionals of other ethnicities. Future studies should retrospectively investigate the experiences of underrepresented students and professionals to better understand the effect the pandemic had on their learning and transition to practice.

We do not know if the women in this study remain in the same positions that they were in when the study was conducted. Furthermore, several of the women expressed uncertainty about remaining in the athletic training profession altogether. A longitudinal examination of newly certified women athletic trainers' experiences could provide additional insight into how institutional facilitators and barriers and the pandemic affected their decisions to remain in or leave the profession. Additional exploration of same-gender mentoring relationships within the athletic training field outside of the global pandemic is needed. The influence of gender within mentoring relationships can vary by discipline, program, and level within the profession. Understanding the professional network of peers as the athletic trainer progresses from early in the transition to practice to a seasoned professional is important. Do the connections and relationships formed early in the transition to practice maintain or change and how do those original peer mentors assist in the creation of the future professional network? Creating mentoring programs within athletic training programs that acknowledge the shifts in needs (eg, learning the skills to be successful in the academic setting versus the clinical setting, building a professional network, and applying to the first professional position) would be valuable to students. Selecting and being matched with varied mentors, such as peers and faculty, throughout the academic program would enable graduate athletic training students to observe and practice the traits that would be most helpful to them whether that is navigating the gendered environment of the profession or learning the benefits and challenges of different clinical settings. Because our study occurred during the pandemic, future studies are needed to continue to understand the experiences beyond the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined women graduates' socialization and transition to practice from a PM athletic training program during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Although their socialization and transition to practice were like that of graduates described in the literature, the personal, relational, and professional identities of the participants were influenced by the pandemic.[6,9,14] The participants of this study sought out women mentors to assist with navigating the challenges of developing a professional identity while being remote and experiencing atypical seasons and circumstances. The socialization and transition to practice are inclusive of one's identity, academic discipline, and professional culture. By better understanding the experiences of the graduate student and early professional, we can create supportive networks to assist with the growth from novice to professional.

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Appendix. Semistructured Interview Guide

(1) After reviewing the participants' Background Questionnaire responses:
   a. Confirm the participants' career aspirations (desired athletic training setting) before entering and during the entry-level master's program.
   b. Confirm the participants' current job location, setting, and title.

(2) During the entry-level master's program, in what ways did your: (1) preceptors, (2) peers, and (3) patients influence your desire to work in (X) setting?

(3) Have there been any other experiences, people, or classes (outside of clinical experiences) that have influenced your career aspirations? Describe.
   a. Probe: Effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, if any.

(4) What were your immediate plans after graduation?
   a. Probe: What influences have impacted your decision for your postgraduate plans? (clinical experiences, advice from a professor, job availability, etc)

(5) You previously stated your desire to work in (X) setting. Is this setting still your desired setting or has that changed?

(6) Reflect on your opinions and expectations of (X) setting. How have your opinions and expectations changed, if at all, now that you have graduated and stepped into your first professional role?

(7) Reflect on your experiences in the first few weeks/months of your job.

a. Is there anything that has helped make your transition to professional practice smoother? Is there anything that has made your transition more difficult?
    i. Probe: Mentoring, cohort, boss, coworkers.
    ii. Probe: Effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, if any.

(8) Describe your experience as a female athletic trainer in your first professional role. How, if at all, has being a female in the profession affected your experiences?

(9) Is there anything else that you would like to share that would be insightful to understanding your career aspirations and experiences in your first job?