

Career Decisions of Senior Athletic Training Students and Recent Graduates of Accredited Athletic Training Education Programs

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Context: Athletic training students and graduates are faced with many factors that direct them into or away from the athletic training profession as a final career choice.

Objective: The purpose of the study was to determine the career decisions made by athletic training students following graduation from an accredited professional athletic training education program (ATEP) and what work-related and ATEP program factors influenced their career decisions.

Design: A 42-question self-reporting web-based survey was used.

Setting: CAATE/CAAHEP-accredited ATEP programs.

Participants: Seventeen hundred and ninety-two seniors and recent graduates of CAATE/CAAHEP-accredited programs from May 2005 through June 2007.

Outcome Measures: Descriptive statistics were utilized to obtain frequency counts of the participants' responses.

Results: The majority of the participants (82.4%) chose to pursue a career as an athletic trainer (AT), while the remainder (17.6%), indicated they did not seek employment as an AT. The college/university setting was the most frequently selected by those employed (45.6%) and those seeking employment (35.6%) as an AT. All 8 ATEP factors (clinical experience hours, clinical experience variety, roles/functions of a clinical instructor [CI] or approved clinical instructor [ACI], preparation to enter the field, level of confidence, CI or ACI attitude toward work setting, CI or ACI demonstration of professionalism, and encouragement from faculty, CI or ACI) were found to be influential in the participants' decisions to pursue a career as an AT. Salary, number of work hours per week, found another profession more interesting, and uncertain or changing work schedule were the most influential factors reported for choosing to not pursue a career as an AT.

Conclusions: The decision to pursue a career as an AT is influenced by ATEP faculty, ACIs, and CIs.

Key Words: career choice, work factors, ATEP factors, professional socialization, Millennials

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Career Decisions of Senior Athletic Training Students and Recent Graduates of Accredited Athletic Training Education Programs

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Athletic training education has evolved significantly since the first athletic training education programs (ATEP) were developed in the late 1960s. While the evolution of athletic training education has paralleled that of medical and health professional education models, athletic training has dealt with a number of important changes over the past decade. These changes have allowed the profession to grow, to improve, and to consolidate into one consistent route to eligibility for the Board of Certification (BOC) examination.¹ The number of candidates taking the BOC exam² has remained relatively steady throughout this reform, while the number of Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) accredited ATEPs has risen dramatically from 132 at the end of 2000 to 364 in 2007 (Personal communication with L. Caruthers, CAATE March 2008) due in part to the termination of the internship route to BOC examination eligibility in January 2004. Although we do not know if these changes had a significant impact on the athletic training workforce, we do know there are currently more opportunities in varied work settings for athletic trainers than ever before.³ Anecdotally, athletic training faculty and program directors have noticed fewer students entering educational programs and into athletic training practice settings following graduation from accredited programs. The National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) responded to declining membership by recently implementing reduced membership dues for newly certified athletic trainers.³ Others⁴⁻⁶ have investigated similar concerns regarding the career choices of graduates in other allied health professions. In a recent study, Mensch and Mitchell⁷ identified several barriers to choosing a career in athletic training at one CAATE-accredited ATEP. The investigators found students indicated time commitment and interest in another career as main factors in determining why they chose not to pursue a career as an athletic trainer.⁷ Riter et al⁸ also investigated the presence of burnout in undergraduate athletic training students and a possible relationship to burnout as a professional. They demonstrated that students experienced burnout in their fourth or higher semester "from their clinical assignments and associated responsibilities of the ATEP"^(p57), as measured by their emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishments, and depersonalization.⁷ This literature indicates that Millennial students and ATEP graduates born after 1982 demonstrate the following characteristics: (a) feel special, (b) sheltered, (c) team oriented, (d) confident, (e) feel pressured, (f) achievement oriented, and (g) conventional.⁹ These characteristics may influence their decision to enter into or move away from athletic training as a final career choice.

The purpose of this study was threefold: first, to determine if graduates from professional ATEPs enter the field of athletic training; second, if graduates are not entering athletic training, what profession are they pursuing; and third, what factors did the graduates report as influential in making their career decision.

METHODS

Participants

The participants for this study included students and graduates of CAATE and Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education programs (CAAHEP) from May 2005 through June 2007. Participants had either taken or had registered for the BOC examination and were invited via electronic mail to participate in this study. Invitations were sent by the BOC to 7,395 potential participants. In an effort to collect data on subjects who did not take or register for the BOC examination, the researchers also sent invitations via electronic mail to 343 Athletic Training Education Program (ATEP) directors asking them to forward the invitation to their recent graduates and to their senior students who they knew had not taken nor registered for the BOC examination.

A total of 1792 subjects agreed to participate in the study. However due to incomplete or inconsistent responses, 139 subjects were removed from the study leaving a response rate of 22.4%, or 1653 valid responses. The valid responses included students who graduated from accredited undergraduate professional (N=1375 or 83.2%) and graduate professional (N=278 or 16.8%) athletic training education programs from May of 2005 to May 2007. The participants included male (N=507) and female (N=1146) students from institutions that sponsored National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (N=864), NCAA Division II (N=265), NCAA Division III (N=391), NCAA Division I & II (N=65), NCAA Division I & III (N=3), and National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) (N=65) intercollegiate athletic programs.

Instrumentation

A web-based self-reporting survey instrument was developed using Zoomerang®, Inc. software program (MarketTools, Inc., San Francisco). To determine content and face validity, the instrument was given to a panel of five athletic trainers, each of whom had at least 15 years of experience in athletic training education. Feedback was collected from the panel and used to make minor grammatical and content changes to the instrument. The instrument was then pilot tested by nine undergraduate athletic training students at the co-investigator's institution. The pilot test was used to determine the clarity of survey items, completion difficulty, and completion time.

The instrument was subdivided into four sections: 1) demographics; 2) athletic training education program information; 3) professional/career information; and 4) athletic training professional preparation. Survey questions included forced choice, Likert-type, and short answer responses categorized to fit employment and degree categories. Demographic questions included the participants' level in the ATEP, gender, year of graduation or expected graduation, if they took or planned to

take the BOC examination within the next six months, and if they were currently BOC certified. The next section focused on the participant's ATEP information. This section determined the academic calendar and number of quarters or semesters required to complete the ATEP, the ATEP admissions process, the average number of clinical experience hours completed at the sophomore, junior, or senior level, and the work settings used to complete the formal observational or assigned clinical experiences. The professional/career section collected information regarding their employment status, the employment setting they were currently in or seeking, and if they had been accepted to or completed a degree, certification, and/or professional program in addition to athletic training. The final section consisted of questions regarding the influence of ATEP factors on their decision to pursue a career in athletic training or pursue a career outside of athletic training. Participants rated the degree of influence of each variable using a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from most influential (4), influential (3), somewhat influential (2), not influential (1), and a not applicable option was provided. In addition, the above Likert type scale was used to measure the degree of influence of various athletic training work factors as it related to the participant's decision to not pursue a career in athletic training. All data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences® (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) for Windows version 16.0.

Procedures

The initial invitation to participate in this study was sent via electronic mail by the BOC due to data privacy. A follow-up invitation was sent two weeks later. The invitation included a brief description of the study, estimated survey completion time, and the URL address to access the Zoomerang® web-based survey. In addition, a letter was sent to all directors of CAATE-accredited programs that included a description of the target population, purpose of the study, and instructions on how to forward the invitation to participate to their alumni and students who they knew did not take or register for the BOC examination between May 2005 and June 2007. The introductory page of the survey provided details of the study, assurance of anonymity, information regarding IRB approval, instructions on how to complete the survey, and informed consent.

Data Analysis

The nature of the research questions and the data obtained required the use of descriptive and frequency statistics. Open-ended short answer responses were categorized by the researchers and appropriately coded. Frequency counts were used to determine if subjects intended to obtain or maintain their BOC certification. Further analyses split the responses into two groups: those who were employed as an athletic trainer (AT) or sought employment as an AT and those who were not seeking employment as an AT. Within each group, frequency counts were used to determine (1) the number of participants seeking work or employment in various athletic training and non-athletic training work settings, (2) to determine to what degree their decision to pursue or not pursue a career using their ATC credential was influenced by eight ATEP program factors, and (3) to determine what degree their decision to not pursue a career using their AT credential was influenced

by nine work-related factors. Descriptive measures were used to determine the influence of ATEP and work-related factors in the career decision process.

RESULTS

The participants' decisions to pursue or not pursue a career as an AT are depicted in Table 1. From this data it is clear that the majority of the participants (82.4%) chose to pursue a career as an AT, while the remainder (17.6%), indicated they were not seeking employment as an AT.

The work settings or desired work settings of participants employed or seeking employment using their AT credential is presented in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. The college/university setting was selected most frequently by those employed (45.6%) and those seeking employment (35.6%) as an AT. The second and third most selected setting for those employed as an AT was the high school-clinic/outreach (20.1%) and high school full-time (14.2%) setting. For those seeking employment using their AT credential, the second and third most desired setting selected was the high school full-time (20.5%) and high school-clinic/outreach (16.1%) settings.

The chosen professional areas reported by the participants who were not seeking employment as an AT are displayed in Table 4. Twenty-nine percent reported they were employed or seeking employment as a registered/licensed physical therapist, and 16% reported they were employed or seeking employment as a physician assistant.

Table 5 indicates the participants' responses to the influence of nine work-related factors on their decisions not to pursue a career using their ATC credential. The participants reported salary (80.8%), followed by number of hours per week (75.3%), found another profession more interesting (71.5%), and an uncertain or changing work schedule (70.8%) as the most influential, influential, or somewhat influential work-related factors having any influence on their decision not to pursue athletic training as a career.

As indicated above, the data from the survey anchors for most influential, influential, and somewhat influential were combined for reporting purposes in order to provide an indication for whether a

Table 1. Participants' Decisions to Pursue or Not Pursue a Career as an Athletic Trainer (N=1653)

Response	n	%
Yes Currently employed as an AT	1070	64.7
Yes Seeking employment as an AT	292	17.7
No Not employed nor seeking employment as an AT	291	17.6

Table 2. Work Settings of Participants Employed Using Their Athletic Trainer Credential (N=1070)^a

Work Setting	n	%
College/university (including junior college)	488	45.6
High School (clinic/outreach)	215	20.1
High School (full-time)	152	14.2
Sports Medicine Clinic (not with physician)	42	3.9
Professional Sports	36	3.4
Physician's Office (orthopedic)	29	2.7
Health/Fitness (personal training/sports enhancement)	13	1.2
Industrial	12	1.1
Hospital	11	1.0
Corporate	3	0.3
Physician's Office (general practice)	1	0.1
Other (write-in)	68	6.4

^aWork settings may include graduate assistantships, internships, part-time, full-time, and season employment.

factor had any influence on the participant's career decision. The participants who planned to pursue a career as an AT reported the following ATEP factors as influential: level of confidence you have in your skills and abilities as an AT (98.2%); the degree to which you feel your education has prepared you to enter the field of AT (97.5%); and clinical experience variety you received during your education (95.1%). As a group, participants who chose to pursue a career other than AT indicated the amount of clinical experience required (41.6%), level of confidence you have in your own skills and abilities as an AT (42.3%), and clinical instructor (CI) or approved clinical instructor (ACI) attitude toward their work setting (41.6%) as factors that influenced their decisions. Responses to the perceived influence of eight ATEP factors on their decision to pursue or not pursue a career using their ATC credential are displayed in Table 6.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to first determine if graduates from professional ATEPs enter the field of athletic training; second, if graduates are not entering athletic training, what profession are they pursuing; and third, what factors did the graduates report as influential in making their career decision. Our results indicate that the majority, 82.3%, of the respondents were employed or seeking employment using their ATC credential. Both work factors and ATEP factors were influential in the career decision making process.

Table 3. Desired Work Settings of Participants Seeking Employment Using Their Athletic Trainer Credential (N=292)

Work Setting	n	%
College/university (including junior college)	104	35.6
High School (full-time)	60	20.5
High School (clinic/outreach)	47	16.1
Sports Medicine Clinic (not with physician)	24	8.2
Professional Sports	12	4.1
Health/Fitness (personal training/sports enhancement)	12	4.1
Physician's Office (orthopedic)	6	2.1
Hospital	5	1.7
Corporate	2	0.7
Physician's Office (general practice)	2	0.7
Industrial	1	0.3
No Response	1	0.3
Other (write-in)	16	5.5

Table 4. Professional Areas of Participants Not Employed nor Seeking Employment as an Athletic Trainer (N=291)

Professional Areas	n	%
PT (registered/licensed physical therapist)	83	28.5
PA (physician assistant)	46	15.8
I am not working in, nor plan to pursue a position in a health care setting	28	9.6
MD (medical doctor)	16	5.5
Medical Sales	14	4.8
DC (doctor of chiropractic)	13	4.5
Unsure	13	4.5
RN (registered nurse)	9	3.1
CSCS (NSCA certified strength & conditioning specialist)	7	2.4
DO (doctor of osteopathy)	6	2.1
MT (registered/licensed massage therapist)	6	2.1
K-12 Education	6	2.1
Personal Trainer (other or no certification)	6	2.1
Other ^a	38	13.0

^aAreas with fewer than 5 responses were placed in the other category. These include EMT, PTA, certified personal trainer or performance enhancement specialist (NSCA, NASM), CNA, and LPN.

Table 5. Influence of Work Factors on Participant's Decision to Not Pursue a Career Using Their Athletic Training Credential (N=291)

Response ^a	n	%	Question Mean (95% CI)
Number of hours per week			2.80 (2.66-2.93)
Most Influential	91	31.3	
Influential	80	27.5	
Somewhat Influential	48	16.5	
Not Influential	49	16.8	
Not Applicable	23	7.9	
Uncertain or changing work schedule			2.86 (2.45-2.72)
Most Influential	74	25.4	
Influential	77	26.5	
Somewhat Influential	55	18.9	
Not Influential	66	22.7	
Not Applicable	19	16.5	
Salary			2.94 (2.81-3.06)
Most Influential	107	36.8	
Influential	80	27.5	
Somewhat Influential	48	16.5	
Not Influential	38	13.1	
Not Applicable	18	6.2	
Used athletic training in preparation for other professional program			2.33 (2.18-2.48)
Most Influential	58	19.9	
Influential	47	16.2	
Somewhat Influential	53	18.2	
Not Influential	83	28.5	
Not Applicable	50	17.2	
Limited opportunities in desired work setting			2.17 (2.04-2.31)
Most Influential	43	14.8	
Influential	56	19.2	
Somewhat Influential	60	20.6	
Not Influential	97	33.3	
Not Applicable	35	12.0	
Limited opportunities in desired geographical region			1.84 (1.71-1.97)
Most Influential	29	10.0	
Influential	31	10.7	
Somewhat Influential	59	20.3	
Not Influential	130	44.7	
Not Applicable	42	14.4	
Found another profession more interesting			2.70 (2.56-2.83)
Most Influential	85	29.2	
Influential	66	22.7	
Somewhat Influential	57	19.6	
Not Influential	54	18.6	
Not Applicable	29	10.0	
Insufficient respect as a health care provider			2.30 (2.16-2.44)
Most Influential	56	19.2	
Influential	62	21.3	
Somewhat Influential	50	17.2	
Not Influential	95	32.6	
Not Applicable	28	9.6	
Limited job functions (scope of practice)			2.26 (2.12-2.40)
Most Influential	53	18.2	
Influential	55	18.9	
Somewhat Influential	65	22.3	
Not Influential	92	31.6	
Not Applicable	26	8.9	

^aIndicates a participant's response to the question, "Are you currently working or seeking employment in a position using your credential as an Athletic Trainer?" The degree of influence was rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from most influential (4) to not influential (1).

Table 6. Influence of Athletic Training Education Program (ATEP) Factors on Participant's Decision to Pursue a Career Using Their Athletic Training Credential

Response	Yes ^a (n=1362)		Mean (95% CI)	No ^a (n=291)		Mean (95% CI)
	n	%		n	%	
Amount of clinical experience hours required			2.64 (2.59-2.69)			1.91 (1.77-2.05)
Most Influential	260	19.1		34	11.7	
Influential	543	39.9		42	14.4	
Somewhat Influential	323	23.7		45	15.5	
Not Influential	209	15.3		133	45.7	
No Response	27	2.0		37	12.7	
Clinical experience variety you received during your education			3.14 (3.10-3.18)			1.57 (1.45-1.69)
Most Influential	486	35.7		18	6.2	
Influential	630	46.3		26	8.9	
Somewhat Influential	178	13.1		37	12.7	
Not Influential	60	4.4		169	58.1	
No Response	8	0.6		41	14.1	
Roles and functions of the CI or ACI during my clinical experience			3.01 (2.96-3.05)			1.82 (1.69-1.95)
Most Influential	415	30.5		25	8.6	
Influential	607	44.5		42	14.4	
Somewhat Influential	239	17.5		49	16.8	
Not Influential	82	6.0		138	47.4	
No Response	19	1.4		37	12.7	
The degree to which you feel your education has prepared you to enter the field of athletic training			3.24 (3.20-3.28)			1.73 (1.61-1.86)
Most Influential	552	40.5		26	8.9	
Influential	613	45.0		33	11.3	
Somewhat Influential	164	12.0		47	16.2	
Not Influential	29	2.1		155	53.3	
No Response	4	0.3		30	10.3	
Level of confidence you have in your own skills and abilities as an athletic trainer			3.21 (3.17-3.24)			1.78 (1.67-1.90)
Most Influential	467	34.3		18	6.2	
Influential	727	53.4		47	16.2	
Somewhat Influential	143	10.5		58	19.9	
Not Influential	21	1.5		13	47.8	
No Response	4	0.3		29	10.0	
CI or ACI attitude toward their work setting			2.99 (2.94-3.03)			1.91 (1.77-2.04)
Most Influential	410	30.1		31	10.7	
Influential	593	43.5		48	16.5	
Somewhat Influential	250	18.4		42	14.4	
Not Influential	88	6.5		133	45.7	
No Response	21	1.5		37	12.7	
Demonstration of CI or ACI professionalism			3.00 (2.96-3.05)			1.73 (1.60-1.86)
Most Influential	410	30.1		29	10.0	
Influential	611	44.9		30	10.3	
Somewhat Influential	231	17.0		40	13.7	
Not Influential	87	6.4		158	54.3	
No Response	23	1.7		34	11.7	
Encouragement or direction from the ATEP faculty, CI or ACI			3.17 (3.13-3.22)			1.78 (1.66-1.91)
Most Influential	568	41.7		27	9.3	
Influential	509	37.4		35	12.0	
Somewhat Influential	198	14.5		50	17.2	
Not Influential	67	4.9		144	49.5	
No Response	20	1.5		35	12.0	

^aIndicates a participant's response to the question, "Are you currently working or seeking employment in a position using your credential as a Certified Athletic Trainer?" The degree of influence was rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from most influential (4) to not influential (1).

Influence of Work Factors on Participants Decision to Choose a Career in AT

Of the total number of respondents, 17.6% reported they were not employed nor were they pursuing employment in athletic training (Table 1). The majority of these respondents indicated they were pursuing education or employment in another healthcare or wellness profession (Table 4). To understand why ATEP graduates are pursuing other healthcare or wellness professions, we investigated the education and work-related factors that may influence their decisions.

The participants of this study, who identified themselves as choosing to not pursue a career using their ATC credential, identified work factors such as: salary, number of hours worked per week, found another profession more interesting, and uncertain or changing work schedule as the most influential, influential, or somewhat influential in their decisions. These findings are similar to those found by Mensch and Mitchell⁷ in a qualitative study describing the perceptions of potential athletic training recruits. They found "too much time involvement" and "interested in a different career" as the most frequently reported barriers to choosing a career in athletic training. A possible explanation for this phenomenon can be found by looking closely at the type of participant involved in this study. Each of these participants can be classified as a so-called "Millennial". Monaco and Martin⁹ define the Millennial generation as students born after 1982 and demonstrating the following characteristics; (a) feel special, (b) sheltered, (c) team orientated, (d) confident, (e) feel pressured, (f) achievement orientated, and (g) conventional. Millennial students typically desire a balance between their professional and personal life.¹⁰⁻¹⁴ Millennial students are not workaholics;¹⁰ they desire a good balance between their work, family, and social lives. Therefore, if, during the student's clinical experience, an ACI or CI modeled professional behavior that exhibited imbalance between their professional and personal life, they may perceive this to be the reality of the profession as a whole. This perceived reality does not fit into the paradigm of the Millennial's life. Another characteristic of the Millennial is a desire for organizational and professional support in maintaining this balance.¹⁰⁻¹⁴ The Millennial student may view the long hours and uncertain or changing work schedule as a lack of support from organizational and professional entities. This perception of lack of support may adversely impact the Millennial's need to be valued as a professional¹¹⁻¹²

Influence of ATEP Factors on Participant's Decision to Choose a Career in AT

The participants of this study who identified themselves as choosing to pursue a career in athletic training identified several ATEP program factors that influenced their decisions. Some of these factors included the roles and functions of their ACI or CI during their clinical experiences, the attitude of the ACI or CI toward their work setting, the ACI or CI demonstration of professionalism, and the encouragement they received from the ATEP faculty, ACI or CI as the most influential factors in their decision to pursue a career in athletic training (Table 6).

Each of these ATEP-related factors can be categorized under the umbrella of professional socialization and mentoring. Professional socialization, as defined in the literature, is a process whereby students become part of the athletic training professional culture.¹³ This process involves acquiring attitudes, skills, and behavioral norms of the athletic training professional.¹⁴ This is an informal induction process where students begin to develop professional values and identity.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ This process gives the students a vision of what it will be like for them to be an athletic training professional.¹⁵⁻¹⁸

For professional socialization to occur, the ACI or CI must take on the role of mentor. The literature indicates that mentoring is essential to a student's development,¹⁹ and for the process to be successful, a personal relationship must be developed between the student and the ACI or CI.^{11, 20} The relationship must have a foundation of congruent professional values and trust.^{19,21} A successful mentoring process for the student fosters a caring student-teacher relationship,^{11,20} a sense of belonging,^{11,22} and professional acceptance.^{11,18} Connected to this mentoring role is the process of modeling professional skills and assisting the students with skill acquisition.^{17, 22-23} The modeling role provides experiences where the students are provided opportunities to make decisions.²¹ Through this process, it is critical that the student be allowed to experiment with learning, while being supported and guided by their ACI or CI.^{8,11,21, 24} This provides a safe environment for the student to develop as a professional.²¹ Effective mentoring takes place when students feel as though their ACI or CI is accessible and approachable.¹⁹ The ACI or CI can provide a positive or negative outlook on the athletic training environment.^{6,17} Students are aware of this outlook and determine this to be a very strong factor in shaping their own attitudes toward the profession.¹⁷ The athletic training professional's work environment perceptions shape the newly forming perceptions of the students. Students begin to take on the established perceptions of the ACI or CI. These perceptions become the student's vision of the profession, and this vision can be a positive or a negative perception of the profession or of a specific work setting. The participants of this study reported that the attitude of the ACI or CI toward their work-setting was influential in their choice to pursue a career as an AT (Table 6). Successful ATEP faculty, ACIs, or CIs create an environment of acceptability²²⁻²³ and autonomy^{11,22-23} for the students. The student is encouraged to participate in the hands-on learning process and has the opportunity to experiment with didactic knowledge under the supervision of the ACI or CI.¹⁸ Students are guided^{8,11,21} and are allowed to systematically master clinical proficiencies. This constant encouragement by the ACI or CI provides the necessary connection^{16-13, 20} upon which the Millennial student thrives. These mini successes drive the Millennial student toward mastery of clinical proficiencies. A key characteristic of the Millennial student is the importance placed on doing rather than simply knowing.^{10-11, 24} Being allowed to search and discover information is paramount over simply being given information.^{10,11,24} The quest for information and the application thereof is enticing to the Millennial student who thrives in an environment where mentoring has a strong presence.^{10-11,24} These students have a personal relationship with their mentors and this relationship is fostered through the student feeling supported and encouraged by their mentor.^{19, 23}

Limitations

The study sample was comprised largely of graduates who have registered for, who planned to register for, or who had already taken the BOC exam. If a student was not planning on entering the profession it is unlikely that he or she would have registered for or taken the BOC examination. Therefore they may have been less likely to respond to the survey request. This limitation was addressed by contacting the program directors of the accredited programs and asking them to identify those individuals who were not planning or had not taken the BOC examination. In addition, since the survey had a response rate of 22.4% it is possible that potential participants chose not to respond to the survey because they were not planning on pursuing athletic training as their career. These limitations make it difficult to determine if the results truly reflect the decisions of all ATEP graduates.

CONCLUSION

At the onset of this research, the purpose was to determine whether recent graduates were choosing a career as an AT, and if they were not choosing a career as an AT, what professional career choices were they making and what factors did they report as influential in making these decisions. Our findings highlight the importance of the ATEP faculty, ACI, and CI in the development of future athletic training professionals. Paramount in this process is the role of mentoring and professional socialization. The students who make these critical connections with their ATEP faculty, ACI, or CI appear to be more likely to pursue a career in athletic training. Our findings also illustrate the need to evolve as a profession in the areas of salary, work load, and work schedule. We need to clearly define our work day and work week or it may be difficult to retain well qualified professionals from the current and future generations. This is a necessary progression for the AT profession to be effective in recruiting and retaining our best and brightest students. The workforce is changing as Millennials enter our educational programs and the profession. Their desire for a work-life balance is critical to their professional and personal fulfillment. If we do not make progress and evolve from this professional ideal, we will lose these future professionals to other healthcare professions.

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