The Professional Values of Program Directors and Head Athletic Trainers: The Impact of the Hidden Curriculum

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Context: Athletic training education programs (ATEPs) promote the development of foundational behaviors of professional practice. Situated in the context of professional values, ATEPs are challenged to identify outcome measures for these behaviors. These values are tacitly reflected as part of the hidden curriculum.

Objective: To ascertain the importance of professional values as perceived by program directors and head athletic trainers at professional ATEPs located in the Great Lakes Athletic Trainers' Association (GLATA) district.

Design: Cross-sectional survey design.

Setting: 77 ATEPs in GLATA and accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE).

Participants: We surveyed a convenience sample of program directors and head athletic trainers from CAATE-accredited ATEPs in GLATA. We partitioned the 146 participants by their professional role: program director (PDs), head athletic trainer (HATs), and program director/head athletic trainer (PD/HATs).

Main Outcome Measure(s): We measured differences among PDs, HATs, PD/HATs relative to their unfamiliar values, important values, top three ranked values, and perceived importance with articulating professional values.

Results: Altruism and aesthetics were identified as the 2 most frequently unfamiliar values among PDs and HATs, whereas PD/HATs identified 1 value, altruism. Truth/honesty and integrity were the most frequently selected values by PDs and HATs. Truth/honesty and respect were the most frequently selected values by PD/HATs. Truth/honesty was ranked the most important value by HATs and PD/HATs. Truth/honesty and integrity were tied as the number one ranked value by PDs. There was a significant difference in ranking between PD and PD/HAT in regard to the professional values of truth/honesty and integrity.

Conclusion: Truth/honesty, integrity, respect, accountability, and caring are important professional values of ATEP PDs, HATs, PD/HATs in GLATA. It is important for the NATA to explicitly articulate professional core values.

Key Words: enculturation, athletic training education, foundational behaviors of professional practice.

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Athletic training education has undergone tremendous change in the past decade to develop stringent standards to promote quality education.[1,2] Accreditation requirements are prescriptive in outlining the cognitive and psychomotor competencies, as well as the clinical proficiencies for professional athletic training education programs (ATEPs). However, little formal consideration has been given to the foundational behaviors of professional practice (eg, values, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations in the preparation of athletic training professionals).[3,4] Consequently, the onus is on the ATEP to convey foundational behaviors of professional practice in classroom and clinical education components.

Critical to the development of professional behaviors is the understanding of the specific professional values unique to that profession because they shape professional identity and mold foundational behaviors of professional practice.[5,6] However, the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) has not identified and explicitly articulated these professional values. One could argue that the NATA's professional values are implicit in the NATA Code of Ethics.[7,8] Consequently, any attempt to tease out the professional values from the NATA Code of Ethics becomes an exercise of interpretation.

Today, there are over 350 ATEPs in the United States. All ATEPs have a program director, who resides in an academic department. In addition, most ATEPs utilize the head athletic trainer, who generally resides in the department of intercollegiate athletics, as a clinical instructor. Both individuals should have a significant influence on the professional preparation of the student; however, it is uncertain what professional values they convey to the student. Given the organizational structure of the ATEPs and the potential robust effect of professional values on the foundational behaviors of professional practice, we believed the issue deserved attention and were curious if 2 of the more influential persons in the students' academic program held the same professional values. Thus, the purpose of our exploratory research study was to examine and compare the professional values of athletic training program directors and head athletic trainers at institutions with professional ATEPs.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: PROFESSIONAL VALUES

While values and virtues have always been part of the moral fabric of life, there is a subtle distinction between them. Virtues have a moral disposition,[9] whereas some values have a moral disposition[10] and other values simply depict relative worth, utility, and importance. One of the earliest notations of virtues by Aristotle espoused the 4 classically defined cardinal virtues of courage, prudence, temperance, and justice. He believed virtues were dispositional and relational, thereby engendering moral character.[11] Another example relative to the importance of virtues is observed in theology with the cardinal virtues of 3 spiritual graces: faith, hope, and charity.[12,13] More recently, healthcare professionals took notice of the book *After Virtue*[14] which emphasized virtue theory and encouraged moral philosophers to examine the virtues of an issue using a tangible perspective.[11,14]

Shared values along with traditions, customs, and practices permeate a culture. In turn, practices among members of a specific group are significantly influenced by those aforementioned elements. Altogether, they contribute to the group's unification and distinctiveness, and they influence how one interacts with and perceives others through language, beliefs, and behaviors.[15] Thus, shared values are effective in binding individuals to a particular group.

There are many value systems that interplay with an individual, and in general, these values influence behaviors.[16,17,18] Some of these value-systems are culturally oriented, or they involve how we relate with others. Such value systems may arise from organizational, professional, or community clusters. Other value systems are more personal in nature and are oriented toward satisfaction, prestige, or economics. Religious and spiritual value systems typically embrace moral values. Awareness of these value systems and how they influence life choices, decisions, and behaviors is illuminating. This becomes apparent especially when values compete for priority. It is the ordering of these values that may help to explain behavior.[19,20]

Professional values define the professional culture.[21,22] They give shape, meaning, and direction to professional life, as well as influence behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. Furthermore, they are at the heart of every professional decision and action.[23] Shared values crystallize one's identity.[21] Moreover, professional values internally motivate members, cultivate an ethical responsibility, and deepen professional commitment, thereby promoting a strong sense of moral obligation.[24]

In healthcare, Weis and Schank[25] claim that the mark of excellence within a collective body is the degree to which the members share congruent values. Table 1 reveals professional values in some conventional healthcare professions (eg, nursing and physical therapy).[26,27] Professional values relating to healthcare are moral and focus on human rights, integrity, and welfare; in other words, they describe how to be humane.[10] Moral values serve to fortify professional and ethical behaviors as well as standards including

Table 1. Professional Core Values in Nursing and Physical Therapy

Profession	Professional Core Value
Nursing	Altrusim, Esthetics, Equality, Freedom, Human Dignity, Truth, Justice
Physical Therapy	Accountability, Altruism, Compassion/ Caring, Excellence, Integrity, Professional Duty, Social Responsibility

a professional code of ethics and the prima facie healthcare principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice.[28]

Although athletic training has not identified its professional values, the National Athletic Trainers' Association's Code of Ethics provides the moral tenor for the membership. In general, a code of ethics represents the collective moral conscience of a professional group, which is considered a necessary sociological characteristic of a true profession.[6] Codes of ethics encourage compliance to the rules that describe appropriate professional conduct. Martone [29] reported, "The power in ethics codes derives from their external control of a professional's behavior, not from that person's internal motivation. As a result, codes of ethics tend to be discreet, individualist, and oriented toward maintenance of the status quo. They offer little incentive for growth."[29 (p.30)] On the other hand, professional values internally motivate members, cultivate an ethical responsibility, and deepen professional commitment, thereby promoting a strong sense of moral obligation and development among members of a professional group.[24]

Although athletic training has not identified and explicitly articulated its professional values, it still maintains core values.[30] Table 2 illustrates our attempt to infer these core values from the NATA Code of Ethics. Moreover, it is likely that every member of the NATA perceives a certain set of implicit professional values that have been shaped through educational and workplace experiences. It is disconcerting; however, that athletic training has not explicitly articulated professional values relative to professional preparation. In education, the hidden curriculum is very influential and oftentimes contradicts the formal curriculum.[31-33] Pending the unambiguous articulation of professional values in athletic, pre-professional behaviors will be marked by inconsistencies.[6]

METHODS

Participants

We utilized a convenience sample of program directors (PDs), head athletic trainers (HATs), and program directors with head athletic training responsibilities (PD/HATs) employed in 77 ATEPs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) and located in the district of the Great Lakes Athletic Trainers' Association (GLATA). Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan compose the GLATA. Of the 77 CAATE-accredited ATEPs, 69 programs had a separate PD and HAT and 8 programs had one person with the combine role (PD/HAT). From these ATEPs, we identified a total of 146 subjects. The names of the CAATE institutions and PDs were gathered from the CAATE web site.[34] The names of HATs were collected from the *Blue Book of College Athletics*.[35]

Instrument and Measures

Raths et al.[17] constructed a values clarification approach to facilitate the awareness of one's own values. Accordingly, the process consists of a 7 step consciousness-raising activity that aids the examination of true values from more immature wants, needs, and aspirations.

The professional values instrument we used in this study was developed according to the "choosing" criteria established by Raths et al.[17] and their conceptual framework of values clarification. More specifically, this criteria requires the subject to (1) choose freely, (2) choose from alternatives, and (3) choose after thoughtful consideration of the alternatives. Given that subjects are required to choose from alternatives, we had to identify values that appeared to distinguish our group of athletic trainers. Consequently, we used expert sources to establish item validity of the values (ie, NATA Code of Ethics, prima facie principles, and professional values of related healthcare professionals).[7,26,27,28]

We conducted a pilot study to help demonstrate face validity. This study suggested that the following values were complete and worthy of listing on the athletic training professional values survey instrument: caring, honesty, accountability, promise keeping, excellence, loyalty, fairness, integrity, responsible citizenship, respect, social responsibility, altruism, aesthetic, and integrity. Additionally, we included the value of self-interest to the professional values list. Given that we asked subjects to choose important values after thoughtful consideration, the selection of self-interest could suggest inattentiveness and/or flippancy. Lastly, in the event that the list of values was not all-inclusive, we provided the opportunity for the subject to add a value.

We established measurement (process) reliability based on the lack of any confusion in completing the pre-test and post-test. Pilot participants (n = 9) completed both instruments accurately.

Table 2. Values Interpreted from the Principles of the NATA code of Ethics[30*]

Principle	Values
PRINCIPLE 1: Members shall respect the rights, welfare and dignity of all	Respect, Caring
PRINCIPLE 2: Members shall comply with the laws and regulations governing the practice of athletic training	Social Responsibility, Accountability
PRINCIPLE 3: Members shall maintain and promote high standards in their provision of services	Caring, Accountability, Excellence
PRINCIPLE 4: Members shall not engage in conduct that could be construed as a conflict of interest or that reflects negatively on the profession	Integrity

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Measure (content) reliability was established based upon a test-retest using experimental group data, with an interim of 6 months between testing. The identification of unfamiliar values was unchanged, and the identification of important values was relatively consistent. The ranked values changed by an order of 1 for 6 values, remaining unchanged for 7 values. A single value changed in rank by an order of 2.

Our survey instrument consisted of 4 steps. The first step involved identification of values that were not familiar to the participants. Step two involved the selection of 5 of the 15 listed values that participants perceived as important professional values. The third step required participants to rank values, and the fourth step allowed participants to clarify the importance of forming and articulating professional values in athletic training.

Procedures

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, we administered the survey instrument via US mail. Along with the coded instrument, we mailed a cover letter that detailed the purpose of the research study, an informed consent letter, and a self-addressed return envelope. Returned instruments remained confidential. We sent all non-respondents a follow-up e-mail approximately 21 days from the initial mailing date.

Statistical Analysis

Using SPSS 13.0,[36] our data analyses consisted of descriptive analyses (frequency analyses), a non-parametric Pearson chi-square (χ^2) test, and a Mann-Whitney U test. We calculated frequencies and percentages for each chosen value. We utilized an individual 3 x 2 χ^2 analysis to assess differences among role (ie, PD, HAT, and PD/HAT) and selection (ie, yes/no) for each given value chosen as one of the five important values. Lastly, we performed a Mann-Whitney U test to determine if differences existed among the rank order of each of the values based upon role. The alpha level for each test was set *a priori* at .05. Power observed for the χ^2 analysis was adequate with a moderate effect size of 0.63.

RESULTS

Table 3 presents the sex, age, and experience of the participants. Of the 146 subjects, 109 responded yielding a return rate of 74.7%. We categorized subjects into three groups: 53 (49%) PDs, 48 (44%) HATs, and 8 (7%) PD/HATs. Relative to sex, there was almost an equal blend of males and females in the PD role; however, there were a greater number of males in the HAT and PD/HAT roles. The average age for all subjects was 41±8.6. The average number of years as an athletic trainer across each role was 17.5 years. Finally, the average number of years with experience in an ATEP was 11 years for both the PD and HAT and 13.4 years for the PD/HAT.

Unfamiliar Values (Step One)

Table 4 illustrates that both PD and HAT participants identified altruism, aesthetics, and self-interest as unfamiliar values. Also, HATs perceived responsible citizenship and promise keeping to be unfamiliar values. PD/HATs did not choose any values to be unfamiliar. Based on our χ^2 analysis, we did not identify any significant differences among roles in their selection of unfamiliar values.

Five Important Values (Step Two)

When prompted to select 5 important values, participants in all roles most frequently selected the truth/honesty value (PD = 88.7%, HAT = 85.4%, PD/HAT = 87.5%). Table 5 indicates that the majority of participants in each role selected respect and integrity as important values. Furthermore, PD/HATs selected the fairness and caring values more often the PDs or HATs . Our χ^2 analysis did not detect any significant differences in the selection of important values relative to role.

Rank Order Top Three Values (Step Three)

Table 6 presents findings indicating that PDs identified truth/honesty and integrity tied for the first important values. The second most important professional value was respect. Also, PDs perceived accountability and caring as equally important

Table 3. Subjects Descriptive Data by Role in ATEP

Role In ATEP	Subjects	Male (n)	Female (n)	Age Years (Mean)	Experience as ATC years (Mean)	Experience in ATEP years (Mean [SD])
PD	53	28	25	41.68	19.08	11.35 +/- 8.64
HAT	48	37	11	40.35	17.19	11.1 3 +/- 9.99
PD/HAT	8	7	1	40.13	16.75	12.38 +/- 8.33
Total	109	72	37			

Abbreviations: PD, Program Director; HAT, Head Athletic Trainer; PD/HAT, Program DIrector/Head Athletic Trainer

Table 4. Unfamiliar Values by Role in ATEP

Values	PD (n)	HAT (n)	PD/HAT (n)
Truth/Honesty	1	3	0
Loyalty	1	3	0
Responsible Citzenship	1	5	0
Excellence	1	2	0
Promise Keeping	3	5	0
Fairness	1	2	0
Respect	1	3	0
Accountability	1	3	0
Self-Interest	1	5	0
Altruism	6	15	0
Social Responsibility	2	2	0
Aesthetics	9	11	0
Caring	1	3	0
Integrity	0	3	0

Abbreviations: PD, Program Director; HAT, Head Athletic Trainer; PD/HAT, Program Director/Head Athletic Trainer

Table 5. Choose Five Important Professional Values by Role in ATEP

Values	PD n (%)	HAT n (%)	PD/HAT n (%)	Total N (%)
Truth/Honesty	47 (88.7)	41 (85.4)	7 (87.5)	95 (87.2)
Loyalty	14 (26.4)	21 (43.8)	1 (12.5)	36 (33.0)
Responsible Citzenship	9 (17.0)	7 (14.6)	1 (12.5)	17 (15.7)
Excellence	23 (43.4)	13 (27.1)	2 (25.0)	38 (34.8)
Promise Keeping	8 (15.1)	4 (8.3)	0 (0.0)	12 (11.0)
Fairness	19 (35.9)	13 (27.1)	2 (25.0)	38 (34.8)
Respect	41 (77.4)	37 (77.1)	7 (87.5)	85 (78.0)
Accountability	28 (52.8)	27 (56.3)	3 (37.5)	58 (53.2)
Self-Interest	1 (1.9)	2 (4.2)	0 (0.0)	3 (2.8)
Altruism	3 (5.7)	3 (6.3)	1 (12.5)	7 (6.4)
Social Responsibility	6 (11.3)	4 (8.3)	1 (12.5)	11 (10.0)
Aesthetics	1 (1.9)	0 (0.0)	2 (25.0)	3 (2.8)
Caring	22 (41.5)	28 (58.3)	4 (50.0)	54 (49.5)
Integrity	43 (81.1)	38 (79.2)	4 (50.0)	85 (79.0)

Abbreviations: PD, Program Director; HAT, Head Athletic Trainer; PD/HAT, Program Director/Head Athletic Trainer

values and ranked them third. HATs ranked truth/honesty, integrity, and accountability as the first, second, and third ranked important values, respectively. Finally, the PD/HAT participants ranked truth/honesty as the first ranked value, respect as the second, and excellence as the third. When we collapsed the data across roles, truth/honesty was ranked first, integrity was ranked second, and respect was ranked third.

We also compared differences of ranked values across roles using a χ^2 analysis and dichotomously coding data (ie, top-three value versus not-top-three value). Accordingly, we coded all values ranked 1, 2, or 3 as a 0 and values not ranked 1, 2, or 3 as a 1.

Role by integrity rank ($\chi^2 = 6.707$, $df = 2$, $P = .035$) using a 3 x 2 Chi square analyses was significant when compared to values not ranked in the top 3.

Further analysis using a Mann-Whitney U test indicated significant differences between 2 roles among rankings. Mann–Whitney U Test values were ($z = -2.024$; $p = .044$) for Truth/Honesty and ($z = -2.405$; $p = .016$) for Integrity. Specifically, there was a significant difference between the PDs and PD/HATs roles in that PDs ranked truth/honesty ($P = .044$) and integrity ($P = .016$) higher than PD/HATs.

Table 6. Rank Order First, Second, and Third Professional Values by Role in ATEP

Values	PD sums	PD rank	HAT sums	HAT rank	PD/HAT sums	PD/HAT rank	Total Sums	Total Rank
Truth/Honesty	138	1*	112	1	12	1	262	1
Loyalty	216		173		31		421	
Responsible Citzenship	228		185		32		445	
Excellence	212		173		27	3	412	
Promise Keeping	230		186		32		448	
Fairness	223		182		31		436	
Respect	188	2	156		23	2	367	3
Accountability	204	3	155	3	29		388	
Self-Interest	232		185		32		449	
Altruism	229		188		32		449	
Social Responsibility	229		187		32		448	
Aesthetics	226		188		32		446	
Caring	204	3	157		28		389	
Integrity	138	1*	132	2	28		298	2

Abbreviations: PD, Program Director; HAT, Head Athletic Trainer; PD/HAT, Program Director/Head Athletic Trainer

* Two values are tied.

[1] Relative to ranking values: 1 is the most important to the participant, 2 is the next most important value to the participant, and 3 is the third most important value to the participant.

[2] Each participant was asked to rank the importance of professional values and was asked to choose one among the following: (1) extremely important, (2) important, and (3) not important.

[3] Rank values were assigned weight according to the following structure: the number 1 value receives the weight of 1, the number 2 value a weight 2, the number 3 value a weight 3, and values not chosen receive a weight of 4. Ranking was determined by the sum of the ranks. The lowest sum of the ranks was ranked number one, the second lowest sum of the ranks was ranked number 2, and the third lowest sum of the ranks was ranked number 3.

Importance of the Articulation of Values (Step Four)

Collectively, Table 7 indicates that the majority of athletic trainers in this sample agreed with the importance of articulating professional values in athletic training: 56.0% extremely important, 36.7% important, and less than 1 percent indicated it was not important. Approximately 6 percent of the participants did not respond to the query. Our χ^2 analysis did not identify any significant differences among the ATEP roles relative to the articulation of professional values.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with other allied health care professions, athletic trainers can benefit from establishing one singular set of professional values to guide and standardize professional behaviors.[6,10,13,22-28] Shared values that are explicit will advantage the profession in today's competitive health care arena because the public will recognize the name athletic trainer and link it with an expected quality relative to professional character, consistency in practice behaviors, and patient-care trust.

Table 7. Importance for the NATA to Explicitly Articulate Professional Values

Role in ATEP	Extremely Important No. (%)	Important No. (%)	Not Important No. (%)	No Response No. (%)
PD	24 (45.3)	25 (47.2)	0 (0.0)	4 (7.6)
HAT	33 (68.8)	11 (22.()	1 (2.1)	3 (6.3)
PD/HAT	4 (50.0)	4 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
TOTAL	61 (56.0)	40 (36.7)	1 (0.9)	7 (6.4)

Abbreviations: PD, Program Director; HAT, Head Athletic Trainer; PD/HAT, Program Director/Head Athletic Trainer

The results of our study are very promising. Important professional values (truth/honesty, integrity, respect, accountability, and caring) identified by the PDs, HATs, PD/HATs are similar given that the χ^2 square analysis showed no significant differences among ATEP roles relative to selected and ranked values. Furthermore, our data indicated that PDs, HATs, and PD/HATs believe it is important that the NATA should explicitly articulate professional values. Finally these selected values are congruent with the values we inferred from the NATA Code of Ethics.

Currently, the profession of athletic training has not identified and explicitly articulated its core values. While professional values are not implicit, they are being conveyed to students unconsciously. The hidden curriculum is comprised of those aspects of an education program that are not planned nor intentionally taught.[37] Relative to education in the healthcare disciplines, the hidden curriculum is extremely powerful in shaping values and often plays out in clinical practice.[38] The hidden curriculum engenders habits that evolve from observed foundational behaviors of professional practice.[31] In fact, the values that are learned in the hidden curriculum are highly variable, with some values being enhanced, some being ignored, and some blatantly inhibited. Until the professional values are explicitly articulated, professional behaviors will be conflicting.[6]

Today, there are 350-plus CAATE-accredited ATEPS in the U.S. and potentially as many interpretations and assumptions by athletic trainers relative to what constitutes professional core values. This sets the stage for educational confusion and professional ambiguity. Moreover, given that professional values guide professional behaviors and influence attitudes, beliefs, and practice, it is conceivable that this ambiguity limits, and will continue to limit, the professional identify of the athletic trainer in the healthcare arena. It is critical to note that the acquisition and internalization of professional values that are congruent with those espoused by a professional body shape one's professional identity.[39,40]

Athletic training's distinctiveness hinges on identifying and articulating one set of shared professional values in the athletic training curriculum so that consistent and predictable patterns of professional practice are consciously integrated into the curriculum.[6] Presently, there is a significant gap in the athletic training literature in regards to professional values.

Enculturation is the process by which an individual intentionally learns traditional content of the culture and assimilates its practices and values.[9] This process precisely transitions the student into the professional community.[8] Professional enculturation is successful when accurate insights relative to the professional community and practice are passed down from one generation to the next. Thus, enculturation sustains the authenticity of the professional practice and identity. At this moment, however, athletic training educators lack direction relative to enculturation, and by default, they unconsciously teach students what they realized from their personal athletic training experiences. The point is that until the profession explicitly articulates a singular set of shared professional values, athletic training's professional identity and practice behaviors will be unpredictable.

Our research demonstrates that PDs, HATs, and PD/HATs in GLATA share common professional values, namely, truth/honesty, integrity, respect, accountability, and caring. Furthermore, they believe it is important for the NATA to explicitly articulate professional core values. In closing, professional values are powerful. They are standards that shape and motivate consistent patterns of behaviors, decisions, and practice and are shared by all members of the professional group. Professional enculturation is a deliberate attempt to teach shared values that will crystallize professional practice and distinctiveness, as well as cultivate an unwavering professional commitment. Furthermore, values-based behaviors will permeate and guide the Foundational Behaviors of Professional Practice, a requirement of all CAATE-accredited athletic training education programs.[4]

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