Predictors of Commitment to Athletic Training Education

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Context: In order for athletic training students to be successful in any athletic training education program (ATEP), a certain level of commitment to the program and profession is required.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to explore the applicability of the sport commitment model (SCM) to an ATEP by applying the SCM in an academic setting to predict ATEP students' commitment to an ATEP.

Design: Cross-sectional, survey.

Setting: Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education-accredited ATEP.

Patients or Other Participants: A total of 99 male and female athletic training students participated. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years of age (mean = 20.10 ± 1.28).

Intervention(s): Previously validated measures were used to assess students' perceptions of enjoyment, attractive alternatives, investments, social constraints and support, benefits and costs, and commitment to the ATEP. All measures demonstrated adequate reliability for the current sample (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.71-0.93$).

Main Outcome Measure(s): A simultaneous multiple regression was conducted to determine which of the SCM determinants predicted ATEP commitment. An analysis of variance and a multivariate analysis of variance were conducted to compare preservice and first-, second-, and third-year ATEP students on SCM constructs.

Results: Perceived enjoyment and investments emerged as the significant predictors for ATEP commitment, with higher perceptions of enjoyment and investments predicting higher ATEP commitment. Students of varying academic years differed on their perceptions of ATEP enjoyment, with preservice students reporting higher enjoyment than first- or third-year students, and second-year students reporting higher enjoyment than third-year students. Additionally, preservice students reported significantly higher commitment and benefits, and lower costs and attractive alternatives, than first- and third-year students. Second-year students reported lower perceived costs than first- and third-year students.

Conclusions: The SCM may provide a theoretical framework in which to predict ATEP students' commitment to the program, as well as behavioral commitment (eg, stay/leave behavior).

Key Words: Retention, motivation, enjoyment, social influence

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INTRODUCTION

The educational preparation for the athletic trainer has evolved significantly in the past decade. The number of Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE)-accredited athletic training education programs (ATEPs) has dramatically risen from 132 at the end of 2000 to 343 in 2011.¹ This increase has resulted in the need for ATEPs to seek out and retain quality students, which has been investigated for many years in higher education.²⁻⁴ Dodge et al⁵ identified 3 key factors associated with student retention and persistence in ATEPs: (1) student motivation, (2) clinical and academic integration, and (3) the presence of a peersupport system. Klossner⁶ reported that student "legitimation" during the second year of the ATEP was a predictor of continued motivation and persistence in ATEPs. Others⁷ have also studied the influence of faculty and preceptors on continued motivation, persistence, and the resultant career decisions of recent ATEP graduates.

One way to examine continued motivation in ATEPs may be to use sport-specific motivational models such as the sport commitment model (SCM),^{8,9} which focuses on predictors of continued motivation in a voluntary activity. The SCM has been used not only to predict psychological commitment to continue an activity but also to explore behavioral commitment such as time, energy, and effort.^{10,11} Perhaps similar concepts and links exist in regards to commitment to an ATEP.

The SCM, developed by Carpenter et al⁸ and Scanlan et al,⁹ provides a conceptual framework for continued desire, resolve, and motivation for a particular activity. According to the SCM, several constructs predict psychological commitment. In this case, commitment to an ATEP would tap a student's resolve and desire to continue within the education program. The SCM suggests that the strongest predictor of an individual's level of commitment to an activity is *enjoyment*, or feelings of pleasure and liking; that is, how much a student is enjoying his or her experience in the ATEP through coursework and clinical field experiences. Personal investments represent everything that one has put into an activity that could not be regained if one were to discontinue the activity, such as time, energy, money, and effort. Athletic training education program students put forth considerable resources into their academic program, including vast time commitments, energy and effort, and fiscal investments. Involvement opportunities are the perceived benefits or perks associated with an activity that can be attained only through continued participation. For the ATEP student, some of these benefits may include achieving personal academic and professional goals, team affiliation, and acquiring knowledge within a medical field. Attractive alternatives are predicted to have a negative influence on commitment in that this construct represents how alluring other activities are in comparison with one's current involvement. Students in an ATEP may feel that other activities are more alluring than their current major or clinical field experience, such as hanging out with friends or working at a paying job.

Social constraints represent a perceived obligation to important others to continue a particular activity. Perceived social constraints could come from a variety of sources for the ATEP student, such as parents, classmates, or professors. On the flip side, *social support* represents the unconditional support and encouragement provided by these same social sources. Both social support and constraints are hypothesized to have a positive relationship with commitment. Lastly, perceived *costs* are the negatives or downsides associated with an activity.¹¹ Some potential downsides experienced by ATEP students could include having too much time taken up by ATEP, not getting along with peers, or feeling pressure to outperform classmates. Higher costs are predicted to be related to lower commitment.

Research testing the SCM with athletes has shown consistent results, with enjoyment emerging as the strongest positive predictor of commitment.^{9,11,12} Investments and involvement opportunities have been positively related to commitment, whereas attractive alternatives and perceived costs have been significant negative predictors of commitment.^{9,11,12} The influence of both social constraints and social support has revealed mixed results with athletic populations, with some studies showing that social constraints are negatively related to commitment,^{8,13} positively related,^{13,14} or not related.^{9,15} Similarly, study of the relationship between social support and commitment has yielded limited results.¹¹

The SCM or certain aspects of the model have also been used to help explore commitment to coaching¹⁶ and officiating,¹⁷ and, similarly to the findings with athletes, these results indicate that the SCM seems to be applicable to other domains within the "sport bubble." Thus, perhaps the SCM should be used within an academic domain that acts like or mimics many other volunteer activities, such as an ATEP. The SCM has yet to be applied within the academic setting, even though the predictors of sport commitment may very well be predictive of commitment to a voluntary academic program like an ATEP.

Thus, the primary purpose of this study was to explore the applicability of the SCM to ATEPs by applying the SCM in an academic setting to predict ATEP students' commitment to athletic training. We hypothesized that the predictors of ATEP commitment would be similar in strength and direction to those found in previous research using the SCM with athletes, coaches, and officials. A secondary purpose was to compare students of varying years in the ATEP on commitment and its predictors.

METHODS

Participants

Of the 110 recruited, a total of 99 athletic training education program students (90%), ranging in age from 18 to 24 years (mean = 20.05, SD = 1.28), participated in this study. All participants were currently admitted into one undergraduate, accredited ATEP that offers 11 on-campus clinical experiences

as well as 13 clinical experiences off campus. Participants represented 4 different cohorts within the ATEP program: third-year students/seniors who were preparing to graduate at the end of the academic year (n = 18); second-year students/ juniors (n = 24); first-year students/sophomores who were involved in their first field experiences (n = 26); and preservice students who had recently just been accepted into the program and were involved in their first academic course in the program (n = 31). Approximately 63% of the participants were female and 37% were male, and about half of the students indicated that they had had previous athletic training experiences during their high school years. Participants' cumulative grade point averages ranged from 2.59 to 3.96 (mean = 3.26, SD = .36).

All students reported intentions to take the Board of Certification (BOC) examination at the end of their academic program. The vast majority (82%) of ATEP students intended to continue their academic preparation after graduation from their undergraduate program. The plans for continuing their academic preparation included attending a graduate program in athletic training (n = 27), physical therapy school (n = 45), or graduate school in another area (n = 10), with others indicating they might attend chiropractic school, medical or physician assistant school, or occupational therapy. Additionally, approximately 81% of the students indicated that they planned on working as athletic trainers in the future.

Measures

All measures used in this study have been previously validated with similar populations.¹⁶ Slight wording modifications were made throughout the measures to indicate "in this athletic training program" or "athletic training" rather than "on this sport team" or "sport." The essence of the original questions remained unchanged; just the context of the question was slightly modified.

ATEP Commitment. We used an instrument from Scanlan et al⁹ to measure the students' continued desire and commitment to the ATEP. Five questions using a Likert-scale format, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very* or *a lot*) were designed to measure commitment. Previous research ^{10,13,18} has shown adequate reliability and validity with a variety of samples, with Cronbach α ranging from 0.88 to 0.90. An example item was "Do you want to continue working on your athletic training major."

ATEP Enjoyment. Athletic training students completed 3 questions designed to assess how much students enjoyed, liked, and gained pleasure from pursuing athletic training as an academic major. Items developed by Scanlan et al⁹ have demonstrated strong psychometric properties in past research¹⁵ (Cronbach α ranged from 0.84 to 0.90). Items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much so*.

Personal Investments. To assess the resources that students had put into their athletic training program that would otherwise be lost should they discontinue, ATEP students completed 5 items using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a lot*).⁹ For example, students were asked, "How much time have you put into athletic training?" This measure has demonstrated adequate reliability

and validity in past studies, 15,16 with Cronbach α ranging from 0.76 to 0.88.

Attractive Alternatives. Athletic training students answered 5 questions designed to determine how interesting or alluring other activities were in comparison with their current academic program.^{9,16} Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, *not at all true for me*, to 5, *completely true for me*. One item stated, "Compared to athletic training, there are other things that I could do which would be more enjoyable." Previous studies^{10,13,18} have shown adequate reliability ($\alpha = .70$ to .90) and validity with various samples.

Perceived Benefits and Costs. The measures designed to assess the perceived benefits and costs associated with being an athletic training major were adapted from Raedeke.¹⁶ For perceived benefits, students were first given a definition of perceived benefits, or perks associated with being an athletic training student, and some examples of potential benefits, such as learning new clinical skills, feeling successful, and attaining personal goals. Next, students were asked to complete 4 items assessing their perception of perceived benefits associated with athletic training on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from not at all to very much so. An example benefits item was, "How rewarding is being an athletic training student?" For perceived costs, or the downsides associated with being an athletic training student, students were also provided a definition and some examples, such as the ATEP is too competitive, studying is boring, and the ATEP requires too many sacrifices and requires too much time. Again, students completed 4 items for perceived costs on a 5-point Likert scale. An example item was, "Do you feel there are downsides to being an athletic training student?" Past research^{10,13,16,18} has shown adequate reliability and validity for both the perceived benefits (eg, $\alpha = .82$) and costs (eg, $\alpha = .79$) scales.

Social Constraints. Students completed 20 items designed to assess perceptions of social constraints from 4 different sources: parents, classmates, best friend, and professors. This measure was designed to assess students' perceived obligation to important people in their lives to continue in the ATEP. Items were completed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true for me*) to 5 (*completely true for me*). For example, students answered the following parent social constraints item, "I have to stay in athletic training because my parents have done so much for me." Studies¹¹ have shown acceptable score reliability and validity ($\alpha = 0.71-0.82$).

Social Support. In order to assess satisfaction with support from important others, the measure of Sarason et al^{19} was used. The measure consists of 12 items that ask participants to list individuals who provide them with each type of social support and their level of perceived satisfaction with each type of social support. For example, the students were asked to list people for the following question, "Who do you know whom you can trust with information that could get you into trouble?" After students listed individuals, they then indicated how satisfied they were with the level of social support they received, with responses ranging from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 6 (*very satisfied*). This measure¹⁹ has demonstrated adequate test reliability ranging from 0.90 to 0.93.

Procedures

After Institutional Review Board approval, we conducted a small pilot study with a sample of ATEP students and coresearchers who completed all measures to determine clarity of items. Current students from one ATEP were recruited to participate during one of their athletic training education courses at the midpoint of the fall semester. A graduate student, familiar with the study and study procedures, actively recruited students to participate. The 2 primary investigators did not participate in student recruitment or data collection in hopes of eliminating potential perceptions of coercion to participate and to enhance feelings of confidentiality. Potential participants were invited to participate and were provided with an explanation of the purpose of the study, study procedures, and an informed consent. Students were asked to read the informed consent and, if they agreed to complete the questionnaire, to sign the consent. Participants then completed the paper-and-pencil questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete (ranging from 10 to 30 minutes). Similar procedures were used to recruit the preservice students; however, these students were recruited at the midpoint of their first course in the ATEP, an introductory course offered during the May term of a summer session.

Data Analysis

Reliability analyses were first conducted for all measures used in this study. The Cronbach α was calculated for all subscales, with a criterion of 0.70 or greater. Intraclass correlations and item statistics were used to determine whether or not to include all items intended for each subscale. Correlations were also conducted to determine if multicollinearity effects would need to be considered. In order to determine the significant predictors of ATEP commitment, 2 simultaneous multiple regressions were conducted. Because of the small sample size in relation to the number of potential predictors of ATEP commitment, we decided to conduct 2 separate regression analyses, with one analysis focusing on the social influence constructs. For the first analysis, the independent variables were enjoyment, investments, attractive alternatives, benefits, and costs, and the dependent variable was ATEP commitment. For the second analysis, the independent variables included all the social influence constructs: perceived social constraints from parents, professors, classmates, and best friends, and perceived satisfaction with social support. Again, ATEP commitment was the dependent variable. Two multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to compare the students of varying years in the ATEP program on ATEP commitment and its predictors. In the first analysis, group was the independent variable and enjoyment, benefits, costs, attractive alternatives, and investments were the dependent variables. In the second analysis, group remained the independent variable and perceptions of social constraints from parents, professors, classmates, and best friends and social support satisfaction were the dependent variables.

RESULTS

Reliabilities and Correlations

The Cronbach α was calculated for all subscales used in this study. All subscales achieved adequate reliability ($\alpha > 0.70$), with α ranging from 0.71 to 0.93. One item from the investments measure ("How much money have you put into

your ATEP?") was not included in our analyses because of low intraclass correlations and item statistics. Removal of this item from the investments subscale changed the α from 0.75 to 0.85. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for all constructs, correlations among the variables, and scale α 's (along the diagonal).

For the most part, correlations among the subscales were in the expected theoretical directions. Enjoyment, investments, and benefits were positively related to ATEP commitment. Perceived costs and attractive alternatives were negatively related to ATEP commitment. Interestingly, social constraints from all sources (parents, professors, classmates, and best friends) were all positively related to ATEP commitment, although the relationships would be considered weak to moderately weak (r = 0.17-0.22). Because of multicollinearity between commitment and enjoyment (r = 0.77) and between social constraints from parents and professors (r = 0.70), we decided to conduct separate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to determine group/year in program differences for enjoyment and professor social constraints.

Predictors of ATEP Commitment

In order to explore our first purpose, we conducted a simultaneous multiple regression to determine which constructs were the significant predictors of ATEP commitment. The regression was significant: $F_{5,93} = 36.65$, P < .0001, R = 0.81, with 66% of the variance of ATEP commitment accounted for by the predictors (enjoyment, benefits, costs, investments, attractive alternatives). Using standardized "ß weights, enjoyment (" $\beta = .50$) and investments (" $\beta = .26$) emerged as the significant predictors. For these students, higher perceived enjoyment and investments to the ATEP predicted higher commitment. However, enjoyment was highly correlated with ATEP commitment and emerged as the strongest predictor of commitment. We then decided to conduct another regression analysis without enjoyment as a predictor. The multicollinearity between enjoyment and commitment could have prevented other variables from emerging as significant predictors.

The second regression analysis was also significant: $F_{4,94} = 31.85$, P < .0001, R = 0.76, with 58% of the variance of commitment was accounted for by the predictors. Perceived benefits (" $\beta = .34$), investments (" $\beta = .33$), and attractive alternatives (" $\beta = -.30$) emerged as the significant predictors of ATEP commitment. Thus, higher perceived benefits and investments and lower perceptions of attractive alternatives predicted higher commitment to ATEP. The next regression analysis attempted to determine the salient social influence predictors of ATEP commitment. The regression was not significant: $F_{5,93} = 1.20$, P = .31. Thus, none of the social influence constructs emerged as significant predictors of ATEP commitment for this sample of students.

Cohort Differences on ATEP Commitment Constructs

We conducted MANOVAs and ANOVAs in order to explore if students from varying years in the ATEP differed on commitment and its predictors. The first MANOVA compared students of varying years (preservice and first-, second-, and third-year students) on ATEP commitment, investments, benefits, costs, and attractive alternatives. The MANOVA was significant: Wilks $\lambda = 0.57$, $F_{15,251} = 3.83$, P < .0001, with

Table 1.	Correlations,	α Coefficients,	and Descriptive	Statistics	for Commitment	Variables
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Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. ATEP commitment	0.83										
2. Enjoyment	0.77*	0.85									
3. Benefits	0.59*	0.69*	0.81								
4. Attractive alternatives	-0.61*	-0.69*	-0.52*	0.93							
5. Investments	0.44*	0.29*	0.13	-0.24*	0.85						
6. Costs	-0.42*	-0.49*	-0.45^{*}	0.48*	-0.01	0.82					
7. Professor SC	0.21*	-0.01	-0.01	0.08	0.18	-0.04	0.76				
8. Peer SC	0.17	0.02	0.01	0.09	0.17	-0.02	0.70*	0.71			
9. Best friend SC	0.22*	0.14	0.03	-0.08	0.19	0.06	0.61*	0.61*	0.77		
10. Parent SC	0.18	-0.03	0.06	0.04	0.05	-0.03	0.70*	0.54*	0.60*	0.81	
11. SS satisfaction ^a	0.07	0.16	0.24*	-0.20	0.03	-0.19	0.01	0.08	0.08	-0.01	0.90
Mean	4.52	4.23	3.99	2.13	4.58	2.83	1.89	1.7	1.5	2.1	5.6
SD	0.54	0.67	0.60	0.89	0.50	0.78	0.76	0.68	0.67	0.88	0.52

Abbreviations: ATEP, athletic training education program; SC, social constraint; SS, social support.

* Indicates significant relationships, P < .05.

^a SS satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 6.

43% of the variance explained by group differences. Students of various years in the ATEP program differed significantly on ATEP commitment, attractive alternatives, benefits, and costs. Post hoc Tukey tests revealed that (1) preservice students reported higher commitment than third-year students; (2) preservice students reported fewer attractive alternatives than first- and third-year students, who were no different from each other; (3) preservice students had higher perceived benefits than first- and third-year students, who were no different from each other; and (4) preservice students and second-year students had lower perceived costs than firstand third-year students, who were no different from each other. An ANOVA was conducted to determine group differences on perceived enjoyment, and it was significant: $F_{93,95} = 11.82, P < .0001$. Post hoc Tukey tests revealed that preservice students reported higher ATEP enjoyment than did first- and third-year students, and second-year students had higher enjoyment than third-year students. The means and standard deviations by academic year in the program for all constructs can be seen in Table 2.

Next, a MANOVA was conducted to compare the students in various years in the ATEP on the social influence constructs: social support satisfaction and social constraints from parents, classmates, and best friends. The MANOVA was not significant: Wilks $\lambda = 0.82$, $F_{15,251} = 1.26$, P = .23. Similarly, the ANOVA examining group differences on professor social constraints was not significant: $F_{3,95} = 0.91$, P = .44. Thus, preservice and first-, second-, and third-year students did not differ from each other on their perceptions of social constraints and social support.

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the applicability of the SCM to an academic domain, in particular the realm of athletic training education. Similar to past research with competitive athletes and coaches, relationships between the sport commitment constructs emerged as hypothesized.^{8,9,11} Additionally, enjoyment emerged as the strongest predictor of ATEP commitment. However, because of the continued multicollinearity between perceptions of

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for All Constructs by Year in the Athletic Training Education Program (ATEP)

	Preservice Students $(n = 31)$	First-Year Students ($n = 26$)	Second-Year Students (n = 24)		
Variable	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	$\text{Mean} \pm \text{SD}$	
ATEP commitment	4.75 ± 0.35^{a}	4.50 ± 0.53	4.52 ± 0.38	4.16 ± 0.80^{b}	
Enjoyment	4.62 ± 0.42^{a}	3.99 ± 0.74^{b}	$4.39 \pm 0.46^{\circ}$	3.70 ± 0.69^{b}	
Benefits	4.36 ± 0.51 ^a	$3.68\pm0.60^{ m b}$	4.03 ± 0.54	3.74 ± 0.50^{b}	
Costs	2.38 ± 0.68^{a}	3.22 ± 0.75^{b}	$2.58 \pm 0.66^{\circ}$	3.35 ± 0.58^{b}	
Attractive alternatives	1.63 ± 0.43ª	$2.45\pm0.99^{ m b}$	2.12 ± 0.87	2.57 ± 0.97^{b}	
Investments	4.57 ± 0.37	4.68 ± 0.56	4.49 ± 0.55	4.56 ± 0.55	
SC—professors	1.83 ± 0.66	2.01 ± 0.95	1.73 ± 0.59	2.06 ± 0.81	
SC—peers	1.56 ± 0.51	1.92 ± 0.92	1.57 ± 0.51	1.56 ± 0.68	
SC—parent	1.99 ± 0.78	2.09 ± 1.07	2.01 ± 0.82	2.13 ± 0.88	
SC—best friend	1.39 ± 0.59	1.56 ± 0.89	1.39 ± 0.50	1.51 ± 0.64	
SS satisfaction ^d	5.79 ± 0.35	5.44 ± 0.75	5.69 ± 0.46	5.59 ± 0.38	

Abbreviations: SC, social constraint; SS, social support.

^{a,b,c} Different letters denote groups that were significantly different from each other.

^d SS satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 6.

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enjoyment and commitment, additional analyses were conducted to allow other predictors to emerge. For athletic training students, higher perceptions of the perceived benefits or upsides related to ATEP, higher perceptions of invested time, energy, and effort, and lower perceptions of attractiveness of alternative activities predicted higher commitment to ATEP. These findings suggest that by enhancing or facilitating perceptions of the positive aspects of the ATEP, enhancing team affiliation, meeting academic and professional goals, forming strong interpersonal relationships, and increasing knowledge about the medical field, could potentially increase ATEP students' motivation and continued desire to complete the ATEP. Enhancing perceptions of the positives associated with the ATEP may decrease how alluring other activities may seem in comparison. These findings parallel the findings of other ATEP studies^{5,7,20} regarding retention and motivation in ATEPs. The interpersonal relationships athletic training students develop with coaches, teams, and clinical instructors⁷ are paramount to the continued motivation of students within an ATEP. Perhaps, as students begin to develop skills and these interpersonal relationships, they gain a sense of affirmation or legitimation⁶ within the program. This legitimation helps the student feel more integrated⁵ into both the academic and clinical portions of the ATEP. This integration helps students feel like they fit in, which may increase positive perceptions of their role within the ATEP.

Several differences emerged between ATEP students of varying years in the academic program or major. Overall, preservice students currently participating in their first course within the ATEP had higher perceptions of commitment and benefits and lower perceptions of attractive alternatives and related costs to the ATEP in comparison with first- and thirdyear students in the program. Intuitively, this makes sense because preservice students are just beginning their academic career in a major that they find to be intriguing, difficult, and alluring. These preservice students had just completed the application process to be accepted into the ATEP, and thus were delighted and eager with anticipation to begin the process. For these students this began the initial process of formal integration⁵ into the program. Initial entry in the ATEP has provided affirming acceptance from clinical instructors, professors and peer mentors that can enhance preservice students' confidence, which in turn solidifies their roles as ATEP students.⁶ In contrast, for the first- and thirdyear students, perhaps some of the novelty and excitement associated with being accepted into the ATEP had worn off. First-year students were in the middle of several difficult academic courses and were learning to balance their time and energy between coursework, clinical field experiences, and other activities (eg, a job, social life). This is a difficult transition for some athletic training students, and this may be why the first-year students reported lower perceptions of the positives and higher perceptions of the negatives associated with the ATEP. The third-year students were also significantly different from the preservice students on several constructs. Again, the experiences of third-year students were very different from those of preservice students. Many third-year students were in the middle of their "senior sport" clinical field experience, which requires greater time commitments and responsibilities, as well as preparing for the BOC exam. These changes in responsibilities and pressures associated with the BOC, searching for future employment as an athletic trainer,

or getting accepted into graduate school could definitely influence these third-year students' perceptions of the ATEP.

Interestingly, second-year students in the ATEP reported greater levels of enjoyment and less perceived negatives associated with the ATEP than did third- and first-year students. One potential reason for this difference could be that the second-year students were just beginning to experience greater responsibility with their sport teams, felt they could contribute more at their various rotations, and had newly acquired technical skills and knowledge skills that could be applied to their clinical experiences, without the added pressure of preparing for the BOC or the hours associated with a senior sport rotation. After surviving the first year in the program, both academically and emotionally, the secondyear students were enjoying the opportunity to use their new skills. Second-year students could be feeling fully integrated into their athletic training experience and thus able to appreciate, enjoy, and reap the benefits of the program.⁵

Despite the many differences found between students of varying years for most aspects of the SCM, no differences emerged regarding perceptions of obligation to significant others or social support satisfaction. Additionally, none of the social influence constructs emerged as significant predictors of commitment to ATEP. These findings are in stark contrast to previous research exploring motivation to an ATEP. As noted previously,^{5,20} students identified clinical and academic integration along with the presence of a peer-support system as key factors of continued motivation in an ATEP. Others⁷ have reported that the relationship between the preceptor and the student is very influential in the student's ability to persist in an ATEP.

Limitations

Some limitations with the current study should be considered. This study used a limited number of participants from only one ATEP at a midsize university, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, this was merely a snapshot of these students' perceptions at one moment in time. To fully understand the dynamic nature and influences in an ATEP, a longitudinal analysis is warranted. Behavioral measures, such as passing the BOC or amount of time studying, were not included in the current study as a means of assessing the influence of psychological commitment on actual behavioral commitment. Thus, the real-world application of commitment to ATEP is somewhat limited.

Implications and Future Research

Based on these findings, several practical implications can be suggested. First, ATEPs should highlight and showcase the benefits associated with being an athletic training major. These benefits could include, but are not limited to, acquiring skills that directly lead to job placement and employment, peer/group cohesiveness, social support network within the academic program and the profession as a whole, and continued involvement in the sport world. Reminding students of the many upsides or perks associated with athletic training may enhance their commitment to the ATEP throughout their studies.⁹ Second, increasing perceptions of the benefits involved with being in an ATEP may help

minimize the attractiveness of other programs or conflicting activities. Enhancing enjoyment during coursework, clinical experiences, and other extracurricular activities associated with an ATEP can also further decrease the attractiveness of other activities. Third, based on the cohort findings from the current study, there appears to be a decline in overall enjoyment and benefits and an increase in perceived costs or downsides associated with an ATEP. For example, factors that could influence preservice students' perceptions as they transition into an ATEP could be the realization of the time commitment (eg, decreased free time, time constraints for studying) and/or that every day on the playing field may not be as exciting as they might have hoped. In contrast, students preparing for graduation may be overcome with anxiety or fear concerning finding a job or the increased responsibility inherent with being an athletic trainer. Thus, ATEP faculty and staff could provide additional social (eg, ATEP-sponsored activities, such as sport tournaments or group picnics), emotional, and informational support for students during the transition years-from being a preservice student to a firstvear student, and as a third-year student transitioning to being a practicing athletic trainer or getting accepted into a graduate education program. For example, an ATEP could implement a mentoring program wherein senior students mentor incoming preservice students during their first year in the academic program. Senior students would be available to provide additional information, study tips and strategies, listening support, and an alternative source of guidance in addition to that provided by faculty.

Future research should continue to explore the applicability of the SCM to ATEPs. Based on previous research using the SCM with sport participants, officials, and coaches, future behaviors of athletic training students could potentially be examined and/or predicted.^{10,17,18} For example, perhaps certain behaviors or outcomes (eg, grade point average, taking and passing the BOC examination, and future employment as an athletic trainer) could be predicted based on the students' level of commitment to an ATEP. Additionally, following changes in the predictors of ATEP commitment over time may help project who continues or discontinues an ATEP.

Conclusions

The SCM appears to be a strong theoretical framework in which to examine athletic training students' continued motivation and commitment. Differences seem to exist between students of varying years in the program on several of the commitment constructs. Athletic training students' perceptions of enjoyment and commitment change throughout their experience in the ATEP. Thus, using legitimation and integration strategies throughout the ATEP may enhance student commitment.

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