

Student Perceptions of an Athletic Training Residential Living Community

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Context: Colleges and universities are implementing new academic and social programs to retain students. One possible program is a residential living community (RLC) devoted to a content area.

Objective: To understand the perceptions of athletic training students involved in an RLC.

Design: Qualitative study.

Setting: Athletic training program.

Patients or Other Participants: Ten athletic training students (8 female, 2 male; average age = 19.50 ± 0.97 years) who participated in an RLC during their first year in college volunteered to participate.

Data Collection and Analysis: We used QuestionPro to complete in-depth interviews by having the participants journal their responses to open-ended questions. We used grounded theory to uncover the dominant themes and negotiated over the coding scheme, completed member checks, and performed a peer review to establish trustworthiness.

Results: The overall theme of our data pertained to the supportive nature of the RLC allowing for early socialization. Specifically, we uncovered 3 subthemes. The participants found *study opportunities* common because they lived in close proximity to peers in the same classes. Our participants believed the RLC provided a *supportive environment* by fostering a support network with classmates navigating similar challenges. Students also enjoyed early socialization by having a resident assistant who was an upper-level athletic training student. The final theme emerged from the *unintended consequences* of the RLC. Finding a quiet area in which to study became difficult and students often had trouble making personal connections outside of athletic training.

Conclusions: The RLC promoted first-year student success by fostering relationships and providing early socialization to the demands of the athletic training program. Some negative aspects did occur; however, these can be remedied by having quiet study spaces available and providing students with sufficient time outside of athletic training to pursue extracurricular endeavors.

Key Words: Socialization, life-balance, student integration

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INTRODUCTION

During this volatile economic time, colleges and universities are concerned with attracting and retaining students, as student attrition can harm institutions in terms of competitiveness, prestige, and financial stability.¹ This focus has led to new programming intended to assist students academically, to integrate students into the campus, and to build a sense of community.²⁻⁴ In 1994, the American College Personnel Association⁵ called upon colleges and universities to create more links between in-class experiences and extracurricular experiences to enhance student learning. Some institutions have created these links through learning communities. A learning community was defined by Cross⁶ as “groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning.”^(p4) Residential living communities (RLCs), a specific type of learning community, are groups of people living in close proximity to one another—potentially the same residence hall or floor⁷—for a defined period of time, and having clear leadership potential. Although many students apply for RLCs, not all students are selected. Many RLCs have specific selection criteria such as first-year student status.⁴ Students are linked with faculty, staff, peers, and upper-level students through more frequent contact, more in-depth conversations, and more quality interactions.^{3,7-9}

Many potential benefits have been reported regarding RLCs. Students in these communities are more involved in campus life, have more interactions with other students and faculty, and are more integrated into the college campus.^{4,9} The interactions with faculty not only are more frequent but also result in more meaningful relationships^{9,10} allowing for personal connections. During the initial transition to the college campus, RLC students are quicker to socialize with their peers because of planned events and total time spent as a group.¹⁰ In addition, the students feel the informal advising/mentoring from an upper-level student eases their transition to college.¹⁰ The students enjoy having a peer group to increase academic motivation and peer collaboration^{4,10} while navigating the challenges of a new setting and a new system with them,¹⁰ leading to a sense of unity among the group.^{4,7}

The outcomes of RLCs can be explained by a modified theory regarding student persistence. This theory uses both Astin's¹¹ theory of involvement and Tinto's¹² theory of student departure. The combination of these theories explains student retention with regards to both academic and social reasons.^{13,14} Students want a sense of community both in the classroom and outside of the classroom,¹⁵ as this is the ideal environment for students to persist in college and get the most out of their experience. In general, the more involved a student is with the academic and college community, the greater the probability the student will persist at that institution.³ According to these theories, students from supportive peer groups are more likely to discuss academic work and concepts outside of the classroom, providing more depth to their learning.^{11,12}

Unfortunately, prospective athletic training students frequently have a limited understanding of the profession.¹⁶ Providing students interested in an athletic training program (ATP) with accurate and complete information regarding a career in athletic training can help attract and retain quality students.¹⁶ Because of the benefits of RLCs,^{4,7,9,10} they may help in educating and socializing students early in their educational experience. Although research has examined RLCs in first-year college students^{7,9,10} and high-achieving college students,⁸ and with specific fields such as criminology,¹⁷ no studies exist examining the value of an RLC for athletic training education to date. Specifically, we were interested in the benefits and drawbacks of participating in an RLC and if students would recommend participation to future athletic training students.

METHODS

We chose to use qualitative methods to determine student perceptions of a RLC for students interested in athletic training. Qualitative methods allow for the gathering of rich description and are used for studying the ways in which people create meaning from their lived experiences,¹⁸ making this approach appropriate for our study. We asked participants questions about their specific experiences while participating in an RLC. We used QuestionPro to collect data through online journaling, allowing the participants flexibility to complete the survey at their convenience.

Participants

Ten athletic training students (8 females, 2 males; average age = 19.50 ± 0.97 years) volunteered to participate in our study from a pool of 11 students who participated in the RLC. All of the students voluntarily participated in an RLC during their first year of college at an institution with a Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE)—accredited undergraduate ATP. This institution was a private, liberal arts, residential college sponsoring National Collegiate Athletic Association Division III athletics. The RLC included students interested in applying to the ATP with an upper-level student serving as the resident assistant (RA). The RLC was marketed by the residence life office to first-year students, but there was a possibility for older students to live on the same residence hall wing. However, the upper-level students typically did not participate in RLC activities. All of our participants participated in the RLC as first-semester college students.

At this institution, students take prerequisite courses and complete observation hours before applying to the ATP during the spring semester of their first year. The secondary admissions process stresses the importance of properly socializing students to provide them with an accurate depiction of the program and a supportive environment that helps them enter the program for the correct reasons.¹⁶ Students begin clinical education experiences in the fall semester of their second year.

Figure. Participant survey questions.

1. Describe your experiences in the residential living community. What activities associated with the residential living community did you participate in? Were you involved in academic functions or extracurricular functions as part of the community?
2. What did you like best about the residential living community? Please explain.
3. What did you like least about the residential living community? Please explain.
4. What would you have changed about the residential living community if you had the chance? Please explain.
5. What is your overall opinion of the residential living community? Please explain.
6. Compared to students who did not live in this residential community, what advantages do you think you had during your first year at [institution name]? Please explain.
7. Compared to students who did not live in this residential community, what disadvantages do you think you had during your first year at [institution name]? Please explain.
8. Compared to students who did not live in this residential community, what advantages do you think you had when you were applying to the Athletic Training major? Please explain.
9. Compared to students who did not live in this residential community, what disadvantages do you think you had when you were applying to the Athletic Training major? Please explain.
10. Did the experience living in the residential community alter your decision to apply to the AT program? Why or why not?
11. Did the experience of living in the residential community alter your decision to remain at [institution name]? Why or why not?
12. Would you recommend being a part of the residential living community to incoming students? Why or why not?
13. If you had the option to experience your freshman year over again, would you choose to be a part of the living community again? Why or why not?

Data Collection Procedures

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we sent an e-mail to students who participated in an athletic training RLC during their first year of college asking them for their participation in our study. Students volunteered to participate by clicking on a link to a secure Web-based data management system called QuestionPro. We chose to use online journaling because of its convenience and the confidentiality it provides to participants.¹⁹ Also, the participants had the opportunity to reflect on the questions instead of answering immediately, allowing for robust responses.¹⁹ Although online data collection can produce rich data, it is void of researcher-participant interaction. To help ameliorate the lack of interaction, we informed participants that we might contact them for further clarification of responses or to ask additional questions if needed.

Once participants logged into the Web site, the survey began with an IRB-approved informed consent page. After agreeing to complete the study, participants provided basic demographic data (age, sex, etc) in the first section of the survey. The second portion of the survey included open-ended questions that we asked the participants to respond to by reflecting on their experience and providing as much detail as possible. We had a peer review the interview questions (Figure) for content and clarity, and we had a student pilot the survey before we initiated data collection. We discontinued data collection once we reached saturation of the data and no new themes emerged.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the responses to the open-ended interview questions using Atlas.ti (version 6.6.15; Atlas.ti GmbH, Berlin, Germany) and following principles of grounded theory. We were particularly interested in the behavior of undergraduate students considering athletic training as a

major, which made grounded theory the appropriate approach for our investigation.²⁰ We provided each participant with a pseudonym before data analysis to protect confidentiality. First, we independently read the transcripts in their entirety to become acquainted with the perceptions of the participants. After gaining familiarity, we independently coded the data using open, axial, and selective techniques to allow the dominant themes to emerge from the data.²¹ During open coding, we broke the data down line by line, noting similarities among the different pieces. We combined data to form categories during axial coding and created central themes through selective coding. Once both researchers completed the analysis, we met to discuss the coding scheme and the central themes. We edited the names of the final themes based on our conversations; however, we made no changes to the categories that comprised the themes.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the authenticity of the data and results.²² We took multiple measures to ensure trustworthiness in our study. First, we coded the data independently of each other and negotiated over the coding scheme until we reached full agreement. We also had a peer review and verify the transcripts, the coding scheme, and the results. The peer review was completed by an athletic training educator and scholar with experience in qualitative methods. Finally, we performed member checks with 3 randomly selected participants to ensure the accuracy of the final presentation of the results. During this step, the 3 selected participants reviewed the final results of the study for accuracy and comprehensiveness.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data allowed us to develop an overall theme for the perceptions of an RLC in athletic training education.

We believe the RLC provided a supportive environment, improving student success while helping to socialize students to the demands of the program and integrating them socially. We were also able to identify 3 subthemes from our data (Figure). The RLC provided students with *study opportunities* and fostered a *supportive environment*, but did have *unintended consequences*. The overall theme and the 3 subthemes are presented below with supporting quotes from participants and a discussion of the findings.

DISCUSSION

We believe the RLC was a positive experience for prospective athletic training students, as 9 out of the 10 participants stated they would participate again and all of the participants stated they would recommend participating in an RLC to incoming first-year students. When asked if she would recommend the RLC to incoming first-year students, Emma stated, “Yes, it is a very positive way to learn about athletic training and be able to share your interests with hall mates.” This quote illustrates the socializing effect of the RLC, as she was able to better understand athletic training. This example also serves to explain how the academic aspects of athletic training were enhanced because of the social aspects of an RLC supporting the modified theory of student persistence^{13,14} as students formed closer, more meaningful peer groups.

Professional socialization is an important component of the athletic training education process, as the field is still not well understood by prospective students.¹⁶ It has been found that athletic training students are socialized by developing relationships within athletic training.²³ We found that the RLC helped foster relationships for our participants. Joshua stated, “I would definitely recommend [participating in the RLC]. It is very beneficial both in making friends and in improving athletic training skills.” The relationships he built during his participation in the RLC may have helped his development while providing him with professional relationships. This could be because of the integration of in-class experiences in other less formal settings.⁹ Similarly, Alexis responded that she would recommend participating to future first-year students. “Definitely. Living with people going through the same process as you helps with stress.” It has been reported that student frustrations often occur because of the stress of completing an undergraduate ATP.²⁴ It appears that an RLC can help students cope by giving them a sense of a peer support group or community.

Participating in an RLC can also help improve student integration socially. When asked if she would participate in the RLC again, Brianna stated, “Yes, because it helped me adapt to the campus and fit in easier.” Improving student social integration can have profound effects on persistence as students begin to feel they belong in the campus community once they become involved in campus life.²⁵ Integration that occurs early on in the college careers of students has a more positive effect on persistence decisions,²⁶ stressing the importance of early involvement. This involvement eases the transition from high school to college.¹⁰ The RLC provided first-year students the opportunity to become engaged in the campus and the ATP, which may have implications for student retention.⁹ The same finding has been reported with first-year RLCs for students interested in criminal justice.¹⁷

Study Opportunities

Students often mentioned that they enjoyed the RLC because they were able to prepare for athletic training related coursework with peers. Olivia stated,

I had a wonderful experience living in [residence hall name] my freshman year. My RA would hold study sessions before a big test or quiz. It was great living in a hall with a lot of the athletic training majors, and also exercise physiology and health promotion majors. We were only 2 steps away from each other if any of us had questions about homework or if we were confused on a certain topic. . . The best part about living in a hall with people that are in the same major as you is the ability to have someone 3 doors down that you would be able to study with or do homework with. We all knew how hard this major was and helped each other when any of us needed it.

Another student, Alexis, felt similarly.

I thought it was really helpful living in the athletic training living community. One of the [residence assistants] in the next hall was an [athletic training student] so it was helpful having him to ask questions. . . It was really helpful having other [athletic training students] around because we could quiz each other and study together for tests. It was also helpful because if we were taping, like ankles for example, they could tell us how it felt and if it was right because we were all learning the same thing. . . I think it's extremely beneficial because you have people to help you with the things you're learning. It gives you a chance to learn together and get help from one another.

Finally, Samantha agreed that having peers close by to study outside of the classroom was one of the best parts of the RLC. She stated, “By living in the residential living community we were able to study together, help each other out if someone did not understand something.”

Peer support groups have been reported to positively influence persistence decisions of athletic training students.^{27,28} Our participants found that developing a support network was easy because students in their residence hall had similar interests and were taking the same classes. Perhaps students find peer study groups especially rewarding as they feel more comfortable asking peers questions than they do faculty and staff. Peer support can be beneficial socially but also helpful with student academic achievement.^{7,8} Classmates were in close proximity to ask for assistance or talk about the course material. Because of proximity, the students in the RLCs might have been involved in more collaborative learning in addition to traditional methods of learning.¹² In addition, the RA was able to provide academic assistance to the students specific to the student's major.

We believe the informal interactions our participants shared with peers can help improve student academic integration into the institution and program²⁵ while facilitating the transition to college life.^{10,29} Becoming integrated into the academic coursework of the ATP can help students become excited about studying athletic training, especially if they share their excitement and dedication with their peers and help each other meet the demands of the program.

Supportive Environment

Residential living communities have been shown to provide social, academic, and psychological support to students from peers.¹² The RLC in the current study facilitated a close-knit program by fostering relationships among prospective students. Samantha stated, “It made everyone who lived in the hall close friends, and now we are in the same major and know that we can trust one another.” Her sense of loyalty to her classmates helped her feel as though she could trust them to provide her with help when she needed it. Jessica echoed Samantha’s sentiment. She stated, “I liked that everyone was going through the same thing so we became a support system for each other.” Participants also stated that they particularly enjoyed having an RA who was an upper-level athletic training student. Sophia wrote, “I liked living there [in the RLC] because it was convenient to have a trustworthy, helpful RA who we got to know easier because of athletic training.” Joshua agreed, stating,

I think that it gave me a step up in my major with the benefit of getting help from my RA. I think that it also makes the students of the athletic training major a closer knit group than if we hadn’t spent our first year in this community.

Both Sophia and Joshua looked up to their RA as a role model. By having a successful upper-level student to look up to, younger students were able to see how to flourish in the ATP. In addition to the benefits for younger students, the RA was able to be a peer teacher, an advisor, and a leader for the ATP. The RA could help students construct realistic expectations for faculty members,¹⁰ as upper-level students have experience in this new environment and can help students understand the role of the faculty in the learning experience.

We believe fostering relationships between students is important, especially early on as students transition to college life.¹⁵ The interactions between students in the RLC improved social integration into the ATP by facilitating informal interactions between peers. According to our participants, these interactions made students feel comfortable, fostered friendships between students, and provided a support network. These relationships also help the students form a powerful sense of community, which has been linked with high retention rates.^{10,30} We encourage program directors to find ways to nurture the relationships between students to help improve integration and provide a supportive atmosphere to breed student success.

Unintended Consequences

The intensity of peer engagement in the RLC may be overwhelming for some students.¹⁰ At times, students may have spent too much time with the same peers. Although having students with similar classes close by facilitated studying, sometimes the atmosphere became more of a distraction than beneficial when preparing for exams. Olivia stated,

Sometimes I would get annoyed with the closeness of everyone. But, that could just be my personality type. Whenever I did want space to study on my own, I would still have people knocking at my door asking questions that I

just did not feel like answering. So that’s when I started going to [another building]!

She had trouble finding a quiet place to study, which resulted in her leaving her residence hall to prepare for examinations on her own. However, the positive socialization into the ATP outweighed the distraction for most of our participants. Most institutions have quiet places available for students who learn individually; such was the case with Olivia. She was able to take advantage of breakout study rooms in a building not far from her residence hall.

Participants also indicated they had trouble meeting people outside of athletic training. Samantha stated, “We saw the same people every day. We lived next to them and had classes with them, so it was harder to meet different people.” Sophia agreed, writing,

Sometimes it was hard to get away from the academic stresses when you are living with all the people that you are constantly in class with because it can put some tension on relationships. . . . Since I was living with the people I was also in class with, I did not build as many strong friendships out of the athletic training realm because it was hard to manage.

Finally, Jessica had similar thoughts. She wrote, “I had so many people close by that I didn’t branch out to others who may have been more helpful.” These sentiments illustrate the importance of students finding activities and friends outside of athletic training. Doing so may help students develop a balanced life. A lack of diversity in a student’s peer group could limit the number and types of experiences the students engage in during college.¹⁴

Athletic training professionals require time away from their career to help cope with the strain and responsibilities of their working environment.³¹ Developing a balanced life can also help reduce the potential for work stress to affect the personal lives of athletic trainers.³¹ We believe students require similar time away from athletic training to find this balance. Students should have the time to participate in activities outside of athletic training²⁴ such as varsity, club, or intramural sports; fine arts such as theater, symphony, or jazz band; Greek life; or other activities. Involvement in such activities will allow students to become socially integrated into the institution while finding friends outside of athletic training.

Limitations

As is common with qualitative research, the generalizability of our results is a challenge. Our participants came from 1 institution with an RLC for students interested in applying to an ATP. Future studies may find different results with a different population of participants. We used an online medium for data collection, which does not allow for probing and could have altered the robustness of the results. Also, students chose to participate in the RLC at this institution, which makes it difficult to broaden our findings to all prospective athletic training students, as their participation might be different if they were required to participate. Some students in RLCs are more competitive in regards to grades in courses;¹⁰ therefore, they may be more inclined to participate in the activities of the RLC.

Future Research

With minimal research having been published on RLCs, the possibilities for future research are plentiful. Basic research reporting the frequency of RLCs is needed. The effect on academic performance and Board of Certification exam results should also be examined. Another aspect to be investigated is the relationship between student retention and RLCs, specifically for athletic training. The connection between RLCs and student engagement should be investigated to determine potential reasons for their use. Research is needed to examine what attracted students to participate in the RLC or caused them to choose not to participate. Finally, more practical information is needed for athletic training program administrators interested in setting up a RLC. This information should include planning a budget, recruiting students, programming ideas, training for RAs and faculty, and potential links to cocurricular activities.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the current study, we recommend implementing an RLC to improve the sense of community and to foster early socialization among students interested in applying to an ATP. In order to start an RLC for students interested in athletic training, we advise careful selection of the RA for this group. The RA needs to be a strong, positive role model for the younger students. It is also beneficial if the RA can attend athletic training courses offered at the introductory level or assist with those classes. Having the RA assist with introductory courses can help students create an academic link in their residence hall. Another recommendation is to have specific programming for this group to aid in their socialization, such as inviting athletic trainers from various settings to talk to prospective students about career options. Finally, quiet spaces should be available for studying and students should have the opportunity to make connections outside of athletic training to find balance.

CONCLUSIONS

An RLC can provide a supportive learning environment for prospective students. Specifically, participants found it easy to prepare for exams and complete course assignments because they had other students in their classes close by to study with or ask for help. Our participants also felt a closeness of the ATP due to the RLC. Students got to know one another on a personal level and enjoyed having an upper-level student as the RA. The RA helped socialize the students into the demands of the program and was available to assist students with any questions or problems (both academic and nonacademic in nature). The RLC did have the unintended consequences of being a loud environment, which was not conducive for some students' study habits. Also, students felt that it was difficult to build relationships outside of their peers in athletic training. These challenges can be overcome by providing students with quiet study environments and time for activities outside of athletic training.

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