

Factors Influencing Athletic Training Students' Perceptions of the Athletic Training Profession and Career Choice

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Context: Successful athletic training programs should help students develop a desire to work within the athletic training profession while providing adequate preparation for them to enter the workforce. Understanding athletic training students' perceptions of the profession as they leave programs and the factors that influence these perceptions is critical in ensuring retention of graduating students in the field.

Objective: To examine senior athletic training students' [SATSs] attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of the athletic training profession and to gain insight into the factors that influence their career choice.

Design: Qualitative study.

Setting: Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education–accredited athletic training education programs.

Patients or Other Participants: A total of 26 SATSs (7 men, 19 women) who graduated in 2011.

Main Outcome Measure(s): We collected data using semistructured phone interviews and implemented a grounded theory approach to analyze the data. We used member checks and multiple-analyst triangulation strategies to establish the trustworthiness of the data.

Results: The SATSs reported positive and negative perceptions about the profession within 2 major categories: (1) aspects of the profession and (2) public understanding of the profession. "Aspects of the profession" was described by long hours/schedule, low salary, family conflict issues, future of the profession, dynamism of the profession, and profession people enjoy. The "Public understanding of the profession" was articulated by public misconception and a lack of respect for the profession. Factors that influence their perceptions are related to prior experience with athletic training/sports, clinical experiences, and interaction with athletic training professionals.

Conclusions: The SATSs have developed positive and negative perceptions about the profession through their professional preparations. These are influenced by their progression through the program wherein they develop confidence and feel prepared to enter the workforce with a better understanding of and passion for the profession.

Key words: Socialization, postgraduation choices, athletic training programs

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Full Citation:

Benes SS, Mazerolle SM. Factors influencing athletic training students' perceptions of the athletic training profession and career choice. *Athl Train Educ J*. 2014;9(3):104–112.

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INTRODUCTION

The field of athletic training is still a relatively new allied health profession. The field has been making progress and is expanding both in employment opportunities and in available Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE)-accredited programs.¹ With this expansion, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that students who enter athletic training programs (ATPs) continue on to work in the field and advance the profession. Despite the importance of ATP graduates staying in the field, there is a lack of data and research about why graduates choose to enter or not enter the athletic training profession. Data from 2004 revealed that 51% of the 2003 graduates found employment in fields other than athletic training, and of the graduates who were continuing their education, 72% were pursuing degrees in fields other than athletic training.² In order to continue to advance the profession, it is important that ATPs are aware of their impact on the choices athletic training students make upon graduation and what influences those choices.

Lent, Hackett, and Brown³ presented a social cognitive framework for understanding career choice which suggests that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals form a dynamic feedback loop that influences career choice. The goal of this framework was to explain how academic and career interests develop, how these interests promote career choice, and why people achieve varying levels of performance and persistence in educational and career-oriented endeavors.³ When applied to ATPs, the framework suggests that career interests are an "outgrowth" of a person's self-efficacy and outcome expectations.^{3(p.7)} Students develop an interest in athletic training and set goals based on this interest. Based on the success or failure of these goals, their self-efficacy and outcome expectations are impacted, which can result in changes in career interest. This framework also suggests that changes in career interest are affected by learning experiences. Lent and colleagues³ theory supports the significant impact that ATPs can have on career interest and career choice by influencing athletic training students' self-efficacy and outcome expectations related to the field. It is critical that ATPs understand the significant role they play in providing athletic training students with experiences that positively influence their self-efficacy and outcome expectations as they relate to choosing a career in athletic training. Research examining athletic training student retention stresses the importance of their self-confidence levels as potential athletic trainers as one factor of motivation. In turn, motivation is a determinant of persistence in athletic training students.¹ Confidence can be developed during clinical and academic experiences, which can lead to self-efficacy, which then increases interest in an athletic training career and influences career choices of graduates.

During their education, athletic training students are being socialized into their roles as professionals. In this anticipatory socialization process, the formal training they receive assists

them in developing the necessary knowledge base, skills, attitudes, and other professional behaviors that are necessary to be successful in the field.^{4,5} A significant part of this process occurs during the clinical experiences in which athletic training students participate and the socializing agents (eg, preceptors, athletes, coaches, and parents) with whom they interact.⁶ It is clear that athletic training students' experiences during their educational training play a critical role not only in their socialization into the profession, but also in their career interest and career choice. Due to the impact experiences in these programs can have, it is important to gain a better understanding about how athletic training students develop perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about the athletic training profession and what these perceptions are as these students prepare to enter into the field.

There is a lack of research examining how athletic training students view the profession at a critical time of their socialization into the field: when they are preparing to graduate from their ATP and enter the work force. Therefore, the purpose of our study was to examine athletic training students' perceptions of the athletic training profession and what factors have influenced those perceptions. Such perceptions are important to understand because they can impact their outcome expectations and personal goals related to the field. Gaining a better understanding of how athletic training students preparing to graduate and enter the workforce view the profession can provide valuable insight for ATPs to assist them in developing candidates who are excited and prepared to enter the field.

METHODS

Methodological Design

We implemented a qualitative, descriptive research design in order to examine the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of senior athletic training students (SATs) near the completion of their CAATE-accredited ATP requirements and how these perceptions, opinions, and attitudes changed during their undergraduate experience. We used a grounded theory approach because it provided a framework for studying the patterns of behavior and understanding the perceptions and attitudes of this particular group as they were socialized into their profession roles. Grounded theory also supports the investigation of how environment shapes an individual's perceptions and how individuals give meaning to their environment.^{7,8} The researchers conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with participants allowing for researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of SATs' perceptions, opinions, and attitudes as they prepare to enter the workforce as well as to garner insight into how the environment of their academic program and their experiences have shaped those opinions. The semi-structured interview format afforded the researchers the opportunity to probe more deeply into subject responses and pose follow-up questions leading to richer, more robust data.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age, y	School Division	Postgraduation Plan	Advanced Degree Sought
Dave	M	21	D3	GS	AT
Tammy	F	21	D3	Int	
Amy	F	22	D3	Travel/ Volunteer work for a yr before Int./GS	
Jamie	F	22	D3	GS	Exercise science w/ specialization in AT
Nicole	F	23	D3	Grad. In Dec 2011, maybe GS, GA, or Int	
Karen	F	21	D1	GS	AT
Ben	M	23	D1	GS	AT
Kate	F	23	D1	Full-time position	
Dawn	F	23	D1	GS	Instructional technology
Brett	M	21	D1	Full-time position	
Sam	F	22	D1	GS	AT/kinesiology
John	M	21	D3	GS	AT
Ashby	F	21	D1	GS	AT
Claire	F	21	D1	GS	Medical health Education & promotion
Laurie	F	22	D1	Exploring several options including GS	
Betty	F	22	D1	GS	
Payton	F	21	D1	GS	DPT
Chase	M	23	D1	GS	DPT
McKenna	F	21	D2	GS	Exercise science w/ AT emphasis
Keira	F	22	D1	Teacher certification program for secondary education	
Ryan	M	22	D1	GS	AT
Nate	M	21	D2	Full-time position	
Lily	F	22	D2	Fulfill prerequisites for GS in 1 year	
Taylor	F	22	D2	GS	Exercise science w/ concentration in AT
Hillary	F	22	D1	Int	
Kinsley	F	22	D1	GS	AT

Abbreviations: AT, athletic training; DPT, doctorate in physical therapy; GS, graduate school; Int, Internship.

Participants

A total of 26 SATSs (19 women, 7 men) enrolled in CAATE-accredited ATPs participated in our study. The average age of the participants was 22 ± 1 years. Of the participants, 16 completed their undergraduate education at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I school, 4 at a NCAA Division II school, and 6 at a NCAA Division III school. Table 1 provides selected demographic data of the participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection we obtained institutional review board approval from both the University of Connecticut and Boston University. We recruited SATSs through convenience and snowball sampling. Initially, we contacted program directors at CAATE-accredited ATPs to forward recruitment materials to their SATSs (convenience sampling). If the program director suggested other programs that might be interested in being involved in the research, we contacted them as well (snowball sampling). The SATSs interested in participating

contacted us, provided informed consent, and enrolled in our study.

Upon enrollment, SATSs completed a background information form. Once this was received, one researcher conducted a semistructured interview with the participant. The semistructured interviews allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of SATSs' perceptions, opinions, and attitudes as they prepared to enter the workforce as well as to garner insight into how the environment of the students' ATP and their experiences have shaped those opinions. The semistructured interview format afforded us the opportunity to probe more deeply into subject responses and pose follow-up questions leading to richer, more robust data. The interviews were 30 to 45 minutes in length, conducted over the phone, and recorded for data transcription.

Instruments

Background Information Form. We designed the background information form to help support the data collected during the phone interviews as a means of data triangulation.

Table 2. Selected Items from the Background Information Form

Please rate the following characteristics of the athletic training profession:	Public opinion of athletic training
	Public understanding of athletic training
	Respect for the profession
	Job-related stress
	Supportive work environment
Please rate the following statements based on importance when choosing a job:	Job security
	High salary
	Interesting job
	Do something useful
	Plenty of spare time
	Human contact

The form was based on the current literature on student retention, the profession of athletic training, and the theory of socialization.^{4-6,9-11} The background questionnaire included closed-ended questions regarding basic demographic information (eg, age, graduation school information) as well as Likert scale questions that asked SATSs to first, rank nine characteristics of the athletic training profession (Likert scale 1–6, *poor* to *excellent*, dichotomized into positive responses [4–6] and negative responses [1–3]), and second, rate 14 items related to their career choice (1 to 5, *not important* to *important*). Items for the Likert scale section were selected and modified for the purposes of this research from studies examining retention and career choice in other health professions.⁹⁻¹¹ Table 2 presents selected items from the Likert scale section of the form.

Interview Guide. A semistructured format was selected for the interviews because we wanted to maintain some level of consistency throughout the interviews to enhance the integrity of the data without diminishing the opportunity to follow up with questions and/or probe more deeply into student responses. We developed the interview guide specifically for our current study, basing the guide on existing socialization research.⁴⁻⁶ Prior to data collection, a peer with knowledge of the socialization process reviewed the guide. We then piloted the guide with two SATSs who were not included in the final results of our study. No changes were made prior to data collection. The SATSs were asked a variety of open-ended questions regarding their perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about the athletic training profession as well as their thoughts about their ATP, their career choice, and their future plans. Table 3 presents the topics relevant to our research agenda.

Data Analysis

We used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data. Our procedures included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.⁷ Initially, single thoughts, words, or phrases with common meanings were identified and grouped together into categories. Next, the categories were analyzed to determine whether relationships existed among the categories. Last, the higher-level categories that had emerged were analyzed to determine themes related to the research question examining SATSs' perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of the athletic training profession and what has influenced those perceptions, attitudes, and opinions. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were analyzed for the Likert scale questions from the background information form. The quantitative data was used to support the themes that were found in the qualitative analysis.

Data Credibility

Creswell⁷ suggested that methodological rigor occurs when researchers use a minimum of 2 steps. We opted to use 3 steps to establish data trustworthiness: member checks, multiple-analyst triangulation, and methodological triangulation.^{7,12} Prior to data analysis, we asked all participants to review their transcripts for clarity and accuracy for the member check procedure. Once data analysis was completed, 4 participants reviewed established themes. This served as another form of the member check. We independently analyzed the data and then communicated to determine the levels of agreement and the final presentation of the data. The use of background information forms and interviews served as methodological triangulation because we could compare both sets of data during analysis.

Table 3. Selected Interview Guide Questions

Topic	Interview Guide Questions
Perceptions of the profession	Please describe the roles and responsibilities of an athletic trainer. What are your opinions of the athletic training profession? Please list 5 words that you associate with athletic training. Please discuss what you think are the characteristics of a successful athletic trainer. What do you think working conditions are like for an athletic trainer?
Career choice	Why have you decided to become an athletic trainer? How have your perceptions, attitudes, and opinions influenced your career choice? Where do you see yourself in 10 years professionally? What most attracts you to a career in athletic training?

Table 4. Senior Athletic Training Students' Perceptions of the Athletic Training Profession from Both the Qualitative and Quantitative Data Sets

Themes from Qualitative Data	Corresponding Items from Likert Scale Questions	Rating from Likert Scale
Category: Aspects of the Profession		
<i>Negative Aspects</i>		
Long hours/schedule	Number of hours worked per week	2.7 ± 1 (Fair/average)
Low salary	No corresponding items	
Family conflict issues	Ability to balance life	3.1 ± 1 (Average)
	Job related stress	3.1 ± 1 (Average)
<i>Positive Aspects</i>		
Dynamism of profession	No corresponding items	
Future of the profession	Ability to advance in profession	4.4 ± 1 (Good/very good)
	Chances for career advancement	4.4 ± 1 (Good/very good)
Profession people are passionate about/enjoy	Supportive work environment	4.5 ± 1 (Good/very good)
Category: Public Understanding of Profession		
Lack of respect	Respect for the profession	3.5 ± 1 (Average/good)
Public misconception	Public opinion of athletic training	3.6 ± 1 (Average/good)
	Public understanding of athletic training	2.3 ± 1 (Fair)

RESULTS

Themes that emerged from the data can be categorized as either *aspects of the profession* or *public understanding of the profession*. Table 4 presents the themes and a summary of supporting data from the closed-ended items. Each theme is discussed below with supporting quotes. Factors that influence SATSs' perceptions are also discussed.

Aspects of the Profession

Negative Perceptions. Long Hours/Schedule. The SATSs reported that the long hours and changing schedule of the athletic training profession was one of the most significant negative aspects of the profession. Kate mentioned "the long hours that can be somewhat stressful." When asked what he disliked about the athletic training profession, Brett responded "the long hours." Kinsley stated, "I think the nontraditional work hours can be kind of stressful." Nate stated, "it's not even the amount of hours, it's the time of which your work hours are." The "fair/average" rating from the background information form further supports that SATSs view this as a negative aspect of the profession.

Low Salary. When asked about negative aspects of the profession, many students cited the low salary of athletic trainers, especially with the amount of hours they work. When asked what things he liked least about a career in athletic training, John responded, "As far as the career, I'm a little hesitant . . . the money thing is a big issue at this point. You wouldn't make the money that I think we deserve." Payton responded to the question of why some students are going on to other careers by saying, "I also think that obviously the pay issue . . . can definitely turn people off from sticking with the profession." Participants also cited the issue of low salary when asked about working conditions; Laurie stated that "in a lot of cases not the greatest pay for the job."

Family Conflict Issues. Participants reported that due to the long hours and schedule, family conflict issues would arise and that this was another negative of the profession. In the background information form, SATSs rated ability to balance

both life and job-related stresses as "average," suggesting that these are aspects of the profession that the participants felt were negative and that might contribute to their career choice later in life. Many participants expressed that while they planned on starting their careers in athletic training, they did not see themselves in the profession in the future due to family conflict issues. Ashby stated she planned to "get a job that's more apt to having a family. So I think eventually I would want to change [professions] just because I see the long hours people put in." Samantha explained,

That's kind of why I have been leaning towards the physician extender role, because I have been in a relationship with my boyfriend, it will be three years in July so that [having the time to start a family and managing professional responsibilities] does concern me and I have thought about it.

Positive Perceptions. Future of the Profession. The SATS participants expressed they believe athletic training is a growing profession. Although there were some professional aspects they disliked, they believed these aspects would eventually change. Betty explained that one of the reasons she likes the athletic training profession is due to "the potential of the profession; because it's a new profession, there's so much potential to educate the public and athletes and coaches about injuries and what we are about." John said, "it [the profession] can only go up from here. I do believe that sometime, hopefully sooner rather than later, you will be able to tell somebody you are an athletic trainer and they will actually understand what that is." Last, Amy explained she has "found that the profession has so much more to grow and it is something I really want to be a part of."

Another aspect of this theme is the fact that SATSs feel that athletic training is a field in which you can advance. Participants rated both "ability to advance in profession" and "chances for career advancement" as "good/very good" on the background information form, which suggests that SATSs have a positive outlook about the potential for their own advancement within the field, as well as the profession's potential to advance.

Dynamism of Profession. Many participants cited that the dynamic aspect of the athletic training profession was something they liked. Participants discussed the variety of settings to work in, the many features of the profession (eg, clinical evaluation, rehabilitation), that every day is different, and that athletic trainers are always dealing with a variety of issues/problems/challenges as positive aspects of the profession. Samantha explained: “I like the variety of things that we do; the multiple settings we can work in.” Nate commented, “There are so many aspects of athletic training.” Participants also supported this theme when asked to list the roles and responsibilities of athletic trainers. The most common responses included prevention, rehabilitation, first responder/emergency care, and psychosocial aspects (eg, counselor, friend, “being there,” listener). Other roles and responsibilities identified include coverage, treatment, administrative duties, education/educator, evaluation, and communication. Payton and Ryan, respectively, stated: “I like the fact that the profession incorporates [aspects] outside of the clinic like on the field and other environments outside of the athletic training room. I like that in a sense it’s very versatile,” and “The setting is always different, it’s not a typical job where you sit behind a desk and have paperwork all day. You’re out in the field and it can be exciting, but you won’t see the same thing every day.”

Profession People Are Passionate About/Enjoy. The SATSs consistently commented on the fact that athletic trainers love their jobs, enjoy the work they are doing, and work in supportive professional environments, characteristics rated as “good/very good” on the background information form. McKenna expressed, “I realize how much the athletic trainers actually enjoy their job.” Tammy said, “I think the biggest thing I noticed with the profession is the camaraderie among the staff and the students and the respect that we all have for each other.” When discussing a mentor he had, Nate explained, “I see the way he acts towards his students and acts when he gets home, [which] makes me want to do it [athletic training]. He’s always happy; he is always in a good mood. He loves what he does.” This theme is further supported by the positive responses provided by participants when asked to list 5 words they associate with athletic training. Common responses were the following: *unique, dynamic, fun, fulfilling, connectedness, growing, dedication, challenging, caring, and important*. Although there were some negative words (eg, *burnout*) identified, the responses were overwhelmingly positive supporting SATSs’ perceptions that athletic training as an enjoyable profession.

Public Understanding of Profession

The subthemes “lack of public awareness” and “respect for the athletic training profession” are included together here because they are similar, both relating to public opinion about the profession. “Public opinion of athletic training” was the lowest rated characteristic of the profession with a rating of “fair.” “Respect for the profession” was only rated “average/good,” suggesting that SATSs feel strongly that this lack of public awareness and respect is a significant issue for the field. In the interviews, Payton stated, “I feel like it’s not really recognized by a lot of people.” McKenna mentioned, “I dislike that we do a lot and don’t get appreciated for it; we are not respected for it. I hate that when I go home and I say I am

doing athletic training they ask me to think of an exercise program . . . I dislike that the public doesn’t really understand what we do.” Kinsley said, “I think what people are not understanding is it is completely different from personal training” and “sometimes, definitely being considered a water girl because people don’t understand that you are so much more than giving water to a football player.” Hillary explained, “It seems like a love-hate relationship with your job because you constantly fight for respect with coaches, strength and conditioning coaches. Whatever it may be, I feel you are constantly fighting for respect . . .”

Factors Influencing SATSs’ Perceptions

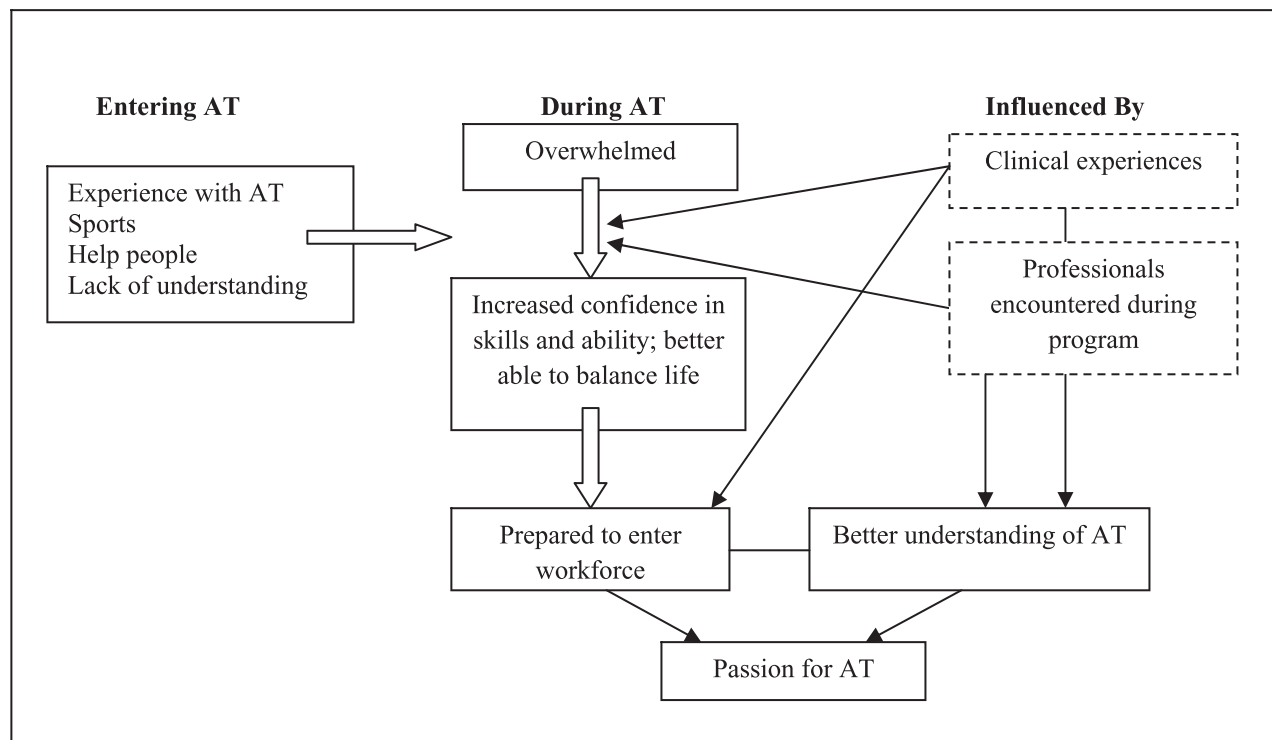
Data from the interviews also revealed that the SATSs entered the athletic training profession for several reasons: (1) due to prior experience with athletic training (eg, in high school or in college before entering the major), (2) because they had been involved with sports and/or have a love of sports, and (3) because they wanted to help people and make a difference. The Figure presents the findings. Nate’s comment summarizes this theme well: “I really like the idea of working with athletes, . . . being a former athlete myself. . . . [I also like] working with someone on a daily basis and just the impact I was able to have on their lives.” However, they also entered with a lack of understanding about what athletic training entails, both within the major and the profession. When asked how their perceptions about the profession changed, Tammy said, “I went into the athletic training major not really knowing what to expect.” Ashby stated, “Early on I didn’t really understand the true aspects of athletic training.” At the beginning of their athletic training education, SATSs reported feeling overwhelmed, but as they continued they gained confidence in their skills and abilities and felt prepared to enter the workforce. For instance, Hillary expressed, “I know that I am going to be overprepared . . .” Samantha stated, “I’ve gained a lot more confidence and I think that I can probably do it on my own.”

That SATSs also reported having a better understanding of the athletic training profession and a passion for the profession. Kinsley explained, “I have really become more aware of the positive and negative aspects of the profession as I have gone through these past years.” Betty said, “I know absolutely 100% more now.” The main influences on these changes were their clinical experiences and the professionals they encountered during their athletic training education. These professionals included faculty, preceptors, and other athletic trainers. When asked what led to changes in perceptions or opinions, Amy stated, “I think all the faculty members and staff members and [preceptors].” McKenna supports this in her response about several classmates: “[My opinions] have changed because I have seen a couple of different areas [settings]. . . . [my] personal experience and my education . . . when I am at a clinical [rotation] your opinion changes every day—what you think about it.” The Figure graphically depicts the relationships among these factors that influence perceptions of the profession.

DISCUSSION

Our study demonstrates that SATSs preparing to graduate from undergraduate ATPs have both positive and negative perceptions of the athletic training profession, and these perceptions were influenced by multiple factors including their

Figure. Factors that influence senior athletic training students' perceptions of the athletic training (AT) profession.



clinical experiences and encounters with professionals. Despite having both positive and negative perceptions, our participants displayed a passion for the field and felt ready to enter the workforce.

Perceptions Upon Leaving Academic Programs

During their education, students develop mixed perceptions of the athletic training profession. Similar to other athletic training research, our participants' negative perceptions included long hours, low salary, family conflict issues, public misconceptions, and lack of respect for the profession.¹³⁻¹⁶ Athletic training research has focused primarily on these negative aspects related to athletic trainers in the field, but our study suggests that SATSs are also aware of these issues. This is not surprising given research which shows that perceptions of approved clinical instructors, now called preceptors, impact the athletic training students' perceptions of the work setting.¹⁷ During their ATPs, athletic training students work primarily with athletic trainers working in the collegiate setting. Recent research found that college athletic trainers were affected by issues of role complexity including role incongruity, role overload, and role incompetence, which can lead to negative job satisfaction and intent to leave the profession.¹⁴ These are the athletic trainers who are socializing athletic training students into their roles as professionals, and if they are dealing with these issues, the students they are working with will be exposed to these issues as well.

Athletic trainers in secondary school settings also serve as preceptors for athletic training students. Research suggests that high school athletic trainers are socialized professionally through informal learning that is largely dependent on the individual's ability for self-reflection and self-direction as well as the context of the socialization.⁵ Given that this socialization process is informal and based heavily on the individual, it

is possible that similar issues that collegiate athletic trainers face are also present for high school athletic trainers. Therefore, it may be more difficult for high school athletic trainers to assist in the athletic training students' socialization process due to their lack of formal socialization into their own role. In addition to improving the professional issues related to the role of the athletic trainer and the informal socialization of high school athletic trainers, it is essential to also continue to examine job satisfaction and intent to leave the profession, including what shapes the opinions of athletic trainers who are primarily responsible for socializing athletic training students into the profession.

Conversely, our SATSs reported many positive aspects of the athletic training profession. It is interesting to note that when asked to list 5 words they associated with athletic training, those words were mostly positive. This suggests the positive aspects of the profession appear to have a stronger impact on the athletic training students' socialization process than the negative aspects they identified regarding a career in athletic training. Previous research states mentoring relationships in the anticipatory socialization process play a significant role in shaping students' expectations about their professional future, as well as the influence that work setting perceptions of preceptors have on athletic training students' decisions to enter into the field.^{17,18} Whereas our findings support previous research that athletic training students' perceptions of athletic training are shaped by the positive and negative perceptions of their preceptors,¹⁷ our findings diverge in that our SATSs appeared to be influenced more strongly by positive perceptions. Given the importance that mentoring has in the socialization process,^{6,17,18} SATSs in our study might have experienced this positive socialization due to a strong mentor relationship in which their mentor displayed positive perceptions of the profession. Determining the factors that influenced these positive perceptions was outside of the scope

of this study, but the finding suggests that more research should be conducted examining the relative influence of preceptors specifically in the development of positive aspects of the profession. Findings from this study suggest that positive perceptions and positive experiences during their academic programs supported their choice of athletic training as a career and that the negative influences were not strong enough to prevent them from entering the field; however, the specific factors that led to this outcome were not examined.

Factors Influencing SATSs' Perceptions of Athletic Training

Students who enter undergraduate ATPs have had prior experience with athletic training, have been involved with and/or have a love of sports, have a desire to help people, and have a limited understanding of what athletic training entails. These findings support research conducted by Mensch and Mitchell,⁴ who found that 3 factors that relate to the recruitment of athletic training students are the association with sport, exposure to athletic training experiences in high school, and their incomplete understanding of the field. Programs might find success in recruiting students with these characteristics but should also work, in conjunction with the larger field of athletic training, to clarify and identify the key aspects of the profession and communicate these to the public. Perhaps with a better understanding of the profession, more students will decide to enter into and remain in the field.

Once they enter their programs, SATSs report that their first years in the program can be overwhelming due to an inability to balance the workload, clinical expectations, and their lives in general. However, their clinical experiences and the professionals they work with assist them in developing confidence in their skills and abilities, which help them overcome these initial feelings. Confidence in skills and abilities can lead to increased self-efficacy, which, according to the theory of Lent et al.,³ is an important variable in influencing career choice and persistence. Additionally, Dodge, Mitchell, and Mensch¹ note that confidence in abilities leads to motivation, which is a key factor in students staying in a program.

Results from this and other studies underscore the importance of mentoring experiences in developing confidence, but also the SATSs' need for increased autonomy as they progress through their experiences.^{18,19} Athletic training programs should make efforts to ensure that as students gain experience, they are placed at clinical sites and with approved clinical instructors who will allow them to exercise their independence and provide them opportunities to apply what they have learned. Furthermore, as suggested in recent research about supervising athletic training students, preceptors should use "situational supervision" that acknowledges and accounts for students' needs and abilities.²⁰ This model would allow for increased independence and autonomy because the type of supervision would be adapted to the specific needs of each student as he or she progresses through the programs. The researchers suggest that this model may also lead to increased levels of satisfaction for both the preceptor and athletic training student, which could further support socialization in the field. Appropriate mentoring, progression of autonomy, and opportunity to demonstrate skill throughout their

program will likely also support athletic training students' professional socialization and legitimization.^{6,18}

Upon exiting their programs, students reported that they had a better understanding of the profession and felt prepared to enter into the workforce. The SATSs explained that their professors and the people they worked with during their clinical experiences introduced them to the "ups and downs" of their professional lives as athletic trainers. It is interesting that it was both the positive and negative aspects of the profession they experienced that led to this better understanding; in this study, the participants chose to continue in the field, suggesting that these students overcame any of the negatives they learned about the profession. This is in contrast to research in another allied health field, nursing, in which researchers found that along with gaining a better understanding of skills and their profession, new contradictions were brought to the students' attention. The researchers also found that student treatment during their experiences was directly related to attrition rates.²¹ It would be interesting to examine how our participants mitigated the negative aspects to still have a passion for the AT profession and still want to enter the profession.

Perhaps significantly, SATSs in this study also expressed a passion for the field and a desire to make the field better. These positive feelings seem to negate the negative perceptions they had of the field including issues of low salary, long hours, and a lack of respect. Many admitted to having these negative opinions, but due to their experiences, felt that these factors were not strong enough to change their decision about a career in athletic training. Many students explained that the positive clinical experiences they had and mentors they encountered were the main contributors to this positive outlook on the profession. However, students also offered examples of those who had left the major or had reversed plans to enter the field who they felt might have been more affected by a negative experience or the negative aspects of the profession. More research should be done examining the impact of both immediate and long-term clinical placements during undergraduate programs. In this study, students were asked to reflect back over the course of their program. Perhaps collecting data at the time of the clinical experiences would offer more insight into the effect placements have on the athletic training student and his or her decision to continue in the field.

Conclusions

Data from this study reinforce the significant influence that SATSs' clinical experiences and the professionals they encounter, such as professors and approved clinical instructors, have on their perceptions of the field. Athletic training programs should monitor students' clinical experiences to help them deal with any negative perceptions that might arise as a result of an experience. The athletic training field in general should continue to evaluate and examine the profession and work to establish consistency throughout the profession and advocate for better working conditions. Programs should also work to ensure that all preceptors involved in the program are quality mentors who can help students develop the skills and confidence in their skills that they need to feel prepared to enter the workforce. Last, programs should try to alleviate some of the variables that make the first years in the program

overwhelming for students. Although participants in this study overcame any issues, it is unclear what factors contributed to this, and it might be that students get discouraged quickly when faced with adversity so soon into their programs.

Limitations and Future Research

The researchers recruited participants through convenience and snowball sampling, leading to a sample not representative of the entire population of SATSs. Future research examining this topic should use different sampling techniques that will result in a more representative sample and more generalizable results. Additionally, all the students enrolled in this study were planning on continuing in the athletic training field immediately after graduation and in the near future, which might have skewed their perceptions about the field. Future researchers should examine the perceptions of both students who plan on continuing in the field and those who are choosing to leave the profession and/or those who dropped out of the major. Last, two researchers conducted interviews, and with the semistructured interview format, the researchers may have used slightly different methods during the interview. The researchers attempted to limit differences by remaining in frequent contact and reviewing all instruments prior to data collection. Examining SATS perceptions of the profession and the factors that influence those perceptions is an important line of research especially significant for retention of quality candidates in the field. Future studies should further expand upon the results of this study to better understand the variables that influence perceptions of the profession and career choice.

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