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Choosing a Career in Athletic Training: Exploring the Perceptions of Potential Recruits

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Context: The success of any academic program, including athletic training, depends upon attracting and keeping quality students. Therefore, understanding potential recruits' perceptions of athletic training is important.

Objective: To (1) gain insight regarding undergraduate students' decisions to enter or not enter an athletic training education program (ATEP), and (2) examine potential athletic training recruits' perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of certified athletic trainers.

Design: We used a descriptive study employing a grounded theory approach to explore perceptions of the athletic training profession by college students with various levels of interest in athletic training.

Setting: Athletic training education program from a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I research-intensive university.

Patients or Other Participants: Forty-six undergraduate students (23 interested in applying to an ATEP and 23 who were aware of but not interested in applying to an ATEP).

Main Outcome Measure(s): Data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding procedures. Member checks and peer-debriefing techniques were used to ensure trustworthiness of the study.

Results: Three contributing factors appeared to influence the recruitment of students to a career in athletic training: (1) a strong affiliation to a sports/team model, (2) initial exposure at the high school level, and (3) an incomplete understanding of athletic training.

Conclusions: Awareness of how students are recruited into ATEPs is important information for our profession. Educators and administrators must create a comprehensive recruitment strategy using factors that influence potential recruits' decisions to enter the athletic training profession, specifically their association with sports and their experiences during high school.

Key Words: socialization, subjective warrant, recruitment, career choice

Key Points

- Secondary school athletic trainers appeared to be the primary socializing agents for college preparatory students.
- The primary attractor to a career in athletic training was the relationship with sports and the feeling of being part of a team.
- Recruits' understanding of the athletic training profession was limited; providing more accurate and more complete information about athletic training may help to attract a more diverse population.

Becoming a certified athletic trainer (AT) is a career choice. We are unsure of the factors that influence individuals to choose athletic training and not other health-related professions, but these factors can play a significant role in attracting competent candidates to 1 of the 330 accredited programs. A key concept in any recruitment process involves understanding a potential recruit's perceptions of the skills and abilities necessary for preparation and practice in the chosen field.¹ Once candidates have chosen to major in athletic training, correcting any flawed perceptions is a key function of professional preparation programs. Prior to entry into professional preparation programs, however, these same flawed perceptions about athletic training may attract some and repel others. Clearly, a richer understanding of this construct has implications for influencing how students are socialized into the athletic training profession.

Professional socialization has received increasing attention in the recent literature in athletic training,^{2–4} nursing,^{5–9} and medicine.^{10–14} The elevation of educational standards in athletic training and other allied health professions has forced educators to examine practices that influence the professional

development of students. Attracting and retaining quality students in athletic training education programs (ATEPs) has become an important motivator for many educators and program directors, as students have competing opportunities at increasing numbers of accredited athletic training and other allied health programs. An initial description of how students (those who are interested and those who are aware of but not interested in athletic training) perceive the profession is vital to identifying misconceptions as well as determining what attracts some and discourages others from entering the athletic training profession.

Typical models of socialization into the allied health professions emphasize 3 stages of development.^{1,2,15–17} The first stage and focal point of this research project involves recruitment, when prospective professionals begin to develop an understanding of the roles and duties associated with the career they have chosen. During this phase, aspiring students explore what is required to become a professional and consider how their own attributes match the expectations. The second stage involves professional socialization, when students learn the desired knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices that will guide

their future practice. This stage of socialization occurs by way of the professional preparation processes outlined by each accredited ATEP. In the third stage, professionals are organizationally socialized into their roles in a specific work environment. In athletic training, this type of socialization occurs after newly certified ATs learn their specific roles through interactions with coaches, athletic directors, physical therapists, physicians, administrators, and other ATs in the professional setting of their choice.

The focus of this study is on the recruitment phase. A previous author¹⁶ studying career choice and recruitment has explored individual perceptions of the skills and abilities necessary for entry into and subsequent performance in a specific profession. Whether accurate or not, it is the perception of roles, skills, and job requirements associated with a profession that attracts some students and discourages others from entering.¹⁶ Understanding the perceptions of students attracted to and discouraged from entering athletic training is important. With further understanding, athletic training educators may more accurately advertise their programs and target potential recruits. Desirable students may then become attracted rather than discouraged, and students who may be more successful elsewhere may make a more educated decision about their enrollment into an academic program. The athletic training profession as a whole stands to benefit from a clearer understanding of how recruits perceive the profession. Our purposes were to (1) gain insight regarding undergraduate students' decisions to enter or not enter an ATEP, and (2) examine potential athletic training recruits' perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of ATs.

METHODS

Participants

Forty-six students (23 interested in pursuing a career in athletic training and 23 aware of but not interested in pursuing a career in athletic training) participated in an in-depth semi-structured interview to elicit their perceptions of ATs and the athletic training profession. The 23 students interested in pursuing a career in athletic training (15 females, 8 males) consisted of 14 freshmen, 7 sophomores, and 2 juniors. The 23 students not interested in pursuing a career in athletic training (13 females, 10 males) consisted of 10 freshmen, 10 sophomores, and 3 juniors. All participants were enrolled in an introductory course over 2 academic years within the College of Education at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I research-intensive university. All participants were provided with and signed an informed consent form. This study was approved by the institutional review board at the researchers' university.

Design

This descriptive study was designed to explore the perceptions of college students with various levels of interest in athletic training. We used a grounded theory approach based on our purpose of generating a theory to explain recruitment patterns of students attracted to or discouraged from a career in athletic training.¹⁸ Grounded theory offers a methodologic design to explain patterns of behavior or actions between and among various groups.¹⁸ This design offers a rationale to explain behaviors, interactions, and perceptions that are ground-

Table 1. Participants' Decisions About a Career in Athletic Training

Questions asked of students interested in athletic training (n = 23):

- Why have you decided to become an athletic trainer? Explain.
- What most attracts you to a career in athletic training? Explain.
- How did you learn about the athletic training profession and what an athletic trainer does? Was there an influential individual who helped you?
- Are you unsure about anything associated with athletic training?

Questions asked of students not interested in athletic training (n = 23):

- Why have you decided against becoming an athletic trainer? Explain.
- Is there some particular reason for your choice?
- How did you learn about the athletic training profession and what an athletic trainer does? Did you ever consider a career in athletic training?
- What is the main reason you have decided against a career in athletic training?

Table 2. Participants' Knowledge of Athletic Training

Questions asked of all students about their knowledge of athletic training (n = 46):

- What is an athletic trainer? Explain.
- When you think of athletic training, what comes to mind?
- What does an athletic trainer do? Job responsibilities?
- What types of skills do athletic trainers need to possess?
- What type of knowledge do athletic trainers need to possess?
- Is it difficult to become an athletic trainer/Why or why not?

ed and developed through data collection. Previous research by Pitney³ and Pitney et al⁴ provided examples of a grounded theory approach to examine socialization in athletic training. Pitney and Parker¹⁹ suggested that a grounded theory approach is applicable when answering research questions such as, "By which processes are students socialized into the profession of athletic training?"

For this research, we invited students from 2 introductory courses. Participants were initially asked to identify their level of interest in athletic training and whether or not they planned to become ATs. Students who agreed to participate were then separated into 2 groups for potential interviews: (1) students who planned to enter an ATEP and were very interested in becoming ATs, and (2) students who were aware of but would not enter an athletic training program and had no plans to become ATs. This sampling strategy, entitled criterion sampling, requires that participants meet a predetermined criterion of importance.²⁰ Patton²⁰ identified criterion sampling as an important component to monitoring program quality through in-depth qualitative analysis.

The format of the interview was designed to help the interviewer and participant move from feelings of apprehension to feelings of comfort. Before the interview, each participant was provided with an overview of the purpose of the study as well as a confirmation of the right to terminate the interview at any time. The interview was separated into 2 sections: (1) decision process to enter or not enter an athletic training program, and (2) knowledge of the athletic training profession. Questions identified specific attractors, barriers, and facilitators for a career in athletic training (Table 1). The second part of the interview focused on participants' knowledge of athletic training and the role of an AT (Table 2).

A semi-structured interview format of open-ended questions enabled the researcher to prompt students to elaborate on their

| Open Coding | Question | Answers (Single Thoughts) | Initial Category (Level 1) |
|-------------|---|---|--|
| | Why have you decided against a career in athletic training? | “athletic training is too time demanding” “I would like to be a normal college student” “I would like to have a family someday” | Time demand Normal student Family time |

| Axial coding | Initial Categories | Related Categories (Level 2) |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | Time demands of students | Time commitment |
| | Students have normal college life | |
| | Importance of family time | |

| Selective coding | Related Categories | Confirmation of Category | Major Theme/Category |
|------------------|---|--|---|
| | Time commitment as a barrier to a career in athletic training | 15/23 participants ^a (identified time as a barrier) | Time commitment is a barrier to a career in athletic training |

Integration to the Theoretical Framework
Socialization

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graph TD
    A[Integration to the Theoretical Framework Socialization] --> B[High school filter]
    A --> C[Team member]
  
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^an=23 students not interested in athletic training.

Figure. Data analysis example.

responses and to ask follow-up questions. Lincoln and Guba²¹ identified semi-structured interviews as a form of naturalistic inquiry and the mode of choice when the interviewer does not seek normative responses. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. All student names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was guided by grounded theory procedures described by Strauss and Corbin.¹⁸ Grounded theory is a systematic approach that connects thoughts, themes, and categories derived from the interview data into a specific explanatory pattern (Figure). Initial analysis placed single sentences or thoughts from the interview data into specific common categories (open coding). Initial categories were then examined and compared to see if they were interrelated (axial coding). The common (interrelated) categories were authenticated by identifying the total number of participants whose responses were coded within the common category. A category was deemed interrelated when 50% or more of the total participants responded with an answer within the category. The final step in the analysis (selective coding) involved integrating the common categories from the data into a larger theoretic framework (socialization) to help explain the perceptions of potential athletic training recruits.

Trustworthiness was established by member checks and peer debriefing.²⁰ Peer debriefing was completed by having 3 ATs

with formal education in qualitative methods (minimum of 6 courses in graduate-level statistics and 2 courses in qualitative methodology) review coded categories for consistency and logic. Member checks were completed by consulting with 8 participants from the study to review the results. Each participant examined the results and agreed that the findings from the study were consistent with his or her perceptions and knowledge of the athletic training profession.

RESULTS

Attractors to a Career in Athletic Training

Sports. The relationship between the athletic training profession and sports was overwhelmingly the most influential factor in student decisions to initially enter into athletic training (Table 3). All 23 students interested in a career in athletic training identified an association with sports and athletes as one of the main reasons they decided to become ATs. For example, Danny said that “I have played sports all of my life and I think I know where the athlete is coming from.” When asked what attracts you most to a career in athletic training, Alice said, “Getting to be around sports and being happy with what I am doing.” Rich indicated that “dealing with athletes and sports” is what most attracted him to a career in athletic training. When asked why she was planning to enter the ATEP, Samantha replied, “Because I love sports and being around

Table 3. Attractors to a Career in Athletic Training

| Attractors to a Career in Athletic Training ^a | Students Interested in Athletic Training, No. (n = 23) | Percentage |
|--|--|------------|
| Association with sports and athletes | 23 | 100 |
| Like to help people | 12 | 52 |
| Feel like part of a team | 12 | 52 |
| Change in working environment | 5 | 22 |
| Flexible hours | 2 | 8 |
| Like being outside | 2 | 8 |
| Good career stepping-stone | 2 | 8 |
| Enjoy the clinical aspect | 1 | 4 |
| Being happy | 1 | 4 |
| Traveling | 1 | 4 |
| Make a real difference | 1 | 4 |
| Money | 1 | 4 |

^aParticipants could name more than 1 attractor.

sports.” Pat identified a “sports affiliation” as the thing that attracted him most to a career in athletic training.

Helping People. The notion of helping people was also identified (by 12/23 students) as an attractor to a career in athletic training (Table 3). Bill suggested that his decision to become an AT was “easy” because he “loves helping people.” John indicated that his main attraction to the athletic training program was the “helping people aspect.” Kim stated that she “likes the medical aspect of helping people who are injured.” Sanja liked the idea of “being able to help people like they helped [her].”

Feel Like a Part of a Team. The idea of being a part of a team was important to the decision process for many students interested in athletic training. Twelve of 23 students interested in athletic training identified that feeling a part of a team was an important consideration for them in deciding to become ATs. Rich suggested that a major reason for pursuing a career in athletic training was “being able to be involved with a team and being a part of something. Even though I can’t play varsity [athletics in college] I can still be involved and I like the recognition from being a part of it [athletics].” Suzy indicated that continuing to be part of a team was important for her decision to pursue a career in athletic training. She said, “I relate to athletes and if I can’t play sports I just want to be around athletes and be part of a team.” Barb, a freshman, indicated that she was sad at the end of every football season and really enjoyed “being around that mind frame like you are a part of a team and working together.”

Additional attractors to a career in athletic training identified by participants included change in working environment (5/23), flexible hours (2/23), like being outside (2/23), good career stepping stone (2/23), enjoy the clinical aspect (1/23), being happy (1/23), traveling (1/23), make a real difference (1/23), and money (1/23). These data are included in Table 3.

Facilitators to a Career in Athletic Training

Relationship with High School Athletic Trainer. It is evident from the interview data that high school ATs have a large amount of influence over potential recruits to athletic training (Table 4). Nineteen students interested in pursuing a career in athletic training indicated that they were influenced or helped toward the athletic training profession because of their interactions with high school ATs. Suzy indicated that she learned about athletic training from “working football with my high

Table 4. Facilitators to a Career in Athletic Training

| Factors Facilitating Students Toward a Career in Athletic Training ^a | Students Interested in Athletic Training, No. (n = 23) | Percentage |
|---|--|------------|
| Relationship with high school athletic trainer | 19 | 83 |
| Injured playing athletics | 12 | 52 |
| Took a course in athletic training in high school | 12 | 52 |
| Internet | 5 | 22 |
| Guidance counselor | 3 | 13 |
| Other allied health professionals | 2 | 8 |
| Parents | 2 | 8 |

^aParticipants could name more than 1 facilitator.

school AT.” She also said her AT helped her take a “training course at the career center to learn more about it [athletic training].” When asked how she learned about the athletic training profession, Samantha replied, “We had an AT at our high school so I learned from her.” John spoke of the role his high school AT played when he said, “During my senior year we had one [AT] and that [relationship with the AT] helped me to decide to be an athletic trainer.” Pat also spoke of the role his athletic trainer played when he stated, “I learned about athletic training during my senior year of high school when we had an athletic trainer. I talked to him about it and he was always at our games. He told me a lot about it and it really seemed interesting to me.” When asked how he became interested in athletic training, Ben answered, “My athletic trainer from high school told me about the program here and encouraged me to major in athletic training.”

Injured in High School. Another theme to emerge from the data as a facilitator to a career in athletic training was a significant injury sustained by participants in high school (Table 4). Twelve students interested in athletic training indicated that they were influenced toward a career in athletic training because of an injury they received during high school. Pat indicated that he enjoys the medical aspect of athletic training and spoke of his own injury experiences. He said, “I got interested in athletic training because I’ve had a lot of injuries while playing football. I had an ACL [anterior cruciate ligament] tear and toe fracture. I have had sprains and bumps and bruises.” Sanja indicated that her first real experience with an athletic trainer occurred after she tore her ACL. She suggested that “after my injury it seemed like I became more interested in it [athletic training].” Bill explained how he became exposed to athletic training by saying, “When I broke my ankle, I went to go see an athletic trainer. She was very helpful.” Other participants spoke at length of the various injuries (eg, ACL tear, quadriceps tear, tibial fracture) they received and how it affected their decision to learn more about the athletic training profession.

High School Athletic Training Course. Twelve of the 23 students interested in athletic training indicated that taking a course in athletic training or sports medicine was influential in their decision to pursue a career in athletic training (Table 4). Bill characterized the importance of taking such a course in high school in his decision to become an athletic trainer when he said, “I enjoyed that athletic training course a lot and it helped me decide to become an athletic trainer.” Samantha indicated that she learned about athletic training “through my high school athletic trainer. I took a high school athletic train-

Table 5. Barriers to the Athletic Training Profession

| Factors Discouraging Students Toward a Career in Athletic Training ^a | Students Not Interested in Athletic Training, No. (n = 23) | Percentage |
|---|--|------------|
| Too much time involvement | 15 | 65 |
| Interested in a different career | 13 | 56 |
| Don't know enough about it | 3 | 13 |
| Course work too difficult | 2 | 8 |
| Not enough money | 2 | 8 |
| Don't like dealing with injuries | 1 | 4 |
| Not in good enough physical shape | 1 | 4 |

^aParticipants could name more than 1 barrier.

ing course and was a student trainer in high school.” Danny suggested that he learned about athletic training “through my high school athletic trainer and high school athletic training classes. I was a student trainer in high school.”

Additional facilitators that helped influence or direct participants toward a career in athletic training included the Internet (5/23), guidance counselor (3/23), other allied health professionals (2/23), and parents (2/23). These data are included in Table 4.

Barriers to a Career in Athletic Training

Too Much Time. Students aware of but not interested in a career in athletic training identified the large time commitment as a major inhibitor and the primary reason for their decision not to enter the profession (Table 5). Fifteen of the 23 students not interested in a career in athletic training spoke extensively about their problems with spending so much time as an athletic trainer and having so little free time to do other things. Debbie stated, “I took a course in high school and learned a little bit about it [athletic training profession]. But, there is too much time associated with athletic training. There is too much of a time commitment with it [athletic training].” Jan, a sophomore, explained that athletic training is “much too time consuming for someone in college. I like my free time and [to] be able to be a college student.” When asked why she didn’t want to be an athletic trainer, Donna indicated that “you spend too much time away from your friends and family. It is too time demanding.” She also said, “I think I would have liked it [athletic training], but I like the route for physical therapists (PT) better because you have to spend less time.” In a similar comment, Fran said, “Athletic training is not for me because

there are too many hours involved and you never have a social life. I like the therapy aspect more and not all the hours.”

Different Career Choice. An additional barrier to a career in athletic training was students expressing an interest in and already deciding on another career. Of the 23 students, 13 stated they had already decided on a different career and that is why they were not entering the ATEP (Table 5). When asked about her decision not to enter the ATEP, Beth simply indicated that she has “no interest in athletic training or sports” and wants a public relations degree. Steve expressed his disinterest in athletic training and said, “I have always wanted to be a coach and a teacher in high school and hopefully college.”

Additional barriers to a career in athletic training included don’t know enough about the profession (3/23), course work too difficult (2/23), not enough money (2/23), don’t like dealing with injuries (1/23), and not in good enough physical shape (1/23). These responses are included in Table 5.

Athletic Training Duties

Participants in this study had a very limited and incomplete understanding of the duties and skills of certified athletic trainers.

Rehabilitate Injuries. The role of athletic trainers in providing care and treatment for athletic injuries was identified as a major theme based upon answers provided by both students interested and not interested in a career in athletic training (Table 6). Forty students (20 interested, 20 not interested) identified providing care and treatment for athletic injuries as a major job responsibility for certified athletic trainers. When asked to explain what an athletic trainer is, Pat indicated that athletic trainers “are the people who take care of the injured athletes. They [athletic trainers] run on the field and then take care of the injury in the training room by using muscle stim.” Donna, a junior not interested in athletic training, said that athletic trainers are “the people that deal with injured athletes and get them [athletes] back to playing again.” When asked about the job responsibilities of athletic trainers, Fran, a sophomore student not interested in athletic training, indicated that “athletic trainers take care of and rehab injuries. They rehabilitate and try to prevent injuries.” Providing treatment and care to injured athletes was overwhelmingly considered a vital part of an athletic trainer’s job by both students interested and students aware of but not interested in a career in athletic training.

Table 6. Perceptions of Athletic Trainer Roles and Responsibilities^a

| Common Theme | Students Interested in Athletic Training, No. (n = 23) | | Common Theme | Students Not Interested in Athletic Training, No. (n = 23) | |
|--------------------------|--|------------|------------------------------|--|------------|
| | No. (n = 23) | Percentage | | No. (n = 23) | Percentage |
| Rehabilitate injuries | 20 | 87 | Rehabilitate injuries | 20 | 87 |
| Tape ankles | 18 | 78 | Tape ankles | 18 | 78 |
| First responders/aiders | 16 | 70 | First responder/aiders | 18 | 78 |
| Prevent injuries | 6 | 26 | Hand out water | 7 | 30 |
| Hand out water | 5 | 22 | Prevent injuries | 4 | 17 |
| Take care of equipment | 3 | 13 | Condition athletes | 4 | 17 |
| Keep records | 2 | 8 | Keep records | 2 | 8 |
| Condition athletes | 2 | 8 | Refer athletes to physicians | 2 | 8 |
| Communicate with coaches | 1 | 4 | Take care of equipment | 1 | 4 |
| Educate high schools | 1 | 4 | | | |

^aParticipants could name more than 1 responsibility.

Table 7. Perceptions of Athletic Training Skills^a

| Common Theme | Students Interested in Athletic Training, | | Common Theme | Students Not Interested in Athletic Training, | |
|----------------------------------|---|------------|----------------------------------|---|------------|
| | No. (n = 23) | Percentage | | No. (n = 23) | Percentage |
| Taping skills | 18 | 78 | Taping skills | 18 | 78 |
| Social/personal skills | 17 | 74 | Identifying anatomical landmarks | 8 | 35 |
| Identifying anatomical landmarks | 5 | 22 | Social/personal skills | 5 | 22 |
| Strength and conditioning skills | 3 | 13 | No idea | 3 | 13 |
| Splinting skills | 2 | 8 | Financial/budgeting skills | 1 | 4 |
| Financial/budgeting skills | 2 | 8 | Strength and conditioning skills | 1 | 4 |
| Time management skills | 2 | 8 | Nutrition skills | 1 | 4 |
| Hand-eye coordination | 1 | 4 | | | |
| React under pressure | 1 | 4 | | | |

^aParticipants could name more than 1 skill.

Tape Ankles. A total of 36 students (18 interested in athletic training, 18 not interested in athletic training) identified taping as one of the primary responsibilities of a certified athletic trainer (Table 6). The association between taping athletes and athletic training is strong and well represented in the interview data. Students specifically identified “taping” and/or “taping ankles” in their initial response to the question, “When you think of athletic training or an athletic trainer what comes to mind?” Joe and Robin, freshmen students not interested in careers in athletic training, considered taping a primary duty for an athletic trainer. Joe and Robin both said that “taping players before practice” is a major job responsibility for athletic trainers. When asked what an athletic trainer is, Kerry responded, “They are the people who tape the football players before practices and games.”

Act as First Responders/Aiders. A theme that emerged overwhelmingly from both groups of students was the perception of athletic trainers acting as first responders in case of an athletic injury (Table 6). Students commented on the important role that athletic trainers play in responding to life-threatening situations. Thirty-four students (16 interested, 18 not interested) specifically identified acting as a first responder as one of the primary roles of an athletic trainer. When asked to explain what an athletic trainer does, Suzy, a freshman interested in a career in athletic training said, “Athletic trainers are the first person on the scene of an injury. They [athletic trainers] are the person who runs on the field and provides first aid.” Bobby, a sophomore student not interested in athletic training, indicated that athletic trainers “are the first responders who take care of athletes when they are injured. They act as a first responder and take care of injuries when they occur.” When asked to identify a specific job responsibility of an athletic trainer, Danny, a sophomore student interested in athletic training, indicated that “athletic trainers are the first person to arrive at the scene [injury on the field] and they must make the right decision.”

Additional responsibilities identified by both groups included the prevention of injuries (interested = 6/23, not interested = 4/23), handing out water (interested = 5/23, not interested = 7/23), taking care of equipment (interested = 3/23, not interested = 1/23), conditioning athletes (interested = 2/23, not interested = 4/23), and keeping records (interested = 2/23, not interested = 2/23). Only those interested in a career in athletic training identified communicating with coaches (1/23) and educating high school students (1/23) as tasks athletic trainers perform. Only those students not interested in careers

in athletic training identified referring athletes to a physician (2/23) as a task athletic trainers perform (Table 6).

Athletic Training Skills

Taping Skills. Thirty-six students (18 interested, 18 not interested) identified taping as a primary skill of a certified athletic trainer (Table 7). When specifically asked about the skills that athletic trainers must have, Robin indicated that you need “good taping skills” to be an athletic trainer. Ben suggested that “taping skills are important for an athletic trainer and it [taping] requires a lot of practice.” Most other participants simply identified “taping” as the most common skill needed to practice as an athletic trainer.

Social/Personal Skills. The ability to cultivate good interpersonal relationships was identified as a necessary skill for athletic trainers only by students interested in athletic training (Table 7). Students (17) interested in pursuing a career in athletic training spoke at length on the importance of having good communication and personal skills. When asked what the job responsibilities of an athletic trainer were, Bill replied, “They must have good people skills and like athletics because they [athletic trainers] are around people involved in sports so much.” Samantha indicated that “having good people skills and being able to adapt to different situations and different people” is very important for athletic trainers. Tom suggested that “in order to be a successful athletic trainer you need to be a people person and be able to communicate with a lot of different people.” Suzy indicated that athletic trainers “need to have good social skills in dealing with coaches, athletes, and parents.” She also said that “these skills [communication] are difficult” but “attainable if you really want it [to become a certified athletic trainer].” When asked about the types of skills athletic trainers need, Sanja said that “the most important thing [skill] to have is people skills and be able to adapt to different situations.” In contrast, only 5 of the 23 students aware of but not interested in athletic training spoke of the importance of athletic trainers having good communication and personal skills.

Additional skills identified by both groups included identifying anatomical landmarks (interested = 5/23, not interested = 8/23) and financial/budgeting (interested = 2/23, not interested = 1/23) skills (Table 4). Only students interested in a career in athletic training identified splinting (2/23), time management (2/23), hand-eye coordination (1/23), and reacting well under pressure (1/23) as skills athletic trainers perform

(Table 7). Only students not interested in a career in athletic training identified strength and conditioning (1/23) and nutrition (1/23) as skills athletic trainers perform (Table 7).

DISCUSSION

Examining the socialization of undergraduate college students into the athletic training profession is a complex process. Ultimately, the key to the survival and enhancement of any profession is the ability to attract and retain quality individuals in a professional preparation program. Our data suggest that 3 contributing factors influence the recruitment of students to a career in athletic training. First, students identify a strong relationship between the athletic training profession and sports, specifically the team member model outlined by Schrader.²² Second, the data suggest the presence of a high school filter; students initially become exposed to a variety of situations (eg, high school athletic trainer, high school course in athletic training, injured in high school athletics) that influence their decision to consider a career in athletic training. Finally, students appear to have an incomplete understanding of the skills, abilities, and job duties of certified athletic trainers, which influences their decision regarding a career in athletic training.

Sports/Team Member Model

An association with sport is a highly motivational recruitment tool for a number of professions, including physical education, coaching, sport management, sports information, and athletic training. Certainly the allure of associating with high-caliber athletes and being a part of a team is attractive to potential recruits. A large line of research in physical education and coaching suggests that an association with sport is a major influence in recruitment into those professions.^{23–26} Literature in physical education suggests that many times recruits are not attracted to the role of the professional but rather to the desire to be associated with sports.¹⁶ In our study, recruits unanimously (23/23) identified an attraction to sport as a primary reason for entering an ATEP. Athletic training students commonly speak of the enjoyment of being on the sideline, field, or court and express little interest in many of the tasks or other clinical assignments associated with an ATEP. Athletic training recruits may decide to enter a program based on an inaccurate perception of athletic training in which they fail to identify with any aspects of the athletic training profession that are not associated with sports or athletics. Whether or not students decide to stay and complete a degree in athletic training, clearly these findings suggest that most will be attracted to an ATEP based on this association with sports.

The athletic training profession suffers from an identity crisis, with 2 conflicting opinions regarding what an athletic trainer represents: the athletic trainer team member or the athletic trainer health provider.²² We suggest the athletic training recruits in this investigation aligned with the athletic trainer team member as they demonstrated an attraction to athletics and membership on a team. Although students did identify with the desire to “help people” as an attractor to a career in athletic training, the association with sport was clearly more influential. Previous researchers⁴ on recruitment into the athletic training profession indicated that students “identify with and are influenced by the culture of sport.” Pitney et al⁴ suggested athletic trainers are able to envision themselves in a

sports setting because of their initial exposure and affinity to a sports culture.

The team member model and the affiliation with sport are major influential factors for potential recruits. Despite these findings, the recent changes to education standards for ATEPs are clearly more aligned with the health care provider model and away from the deep connection to athletics. Examples include the abolishment of the internship route to certification, establishment of Approved Clinical Instructor training, abolishment of the hour requirement, and additional requirements for students to obtain a variety of clinical experiences. These changes have all affected the traditional education of athletic training students. Education programs can no longer cater to the coverage demands of athletics. Most ATEPs attempt to provide students with well-rounded clinical experiences in a variety of settings. It is difficult to establish a single group of academic and clinical standards universal to all settings, because ATs currently work in many employment venues.²² Athletic training educators and practicing ATs must both understand that new education standards limit the autonomy of athletic training students and the extent to which they can help athletic departments provide medical coverage, while also realizing the connection to athletics is the primary reason most students chose the profession.

High School Filter

Students are exposed to a variety of planned and unplanned experiences in high school that ultimately influence their transition to the “real world,” including their decision on a specific career or trade. The findings from this study suggest that some specific experiences during high school play a vital role in a student’s decision to consider entering an ATEP. Examples of high school experiences that may direct students toward a career in athletic training include a relationship with the high school AT, suffering an injury during high school athletics, and completing a high school course in athletic training or sports medicine.

A strong relationship with the high school AT influenced students toward a career in athletic training. Authors^{27–29} of comparable studies in physical education and coaching identified a specific role model (coach) as most influential in their decision to enter the physical education or coaching profession. Both informal and formal mentoring of high school students by an AT at the high school level plays an influential role in a student’s career decision. Pitney et al⁴ described mentoring as a key component to the professional development of ATs during their professional socialization. The experiences of high school students and their socialization into the athletic training profession were similar to those of college students³ and entry-level ATs.⁴ Authors^{30–32} of studies in athletic training recognized specific mentoring strategies, such as approachability and accessibility, as helpful in promoting the socialization of the athletic training profession. Interview data from students identified a relationship with the high school AT as a key component in their decisions based on their interactions.

The relationship between a student and a high school AT can also be a barrier for students thinking about entering an ATEP. Students who have a close relationship with an AT at a high school can observe the long hours ATs sometimes spend before, during, and after practices. Fifteen of the 23 students indicated that the extensive time commitment for ATs was a major barrier to their decision not to enter an ATEP. All as-

pects of a high school AT's job performance can potentially influence a student's willingness to seek a career in athletic training. Students observe the hours high school athletic trainers must commit to their job, the attitudes they display while doing their jobs, the types of tasks they are required to perform, and the relationships they establish with coworkers. It is important for high school ATs to realize the effect they have on the recruitment of students into the athletic training profession.

The experience of completing a course in athletic training or sports medicine at the high school level has a significant role in engaging potential ATs in the profession. The opportunity to learn about the skills and knowledge ATs require should help students make a more informed decision about a career in athletic training. High school-level athletic training or sports medicine classes provide prospective students with a preview of the knowledge and skills they will learn as they are socialized into the athletic training profession by accredited education programs. This preliminary information helps prospective students form a more accurate understanding of athletic training and becomes part of the basis for future decisions to enter the profession. Lortie's¹ work in socialization identified the importance of examining the subjective warrants of younger students (high school) to more effectively understand the perceptions of prospective recruits. The potential for an increase in the number of new entry-level master's degree athletic training programs and the rising number of non-traditional and transfer students into undergraduate programs suggest a need for high school recruits to have a more accurate representation of the profession.

The idea of becoming involved in athletic training because of a previous injury one sustained is not a new concept. However, no current research in athletic training exists to support the hypothesis. Although this information may be common to most ATs, the meaning of these experiences (ie, injuries) and how they may relate to the recruitment of future athletic training professionals cannot be overlooked. In addition to having an understanding of the knowledge and skills associated with a profession, students also need an understanding of the values, rituals, and attitudes of individuals who make up the profession.¹ This type of information will help recruits obtain a more accurate representation of the personal and professional attributes of an AT. Certainly this information can be obtained during the recovery of an injury while a patient interacts with a variety of health care professionals (eg, nurses, physicians, radiologic technicians, physical therapists, and ATs). From these experiences with different allied health professionals, recruits can compare professions and subsequently make a more accurate and informed decision on a potential career.

Incomplete Understanding of Athletic Training

The perceptions of what an AT does and the requisite skills are predominantly similar between participant groups. A limited or incomplete perspective of the responsibilities and skills of an AT by both groups of participants may contribute to the type and quality of students entering ATEPs. A student with an incomplete understanding of what ATs do may be unable to make an informed decision on this potential career path.

Both participant groups exhibited a limited understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and educational requirements of an athletic trainer. It is not surprising that students from an introductory class would have limited knowledge of specific

skills and duties of ATs. However, misconceptions of duties and skills of ATs may ultimately lead students to choose other career paths. Any misunderstanding by potential recruits about employment settings or scope of practice of ATs needs to be addressed. Students from both groups believed that ATs tape ankles, take care of injuries, and run out on the field when an athlete is hurt. In addition, both groups felt that taping was the primary skill needed for an AT. Students interested in athletic training were able to identify personal and communication skills as important to ATs. Several additional skills were mentioned by both groups, reflecting a minimal understanding. As athletic training continues to expand into non-traditional settings, potential recruits should be provided with the scope of information about all career possibilities for ATs. The more accurate the information students can acquire before having to make a decision to enter college, the more likely it is students will make an informed career decision.

An incomplete perception of a professional's roles, responsibilities, and educational requirements by recruits or others is problematic in any profession. Research in physical education has been useful in demonstrating more about the recruits who decide to enter their preprofessional programs.²⁵ In athletic training, we know very little about the recruits who enter programs and what they know about athletic training. Even the profession itself is having a hard time identifying who ATs are, as well as what their job responsibilities entail. One needs only to look at the inconsistencies of practice acts across states as well as the movement to consider a name change for the profession as evidence of misunderstandings of our profession at all levels.

Learning more about why students enter athletic training programs is important. Findings in the physical education literature suggest that teaching physical education is not considered by recruits as a primary motive for entering a physical education program.¹⁶ Motives for entering physical education programs include the desire to remain physically active, intent to help others, and the desire to coach.^{27,33} We hope that motives for entering ATEPs are aligned with the mission of the profession and not a contingency for other career choices.

Limitations

The participants in this study were drawn from 1 university and a single introductory course in successive years. It is possible that these participants were not representative of students in other universities who were interested or were aware of but not interested in pursuing a career in athletic training. The sample for this study was intentionally small, purposeful, and nonrandom, due to the nature of this initial exploration. It will be incumbent upon readers to determine the extent to which these results can inform recruitment efforts in their own ATEPs.

CONCLUSIONS

Our purpose was to gain insight regarding a student's decision to enter an ATEP. In addition, we attempted to examine potential recruits' perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of ATs. The grounded theory technique used in this research allows us to generate an explanation of the recruitment process of students into the athletic training profession.

The influence of high school ATs cannot be underestimated. High school ATs have a tremendous influence over the stu-

dents who may enter the athletic training profession. Secondary school ATs appear to be the primary socializing agent for college preparatory students in this study. These ATs can provide students with an accurate description of their own role in the profession. Many times, it is the high school AT who serves as the initial contact or exposure for students interested in a career in sports medicine. The athletic training profession needs to be more active in lobbying specific states for laws that require ATs in all secondary schools. Quality students who have no exposure to an AT may ultimately choose another profession within the allied health community.

Sport influences the potential enrollment of students into an ATEP. The primary attractor to a career in athletic training was the relationship with sports and athletics and the feeling of being a part of a team. Athletic training education programs should be providing valuable clinical experiences in all the professional settings to give students a true understanding of our scope of practice as ATs. Current Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education accreditation standards do not require clinical experiences outside the host institution. Therefore, at some ATEPs, students may only be exposed to a specific population of patients (eg, athletes) and limiting their perception of the possible employment settings for ATs. It is important for ATEPs to highlight the many opportunities for ATs in nontraditional settings to prospective students.

This research provides the first step toward understanding why students choose to enter an ATEP or not. Regardless of how students are influenced toward a career in athletic training (sports or high school mentor), it appears that recruits still have a limited understanding of the athletic training profession. Providing a more accurate and complete representation of athletic training to potential recruits may be helpful in attracting a more diverse population and warrants further research.

Future Research

We suggest future researchers should investigate the role and influence of the secondary school AT in providing accurate information to potential athletic training students and retention of these students. Identifying what attracts and discourages students from entering an ATEP is important. A related extension of this work would be to examine attrition rates of athletic training students as they progress through education programs. For example, are the attractors and barriers to the profession the same for senior students as they were when first entering the program? In addition, a perspective of the athletic training profession from a student who graduates from an education program and never sits for the Board of Certification examination would be very informative.

We determined that high school ATs play an important role in the recruitment of future ATs from a student's perspective. Examining the perspective of a high school AT would be a logical extension of this work. It is common to read and hear about athletic training professionals arguing over a lack of vision regarding employment settings (physician's extender), education level (entry-level master's degree), and specific knowledge and skills (educational competencies) pertaining to the athletic training profession. The type of athletic training professional our membership envisions and the perceptions of those considering a career in athletic training may not be congruent. We hope our findings will initiate a larger discussion

that examines what type of student is attempting to enter into the athletic training profession and why.

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