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Perceptions of Support Networks During the Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer Experience

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Perceptions of Support Networks During the Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer Experience

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B.S., University of Connecticut, 2011

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Perceptions of Support Networks During the Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer Experience

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Perceptions of Support Networks During the Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer Experience.

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Context: The Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer (GAAT) position often serves as the first experience independently working as an AT, and the next stage in the professional socialization process. GAATs have three academic program tracks to choose from when selecting their assistantship: 1) Accredited postprofessional athletic training (APPAT), 2) Postprofessional athletic training (PPAT), and 3) Nonathletic training (NAT). The graduate assistantship experience can highly influence professional commitment and retention within the field due to the perception of being a rite of passage. **Objective:** To gain an understanding of how GAATs perceive professional socialization and mentorship during their graduate experiences. **Design:** Semi-structured phone interviews. **Participants:** 25 GAATs (20 females and 5 males) studying in all three academic tracks (APPAT = 8, PPAT = 11, NAT = 6) volunteered. The average age was 25 ± 5 years with the median age being 24 years. Participant ages ranged between 23 and 47 years. Participants were BOC certified for an average of 2 ± 0.4 years. **Data Analysis:** The interview protocol was divided into 2 sections: basic demographic information and open-ended questions regarding the GAAT's experiences. All phone interviews were conducted by the same two researchers, digitally recorded with the consent of the participant, and transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed borrowing from the principles of general inductive approach. Data credibility was maintained using peer review, field notes, and intercoder reliability. Data saturation guided participant recruitment. **Results:** Three main themes were identified: 1) *Peer Support* 2)

Supervisor support and 3) *academic personnel support*. Our participants identified a strong sense of *peer support* throughout their experiences, both in the academic and clinical settings. GAATs frequently utilized other GAATs for support due to shared experiences and understanding of workloads. GAATs often described difficulty receiving *supervisor support* from full-time staff due to the staff AT's workload and resulting time constraints, which limited their *availability* for mentoring. Similar issues were also expressed with coordinating time with academic faculty by those studying in PPAT programs. Communication emerged as helpful for the incoming GAAT, where the previous GAAT provided formal mentorship via a job description used to highlight responsibilities and expectations of the role. Differences among assistantship type was only noted in terms of receiving balanced mentorship between academic and clinical instructors, where students studying in APPAT programs perceived more balanced support. **Conclusions:** Our results support the literature regarding the GAAT's pursuit of continued formal mentoring. Our results, however also, indicate that GAATs perceive less support from their full-time ATs and academic staff due to limited availability. As a result GAATs are leaning on other GAATs for support during the graduate experience. The GAAT position remains an educational experience for the AT, and warrants mentorship from more experienced ATs.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Factors pertaining to attrition within the athletic training profession have become a highly researched topic, motivated by the first decline in membership of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) in organization history between 2005-2008.¹ While attrition within the athletic training profession was examined in the early 1990's² during a time of NATA membership growth, it has gained more recent popularity in the literature³⁻⁵ as membership numbers have not reflected the same strong growth rate, particularly in certified membership. Interestingly enough, student membership increased 23% in one year following the certified membership decline.¹ Whether these membership numbers are the result of athletic trainers (ATs) simply not renewing their membership or if they are leaving the field is still to be determined. However it is still highly plausible to assume that factors of attrition, such as job satisfaction, burnout, and work-life balance, are contributing to the decline in NATA membership.

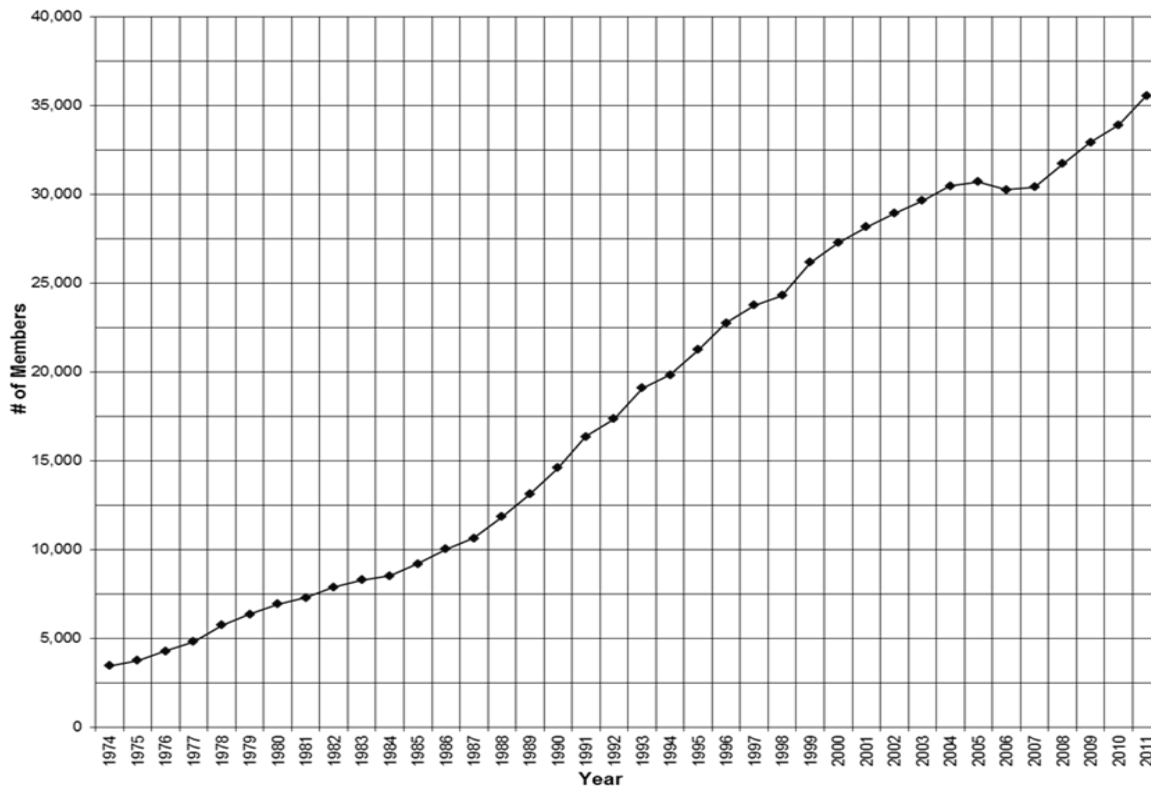


Figure 1. NATA Membership Growth 1974-2011.¹

National Athletic Trainers' Association membership growth trends can be seen in Figure 1.

While research focusing on the negative aspects of the athletic training profession demonstrates that these challenges exist, speculation still remains as to how the timing in which these aspects are experienced affect an AT's career. Limited research in athletic training exists regarding the graduate assistant (GA) population, especially in the areas of job satisfaction, burnout, and mentorship. These concepts have been examined in athletic training, but often excluded the Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer (GAAT) as they are not considered to be a full-time employee despite managing a workload that resembles that of a full-time staff member. The GAAT position is unique in that the newly certified AT is required to serve as a healthcare provider, student, and in some cases teacher/clinical preceptor concurrently. Balancing each responsibility and the duties associated with each can pose a challenge to the novice AT. In fact, many GAATs are susceptible to experience role strain and burnout due to the number of hours they work as well as the various roles they assume as a GAAT.^{6,7} For most GAATs, this position serves as their first experience independently working as an AT. The decision to pursue the graduate assistantship position is often to facilitate clinical growth, while being mentored professionally.^{7,8} In the professional socialization context, the GAAT is gaining valuable organizational training, which provides valuable experiences regarding the role and responsibilities of the AT, beyond those gained as a non-certified student. The time engaged as a GAAT has the potential to influence professional commitment and retention within the field, as evident by the literature on the role of professional socialization on the undergraduate student.⁸ It has been suggested that mentoring and positive learning experiences can optimistically influence retention.⁸

Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers represent the future of the athletic training profession, as they are most often the newest members of the field.⁹ The graduate assistantship has been identified as a rite of passage for those looking to transition to full time employment in the collegiate setting.¹⁰ The NATA Executive Committee for Education has identified transition to practice as a key future direction facing the profession. However, studies have shown that this subpopulation of ATs experience some of

the same negative aspects of the profession as their full-time counterparts,^{7,11} yet limited research is available on how these aspects are perceived by this highly influential population. Therefore, the purpose of this literature review is to investigate the negative aspects of the athletic training profession and gain an appreciation for how they may impact the experiences of GAATs.

Mentorship

Mentorship plays a key role in athletic training as it can influence the AT's career before it starts and can continue throughout the remainder of the career. Literature in academic medicine has established that mentors and role models both positively and negatively influence students.¹²⁻¹⁴ Mentorship was first discussed by Levinson¹⁵ who identified the significance of mentoring on a young adult. The importance of mentorship on areas such as personal and career development and career choice have also been highlighted.^{12,13} A mentor is defined as a senior member of a group who intentionally encourages and supports younger colleagues in their careers. A role model is a person that helps build professional identity through leading by example.¹⁵ Role modeling is characterized by informal, unintentional teaching. Role modeling can occur during the mentoring process and mentoring can occur in the absence of role modeling. Mentorship studied in the undergraduate athletic training student population has shown a correlation between positive learning experiences and increased retention.⁸ It is also during the undergraduate experience that the athletic training student begins the professional socialization process.

Professional socialization is an intricate educational process where one assimilates the norms, knowledge, skills, values, and roles of a given profession.¹⁶ Socializing agents include mentors, clinical instructors, academic faculty, and peers.¹⁷ Professional socialization is typically divided into two stages: anticipatory and organizational.¹⁰ The anticipatory phase is the theoretical aspect of the profession where one envisions the role they would like to assume.¹⁸ It is classified by exposure to the profession before entering the work setting^{10,17,19-21} and encompasses the formal education and professional preparation such as an apprenticeship or clinical training.²² The organizational phase is the practical component where the individual enters and engages in the profession, thus assuming the roles associated with that given field.¹⁷

The organizational phase is also divided into two stages. The first is the induction phase consisting of an introduction session or orientation. The second is role continuance which focuses on adapting to

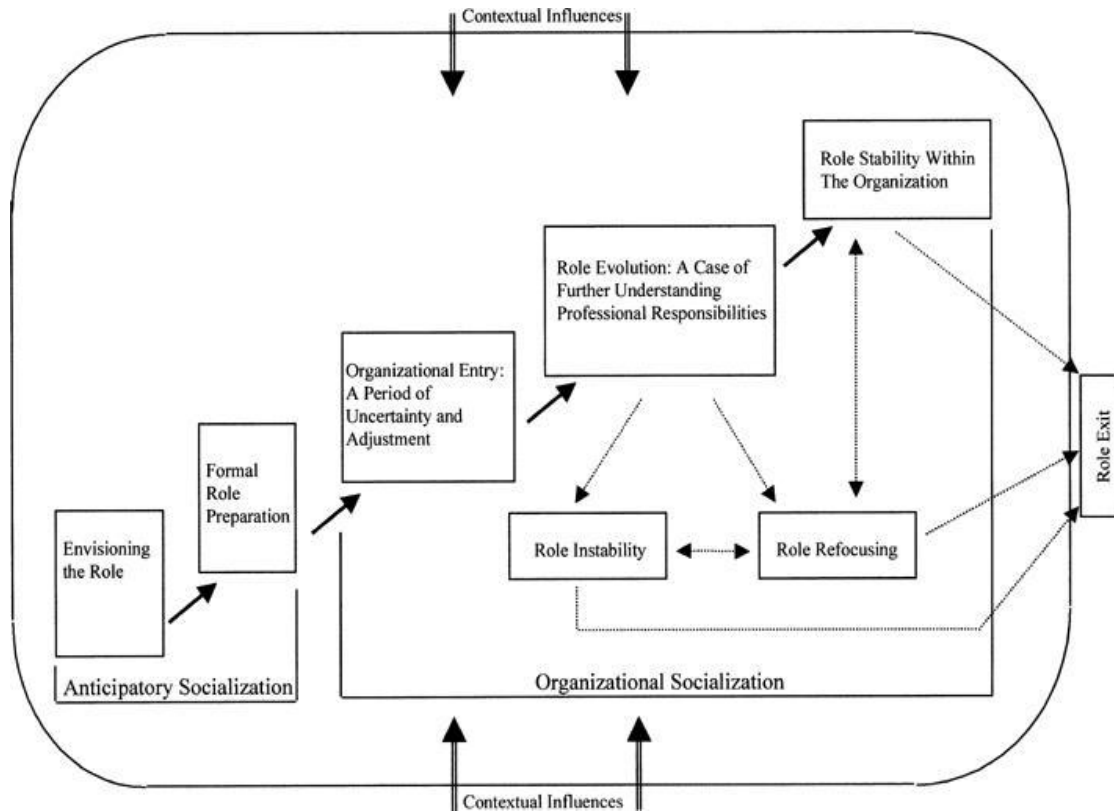


Figure 2. Process Model of Professional Socialization of ATs in NCAA Div. I Setting¹⁰

organizational structures and continuing to learn the roles of their chosen profession.^{10,23} While the phases each have their own characteristics they can occur congruently.^{18,20} Figure 2 from Pitney et al¹⁰ demonstrates the relationship between the phases of professional socialization. The GAAT is immersed in both processes as they are concurrently serving as a student enhancing their formal education while also being socialized into the organization by serving as a practicing clinician.

The GA position is viewed as a valuable experience to continue the professional socialization process and enhance one's clinical abilities while being mentored.^{7,8} The Pitney et al.¹⁰ investigation of professional socialization in the Division I context highlighted the importance of socialization as preparation for assuming the role of an AT. The GAAT position is viewed as a rite of

passage and prerequisite to evolve into the role of an AT, especially for the Division I setting. Based on the literature for the undergraduate student it can be hypothesized that positive engagement during the graduate assistant experience can also impact professional commitment and retention within the profession.⁸ Additionally, GAATs have reported that support from within their organization is an appealing quality that draws them to the GA position and that lack of support can create a potential for burnout.⁷

Organizational support and mentorship has also been studied in the context of WLB by Pitney.²⁴ When discussing recommendations for changing socialization aspects of the athletic training profession a recurring theme that emerged from respondents were to encourage young professionals to schedule personal time and create space between work and their personal life. The acknowledgement from veteran ATs that the profession needs to shift away from the issues that diminish quality of life highlights the awareness that the influx in qualitative research in athletic training has generated. It may also represent recognition of the dissimilarity in mindset between the younger and newer healthcare professionals, as the younger generation is more willing to leave a profession in search for one that fulfills their needs.²⁵ Literature in academic medicine however has highlighted the benefits of positive influences on young professionals as ways to engage the student, as these encounters have been found to play a key role in personal and professional growth, increases in research production, career selection, and professional commitment.^{8,12-14}

Job Satisfaction

While many factors can impact an individual's commitment and intentions to leave a career, job satisfaction has been identified as a strong forecaster of professional attrition.^{26,27} Job satisfaction has been defined as the level at which a person likes their job.²⁸ Job satisfaction encompasses two psychological components, an affective component encompassing one's feelings of satisfaction regarding their job and a perceptual element of whether the job is meeting the individual's needs.²⁹

There are several different measurements used to assess job satisfaction. The most valid and reliable methods commonly used in assessing job satisfaction among healthcare professions are the Job in General Scale (JIG), Andrew and Withey Job Satisfaction Questionnaire, Spector Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS), Emergency Physician Job Satisfaction Instrument (EPJS), McCloskey/Mueller Satisfaction Scale (MMSS), Measure of Job Satisfaction (MJS) and Nurse Satisfaction Scale (NSS).³⁰ Each method consists of a survey utilizing Likert scales that assess an employee's attitude towards their job. The Spector Job Satisfaction Survey has been utilized in job satisfaction research focusing on athletic trainers.¹¹ The JSS is a 36 item survey consisting of nine components; Pay, Promotion, Supervision, Fringe Benefits, Contingent Rewards, Operating Procedures, Coworkers, nature of Work, and Communication, used to assess employee attitudes towards their job. The survey utilizes a Likert scale of six points ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with questions written in both positive and negative directions.³¹ The JSS has demonstrated the ability to be adapted to specific work settings as seen in the study by Terranova and Henning¹¹ allowing for ease of use. Often the most frequently utilized instrument in research targeting social service professionals, the JSS has demonstrated average reliability and construct reliability.³⁰

Job satisfaction has been studied throughout various health professions including nurses,^{25,26,32} occupational therapists,³³ and physicians.³⁴ Research regarding job satisfaction and intention to leave amongst athletic trainers is also beginning to gain popularity, however it still continues to focus primarily on the full-time athletic trainer.^{5,11} The literature identifies factors such as financial compensation, work-life conflict, organizational challenges, high stress, and role strain to impact job satisfaction.^{2,4,5,25,26,32-34} A study by Terranova and Henning¹¹ investigating job satisfaction levels in collegiate ATs confirm the findings of previous literature regarding factors impacting job satisfaction.

The Terranova and Henning¹¹ study also unveiled that level of satisfaction, particularly related to one's job or nature of their role in their job, is considered to be a strong predictor of intention to leave the profession. This finding provides a strong underpinning for the theory that if a GAAT experiences burnout, they may likely become dissatisfied with their job and subsequently question their future role in

the profession. This occurrence was already noted in the GAAT population by Mazerolle et al.⁷ Further support can be garnered from other healthcare professions who have targeted the graduate assistant population as the main focus for their investigations. For example, one study by Aiken et al.²⁵ examining graduate assistants in various nursing programs demonstrated that the newest generation of healthcare professionals are more likely to leave their job if they are dissatisfied with the position for not fulfilling their personal goals.

Retention in Athletic Training

Turnover is a normal and inevitable occurrence within a given vocation, however a high rate of voluntary employee departure becomes a concern as it can negatively influence many aspects of the organization.³⁵ Retention has been studied extensively in other healthcare fields such as nursing^{25-27,32} as well as in the athletic realm among collegiate coaches.^{36,37} Retention within athletic training was first studied in the 1990's by Capel.² Common themes exposed by Capel that are linked to attrition of athletic trainers include long work hours, challenging schedules, low financial compensation, limited career advancement opportunities, and administrative and coaching conflicts.² Limited research still presently exists regarding retention of ATs, but studies that do exist confirm the initial findings of Capel.^{4,5,11}

Maintaining professional commitment and minimizing one's intent to leave a profession can be difficult when one has reached the highest dissatisfaction within their chosen career path. Intent to leave (ITL) has been studied extensively in the nursing profession.^{25-27,32-34} Separate studies by Heinen et al³² and Suadicani et al³³ revealed that between 9-15% of nurses express interest in departing from the field. Accounting for economic factors, ITL numbers increased to 26% for nurses who reported they would leave if they could financially afford to do so.³³ Frustrations with job demands, job support, burnout, and leadership were the most common predictors of ITL amongst nurses.^{26,27,32,33} These factors have also been noted within the athletic training profession to cause job dissatisfaction that ultimately leads to career departure.^{2,5,38} Limited research regarding professional commitment among athletic trainers has focused on the full-time athletic trainer within the intercollegiate and secondary school setting.^{39,40} Both studies by

Winterstein³⁹ and Pitney⁴⁰ highlight the service-oriented nature and significant perceived commitment the AT has towards the student athlete. While the patient oriented mindset assists the AT in serving as a successful clinician, it can also force the AT to confront the negative precursors of job dissatisfaction and ITL. A recent study by Goodman et al.³⁸ is the first to look at retention among current and past experiences of female ATs. While Goodman also confirms the reoccurring themes of occupational dissatisfaction, as seen in Figure 3, like the other research available it focuses on experiences of the full-time athletic trainer.

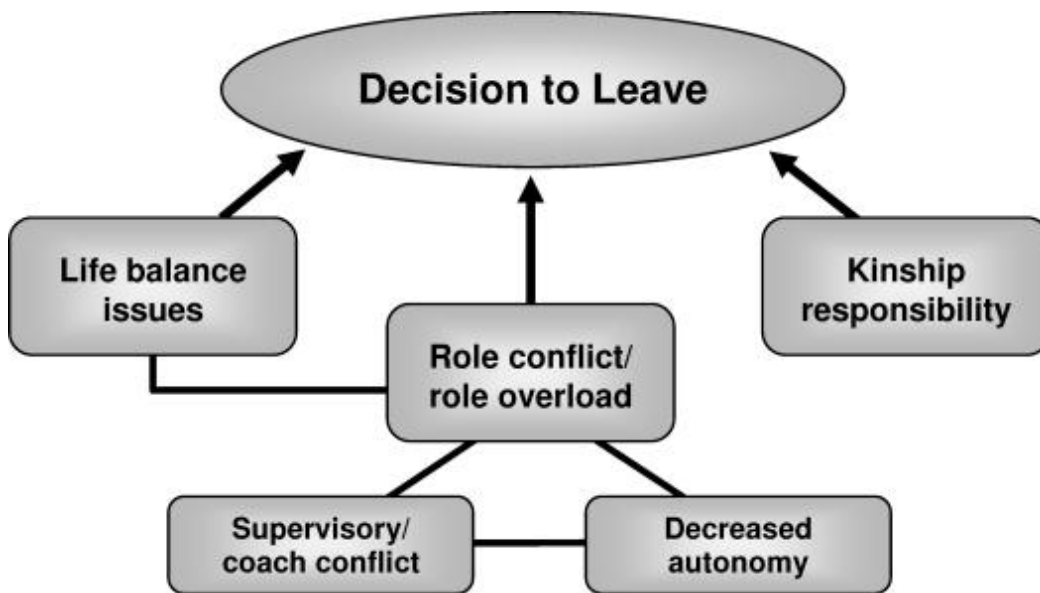


Figure 3. Factors contributing to ITL in Female ATs in NCAA Div. I Setting³⁸

Work-Life Balance

The ability to effectively manage and balance one’s personal life with work responsibilities has correlated with increased job satisfaction, decreased perceived burnout, and decreased intentions to leave a profession.³ Work-Family Conflict (WFC), defined as discord that arises when the time devoted to or spent completing professional responsibilities conflicts or limits the time available to fulfill family-related responsibilities,⁴¹ has been briefly investigated among professionals within the athletic realm such as coaches^{36,37} and athletic trainers.^{3,5} Over the years the term work-family conflict has held a limiting

connotation of only encompassing those that have traditional family responsibilities, such as commitments to a spouse or child, and has thus excluded single or unmarried professionals. Because the stresses of WFC occur within athletic training regardless of family or marital status, the term WFC has been replaced with the concept of work-life conflict or work-life balance (WLB).⁴² While the terms are interchangeable, WLB better describes the quality of life issues experienced by the profession as a whole. Lack of time for family or personal obligations secondary to an inability to balance work and home life has been linked to healthcare professionals,^{25,27,33,34} as well as those in the athletic industry.^{2,3,5,37} The literature has identified long work hours, travel, inadequate staffing, lack of control over work scheduling, and work overload as characteristics associated with work-life balance conflicts.⁴³⁻⁴⁷ While the literature has not focused on the GAAT population, GAATs are just as susceptible to experience WLB as their full-time counterparts as the GAAT assumes the role of an AT by serving as a healthcare provider while also managing the challenges associated with personal academic responsibilities.⁷ This juggling of responsibilities can lead to the experience of role overload. Role overload is defined as an occurrence when an employee finds it difficult to perform professional responsibilities or complete them in a timely manner, or when the quality of the obligations completed are not at a level of competence that could be attained if other responsibilities were not present.⁴ GAATs may experience a higher perception of role overload in the attempt to balance the dual role of AT and student, particularly GAATs hired in positions that serve to assist staffing inadequacies.^{2,44}

Support networks have been identified as positive assets to combat the stressors of work-life conflict.⁴² Studies have supported that those with higher perceived social support experience less work related stress.⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ Social support can come from a variety of sources. Most commonly, social support is reported to come from one's immediate family and friends.^{38,42} Additionally, support from co-workers, administrative personnel, supervisors, and colleagues also play a key role in reducing stress and assisting with work-life balance.^{38,46} Social support within the workplace can ease the tension created by role overload experienced by GAATs and full-time staff alike.

Burnout

An interlinking factor of job satisfaction and work-life conflict is burnout. Burnout is defined as a negative response to chronic stress that results in a person experiencing emotional and physical exhaustion secondary to the high demands placed on that person over a period of time.^{51,52} Burnout is characterized through three psychological effects: depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and lack of personal accomplishment.⁵³ The most accepted theoretical model of burnout comes from Smith⁵⁴ and is based upon three components. The first component states that perception of stress is influenced by personal and situational characteristics. The second involves the person's cognitive assessment of the stress. The third component entails the coping strategies for stress.⁵⁴

Developed around the psychological effects that characterize burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment) the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is the most widely recognized and utilized method to measure burnout among service professionals.^{53,55} While the MBI has been shown as an effective tool for measuring burnout, its lack of context often posed as a limitation, causing some researchers to suggest an individualized MBI be used for each service profession.⁵⁶ In order to better study specific characteristics within the athletic training realm Clapper and Harris⁵⁷ developed the Athletic Training Burnout Inventory (ATBI). The ATBI was constructed around four distinct themes within burnout of athletic trainers: emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (EEDP), administrative responsibility (AR), time commitment (TC), and organizational support (OS).

Burnout research has gained popularity within the athletic training profession in recent years.^{3,50,51,57-60} While the majority of research has focused on the full-time athletic trainer, Mazerolle et al.⁷ targeted GAATs in her 2012 assessment of burnout, unveiling that the GAAT population is just as susceptible to experiencing burnout as their full-time counterparts. Factors contributing to burnout are summarized in Figure 4.

A major characteristic of the athletic training professions is its time intensiveness, therefore one of the most recurrent themes predicating burnout within the field is hours worked.^{3,10,61} Long days,

weekend and holiday coverage, and travel are frequently required by athletic trainers. Coupling long days with inadequate staffing and increased workload amplifies the stresses placed on service providers.^{2,59} The need for flexibility with one's schedule also places strain on the AT, who is commonly impacted by last minute schedule adjustments made by coaches and/or administrators. The lack of control over one's schedule also surfaces frequently as a tie between work-life conflict and burnout in athletic trainers.^{3,42,62} Time management has been a topic of interest among those studying graduate assistants. Independent studies by Reed and Giacobbi⁶³ and Serephin and Breuning⁶⁴ found that GAs report long work hours to impact their time management abilities and result in a significant source of stress.

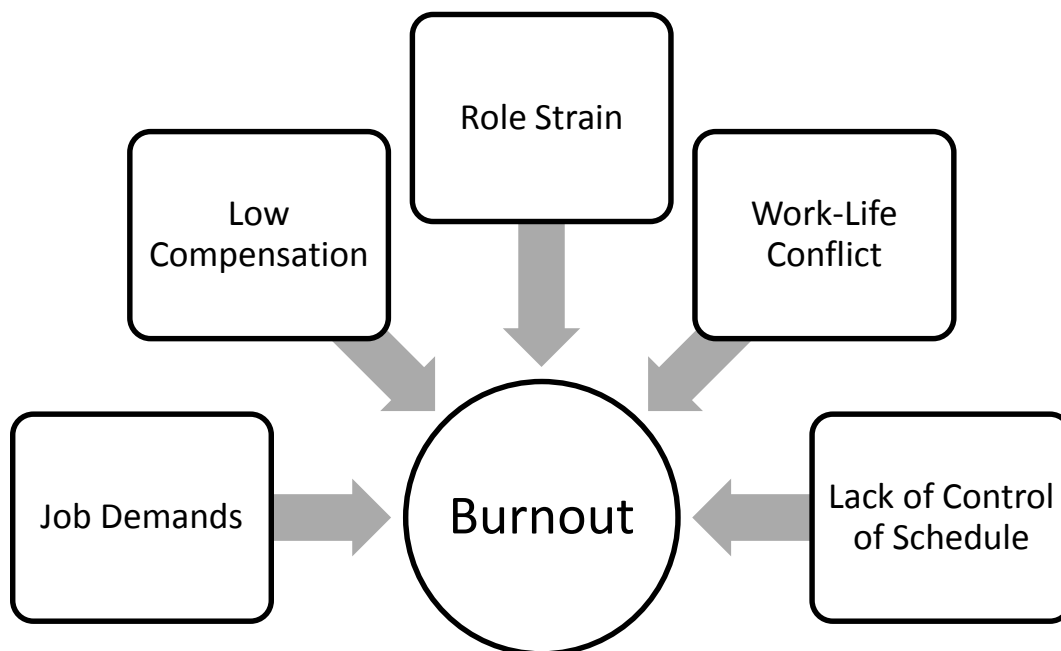


Figure 4. Factors contributing to burnout in athletic training.

Job expectations and demands on the athletic trainer are high. Patient care alone is a time intensive and stressful responsibility incurred by the athletic trainer, especially for those working in an environment with high athlete-to-AT ratios.⁵⁰ Along with clinical duties, ATs may balance a combination of administrative and academic/teaching responsibilities in addition to personal and family commitments. The GAAT faces the challenge of managing the aforementioned responsibilities along with their own

responsibilities as a student. Each additional obligation can cause the experience of role strain. Role strain, also referred to as role overload, is defined as difficulty completing the responsibilities associated with multiple roles.⁶⁵ Role strain has been documented in the literature to occur within the athletic training profession. For example, a study by Henning and Weidner⁶ revealed that athletic trainers who serve as Approved Clinical Instructors (ACIs) frequently experience role strain.

Athletic trainers are often viewed as a “jack of all trades” service provider as their responsibilities and required skill set are viewed as unique to athletes, coaches, and administrators. Unfortunately the uniqueness of roles an AT can play lead to a phenomenon known as role ambiguity. Role ambiguity occurs when job descriptions are unclear, vague, or ill defined; position responsibilities are contradictory; and are associated with vague requirements, substandard performance, and inconsistent evaluations and disciplinary actions.⁶⁶

Role complexities of athletic trainers are impacted by the expectations of coaches, athletes, administrators, and academic program directors. These expectations can play a substantial, and sometimes conflicting, role in dictating responsibilities and availability requirements for the athletic trainer. Role complexity research is limited within the athletic training literature,^{4,6} but has been studied in other healthcare professionals.^{67,68} A study by Brumels and Beach⁴ investigated role complexities in the Division I athletic training population. A correlation was found between role ambiguity, job satisfaction, and intent to leave the profession. Those that reported a high experience of role ambiguity were less satisfied with their current position and expressed a desire to leave athletic training.⁴

Social support is a reoccurring theme to overcome the negative occurrences such as burnout within healthcare professions. Organizational support has been identified by GAATs as a desired characteristic of their work environment.⁷ Inter-organizational networks have been shown to help decrease work related stress and burnout.³⁸ Additionally, a healthy social life outside the workplace can aid in impeding and possibly avoiding burnout.⁵¹

Conclusion

The GAAT position is a highly valuable and sought after experience by novice ATs looking to enhance their clinical skills and knowledge of the profession.^{7,8} It is also viewed as a prerequisite for advancement in certain clinical settings.¹⁰ GAATs value the mentorship and guidance provided by their more practiced colleagues.⁸ Subsequently, the impact of both positive and negative influences experienced by the GAAT play a major role in personal and professional development as well as future career decisions.¹²⁻¹⁴ As a result, the GAAT experience is a highly vulnerable period in the GA's career.

Research has shown that GAATs experience burnout just as their full-time counterparts.⁷ Role strain and WLB conflicts contribute to the stressors placed on ATs. The addition of personal academic responsibilities to the general job responsibilities as a healthcare provider and often roles as a preceptor or other form of academic instructor augments the challenges placed on the GAAT. Increased stress associated with any combination of burnout, role strain, or work-life conflict increases the rate of attrition from a profession.^{3,5,6,11,38} However, positive engagement and mentoring during the GA experience has been suggested to encourage retention of young professionals within the athletic training profession.⁸

The NATA recognizes transition to practice as a key component for the future of the profession,⁹ especially as student membership has continued to be the largest growing population of new organizational members.¹ Yet while GAATs are viewed as the future of the profession,⁹ little research is available that focuses on the perceived experiences of this influential population. Further investigation into the role of mentorship and its impact on areas such as job satisfaction, burnout, and retention within this unique group of young professionals is critical for the growth and maintenance of the profession.

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Introduction

The Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer (GAAT) position is a unique position in that certified athletic trainers (ATs) are required to serve as a healthcare provider, student, and in some cases clinical preceptor concurrently. Balancing each of those responsibilities and the duties associated with each role individually can pose a challenge on this novice class of ATs. For most GAATs, this position serves as a first experience independently working as an AT. The role is often viewed as a rite of passage to the entry-level position of the AT, and is the next stage in the professional socialization process.¹ As a result, the graduate assistantship experience can highly influence professional commitment and retention within the field.

The desire to complete a graduate assistantship is frequently influenced by the appeal of an opportunity to enhance clinical development while receiving professional support.^{2,3} In the context of professional socialization, the GAAT position provides a unique opportunity to blend the anticipatory and organizational stages of the process as the GAAT is concurrently expanding their own formal knowledge as a student while providing a valuable opportunity to gain organizational training that builds upon the experiences gained as a non-certified student. As demonstrated in the undergraduate student population, engagement within the athletic training profession can assist in increasing professional commitment and retention.² Transition to practice has been identified as a focal point in the future direction for the athletic training profession by the NATA Executive Committee for Education.⁴ Studies have shown that the GAAT population faces the same negative challenges of the profession, including burnout, role strain, and work-life balance, just like their full-time coworkers,^{3,5} however the research fails to understand how these aspects are perceived by this impressionable subpopulation.

The selection of a graduate assistantship is also impacted by the academic desires of the GAAT. There are three academic options that the GAAT can select: accredited postprofessional athletic training program (APPAT), postprofessional athletic training (PPAT) program, and non-athletic training (NAT) program. The APPAT is classified as a graduate program accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE), the governing body of all entry-level athletic training education programs. Accredited postprofessional programs are characterized by a curriculum that emphasizes advanced knowledge and skill development in the field of athletic training. The goal of the PPAT is to also offer courses that advance the knowledge and skill set of a GAAT beyond those learned in the entry-level program. Postprofessional athletic training programs vary from APPATs in that PPATS are acknowledged by the NATA as possessing advanced athletic training educational curriculums but are not accredited by any governing body. Non-athletic training programs are those in which no affiliation is made between academic studies and the clinical component of the assistantship.

Limited research in athletic training also exists regarding the graduate assistant population in the areas of mentorship and professional socialization. Of the research available,^{1,3} the influence and impact of mentorship and the professional socialization process is not investigated from the prospective of the GAAT. Mentorship has been identified as a significant factor that can impact the personal and professional development of a young adult.⁵ In the context of athletic training, the presence of positive mentorship has been associated with increased student engagement and retention within the profession.³ While mentorship has been suggested to play a key role in the athletic training student's decision making to choose graduate programs,³ the research does not examine whether this mentorship continues once these students begin their graduate assistantships. Mentors have also been identified as prime agents in

facilitating the professional socialization process.⁶ The professional socialization process is a complex educational experience where one learns the norms, knowledge, skills, values, and roles of a given profession.⁷ An investigation by Pitney et al¹ regarding the professional socialization of the Division I athletic trainer emphasizes the importance of professional socialization in the assumption of the role of an athletic trainer. The study also identifies the graduate assistantship position in athletic training as a prerequisite for professional advancement specifically in the collegiate setting however it does not identify the perceptions of the GAAT during the socialization process.

Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers represent the future of the athletic training profession, as they are most often the newest members of the field. Studies have shown that this subpopulation of ATs experience some of the same negative aspects of the field as their full-time counterparts,⁸⁻¹² yet limited research is available on how these aspects are perceived by this highly influential graduate assistant population. This study was part of a larger study with the global purpose of gaining an appreciation for the experiences of GAATs. This paper will focus specifically on the professional socialization and mentorship received as perceived by the GAAT. The following research questions served as our guide for this study:

1. How do GAATs perceive the level of mentorship they receive from their academic and clinical supervisors during their graduate assistantship?
2. Is there a difference in perceived mentorship and support networks between graduate assistants in athletic training versus non-athletic training programs?

Methods

For this study, a qualitative methodology was utilized to investigate the experiences of GAATs, specifically regarding their professional socialization, mentorship received during their experiences as a GAAT. Seidman¹² suggests using a qualitative paradigm when the main objective is to gain understanding from a particular experience as by a person who has lived it. One-on-one, in-depth phone interviews were conducted with all participants. This method was selected because it serves as the best medium to allow participants to share and elaborate on their experiences with individuals who share similar social characteristics.¹² We present the data, in this paper, which represents experiences with mentoring as a GAAT, and will illustrate findings related to professional socialization independently.

Participant Selection. To gain a sample that represented all 10 National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) districts we attempted to recruit at least one participant per district. We were able to recruit from 8 of those districts. Participants were recruited purposefully via direct recruitment or involving program directors of graduate assistantship programs. Professional contacts of researchers, the CAATE website, and participants served as a means to help identify participants. GAAT positions were discovered using the NATA Career Center and random search of athletics websites of various colleges and universities in the US. Participants received an e-mail either directly from the researchers or a forwarded e-mail from their program director containing an informational form explaining the purpose and data collection procedures for the study. GAATs who received e-mails matched the following inclusion criteria; 1) enrollment in either a CAATE Accredited Post-Professional Athletic Training (APPAT) program, Post-Professional Athletic Training (PPAT) program or a non-athletic training (NAT) degree program, 2) Board of Certification - certified AT, 3) in their final semester of study and

graduating at the end of the semester, and 4) had a possible interest to participate. Interested volunteers directly contacted the researchers to initiate consent and data collection.

Participants. A total of 25 GAATs participated in this study, consisting of 20 females and 5 males. The average age was 25.1 ± 4.6 years with the median age being 24 years. Participant ages ranged between 23 and 47 years. Individual participant demographics can be seen in Table 1. All participants studied under academic programs at a Division I university with varying clinical assignments ranging from intercollegiate athletics, high school outreach, research/teaching positions, and nontraditional settings. Average years of certification for participants was 2.1 ± 0.4 years. Academic majors included athletic training, exercise science, sports management, medical science, tourism administration, health promotion, public administration, and physical education. Degree requirements varied by academic program and included a master's thesis, comprehensive exams, and/or a research project.

Data Collection Procedures. Internal Review Board at the University of Connecticut was gained prior to data collection. The interview protocol was divided into 2 sections: basic demographic information (age, years of experience, etc.) and open-ended questions regarding the GAAT's experiences. The interview guide was developed by a 3-member research team consisting of a faculty supervisor, doctoral student, and masters student. The guide, which was semi-structured in nature, was based upon the existing literature regarding socialization and job satisfaction.³ A peer review was completed by an independent researcher to provide feedback on instrumentation and ensure accuracy with questioning, logical flow to the line of questioning, and reduce any potential bias with the questions. Our peer is a seasoned qualitative researcher with a strong knowledge of the professional socialization literature. Minor changes were made to the interview guide to correct question sequencing and word choice. All participants consented to

Table 1. Participant Demographics

	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Years Certified	NATA District	Clinical Setting	Academic Major	Thesis Requirement
APPAT	Erin	F	24	2	4	Div I	Ath. Train.	Thesis
	Alysha	F	26	2	7	Ju Co	Ath. Train.	Thesis
	Mia	F	24	2	4	Div I	Ath. Train.	Thesis
	Lisa	F	24	2	4	Div I	Ath. Train.	Thesis
	Jennie	F	26	4	3	Div I	Athl. Train.	Thesis
	Jill	F	25	2	4	Div I	Ath. Train.	Thesis
	Abby	F	25	2	4	Div I	Ath. Train.	Non Thesis
	Carl	M	24	2	3	Div I	Ath. Train.	Thesis
PPAT	Brianna	F	24	2	2	HS	Exercise Sci.	Thesis
	Alexa	F	24	2	1	Div I	Exercise Sci.	Thesis
	Erica	F	24	2	1	MS	Exercise Sci.	Thesis
	Carrie	F	24	2	8	Div I	Ath. Train.	Thesis
	Jessica	F	23	2	9	Div I	Medical Sci.	Non Thesis
	Camille	F	23	2	3	HS	Ath. Train.	Non Thesis
	Matt	M	25	2	9	RA/TA	Exercise Sci.	Thesis
	Jason	M	47	2	3	Div I	Ath. Train.	Non Thesis
	Paige	F	24	2	3	HS	Ath. Train.	Non Thesis
	Jackie	F	24	2	2	Div I	Exercise Sci.	Thesis
	Randi	F	23	2	1	HS	Exercise Sci.	Thesis
NAT	Tara	F	24	2	5	Div I	Sport Mngmt.	Non Thesis
	Emma	F	24	2	3	Div I	Tour. Admin.	Non Thesis
	Claire	F	23	2	5	Div I	Health Promo.	Non Thesis
	Adam	M	26	2	9	Div II	Phys Ed	Non Thesis
	Mackenzie	F	24	2	5	Div I	Public Admin.	Thesis
	Griffin	M	24	2	5	Div I	Health Promo.	Non Thesis
	Average:		25.1	2.1				

*Key: APPAT = accredited postprofessional athletic training program, PPAT = postprofessional athletic training program, NAT = non-athletic training program, JuCo = junior college, HS = high school, MS = middle school, RA = research assistant, TA = teaching assistant

participation via a signed consent form prior to data collection. All phone interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the participant and transcribed verbatim. Two researchers

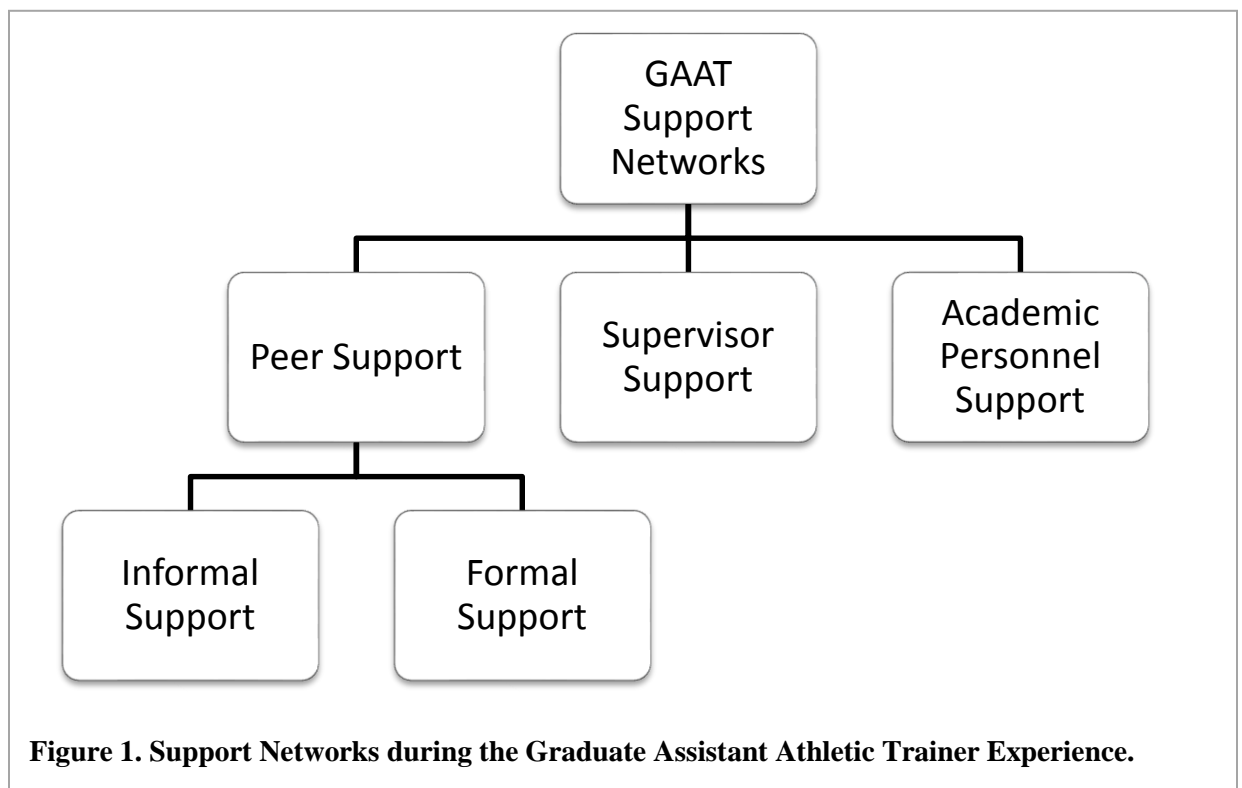
(SC, CE) conducted the phone interviews, where one member conducted the interview and the second took field notes.

Data Analysis. Data analysis was qualitative in nature and was on-going in order to evaluate and compare interviewee responses as a means to organize them into systematic codes. Content of the interviews were first reviewed to identify concepts related to the research purpose and questions. These concepts were then coded with a conceptual label to capture their meaning. The conceptual labels, or codes, collected from the transcripts were examined and organized into themes. The emergent themes generated have been analyzed to compose higher-order and lower-order themes used to explain the professional socialization and mentorship experience as perceived by the GAAT.

Data Credibility. We utilized 3 main strategies to secure data credibility: 1. peer review, 2. field notes, and 3. intercoder reliability.¹¹ The first, as previously mentioned, a peer review was conducted prior to data collection and after analysis of the data. During the phone interview process, one researcher took field notes as a means to capture key points raised during the interview process. The notes assisted in the analysis process as a means to identify emergent, dominant themes. The final strategy consisted of two members (SC, SM) of the research team coding the data independently following the steps previously illustrated. Upon completion of the independent coding, the researchers compared findings and come to an agreement before sharing the final presentation of the results to the peer for review.

Results

After completing our general inductive analysis we uncovered three main themes from our data: 1) peer support, 2) supervisor support, and 3) academic personnel support. Peer support was further explained by formal and informal peer support. Supervisor support was reported in the clinical setting. Supervisor support was influenced by the availability of the supervisor. Academic personnel support refers to support networks of the academic component of the GAAT experience. Figure 1 demonstrates the support networks experienced by the GAAT. We present these findings in the next section with supporting textual data from our participants.



Peer Support: Our participants identified a strong sense of *peer support* throughout their experiences, both in the academic and clinical settings. *Peer support* occurs when a GAAT provides or receives knowledge, experiences, emotional, or social assistance from a fellow GAAT. Twenty-one of 25 (84%) of our GAATs interviewed identified peer support as being a

key component of their support networks regardless of academic program type or clinical assignment. Participants also identified that support from fellow GAATs was overall the most significant source of support during their experience. Erin, an APPAT GAAT reflected on her support networks, specifically regarding her clinical experience:

“I primarily relied on the past GA [for support]”. Carl, a GAAT in a PPAT program, confirmed the general experience of peer support by saying, “My classmates...I absolutely love my classmates. They were a very big source of support going through the program.” Abby, a GAAT studying in a NAT, also responded regarding other GAATs providing the majority of her support throughout her experience: “The support that I got was definitely from my friends [other GAATs] that were having the same frustrations as I was.”

Our participants frequently utilized other GAATs for support due to shared experiences and understanding of workloads. An appreciation for the role of the GAAT provided a foundation for providing support. Randi, a PPAT GAAT, discussed the benefit of having a peer network to share similar experiences at the high school clinical setting:

As far as peers, at least it's people that were going through the same thing at the high school... you're both recently graduated, you're both taking on a high school, and you're both dealing with the same things. That was great.

Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers identified peer support as the predominant form of support during their experiences. Peer support was facilitated by the mutual understanding and appreciation of the role of a GAAT. Peer support occurred independently of academic program type and clinical setting.

Informal Support. Informal support predominantly occurred through casual interactions and impromptu discussions between GAATs. The interactions were viewed as a collaborating

effort, where GAATs cooperated to assist a GAAT in the learning process. Jennie highlights this in discussing the GAAT relationship she experienced during the clinical component of her position in an APPAT program:

There is a second year and first year and so all of us work with the class above and below us clinically. Clinically for my classmates we just use each other as resources if we have questions or just need more ideas and even mentally we help each other a lot.

Mia, another APPAT student, highlighted the benefits of informal support between her peers: “The relationships between my peers are good. We are all able to bounce ideas off of each other just because some of us are placed in high schools where they have limited resources and others of us are placed in [intercollegiate athletics] where more resources are available. So we’re able to kind of really hear what some that don’t have many resources are going through or ideas they came up with.”

While it is not common to have multiple GAATs assigned to the same high school Paige, a PPAT student, appreciated the presence of a peer throughout her time as a GAAT in the high school setting. When discussing her experiences and the process of learning the role of a GA she shared; “I’m fortunate enough to have a coworker who’s also a grad student at the college that I go to, working at the high school with me.”

Shared experiences aided in facilitating peer relationships. Mackenzie, a NAT GAAT, utilized her peers for support due to their ability to relate to her experiences: “My relationship with my peers... the two other GA’s that I work with would be very much a kind of a give and take. We help each other out a lot, we relate to each other especially in the type of position that we’re in.” Feeling more comfortable seeking assistance from a peer was also evident when participants in this study were asked to give advice for future GAATs as they highlighted fellow

GAATs as the primary resource to be utilized as a new hire. Adam, a NAT GAAT, responded, “I would say ask as many questions as you can of the older GA’s. If you’re in doubt about something you’ve got to ask a question.”

Informal support was the most frequent type of peer support received. Participants identified fellow GAATs as a positive and beneficial source of support. Informal support was provided for both clinical and academic purposes. No differences in the amount of informal support received were found between APPAT, PPAT and NAT programs.

Formal support. Formal support was a structured interaction between GAATs. Mostly our GAATs described either being provided with letters from the previous GAAT or drafting their own for the incoming GAAT that served as a checklist or manual of expectations and requirements of the position. Erin further explained her experience of formal peer mentorship from the GAAT preceding her regarding the clinical aspect of her position at her APPAT program, “...honestly, the best resource I had there was the GA who had graduated the year before me. She gave me a brief intro packet of her own and then was very available through e-mail and phone...”

Alexa, a PPAT GAAT, discussed her experience giving formal guidance to the incoming GAAT,

Actually I just wrote a little layout for the new GA coming in just with preseason stuff.

It’s not to tell her that this person is this or that, I don’t want that aspect of it but just to be like, all right, so you have to do physicals now, you need to get this, this and this into the online system, talk to coach about scheduling and just like the little nitpicky things that I wish I would have known coming in. So I basically, as I went through last volleyball preseason wrote down things that I would want her to know going right into it.

Formal support was also generated out of frustrations resulting from a lack of guidance from supervisors. Claire discusses the desire to improve the quality of the clinical experience for the new GAATs in her NAT program:

We kind of talked to [the incoming GAATs] about what our expectations were so hopefully they have a good idea of what is expected and we actually kind of came up with our own little, not handbook but just kind of wrote down [key points] like these are all our team docs, these are what [the staff] expect you to do over lunch hour, this is what [the staff] expect you to do during clinics...I guess, sort of like starting from ground zero kind of like we were. So, trying to make it better for the next people.

Carrie, a PPAT GAAT, also discussed the struggles of her position that prompted her to proactively contact to the incoming GAAT as a way to assist with their transition into the role:

The first year, I just was kind of going through the motions, just trying to get through the first year, and that's not how I wanted my first year to be. I wanted to come in like I did my second year, and so that's why for the graduate assistants that are coming in now, I've already talked to the one that's taking over my position, and I said, 'Come in the middle of July, and you will not regret it.' And that's what I wish someone had told me.

Formal support often stemmed from the desire to improve the experience for the incoming GAAT. All participants that identified the occurrence of formal support only discussed the interaction occurring during the clinical aspect of the GAAT experience.

Supervisor Support. The second theme that emerged in our study was *supervisor support*, defined as mentorship received by the GAAT from a full-time, experienced staff member. Twenty of the 25 (80%) participants discussed the presence of a positive clinical support system during their GAAT experience. The degree of support given by the supervisor

was influenced by the supervisor’s availability. Table 2 demonstrates the sources of support perceived during the GAAT experience in each program type. Clinical support was identified as the major form of mentorship received during the GAAT assignment. Clinical support networks consisted of full-time staff certified athletic trainers.

Table 2. Level of support perceived during graduate assistant experience by program type.

Program	Academic Support	Supervisor Support	Peer Support
APPAT	5/8 (63%)	6/8 (75%)	7/8 (88%)
PPAT	5/11 (45%)	8/11 (73%)	9/11 (82%)
NAT	0/6(0%)	6/6 (100%)	5/6 (83%)
Total:	10/25(40%)	20/25 (80%)	21/25 (84%)

*Abbreviations: APPAT = accredited postprofessional athletic training, PPAT = postprofessional athletic training, NAT = non athletic training.

The strongest clinical support network was perceived by GAATs in NAT programs, as all six participants (100%) noted receiving clinical mentorship during their assistantship. Mackenzie highlighted the clinical mentorship she received in her NAT program:

The other assistant [ATs] and our head athletic trainer, they’re all very helpful. Everyone kind of understands that we’re all very young and have questions and they’re all very willing to help

Tara, a GAAT in a NAT program, discussed the benefit and uniqueness of the clinical support she received by her supervisor who is an alumna of the graduate program she was completing:

Well my supervisor was also a GA here. She went through a very similar program... six years prior to me going through it so [she] was a very good person to lean on for both experience, being a GA and being a student, and so I think that was very helpful. She was able to give me good advice and - and just be a good ear to listen to problems and shoot ideas off of.

Strong clinical support was also identified by GAATs in athletic training based educational programs where six of eight (75%) APPAT students and eight of eleven (73%) PPAT students acknowledged the occurrence of clinical mentorship during their experience.

Jason, a PPAT GAAT discussed the value of the clinical mentorship he received:

The athletic trainers that I work with there have really, really helped me a lot to grow... I lacked some confidence when I first started and they really helped me to gain confidence without putting a lot of pressure on me.

Alexa, another PPAT student also discussed the presence of clinical mentorship during her position working intercollegiate athletics:

I had the support of my coworkers and the staff who have had more experience in the clinical setting that I could go to if I had questions but again, they weren't hovering over every decision [I made] or every time I did an evaluation... I was the one making decisions.

Jill also received a positive mentorship as an APPAT GAAT:

We [GAATs] have a pretty good relationship with all of our [staff ATs]. They are always available to us if we need help with anything. They are pretty good about explaining new situations to us. If we hadn't had something come up before they kind of walk us through it.

Jennie discussed her experience of receiving clinical support in an APPAT setting as well: "sometimes I'd say you'd have to seek it out if you need it, but it was definitely there and everyone was definitely supportive if you let them know that you needed it."

Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers received the majority of supervisor support during the clinical component of the graduate assistantship. Supervisor support occurred in all three

academic program types. Nonathletic training GAATs perceived the highest level of clinical support.

While supervisor support occurred in all academic program types, clinical support was found to be dependent on the clinical assignment of the GAAT. Of our 25 total participants, five participants were placed at off campus clinical assignments at either a high school or middle school. Zero of our five (0%) high school or middle school setting GAATs reported experiencing supervisor support during their appointments. In comparison, 20 of the 25 (80%) GAATs assigned to an intercollegiate position reported receiving supervisor support during their experience.

The *availability* of the supervisor developed as a trend throughout our study that impacted the level of supervisor support and mentorship that transpired during the GAAT experience. A positive correlation between the availability of the supervisor and the amount of mentorship perceived emerged in that the less available the supervisor was to the GAAT, the less support was given. Erin discussed her issues with the limited availability of her supervisor in the APPAT clinical setting:

For me my clinical mentor was identified from day one as the resource for me and really while he's a tremendous resource... at the same time he wasn't very available so I needed to identify other resources that were more available for when I needed them.

In some cases accessibility of the clinical supervisor was also identified as a positive impact on the GAAT experience. The availability of Mia's APPAT clinical supervisor impacted the level of autonomy she was given: "I have more independence just because my supervisor works football so he is pretty tied up all the time." Independence gained from less direct

supervision was identified by the GAAT as a beneficial experience that impacted their development as a clinician. Carrie highlighted this occurrence:

I really like that I was given full trust and responsibilities for my athletes. I know that... I just know a lot of colleges where you're still looked over all the time, and as soon as I got here, you know, I was certified, and I was the one making my decisions, doing everything on my own, and I really think that... even though at the beginning, that was a couple of months... was a huge struggle because there was a lack of mentorship, I really feel like it helped me grow even faster and even better, but I really think that was the best part, was just being able to be my own athletic trainer from the start.

The understanding of role strain and overload by the GAAT also influenced the availability of the clinical supervisor. Erin observed the stress placed on the athletic training staff associated with large workloads that contributed to decreased availability:

Just the kind of lack of clinical mentorship, not for want of trying from the mentor, but just, you know, a time constraint, that job responsibility constraint and kind of overloading there and just the location set-ups that I'm really completely on my own..." Erin further discussed her hesitations regarding initiating the mentorship for fear of adding to her supervisor's stress: "he's a great, great resource but he's so busy it tended to make me feel, I don't know, kind of guilty just dragging him away from everything else on his plate.

The concept of availability was also discussed in the academic context. Matt discussed the lack of support he received after staffing changes were made in this PPAT program: "my professor actually ended up taking [another] job... so I really didn't have a professor my last year... I had a really great experience, and it was great because [my professor] was right down the hall and I can go to him asking questions and that was really good for me."

Supervisor support was affected by the degree of availability the supervisor had for the GAAT. Our participants perceived reduced availability as both positive and negative aspect during their appointments. Accessibility issues were found in both the clinical and academic settings. Job demands of the supervisor are associated with the level of supervisor availability. The GAAT population recognizes the occurrence of role strain and overload.

Academic Support Personnel. Academic support networks were comprised of academic advisors, program directors, and professors. Support from the academic side of the GAAT experience was reported to occur for 10 of the 19 (53%) participants studying in an athletic training based program, where the mission is to provide a blended academic and the clinical experience. Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers studying in an APPAT program reported the highest level of academic support as five of the eight (63%) APPAT participants expressed receiving support from the academic staff. Lisa highlighted a strong sense of support from the academic staff in her APPAT program: “We work very closely with the faculty... we’re more like colleagues more than anything because each GA has a specific mentor that they work closely with, with their thesis or research project.”

Academic support was moderately experienced by those GAATs in a PPAT program. Five of the 11 (45%) PPAT GAATs reported experiencing support from the academic faculty during their experiences. Brianna discussed the support she received from her academic advisor in her PPAT program:

Academically, I would say probably my advisor was the biggest contributor to helping me out. We met every couple weeks and we always talked about where I was in the process of my thesis and classes and everything like that so we had a good relationship.

All six GAATs in NAT programs did not feel a strong presence of support during the academic component of their experience. Emma, a NAT student, discussed the lack of connection with the academic staff during her experience:

my interaction with my academic professors and advisors was pretty minimal... some of them I didn't make relationships with, some of them I did... But, I didn't have the deep connections with them as far as like I do with the staff in my clinical side. For academics it was more show up, go to class, and figure out the group projects as we go.

Academic support was perceived to occur more frequently in APPAT and PPAT programs as compared to NAT programs.

Degree requirements contributed to the level of academic support perceived. Fifteen of 25 (60%) participants completed a master's thesis as a requirement for graduation. Of those completing a thesis 10 of the 15 (67%) GAATs reported receiving support from academic personnel, where as none of the 10 (0%) GAATs in non-thesis programs perceived having a support network consisting of academic personnel during their experience.

Discussion

Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers represent the future of the athletic training profession, as they are commonly the newest members of the profession, yet limited research is available regarding how this influential subpopulation perceives their experiences. For most GAATs, this position serves as a first experience independently working as an athletic trainer and is often thought of as an important transition to practice experience. The experience is important, and therefore, the graduate assistantship experience may affect professional commitment and retention within the field. Literature in academic medicine has established the impacts mentors and role models have on students as both positive and negative influences.¹³⁻¹⁵ Mentorship has shown to aid in personal growth and professional development as well as career selection,^{13,14} particularly through fostering learning, maturity, and reciprocal growth.¹⁶ Conversely, negative influences and/or a lack of mentorship may adversely impact professional development and result in career success deficiencies.^{13,15,17} In the athletic training literature mentorship has been investigated in the undergraduate student and has been suggested to play a key role in decision making regarding selection of graduate programs,³ yet the research does not examine whether this mentorship continues once these students begin their graduate assistantships. Understanding the perceptions of mentorship received during the GAAT experience is significant as a major attractor contributing to the decision to seek a GAAT position is the appeal of the opportunity to receive professional support while developing as a clinician.^{2,3}

This study is unique in that it is the first to examine the GA experience from the perspective of the GAAT, as previous research has gained the understanding from the supervisor.¹⁸ Our findings identified that GAATs perceived support from three avenues 1) peer

support 2) supervisor support, and 3) academic personnel support. Peer support, occurring when GAATs collaborate to assist in learning, was expressed as a significant resource throughout both the academic and clinical components of the experience. Shared experiences and an understanding of workloads influenced the camaraderie between GAATs. Peer support, both informal and formal, was of the highest value to the GAAT. Supervisor support received from veteran clinical athletic trainers was identified as the primary source of mentorship received during the assistantship, and continues to illustrate that relationships between supervisors provides the backbone for professional maturation. Academic personnel support was more present for those studying in one of the athletic training based educational programs, possibly suggesting that the postprofessional degree offering provides more chances for mentoring (i.e. from both clinical and academic mediums).

The motivation behind the novice athletic trainer choosing a GAAT position is highly influenced by the appeal of receiving mentorship to facilitate clinical growth.^{2,3} Pitney et al.¹⁹ found that communication, feedback, reinforcement, listening, providing advice, support and challenges, and role modeling are roles associated with successful mentoring as perceived by athletic training students. We know that practitioners play a key, multidimensional role in mentoring athletic training students¹⁹ we also know that Division I female ATs value relationships with mentors in regards to career guidance.²⁰ What the literature has not told, is how mentoring can impact the GAAT and if GAATs are seeking out or identifying professional mentors. Our participants provide confirmation that GAATs are selecting their positions in search of professional mentorship, supporting the findings of Mazerolle and Dodge,³ and identify that they are having their desire for guidance and support met. What is compelling however is that emphasis of the sought out support is placed on the linear peer to peer relationships rather

than the mentorship received from a hierarchal relationship with an experienced professional. Our results do not downplay or suggest a hierarchal relationship is not important in professional growth or development, but they do suggest that once certification is gained, peers provide a more favorable, supportive relationship. This finding is very realistic, as with most individuals who become more comfortable with their skills, due so because of immersion into their professional culture, which is often fostered by peers and practicing professionals.²¹ Camaraderie between GAATs resulted from a shared understanding of each other's roles and provided a foundation for their relationship. The relatability between GAATs can be considered the catalyst for generating a comfortable and open environment to seek support, making linear relationships the preferred resource during the GAAT assignment.

Guidance and mentorship from well-versed athletic trainers is of high value during the education process³ and has been found to hold a crucial role in the professional development of the athletic trainer,²⁰ yet professional mentorship was not described as the immediate choice of guidance during the GAAT experience. In off campus clinical assignments, such as the high school GAAT position, opportunity to learn from a seasoned professional is often nonexistent as the GAAT commonly serves as the sole care provider for the athletes. As a result, individuals in these types of positions are not afforded the opportunity to receive mentorship and guidance from an on-site clinical supervisor during their experiences, which is likely to contribute to the draw towards peer support, especially from other GAATs with similar clinical assignments. Comfort level of seeking mentorship can greatly impact the process as approachability and interpersonal skills of the supervisor have been identified as barriers to mentorship.^{19,22} It is possible that the absence of these characteristics among supervisors but presence between fellow GAATS were a contributing factor to the significance of peer relationships discussed by our

participants. Support from the clinical supervisor was often discussed in the context of availability with both a positive and negative connotation. Difficulties in receiving supervisor support were described to result from limited availability of the full time staff member. It is well understood that athletic trainers are under stress, and often experience higher levels of role overload and strain,^{23,24} which may help explain our findings regarding the negative relationship with supervisor mentoring.

While the lack of availability left some GAATs feeling isolated, others enjoyed the independence that was associated with less supervision. Our findings show that not only is the GAAT hoping to gain mentorship during this transitional period, but they are eager to experience autonomy for the first time. Neibert et al²⁵ found that novice athletic trainers seek low pressure, low consequence learning environments during GA experiences as a means to gain real-life work experience, but with guidance and support of a learning environment. One can speculate that this dichotomy results from the excitement of transitioning into the role of clinician conflicting with the confidence level and apprehension associated with the young professional. Limited opportunities for self-growth and lack of independence have been identified as concerns to mentorship within the context of athletic training.¹⁹ Therefore a delicate balance must be maintained between granting the GAAT clinical independence while also providing adequate supervision and maintaining the integrity of the educational purpose of the position. The GAAT is able to be active in their learning, much like an apprenticeship model where an electrician may gain on the job training and skills necessary to succeed independently in the future.

Advisors, program directors, and professors comprised the academic support networks. Support reported from academic personnel more commonly presented in the form of an advisor rather than a traditional mentor. Differences between advisors and mentors have been discussed

by Peyton et al.²⁶ who has identified an advisor as an individual whose role is curriculum oriented. Consistent with the dialogue of Peyton et al,²⁶ our participants described incidents of guidance in regards to accomplishing program requirements and responsibilities. In addition to advisement, an academic mentor provides inspiration for achievement of academic success, goal setting, and career planning.²⁶ We know that academic support received during the undergraduate experience contributes to the selection of an athletic training based graduate assistant program.³ Advisement was identified as a positive contribution to the GAAT experience, as those in APPAT and PPAT programs with a thesis requirement expressed appreciation for the constructive relationships among academic personnel. Moreover, completion of an APPAT and PPAT program, has been seen as a means to develop into an expert clinician due to an increased understanding of the foundational subject matter as well as theoretical underpinnings related to the domains of athletic training.²⁵ This finding as described by Neibert et al²⁵ illustrates the need for and importance of academic mentoring and interactions in these programs, and as our participants described was helpful in their experiences. Regular interaction with academic staff in a thesis based program is a possible facilitator for the differences between support perceived in thesis versus non thesis programs as the continual collaboration required between student and faculty member to complete the thesis requirement encourages the presence of an academic relationship for both parties.

Limitations and Future Research

While the findings of this study are notable, certain limitations must be considered. Sample size restricts the ability to generalize these results to the entire GAAT population, especially as divided by subpopulation. The limited number of APPAT programs impacted the

total number of participants that met our eligibility criteria for this group. According to the CAATE website, a total of 16 APPAT programs exist, creating an already small pool of potential participants for recruitment. The small sample of NAT participants also contributes to the limited ability to generalize this information. More females than males volunteered to participate in this study however no identifiable differences were found in the perception of mentorship between the two groups, despite the disparity in numbers. Our main purpose was to begin an exploratory investigation regarding the socialization process for the GAAT, thus the small, but representative sample. Future studies should include a more robust group of GAATs to help validate the findings presented in this manuscript. This could include a mixed methods study that includes multiple perspectives including the GAAT, supervisors, and program coordinators.

The data presented in this manuscript was part of a larger investigation examining the professional socialization process and the influence of the graduate assistant experience on future career decisions of the GAAT. Mentorship was found to be an important aspect of the socialization process for the GAAT, however not all questions in the interview guide were geared towards mentorship. An expanded line of questions regarding mentorship can enable participants to elaborate more on the impacts and perceptions of support networks during their experiences. Therefore future researchers may want to focus an investigation on the mentorship and support networks perceived by the GAAT during their experience.

Conclusion

The GAAT position is an important experience in an athletic trainer's career as it often marks the first step of transition into clinical practice. The literature highlights the influential role of mentorship, particularly within the context of undergraduate academics, however no study

until now has examined the impacts of mentorship from the perspective of the graduate assistant population. Our findings support the rationale behind seeking a GAAT position in order to obtain mentorship and guidance, but have discovered a substantial presence of peer to peer support as an intricate part of the mentoring process. Approachability and good interpersonal skills on the part of the supervisor can aid in the facilitation of positive mentorship, as these qualities are a potential draw towards linear relationships. Harmony between providing guidance while allowing autonomy during the GAAT experience is central to supervisors in order to aid in professional development. Academically, advisement is a welcomed component of the GAAT experience to those studying in educational programs with an athletic training foundation. Most importantly, the influences encountered during this significant chapter of the young professional's career have a substantial impact on personal and professional growth as well as professional commitment, highlighting the significance of mentorship during this transitional stage.

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Appendix 1
Semi Structured Interview Guide

Table 1. Background Guide

Background Information

Age:

Years of Certification:

Clinical work experience as a Certified Athletic Trainer prior to GA:

NATA district of institution you attend:

Athletic division of institution you attend:

Are you currently studying in an accredited athletic training masters program?

Degree concentration (i.e. MS in exercise science):

Clinical assignment:

Average number of hours per week you spend working clinically:

Average number of hours per week you spend academically:

Table 2. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Interview Questions

1. What process went into your decision-making and final selection of your GA position?

Probe: Who influenced your decision, what resources did you use?

2. How would you describe the relationship between your academic and clinical work?

3. How did you learn about the expectations of the GA position?

4. Do you feel your GA position was accurately presented to you during your interview/tour/etc.?

5. Can you describe the relationships between your peers, mentors, and faculty during your educational and clinical experience?

Probe: Do you feel you had a strong support network during your GA? Explain.

Probe: Who provided support?

6. What are the positive aspects of your position?

7. What are the negative aspects?

8. If you had the opportunity what, if anything, would you change about your graduate student and/or assistantship experience?

9. What, if anything, could have better prepared you for the role of the GA?

10. What are your current career goals?

Probe: Over the next 5 years

Probe: In 10 years

11. Reflect back to when you were applying to graduate schools/GA positions. What were your professional goals/objectives?
 12. Have your career goals been influenced from your experiences as a GA?
 13. Did your career goals/objectives ever change/waiver during your GA?
 - If they have changed, what do you feel influenced the change?
 - If no change, were there any factors that reassured your career objective(s)?
 14. If you could pick your GA experience again, would you make the same choice? Explain.
 15. Would you recommend your position to another GA candidate? Explain.
 16. What advice would you give a new GAAT?
 17. What advice would you give the incoming GAAT taking your position?
-

Appendix 2

Email Recruitment Letter to Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers

Hello, you have been invited to participate in a Master's thesis research study examining the experiences of Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers. This study is being conducted by Stephanie Mazerolle, PhD, ATC and Stephanie Clines, ATC of the University of Connecticut, Department of Kinesiology.

Our purpose is to gain an appreciation for the experiences of graduate assistant athletic trainers (GAATs). A comparison will be investigated between GAATs studying in athletic training degree programs versus those in non-athletic training degree programs. Particular attention will be paid to mentorship received, enjoyment of graduate assistant experience, and influences on career intentions post graduation. Information gained from this study will hopefully aid future GAATs make decisions about post-professional education as well as provide insight to employers of GAATs on possible strategies to improve experience satisfaction.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to respond to a series of questions, which examine your perceptions of your graduate assistantship experience over the phone. We anticipate the total time to be approximately 30 minutes. If you are interested, please respond to this email to indicate your interest as well as the best email address for correspondence. It is important to note that email is not a secure method of transmission and information transmitted via work email can be viewed by your employer. We will then set up an interview date and time, at your earliest convenience. A consent form will then be emailed to you to be returned via fax to Stephanie Mazerolle [860-486-1123], standard mail [2095 Hillside Road, U-1110; Storrs, CT 06269], or via email [scan it] and a final version of the consent form will be mailed to you via standard mail by the primary researcher.

Participation is confidential and optional. Pseudonyms will be used in place of names, and there will be no link to your current/former institution(s). If you would like to participate, or if you have questions about this study, you may contact me at stephanie.mazerolle@uconn.edu, 860-486-4536 or Stephanie Clines at stephanie.clines@uconn.edu or 860-836-2559. This research study was approved by the UCONN IRB, Protocol #H12-333.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact me at your earliest convenience if you are interested in participating.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Mazerolle, PhD, ATC
Assistant Professor, Primary Investigator
University of Connecticut

Stephanie Clines, ATC
Graduate Assistant, Co-Investigator
University of Connecticut

Appendix 3

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Stephanie M. Mazerolle, PhD, ATC/L

Student Investigator: Stephanie Clines, BS, ATC

Study Title: An examination of Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer experiences

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study to examine the experiences of Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainers (GAATs). Particular attention will be paid to mentorship received, enjoyment of graduate assistant experience, and influences on career intentions post graduation. A comparison will be investigated between GAATs studying in athletic training degree programs versus those in non-athletic training degree programs.

Limited research in athletic training exists regarding the graduate assistant population, especially in the areas of job satisfaction, burnout, and mentorship. This investigation will serve as a means to gain an appreciation for the experiences of graduate assistant athletic trainers (GAATs). Information gained from this study will hopefully aid future GAAT decisions about post-professional education as well as provide insight to GAAT employers on possible strategies to improve experience satisfaction.

What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

You will participate in one in-depth phone interview with either Stephanie M. Mazerolle or another investigator. The interview is designed to gain better insight into your graduate assistant experiences and perceived satisfaction with aspects of your GAAT position such as mentorship, burnout, and future career intentions. This interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be digitally recorded with your consent. Once you've completed the consent form, please fax it to 860-486-1123 [attn: Stephanie Mazerolle] or scan and email it [stephanie.mazerolle@uconn.edu] or mail it directly [2095 Hillside Rd, U-1110, Storrs, CT 06269]. You will also complete a background questionnaire prior to data collection in order to gain demographic data. This will be done over the phone, before the interview session begins. The recording is necessary to fully capture the depth and richness of the interview. This recording will then be used to transcribe the interview verbatim. Once the interview has been conducted and transcribed you will be sent the transcription, to review for accuracy, this is referred to as a member check, and is done to ensure the transcription captured the key points and was an accurate representation of the interview. This will be done electronically via email. Note that email is not a secure form of communication and we cannot guarantee your confidentiality. You have the option to request that transcripts be mailed to you.

What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

The risks are minimal for this study and include the potential of being identified once the results of the study are published. To minimize this risk, you will be identified by a pseudonym assigned by the researchers. You will only be referred to by the pseudonym during transcription, data analysis, and in publication. Additionally, any potential identifiers (institution, etc.) will be disguised. You may choose not to answer questions if

you find them too uncomfortable. You may also terminate the interview at any point in the process.

The major inconvenience is the time required to schedule and conduct the interview, which we anticipate to be between 30-45 minutes. I will make every attempt to accommodate your schedule to avoid any inconveniences.

What are the benefits of the study?

As a participant you may not directly benefit from the research study, however your participation will help provide valuable information on perceptions of satisfaction, mentorship, and professional commitment during the graduate assistant experience, which can provide valuable insight to future GAATs seeking to assume similar roles as well as help improve the experiences offered by graduate assistantship regardless of graduate degree program.

How will my personal information be protected?

To protect your confidentiality, after the data has been audio recorded, the recording will be transferred to Stephanie Mazerolle's password protected, computer. Your interview will be coded to protect confidentiality. There will be no identifying information regarding your identity, including in the audio recording. The code sheet linking participant's identity to interview will be kept in a separate file on Stephanie Mazerolle's password protected computer. Following transcription of the audio recordings, the audio files will be deleted from Stephanie Mazerolle's computer. Transcribed interviews will be identified by the codes assigned to you. You will be assigned a pseudonym in the reporting of all data as a further method to protect your confidentiality.

You should also know that the UConn Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office of Research Compliance may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

You will be notified of all significant new findings during the course of the study that may affect your willingness to continue.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Stephanie M. Mazerolle at 860-486-4536 (stephanie.mazerolle@uconn.edu). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.

Documentation of Consent:

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible hazards and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant Signature:

Print Name:

Date:

Signature of Person
Obtaining Consent

Print Name:

Date: