An Examination of Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer Experiences in Regards to Mentorship

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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 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. 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. **Patients or Other 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:** Two main themes were identified: 1) **Peer Support** and 2) **Availability.** 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 mentorship 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. **Word Count:** 443