Exploring longevity in athletic training: Factors influencing persistence in the Division I setting

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Context: Within the athletic training profession, there is a growing concern regarding career longevity. The departure of athletic trainers from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I collegiate setting has been documented for various reasons, thus it is rare to find an athletic trainer with more than 15 years at this setting. Objective: Investigate the factors that have supported persistence among athletic trainers working in the NCAA Division I setting. Design: Semi-structured phone interviews. Setting: NCAA Division I universities. Patients or Other Participants: 14 athletic trainers (11 males, 3 females; age = 54 ± 6) from 11 NCAA Division I institutions who have been working in this setting for greater than fifteen years (experience: 30 years ± 5). Participants had an average staff size of 15 people ± 5, including intern and graduate assistant athletic trainers. Data Collection and Analysis: Semi-structured phone interviews were completed by all participants, which were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up interviews were completed with 4 participants to complete the member check process. Data analysis was completed using a general inductive approach. Multiple data triangulation and peer reviews were also completed to establish credibility. Data saturation was secured at 14 participants. Results: Four main themes were identified regarding the persistence of athletic trainers in the NCAA Division I setting: 1) having a passion for the role and job, 2) an acceptance of the athletics lifestyle, 3) having a support system, and 4) family integration and acceptance of parenting roles. Participants shared their passion for their role as an athletic trainer, which was developed by working daily with the student-athletes. Athletic training in the Division I setting was described as a lifestyle; something that encompasses ever-changing work schedules and long hours, however accepting it as such and adapting to it helped perseverance. Our participants credit their families, friends, and co-workers for providing support and helping their continued success. The support, in part, helped the athletic trainers navigate work-life balance and personal rejuvenation. Many of our participants have found ways to get their families involved in their work, often through workplace integration and family planning. We found, however, only a few female athletic trainers who were still working in the setting after 15 years. Conclusions: Career longevity in the NCAA Division I setting may not be commonplace in athletic training, however it appears that its stimulation can be multifactorial. Our study suggests that the athletic trainer needs to have a strong support network in place as well as have a love for their role within the setting. Mentoring and life planning may provide some insights to promotion of career longevity, and as such more research is needed with those who are able to persist. Word Count: 448