

Accomplishments and Experiences Necessary for NCAA Division III Athletic Trainer Success

by Robert C. Schneider, Timothy J. Henry, and William F. Stier Jr.

Abstract

A 22 statement Likert-type scale survey was used to determine accomplishments and experiences necessary for the success of athletic trainers at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III institutions. The survey was mailed to all 410 head athletic trainers of NCAA Division III institutions in the United States. There were 185 surveys returned for a 45.1% return rate. Means of the respondents were computed and it was found that the two “accomplishments” believed to be essential by the highest rate of athletic trainers were *establishing positive relationships with coaches* (55.6%) and *relating to athletes* (69.3%). The two “experiences” found to be essential at the highest rates were *multi-tasking* (42.2%) and *performing successfully in high stress environments* (43.8%).

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The profession of athletic training got its start in the early 1900s when it was recognized that there was a need for someone, other than a coach, to take care of injuries that were being suffered in college football. In fact the number of deaths and severe injuries were so high in those years that President Theodore Roosevelt threatened to abolish football on college campuses. Recognizing the need for injury prevention and care, larger colleges and universities across the country slowly began hiring athletic trainers. Later, the National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA) was founded in 1950 with a beginning membership of 200 persons (Trampf & Oliphant, 2004). It did not take early workers long to combine a scientific approach with their enthusiasm for athletic training. Within 40 years, a complex teaching and learning plan had evolved. Today through its evolution, sport and exercise medicine is an established medical specialty, the aims of which are to understand and to meet the needs of an exclusive group of patients (Harland, 2005).

Since being founded the NATA has grown to almost 30,000 members (National Athletic Trainer’s Association, 2006b). With growth comes a need to ensure that athletic trainers are accomplishing, and experiencing what is required to meet the needs of their athletes and communities. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) (2006), athletic trainers held about 15,000 jobs in 2004 and were found in every part of the country. The BLS also indicated that employment of athletic trainers is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2014 (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics).

Given this strong growth of athletic training jobs, it is important to identify particular accomplishments, and experiences that are necessary for the success of Division III athletic trainers. This study gathered, compiled, and generated information that will assist Division III athletic trainers in their quest to succeed in the profession of athletic training. Results of this study will

also be helpful to athletic training program directors as well as athletic trainer’s associations that hold the responsibility of creating accreditation standards that include but are not limited to curriculum development. Concerns may exist that the quality of athletic trainers will be compromised in the interest of meeting the projected rapid increase in numbers of athletic trainers over the next several years. These concerns can be allayed, to some extent, through research such as this national study that intends to help maintain the quality of athletic trainers.

Need for the Study

There is a void in the literature that addresses the accomplishments, and experiences necessary to succeed as an NCAA Division III athletic trainer. This study has attempted to begin filling that void by asking athletic trainers at NCAA Division III schools what is necessary to succeed as an NCAA Division III athletic trainer. Prospective athletic trainers as well as those responsible for preparing athletic trainers will benefit from this study.

Using the National Athletic Trainers’ Association Board of Certification (NATABOC) as a foundation, Barrett, Gillentine, Lamberth, and Daughtrey (2002) indicated that the profession of athletic training has the responsibility of identifying new ways to advance in the area of human resources and job satisfaction in order to propagate a satisfied, well adjusted, balanced, and dedicated professional. Kahanov and Andrews (2001) proposed that a better understanding of employer hiring criteria may increase athletic trainers’ ability to market themselves and, in turn, begin to take steps toward achieving success. This study will not only identify new ways that athletic trainers can advance in job satisfaction but also will assist those who are interviewing and marketing themselves for athletic training positions.

After discovering what is necessary for the success of athletic trainers, educators will be able to more effectively advise, teach, and generally point prospective athletic trainers in the proper direction to succeed. Additionally, after gaining this knowledge, prospective athletic trainers will be able to, independently, take steps toward succeeding in the field of athletic training. The empirically based results of this study will provide a foundation to guide prospective athletic trainers in their quest to achieve success in their chosen profession of athletic training.

Background Information

Necessary Skills to Gain Employment

Preparation for athletic training employment through accredited athletic training degree granting programs include formal instruction in areas such as injury/illness prevention, first aid and emergency care, assessment of injury/illness, human anatomy and physiology, therapeutic modalities, and nutrition (National Athletic Trainer’s Association, 2006a). In a study that surveyed 111 athletic training employers, Kahanov and Andrews (2001) found that four hiring criteria factors emerged as desirable characteristics for

athletic training employers: personal characteristics, educational experience, professional experience, and professional attributes. Kahanov and Andrews also proposed that a better understanding of employer hiring criteria and an emphasis on personal characteristics might make athletic trainers more successful in the interviewing and hiring process.

The Demands of Athletic Training and Working with Others

The NATA described certified athletic trainers as being health care professionals who specialize in preventing, recognizing, managing, and rehabilitating injuries that result from physical activity (National Athletic Trainer's Association, 2006a). According to Edelman (2006) it is unrealistic to expect one athletic trainer, who teaches during the day, to cover all the athletic demands of the high school. When schools only had one trainer at a school coaches were found to be unhappy (Edelman).

Certified athletic trainers must cooperate with other health care professionals, athletics administrators, coaches, and parents (National Athletic Trainer's Association, 2006a). Harland (2005) pointed out the importance of an experienced medical team finding a way to please both the athlete and the coach. In a study by Robbins and Rosenfeld (2001) 35 male and female Division I college athletes, from various sports, were surveyed and it was found that athletes who received social support during rehabilitation primarily received it from their athletic trainers (Robbins & Rosenfeld). Lockard (2005) stated the need for athletic trainers to have good social and communication skills along with the ability to collaborate with others.

Experiences of Athletic Trainers

According to Lockard (2005), first and foremost, athletic trainers must assume the responsibility of injury prevention, which includes educating athletes and patients about what they should do to avoid putting themselves at risk for injuries. Domains of licensed athletic trainers include prevention, recognition, evaluation, and assessment, immediate care, treatment, rehabilitation and reconditioning, organization and administration, and professional development and responsibility (Trampf & Oliphant, 2004).

Arnold et al. (1998); and Lockard (2005) acknowledged that many collegiate athletic trainers have experience related to administrative responsibilities. Additional experiences rated as important were collegiate clinical experiences and reasoning skills (Arnold et al., 1998; Heinrich, 2005). Finally, experiences given high ratings of importance by collegiate employers were computer literacy, and oral recommendations (Arnold et al., 1998).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the essentiality, level of importance, or irrelevance of selected accomplishments, and experiences necessary for athletic trainer success. An expected outcome of this study was to provide prospective athletic trainers and those responsible for preparing prospective athletic trainers, with information necessary for their success.

Methods

Survey

A survey was developed to determine accomplishments,

and experiences necessary for the success of NCAA Division III athletic trainers. The survey consisted of 22 Likert-type scale statements. The substance of the statements was based on current existing literature related to the area being studied, input from the researchers, and insights from experts (athletic trainer practitioners) in the field of athletic training. To indicate the extent that accomplishments, and experiences might be necessary for the success of Division III athletic trainers, the athletic trainers selected from one of the following Likert-type scale options: Essential (5); Very Important (4); Important (3); Not Very Important (2); and Irrelevant (1). For the purpose of helping address content validity, the creation of the survey statements were grounded in related literature and supported by the expertise of the researchers in the area of athletic training.

Subjects

The subjects in this study were all NCAA Division III head athletic trainers in the United States and totaled 410 in number. Of the 410 subjects, 185 returned the survey for a return rate of 45.1%. A list of the NCAA Division III member institutions was obtained from the NCAA national headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Procedures

Copies of the survey were mailed to the subjects with a cover letter that provided them with the information to self-administer the survey. After completing the survey, the subjects returned it in a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the principal investigator. It was made clear to the subjects, in the cover letter, that they were under no obligation to participate in the study and could exercise that option by choosing to not complete and return the survey. The cover letter also notified subjects that if they chose to complete and return the survey it would serve as an indication that they consented to participating in the study. Upon return of the surveys, means were computed for each response category of each Likert-type scale statement.

Findings

The findings displayed in Table 1 revealed varied opinions regarding past accomplishments, and experiences that Division III head athletic trainers believed to be essential, very important, important, not very important, and irrelevant in order to be successful as a Division III athletic trainer. Most items were found to be at least important to the success of athletic trainers; however, a few items were found to be irrelevant or not very important.

Accomplishments

Having a record of preventing and solving problems was believed to be very important by 51.8% of the athletic trainers while 20.1% believed it to be essential for the success of Division III athletic trainers. The rate of athletic trainers who indicated that having a record of preventing and solving problems was important was 23.3%. Successfully working with others was perceived to be essential by 49.7% of the athletic trainers and 39.5% of the trainers believed that successfully working with others was very important. Having a record of using/creating a sports medicine handbook for an athletic program was perceived to be important by 56.7% of the

Table 1. Accomplishments, and Experiences Necessary for Athletic Trainers' Success

	Essential	Very Important	Important	Not Very Important	Irrelevant
Accomplishments					
Preventing and Solving Problems	20.1	51.8	23.3	3.2	1.6
Working with Others	49.7	39.5	6.4	2.2	2.2
Using/Creating a Sports Medicine Handbook	4.9	18.4	56.7	16.8	3.2
Working with Community	9.7	11.4	49.7	26.0	3.2
Positive Working Relationships with Allied Health Professionals	35.1	41.7	20.5	0.0	2.7
Positive Working Relationships with Coaches	55.6	37.3	2.7	2.2	2.2
Relating to Parents	21.6	44.3	23.3	9.2	1.6
Positive Working Relationships with Administrators	35.7	47.5	12.4	2.2	2.2
Relating to Athletes	69.3	25.4	1.6	0.5	3.2
Professional Experiences					
College Athlete	7.0	11.9	18.4	38.4	24.3
High School Athlete	2.2	14.6	31.8	33.0	18.4
Head Athletic Trainer (College)	5.4	20.0	39.5	26.5	8.6
Assistant Athletic Trainer (College)	9.2	28.7	43.2	15.1	3.8
Graduate Athletic Trainer (College)	7.0	29.7	39.5	15.7	8.1
Athletic Department Policy Handbook	4.3	16.8	46.5	24.3	8.1
High School Coach	3.8	3.8	9.7	27.6	55.1
Teacher in Athletic Training Curriculum	2.2	5.9	30.3	39.5	22.1
Supervising Undergraduate Athletic Training Students	3.2	14.1	44.8	23.8	14.1
Promoting Sports Medicine	4.9	16.2	45.9	23.8	9.2
Multi-tasking	42.2	37.3	15.1	2.2	3.2
Performing Successfully in High Stress Environments	43.8	43.9	6.4	4.3	1.6
Dealing with Assertive Coaches	31.9	47.5	16.8	2.2	1.6
<i>Note.</i> The values represent mean percentages of the Likert-type scale responses					

athletic trainers.

The trainers found working with the community (public relations) to be important at a rate of 49.7%. On the other hand, 26.0% of the athletic trainers believed working with the community was not very important. It was indicated by 41.7% of the athletic trainers that having positive working relationships with allied health professionals within the community was very important. While 20.5% believed having positive work relationships was important, 35.1% believed such relationships to be essential.

When combining the rate of athletic trainers who believed having a positive relationship with coaches in the school as being very important (37.3%) with being essential (55.6%), 92.9% believed having positive relationships with coaches in the school

was at least very important. Finding the accomplishment of having a successful record of relating to and with parents as being very important were 44.3% of the athletic trainers followed by 23.3% who believed it to be important and 21.6% essential.

Having positive working relationships with administrators within the school was found to be very important by 47.5% of the athletic trainers and essential by 35.7%. Having a successful record of relating to and with student-athletes was reported by the athletic trainers as the accomplishment believed to be most essential (69.3%) to be successful as an athletic trainer. And, 25.4% of the athletic trainers indicated that relating to and with student-athletes was very important to succeed as an athletic trainer.

Professional Experiences

Essential and important.

Generally, the athletic trainers surveyed indicated that experience as a head athletic trainer at the college level was believed to be very important (20.0%), or important (39.5%), yet 26.5% believed it to be not very important. Experience as an assistant athletic trainer was perceived to be very important (28.7%) and important (43.2%). Similarly, experience as a graduate assistant athletic trainer at the college level was perceived to be very important by 29.7% and important by 39.5% of the athletic trainers surveyed.

Performing successfully in high stress environments was considered essential by 43.8% of the athletic trainers and very important by 43.9%. In order to succeed as an athletic trainer, athletic trainers indicated that it was essential (42.2%) and very important (47.3%) to have experience in the area of multi-tasking. The athletic trainers also indicated that it was essential (31.9%) and very important (47.5%) to have experience dealing with assertive coaches.

Irrelevant and not very important.

Items in the accomplishments category were generally believed to be more important to the success of athletic trainers than items in the professional experience category. In fact one item, experience as a coach, was perceived by over half (55.1%) of the athletic trainers as being an irrelevant professional experience necessary for the athletic trainer. And, 27.6% of the athletic trainers considered experience as a coach to be not very important.

Athletic trainers' responses regarding experience as a teacher in an athletic training curriculum were somewhat varied. Over one-fifth (22.1%) indicated that experience as a teacher in an athletic training curriculum was irrelevant and 39.5% indicated it was not very important. Still, 30.3% perceived it to be important. Experience as an athlete in college was not held in high regard by the coaches either. Nearly one-fourth (24.3%) believed that experience as an athlete in college was irrelevant and 38.4% perceived it to be not very important. Dismissed by the coaches at a similar rate was experience as a varsity high school athlete. Approximately one-third (33.0%) indicated that experience as a varsity high school athlete was not very important and 18.4% indicated that it was irrelevant to an athletic trainer's success.

Nearly one-fourth of the following professional experiences were viewed by the athletic trainers as being not very important while all of the same items were believed to be important by at least 44% of the athletic trainers. Experience working with an athletic department policy handbook was found to be not very important by 24.3% of the athletic trainers and important by 46.5%. Experience in supervising undergraduate athletic training students was found to be not very important by 23.8% of the athletic trainers and important by 44.8%. And experience in promoting sport medicine within the community was found to be not very important by 23.8% and important by 45.9% of the athletic trainers.

Discussion

The findings in this study addressed the accomplishments, and experiences necessary to be successful as a NCAA Division III athletic trainer. This study's findings supported those by Lockard (2005) who found that athletic trainers should be able to manage

difficult situations and the stress associated with them, such as when disagreements arise with coaches, clients, or parents regarding suggested treatment. Lockard also stated that athletic trainers should be organized, be able to manage time wisely, be inquisitive, and have a strong desire to help people. Similarly along the lines of helping people, this study found that athletic trainers should have positive relationships with people in order to succeed as an athletic trainer.

In a study conducted by Kahanov and Andrews (2001) where 111 athletic training employers were surveyed it was found that four hiring criteria factors emerged as desirable characteristics for athletic training employers: personal characteristics, educational experience, professional experience, and work-related (professional) attributes. This study, in general, supported the aforementioned findings of Kahanov and Andrews in that relating to athletes, and having positive working relationships with coaches as well as the experience of being able to multi-task were found to be either essential or very important to the success of athletic trainers. Also in agreement with the importance of athletic trainers being able work with others is the NATA which, more specifically, adheres to the notion that certified athletic trainers must work in cooperation with not only coaches but also athletics administrators, coaches, and parents and also under the direction of a licensed physician (National Athletic Trainer's Association, 2006a). Furthermore, Harland (2005) generally indicated that it was important that athletic trainers have positive relationships with authorities. Specifically, Harland stated the need for medical teams to please athletes as well as authorities.

Having a positive relationship with coaches in the school was found to be essential or very important in this study and supported the works of Edelman (2006); and Lockard (2005). Edelman found that coaches became unhappy when athletic trainers were asked to assume numerous responsibilities to the point where they could not cover all of the athletic demands of the high school. Lockard (2005) further reinforced the importance of having positive relationships by stating that because athletic trainers deal with a variety of people, they need good social and communication skills.

Even though the NATA emphasized the importance of certified athletic trainers being able to work with a coach (National Athletic Trainer's Association, 2006a), the Division III athletic trainers in this study did not view experience as a coach as relevant to their success. Certainly a distinction can be made between experience as a coach and being able to work with a coach. The respondents in this study valued working with a coach but not experience as a coach. The necessity of athletic trainers being able to work with a coach was reinforced by the NATA (National Athletic Trainer's Association).

Also perceived to be irrelevant or not very important in this study was experience as an athlete in college or high school. Literature, however, is scarce that directly relates to information indicating a correlation between athletic trainers' success and experience as a high school or college athlete. In this study over one-fifth of the athletic trainers indicated that experience as a teacher in an athletic training curriculum was irrelevant (22.1%) and 39.5% indicated that it was not very important. On the other hand, Lockard (2005) pointed out the importance of education when indicating that an

athletic trainer's job responsibilities begin with injury prevention, which includes educating athletes and patients about what they should do to avoid putting themselves at risk.

Conclusions

It is essential that NCAA Division III athletic trainers have positive working relationships with coaches. It is also essential that Division III athletic trainers are able to improve their ability to work with athletes. Furthermore, it is essential or at least very important that athletic trainers be able to multitask and perform in high stress environments. Moreover, the ability to deal with assertive coaches is at least very important to the success of the Division III athletic trainer.

Having the professional experience of a high school coach is irrelevant to becoming successful as a Division III athletic trainer. And it is not very important to have teaching experience or experience as a college or high school athlete to succeed as an athletic trainer at the NCAA Division III level.

Drs. Robert Schneider, Timothy Henry, and William Stier Jr., are faculty members at the College of Brockport, State University of New York.

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