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Recent Graduates' Perceptions of Immersion and its Effect on Preparation for Professional Practice

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Abstract

Purpose: The Standards for Accreditation of Professional Athletic Training Programs now requires students to complete an immersive clinical educational experience. There is limited research in athletic training education on recent graduates' perceptions of the impact of these immersive experiences. The purpose of our study was to explore recent graduates of a masters' athletic training program perceptions of an immersive experience as it relates to preparation for professional practice. **Method:** A qualitative inquiry was utilized for this study to explore athletic trainers' perceptions following an immersive clinical experience. Ten recent graduates (1 male, 9 female) who completed a 10-week immersive experience and graduated from a masters' athletic training program participated in one-on-one phone interviews. One-on-one phone interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim. Interview data were analyzed inductively to uncover dominant themes, first by organizing the data, then summarizing into codes, and finally interpreting. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checks, prolonged engagement, rich thick descriptions, and investigator triangulation. **Results:** Three themes emerged from the participants' immersion experience: authentic experience; exposure; and network. Participants had an authentic experience and gained a realistic and comprehensive understanding of athletic training professional practice. Participants experiences of exposure embodied length and dedicated time in the immersive experience which promoted familiarity of professional responsibilities and developed confidence in transition to practice. Network comprised participants developing mentors and professional connections, whose relationships facilitated professional networks and supported gainful employment and transition to practice.

Conclusion: Our results suggest that a 10-week immersion experience positively influences athletic trainers' preparation for professional practice. Through the immersive experience participants were able to see the day in the life of an athletic trainer in a setting of potential future employment while practicing and learning all the skills necessary in that particular setting. Participants perceived the immersion experience assisted in their transition to clinical practice and they felt more confident, and developed mentors and connections.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The Standards for Accreditation of Professional Athletic Training Programs now requires students to complete an immersive clinical educational experience. There is limited research in athletic training education on recent graduates' perceptions of the impact of these immersive experiences. The purpose of our study was to explore recent graduates of a masters' athletic training program perceptions of an immersive experience as it relates to preparation for professional practice. **Method:** A qualitative inquiry was utilized for this study to explore athletic trainers' perceptions following an immersive clinical experience. Ten recent graduates (1 male, 9 female) who completed a 10-week immersive experience and graduated from a masters' athletic training program participated in one-on-one phone interviews. One-on-one phone interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim. Interview data were analyzed inductively to uncover dominant themes, first by organizing the data, then summarizing into codes, and finally interpreting. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checks, prolonged engagement, rich thick descriptions, and investigator triangulation. **Results:** Three themes emerged from the participants' immersion experience: authentic experience; exposure; and network. Participants had an authentic experience and gained realistic and comprehensive understanding of athletic training professional practice. Participants experiences of exposure embodied length and dedicated time in the immersive experience which promoted familiarity of professional responsibilities and developed confidence in transition to practice. Network comprised participants developing mentors and professional connections, whose relationships facilitated professional networks and supported gainful employment and transition to practice.

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Keywords: clinical education, transition to practice, professional development

INTRODUCTION

Transition to practice for new athletic training graduates can be emotionally challenging. Newly credentialed athletic trainers experience trouble with independent decision-making, confidence, role ambiguity, and communication skills and indicate lack of access to mentors.¹ Mentorship is a critical aspect of transition to practice and professional development.^{2,3} Immersive clinical experiences are a necessary and integral component of athletic training education that add value to clinical education and may help smooth transition to professional practice.⁴ With varied placement in educational programs and length of immersive experience, further study into athletic trainers' experiences and perceived impact of immersive experiences is relevant to promote advancement of athletic training education.

Clinical education is vital for health care professions as students transition knowledge and skills from classroom learning to clinical application. Clinical education can also be a key strategy to support professional students' positive and successful transition to clinical practice.⁵ Traditionally, the clinical education model in athletic training education is didactic education during a portion of the day followed by clinical experiences in the afternoon to evening. While creation and delivery of clinical education experiences can be varied, this model can lead to students missing key practices of athletic training by not being physically present to all aspects of patient care and professional job responsibilities. Students may need more time with a variety of patients and populations to expose students to autonomous practice and promote transition from student to self-directed practitioner.⁵

Immersion experiences can be found in many health professions. In nursing education, immersive experiences have been found to be an effective way to learn and grow.⁶⁻⁸ The Commission on Accreditation for Athletic Training Education (CAATE) now requires athletic training programs to implement immersive clinical educational experience. Immersive experiences must be a minimum of 4 weeks and designed to facilitate full student participation in a practice-intensive experience that allows student involvement in the totality of professional responsibilities and patient care provided by athletic trainers.⁹ Programs have institutional autonomy to determine when in the curriculum these immersive experiences may occur and length of time. Researchers have investigated the immersive experience in athletic training.^{4,10} However, as programs explore immersive clinical models, research in athletic training education that uncovers whether placement and/or length of immersive experiences impacts students learning and transition to professional practice is relevant.

Nursing students who completed an immersive clinical rotation in their last semester in a nursing program experienced high level of engagement with their preceptors, which students felt fostered feelings of overwhelming support and contributed towards enhancing their confidence.⁸ In a recent investigation of athletic training student perceptions of their immersive experiences, students believed the clinical experiences positively increased their exposure to athletic training practice and improved their preparation for transition to practice.⁴ However, there was significant variability of immersive experiences; when it was completed within a curriculum, the number of immersive experiences a student completed, and length of time of the immersive experience.

Our study investigated recent graduates of a masters' athletic training program who completed an immersive experience at the same point in matriculation and over a similar length of time (10 weeks). The immersion experience in this study is a capstone experience, planned during students' final semester in the program. Leading up to the final semester, students have completed a majority of the core curriculum and are prepared for independent learning and complete engagement with the experiential craft of athletic training without in-person didactic course interruptions. Our studies aim was to expand the body of athletic training research on immersion while specifically seeking recent graduates' perceptions of their immersion experience.

METHODS

We employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to further understand recently graduated athletic trainers' perspectives on immersive clinical educational experiences. Recently graduated athletic trainer is defined, for this study, as a masters' athletic training student who graduated 6 months ago. A qualitative approach allowed us to explore experiences of the participants in a comprehensive and holistic manner and to enhance learning and understanding of recently graduated athletic trainers' perceptions of immersive clinical educational experiences. This study aimed to further explore the impact of an immersive experience completed in the final term of a masters' athletic training program and to enable us to describe the lived experience as perceived by the participants. This allows us to understand the practice of immersive clinical experiences as perceived by the participants.¹¹

Participants

Participants were selected through a purposeful sample of recent athletic training graduates who had completed an immersive clinical experience. A recruitment e-mail was sent to graduates seeking volunteers. Individuals who volunteered to participate in the study were contacted by the principal investigator. Consent forms were completed and return via email and one-on-one phone interviews were scheduled at a convenient time. Our sample consisted of 10 participants (9 females, 1 male) who volunteered for

this study (Table 1). Theoretical saturation, the point where additional data provided no new insight, was met at the tenth one-on-one phone interview.¹¹ The principal investigator heard the same comments repeatedly, and no further interviews were conducted.

Table 1. Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Work Setting
Bellamy	24	Female	Collegiate
Dakota	26	Female	Collegiate
Charlie	24	Male	High School
Denver	23	Female	High School
Finley	24	Female	High School
Justice	27	Female	Industrial
River	27	Female	Industrial
Skylar	24	Female	High School
Blake	33	Female	Collegiate
Casey	24	Female	Collegiate

Data Collection

Prior to conducting this study, the interview protocol and informed consent was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the researchers' institution. All participants signed and returned an informed consent form before initiating one-on-one phone interviews. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews which allowed participants to express their thoughts about their immersion experience. All participants were notified that their responses would remain confidential.

The interview guide was designed to explore recent graduates' perceptions of an immersive clinical experience, completed during their final term in a masters' athletic training program. The interview guide included open-ended questions which allowed for individual responses and gave the principal investigator opportunities to pursue emerging ideas and gain additional insight.¹¹ The interview guide (Table 2) was based on the principal investigator's experience with qualitative research. An expert in athletic training education reviewed the guide for content, bias and clarity. The principal investigator and expert in athletic training education met to discuss the interview guide, and edits were made based on feedback from the experienced qualitative researcher. During one-on-one interviews, participants were asked to further clarify or describe any questions that were answered with a simple yes or no. One-on-one phone interviews lasted 30 minutes on average and were audio recorded utilizing H4n Pro (version 4.0, Zoom, Hauppauge, NY).

Table 2. One-on-One Interview Questions

1. Please describe a typical day at your current job?
2. Describe your immersive clinical experience?
a. Describe a typical day?
3. What were your career goals prior to beginning immersive clinical experience?
a. Would you say the immersive clinical experience assisted in reaching those goals?
b. In what ways did your immersive clinical experience assist in reaching those goals?
c. If no, what would you have changed to make it so that your immersive clinical experience would have assisted in reaching those goals?
4. How would you describe your experiences of transitioning from a student to your current work setting?
a. Can you elaborate or tell more?
5. In what ways, if any, did your immersive clinical experience prepare you for your current work setting?
a. Impact on your transition to practice?
b. What would you have changed regarding your transition to clinical practice?
c. Can you elaborate or tell more?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding your immersive clinical experience and your transition to clinical practice?

Data Analysis and Data Credibility Strategies

Two investigators transcribed the audio recordings verbatim and then replayed the recordings to verify accuracy. All transcriptions and information were stored on a password-protected laptop and server. Throughout the one-on-one phone interviews, notes were taken and kept with the transcriptions in the principal investigator's locked office. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and records of interviews were kept in separate files labeled with pseudonyms. Audio files were stored on a password protected server.

During data analysis we adopted an inductive process that included reading and re-reading the transcripts to understand and fully interpret what was heard about athletic trainers' perception of the immersive clinical experience.¹¹ Two investigators independently read each transcript to gain a general understanding of the perceptions of the participants. As the experiences of the participants were analyzed, the two investigators independently labeled each individual experience in codes and grouped the codes into categories. Several consensus meetings occurred between the two investigators throughout the data analysis process to ensure consistent use of codes and categories while also checking for common understanding of concepts and categories. From the categories, themes emerged to express the underlying meaning of the immersive clinical experience.

To ensure consistency and authenticity and to reduce bias, data credibility was established through informal member checks, prolonged engagement, rich thick descriptions and investigator triangulation. Informal member checks occurred during the interviews to check for understanding as participants confirmed or adjusted reflections while clarifying questions were asked regarding the participants responses.¹¹ The two investigators had extended time with the data, or prolonged engagement, through transcribing, reading, and re-reading the transcriptions. Prolonged engagement supported the investigators' ability to fully consider the context of information throughout data analysis. Additionally, rich thick descriptions, in the form of participants quotes, were used to help the reader determine if findings can be transferred to similar situations.¹¹ Investigator triangulation involves multiple investigators collecting and analyzing data.¹¹ In this study, the two investigators reviewed the data independently by reading and re-reading the transcription notes to determine codes, larger categories, and the overarching themes. The two investigators completed three consensus meetings during the analysis process to discuss and reach agreement on findings. Through these processes of informal member checking, prolonged engagement, rich thick descriptions, and investigator triangulation, credibility and validity were established.

RESULTS

After completion of data analysis, three common themes emerged encompassing recently graduated athletic trainers' perspectives on immersive clinical educational experiences completed during their final term: (1) authentic experience; (2) exposure; (3) network (Table 3). A description of each theme and supporting categories follow, including verbatim quotations from participants that support each theme.

Table 3. Themes and Sub-Themes

<p>Authentic Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life of an Athletic Trainer • Setting • Doing
<p>Exposure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarity • Confidence
<p>Network</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentoring • Connection

Authentic Experience

Authentic experience encompasses participants reflecting on the immersion experience offering them a realistic and comprehensive understanding of athletic training professional practice. This first theme emerged from participant's perceptions of the immersive experience in their final semester as they gained proficiency in all domains of athletic training in a setting of future employment. Participants mentioned the immersive experience gave them insight into the life of an athletic trainer in that specific professional setting and promoted understanding and performing of all skills necessary in that particular setting.

Life of an Athletic Trainer

Participants agreed that immersion felt like they were actually employed in the professional setting and they were able to see and feel what life would be like as an athletic trainer in that setting over the 10-weeks of their immersive experience. River detailed that:

I think it [immersion] was a good way to help us become full time athletic trainers, because as you are going through it [immersion] you are a full-time employee and you are there day in and day out...you are there for 8 to 10 hours to see how that feels to be an athletic trainer.

Denver also commented on the multiple days and long hours, stating "I worked multiple days in a row for long hours and then getting up and doing that the next week...I really felt like I was an athletic trainer...I had a job." For Finley, the immersive experience allowed them to participate in all aspects of the day-to-day responsibilities of athletic trainers and develop efficiency in completion of professional tasks "I was there working with the athletes almost all day, I got use to kind of standing and watching practice. I got use to the very fast pace of getting people ready to go to practice or games."

Setting

Participants in our study stated that the immersive experience helped them define professional goals. Participants experienced clarity in; what obtaining a position in a particular setting would be like, roles and responsibilities associated with a specific setting, whether the immersion setting matched their current professional goals, and whether to consider a different professional setting or if athletic training was the profession they ultimately wanted to enter. Dakota had thought she wanted to pursue physical therapy (PT) school after graduation, but her immersive experience helped her decide being an athletic trainer in the collegiate setting was where she wished to work:

I started to actually do athletic training in my immersive experience and I realized that PT was not actually the route I wanted to go anymore, I actually fell in love with athletic training so I decided that I wanted to be at a Division III collegiate setting.

Several participants in our study explored other professional settings such as industrial, collegiate including community college, and performing arts. Participants also traveled outside of the state or geographic areas for their immersive rotation. They stated that the immersion rotation allowed them to see and experience athletic training settings that were different than previous clinical experiences, which introduced them to employment opportunities they wished to pursue that they may not have considered prior to completing immersion. Justice, who was at an industrial setting for their immersion rotation, stated "prior to my immersive experience I did not have any idea what industrial settings looked like. I knew they (industrial) were different but my immersion experience really opened up my eyes on how it was different." Other participants also perceived the immersion experience helped them solidify their ideal post-graduation setting. Finley commented "I knew I wanted high school. I think it just proved to me that was the setting I wanted to be in."

Doing

Through this immersive experience, the participants in our study were able to practice and perform all aspects of athletic training. Participants reflected on opportunities to perform skills and take part in other tasks and responsibilities that may not have been available to them in previously completed clinical experiences. Most of our participants stated they were practicing skills, communicating with coaches and other members of the sports medicine team, taking part in documentation and making decisions on patient care. Charlie stated that she was able to perform independently during her immersive experience, stating "I got a lot of hands-on experience basically...I learned to be an autonomous athletic trainer and making my own decisions and seeing how those decisions worked out." Participants also spoke about being a contributing member of the sports medicine team. Blake shared "I was given the opportunity to be an integral part of the team. I was actively hands-on with treatments, doing evaluations and coming up with care plans as part of the team."

Communication was an important skill that was learned and practiced through the immersive experience. Participants discussed being able to communicate with patients and coaches during their immersive experience. For Casey, the immersion experience encompassed more than just the physical skills, but also interpersonal communication and the nuances of adjusting communication based on the intended audience, stating "I was really able to learn the skills not only the physical skills of being an athletic trainer but also learn how to communicate and build relationships." Casey also further clarified that she was able to practice varied forms of communication:

I did learn interpersonal skills and professional communication skills. At the high school level, I was helping send out some e-mails... just building professional skills on how to send out e-mails and how to communicate effectively especially with guardians and parents. It also helped me understand how to communicate effectively with younger adults.

In addition to taking an active role in the daily tasks of treatments and having the opportunity to work with multiple injuries, participants also mentioned completing all tasks of professional practice encompassing evaluation, treatment, rehabilitation and documentation. For Dakota, the experience of managing patient care from initial evaluation to return to participation, to learn by doing, was valuable:

Being thrown in...being put out there to just do it [athletic training] and learning from your mistakes was very beneficial instead of not doing the immersive experience and trying to go straight from graduating to a job would have been a lot harder without being there [immersion] and doing everything hands on and learning from what I should do or should not do or what I learned throughout it [immersion] was the most beneficial...learning how to evaluate an athlete from opening to end

The occasion to perform athletic training tasks facilitated building participants confidence and self-efficacy. Finley expressed "just the amount of hands on that I got really improved my confidence in knowing that I can do this job."

For some participants, it wasn't until the immersion experience where they had the chance to utilize administrative knowledge and skills. Bellamy specifically mentioned administrative responsibilities "I learned the basics of documentation; I had not used them until immersive."

Exposure

The second theme, exposure, emerged from participant's perceptions the immersive experience facilitated a smoother transition from student to health professional. Participants mentioned the immersion experience assisted in creating familiarity which contributed to their confidence in their current job post-graduation.

Familiarity

For several participants in the study, the immersive experience led to their employment at the site where they completed their immersion rotation. As participants reflected on their transformation from student to health professional, having spent 10 plus weeks with an organization and then seeking employment with that organization, promoted a smoother transition to practice due to their familiarity with the setting, coaches and other staff. Dakota stated:

I was already comfortable at my current job. I already knew how stuff gets done and I felt comfortable going into the job. If I would have gone to another place I may not have felt as comfortable because my immersive experience set me up to go into my job, basically already being an athletic trainer, I just was not totally graduated or certified yet.

Justice, who was also employed by the organization where she completed her immersive experience, echoed the relationship between familiarity and job performance: "immersion really helps you become a better practitioner because I was recognizing what the associates were doing and what it meant without having to guess." Through the immersive experience, participants obtained employment within the organization and were familiar with the policies and practices at the site which assisted in their transition to practice.

For those participants whose immersive experience facilitated obtaining employment at the same organization, familiarity with policies and practices at the site assisted in their transition to professional practice. For other participants, exposure to other variables during their immersive experience, such as a competitive patient population, helped them feel better prepared to work with the patient population at their current place of employment. Charlie talked about:

"(for immersion) I was working at Division I place with basketball players and soccer and cross-country. The high school is a pretty competitive high school with a lot of Division I athletes so I do not feel intimidated working with Division I athletes because I have been in that position so that has been pretty helpful."

Confidence

The participants in our study perceived immersion assisted in their transition especially in the area of confidence in their skills. The increase in dedicated time spent at the immersive clinical site enabled them to leave the immersive experience ready and feeling comfortable to transition into their professional jobs. Dakota mentioned that:

Being at a place for a long period of time you actually start learning and you see all the different things you can do in immersive experience. I definitely saw myself transition from being less confident to a whole lot of confidence and really felt comfortable in my environment and I can actually do my job moving forward.

Blake developed the confidence to apply for an athletic training position, which they attributed to the immersive experience: "being in that immersive experience gave me the job that I have, it was a position that opened while at my immersive experience. It also gave me the confidence and allowed me to seek this position."

Whether employed with the same organization or another similar setting, the immersive experience allowed for diverse hands-on experiences that assisted in their transition to current employment after graduation and led to them feeling more confident in their current job.

Network

The participants in our study developed a broader network through the immersive clinical experience. The third theme, network, emerged from the participant's perceptions of the immersive experience as a time to develop mentors and professional connections that would support them while searching for employment and transition to practice. The participants discussed how they were able to develop relationships with preceptors, coaches and administrators who assisted in broadening their professional network and eventually were mentors for them both during and after the immersive experience.

Mentoring

Many of the participants in our study mentioned their preceptors from the immersive experience became their mentors. Immersion in a clinical setting during participants final rotation allowed them to establish a rapport with their preceptor that persisted through the experience and beyond graduation. Participants discussed calling to speak to these mentors, seeking advice as they transitioned into their first job. Skylar mentioned:

I got to know them (preceptor) so well and I can reach out to them at any time and ask advice about someone I am working with...really helped me with the transition was the connections. Having those people to always go back to and talk to, and feel supported from them. That is something that will never go away...it is a nice relationship to have and I do not think there is anything better than having a network of people that are willing to help support you and know you well.

Participants believed they were ready for their first job due in large part to the assistance and mentoring received from preceptors throughout the immersion experience. Dakota stated that "my preceptor helped me from the beginning to the end of the immersive experience, really helped me grow and fully be prepared to actually go into the job world."

Many of the participants in our study shared through the long hours over several weeks of working with the athletic trainers at their clinical sites, their preceptor became a trusted counselor and guide, in turn giving them confidence. Several of the participants in our study mentioned their preceptors as mentors not only during the immersive experience, but also as they transitioned into their first job.

Connection

The immersive experience allowed for hands on learning and promoted connections. These connections were not only with athletic trainers, but also with coaches, athletes, administrators and other health professionals. These connections were also helpful in supporting the participants transition into their current place of employment, and at times were instrumental with obtaining a job.

Several participants in this study stated that the people they met during immersion served as references as they applied for various positions. Blake mentioned these connections assisting them with finding a job; "when I went to interview for the permanent position at the school, I had a lot of people who knew me and I could use them as references." Skylar also mentioned the connections and how they were instrumental in her obtaining employment: "my immersion, they were letters of references and so knowing them and applying to jobs and getting offers went very smoothly." Through the connections made in immersion, Justice was able to talk to a recruiter for the company in an endeavor to support obtaining a job after graduation:

Having that experience (at immersive) built relationships and people knew my name in the company because of that. I had a direct link to a recruiter and I was basically talking with her and asking her how can I get hired on.

Participants in the study developed connections during the immersive experience who later provided recommendations and became references, which may have assisted with obtaining employment after graduation.

DISCUSSION

Clinical education is a necessary and vital component in the development of health professionals. Immersive clinical experiences are required in athletic training education and can consist of single or multiple clinical rotations of varied length and placement within an athletic training curriculum. As previous research indicates, athletic training students experience positive professional growth from completing immersive clinical experiences.^{4,10} However, not much is known on how an immersive experience completed in the final term of a curriculum impacts masters' athletic training students after recent matriculation. The purpose of our study was to seek perceptions of recent graduates who had completed an immersive experience during their final term prior to graduation and the impact on professional practice.

Authentic Experience

Our participants perceived the immersive experience offered a realistic demonstration of a day in the life of an athletic trainer while also allowing them to practice skills and exposing them to diverse settings. Clinical education takes a vital role in health professions as students apply to patient care the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom. Traditionally, athletic training curriculum were developed to include completion of didactic coursework in the morning and attendance of clinical education rotations in the afternoons. This model can work well in educational institutions such as college/university or high school settings, as patient care opportunities and events often occur during afternoon and evening hours. However, in this model students can miss many important components of athletic training professional practice such as administrative tasks. Arriving late or having to leave early, not experiencing or participating in all aspects of athletic training in varied professional settings, can dilute students clinical experience, creating potential obstacles to transition to practice. Researchers^{12,13} investigating transition to practice have found several weaknesses of newly credentialed athletic trainers that include communication, confidence, administrative tasks, time management and independent decision-making. However, students in these studies did not complete immersive experiences.^{12,13} With the new CAATE standards, research should focus on athletic training education and the impact of immersion and preparation for professional practice.

In an immersive experience, students can now follow all aspects of a supervising athletic trainer and participate in the totality of care and treatment of patients, affording them a more realistic and rigorous experience. Many of the participants in this study mentioned the long hours, managing many patients at once, and seeing all aspects of an athletic trainers' role in that particular setting. While completing their immersive rotation, recent graduates were repeatedly gaining experiences for long hours during multiple days, over 10 weeks. Without required attendance in didactic coursework, they were able to attend full-time and participate in all clinical operations and witness the ever-changing health care environment, gaining an authentic experience of athletic training professional practice. A principle echoed in nursing education research; immersive experiences allow students to see the authentic experience of a health professional.^{6,14} Nursing students perceived immersive experiences were authentic because they did not have to balance the demands of both didactic and clinical education, they could focus on nursing roles during the immersion.¹⁴ In a mixed methods study⁶ investigating a senior-year clinical immersion model, nursing students commented on the experience as the "real-world" of nursing. They further clarified that the immersion opened their eyes and showed the nursing students totality of care.

Professional socialization occurs through both educational training and real-time observation.¹⁵ Athletic training education has followed this model to prepare newly credentialed health professionals. Similar to previously conducted research⁴, immersive experiences allow for more exposure to all domains of athletic training and students who have completed immersive experiences reported greater professional socialization compared to students who completed a traditional clinical model.¹⁶ Implementing an immersive clinical rotation to complete clinical education (no didactic interruptions) allows students to see the totality of care and experience increased responsibility, accountability, and competence, which may improve their transition to professional practice.

Transition

As students in professional health programs transition to professional practice, they may lack confidence, questioning their decisions and care of patients. Students completing clinical education rotations within their curriculum of study are typically supervised by a preceptor throughout their rotation and specifically during direct patient care. Students become comfortable knowing they have a knowledgeable individual to fall back on and ask questions when they are unsure. As students matriculate and begin their first job as health providers, they may find themselves alone and having to quickly navigate policy and procedure and patient care decisions without a preceptor or mentor to look for guidance or who can intervene if necessary. This can often be the case in a high school setting where only one athletic trainer may be employed. After examining perceptions of newly

credentialed athletic trainers as they transitioned from student to clinician, Bowman et al. found that new clinicians felt apprehensive with decision making and lacked confidence.⁵

The recent graduates in our study stated that the immersion experience led to them feeling more confident in making decisions and facilitated enhanced familiarity and comfort in their role as health professionals and athletic trainers. Our findings support previous research that immersion can promote confidence of health professionals.^{3,8,17} For nursing students and recent graduates, participating in immersion helped them transition to clinical practice with confidence.⁸ Bay, Sherzer and Darnbrook¹⁷ redesigned a nursing curriculum to include a 15-week immersive clinical experience due to the charge by the American Association of Neuroscience Nurses in 2012 for the future of neuroscience nursing for the support of transition to practice and working toward excellence in practice. Through their curricular redesign they found that nursing students showed improved confidence and reduced insecurity and fear with making clinical decisions after completing the immersive experience. Regarding preparation of athletic training professionals, faculty and students from athletic training programs³ believed clinical education was a major facilitator in their transition from student to clinical practice and these clinical experiences were perceived as a confidence builder as they entered clinical practice. As demonstrated in our study, immersive experiences in athletic training education may help newly credentialed athletic trainers transition to practice with more confidence in making clinical decisions.

Athletic training students starting their professional degree may not be familiar with varied professional settings and unsure which setting they may wish to seek employment. One way a student can explore various settings, such as industrial, orthopedic office, performing arts, or fire department, is pursuing clinical education experiences in these settings. Several of the recent graduates in this study identified the industrial setting for their immersion rotation. Prior to immersion it was a challenge for students to be exposed to settings outside of college/university and high school due to conflicts with didactic coursework and schedules. Through the immersive experience, masters' students were exposed to different settings and diverse experiences, learning the roles of the athletic trainer in that setting. They became familiar with terminology used in these settings, which they mentioned improved their confidence and assisted with their transition to practice. For many, completing their immersive experience with these organizations facilitated obtaining employment with the organization upon graduation.

Network

Clinical education not only provides students opportunities to practice skills, but also form connections and work alongside preceptors who advise, support and mentor students. The mentorship that occurs within clinical education is an important aspect and a majority of the recent graduates in this study mentioned and valued the mentorship and connections made through the immersive experience. Many discussed continuing to communicate with their immersion preceptors while they are in their first job post-graduation. Mentorship and its importance to transition to practice for newly credentialed athletic trainers has been established in athletic training research.^{5,18,19} However, this previous research focused on newly credentialed athletic trainers who were professionally practicing and the challenges they faced with finding mentors. The newly credentialed athletic trainers in our study were able to find mentors and solidify a mentorship relationship during the immersion experiences they completed while students in a professional program. These mentorships continued after matriculation, helping with job searching and providing guidance and insight as the participants transitioned to practice. Immersion experiences can connect students with necessary mentor-mentee relationships prior to professional practice.

Mentorship is essential to ongoing development of students and is impactful to students completing lengthy immersion or residency programs.^{8,17,20,21} Nursing students who completed a 15-week clinical immersion experience were able to develop meaningful relationships with mentors who supported students' feelings of belonging, which in turn led to an easier transition to practice.¹⁷ Moreover, based on data collected over a three-year period of immersion experiences, 90% of nursing students obtained positions in their leading career choice, which was attributed to guidance they received from not only Nursing faculty, but also from preceptors who became students' mentors. Immersion experiences offer valuable opportunities for students to develop connections and mentorship relationships. As a result of completing an immersive residency model experience, nursing students felt more connected with preceptors and their co-workers.⁸ Prolonged engagement with a preceptor, such as during an immersive experience, can afford students' an opportunity to cultivate connections and mentor relationships. A mentor-mentee relationship that extends beyond a students' immersive experience to employment post matriculation can provide valuable support and facilitate transition to practice for new professionals. Several of the recent graduates in this study obtained employment as a direct result of their immersive clinical experience. Additionally, the mentors and connections they developed, which they retained after graduating, were essential to obtaining employment and assisting with a smooth transition to professional practice.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of our research included: one college population, pandemic restrictions associated with the novel coronavirus disease known as COVID-19 during the student's education and clinical experiences and the principal researcher title of coordinator of

clinical education at the time of the study. First, the data for this study was collected from graduates of one masters' athletic training program. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all colleges/universities and athletic training students. The participants in this study were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic for over half of their graduate degree, which directly impacted their clinical education experiences for a year and a half. Restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted their normal progression of clinical experiences and may have impacted their perceptions of the immersive experience. We also recognize that the graduates who volunteered for this study valued the immersive experience and had been students of the principal investigator, who at the time of data collection was the coordinator of clinical education. While keeping all one-on-one interviews consistent, we must also be aware that participants may have answered questions in order to not disappoint the principal investigator. Future research should consider mixed methods analysis to further explore the impact and outcome of immersive experiences on preceptors, employers as well as the timing of immersion within the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Immersion clinical experiences are an essential component in health care professionals' progression to autonomous clinical practice. Our results suggest that a 10-week capstone immersion experience, completed during athletic training students' final term in a professional program, positively influences transition to practice. Immersion affords students an opportunity to experience and participate in a realistic day in the life of an athletic trainer while learning and applying all the skills necessary for professional practice in that particular setting. An immersion setting purposefully selected to match a students' professional goals can facilitate obtaining and transitioning into potential future employment with the same organization. Moreover, recent graduates believed the immersion experience assisted in their transition to clinical practice by improving their confidence, facilitating connecting with and developing mentors, and promoting other relationships with administrators, job recruiters, and coaches. Clinical coordinators should consider at what point in the curriculum to place immersive experience(s), including seeking agreements with clinical sites that allow students to provide autonomous patient care, and identifying settings a student may want to seek employment post-graduation. Our findings support athletic training research on immersive experiences, further demonstrating the positive influence of immersion on transition to professional practice.

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