

The Athletic Training Professional Degree: A Case Study of the Perceptions of Program Stakeholders in a Private College

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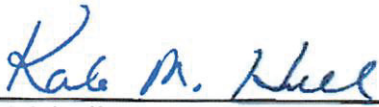
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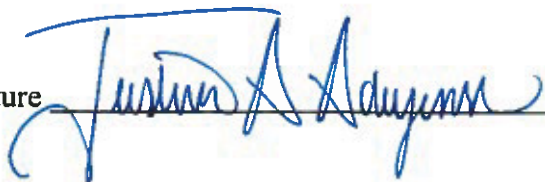
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## ABSTRACT

By 2022, existing undergraduate athletic training programs must offer a master's degree in order for students to seek entry into the field. As a profession embedded within allied healthcare, this educational reform exists not only to improve student's educational competencies, but to also improve the standard of care patients receive and better align the profession with peer healthcare professionals. Although recent literature examining stakeholder perceptions related to the degree transition exists, there is a lack of research detailing how this mandate impacts a single institution. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of program stakeholders at one private liberal arts institution as it pertains to the professional degree transition. Semi-structured interviews and focus forums were used to investigate how the change in the professional degree impacts stakeholders personally and professionally. Three athletic training faculty members, four preceptors and ten athletic training students were interviewed. The results of this study indicate that the faculty members and preceptors at this institution believe they are well equipped in terms of support from the administration to offer the professional master's degree in athletic training. They also indicate the potential of this transition to advance the profession in terms of educational and clinical preparation for students. While both groups indicate a level of uncertainty regarding this change, they believe there will be a level of consistency in how they currently operate as a program. This study also suggests that the stakeholder group impacted by this change the most is athletic training students. Six of the ten students indicated they would pursue careers in alternative healthcare fields, if being faced to consider entry into the field as a graduate student.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Faculty members in baccalaureate-level athletic training programs have prepared individuals for certification and entry-level practice since 1969 (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). In 2022, that practice will come to an end as students wanting to become certified athletic trainers will need to earn a master's degree in athletic training for entry into the field (NATA, 2015). As a profession embedded within allied healthcare, this educational reform is meant not only to improve student's educational competencies, but to also improve the standard of care patients receive. The decision to transition from the baccalaureate degree to a master's degree for entry-level certification is a monumental change for program stakeholders and institutions of higher education that currently offer the undergraduate degree in athletic training.

#### Current Context for Athletic Training Programs

The Commission on the Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) currently accredits three different educational programs: professional, post-professional and post-professional residency programs (CAATE, n.d.). According to the most recent CAATE Analytic Report (2015-2016), 370 athletic training professional programs are maintaining accreditation, and an additional 10 programs are seeking initial accreditation (CAATE, 2017). Of these programs, 307 (83%) are at the baccalaureate level, and 63 (17%) are offered at the master's degree level (CAATE, 2017).

Previously, there were no CAATE accredited doctoral programs. However, the increasingly popular doctorate of athletic training degree is emerging within the profession with one program now having accreditation status. As the profession's clinical doctorate, this program is appropriate for those looking to expand their clinical, research and field-based knowledge after having acquired initial certification. According to CAATE's analytic report, 225 (61%) program directors hold academic doctorate degrees, and 137, 37 (37%) hold master's degrees, and the remaining 8 hold other advanced degrees (CAATE, 2017).

The impact of transitioning athletic training professional degree programs to the graduate level in four years is significant, given that 83% of the professional degree programs are currently at the baccalaureate level (CAATE, 2017). The impetus for this change has been a series of reports urging healthcare reform. These reports highlight recommendations related to utilizing graduate education and improving clinical education to address the increasingly complex healthcare issues facing allied health professionals.

### *Healthcare Reform*

Allied healthcare is an "alliance of many essential health care professionals who serve as critical partners, or allies" to physicians, nurses and or physicians' assistants (Thomas, Mclean & Debnam, 2011, p. 2). This includes, but is not limited to, fields of practice such as: athletic training, audiology, dental hygiene, and both occupational and physical therapy (Thomas et al., 2011). Though broad in the litany of professions that classify as allied healthcare, overarching skills and expertise include preventative care, injury evaluation, diagnosis, and physical rehabilitation, to name a few (Thomas et al., 2011). In essence, allied healthcare professionals with differing backgrounds and

experiences function as a cohesive unit to provide optimal care to a variety of patients. With an extensive scope of practice, many are being called upon to serve a diverse and growing number of patients (NATA, 2013). And as a result, it has become increasingly important to ensure adequate educational and clinical preparation for those entering the field. To achieve this goal, significant efforts have been forged to improve students' professional preparation through advancing or expanding education to the graduate-level.

### Change Management

While the impetus for change may be imposed or voluntarily implemented, it is a necessary process to maintain vitality and longevity for a profession (Fullan, 2007). In athletic training, the need for change is born out of the need for improvement. According to the NATA (2013), improvement is needed in the field as it relates to student retention, alignment with peer professions, and the need to enhance the clinical education of students. While resistance to change is common, it occurs primarily because an individual or organization is being pushed outside their comfort zone or because there are concerns about whether the change will lead to improvement (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Fullan, 1993; Hall & Hord, 2011). As noted by Kotter (1996), change must be guided by a coalition; this leadership team should not only have expertise in the field, but also have an ability to communicate the change to program stakeholders. As a result, careful communication allows the leadership team to thoroughly address resistance to the change, establish buy-in and increase the probability for greater program outcomes (Beach & Lindahl, 2017; Fuller, 1969; Hargraves, Earl, Moore & Manning, 2001).

## Problem Statement

The impetus for changing the entry-level requirements for athletic training professionals is based on the recognition of the increasingly complex skill set that will be necessary to ensure that certified athletic trainers can adapt to the ever-evolving healthcare field. However, there are currently 307 institutions of higher education preparing athletic trainers at the undergraduate degree-level and by 2022, these institutions will be required to add a master's degree in athletic training if they want to continue providing initial certification (CAATE, 2017). These institutions only have four years to transform their programs, and re-tool faculty and preceptors so that they are eligible to teach and supervise at the graduate level.

On average, 36 students for each of the undergraduate professional programs will be affected, requiring over thirteen thousand athletic training students to invest additional time and finances to acquire the professional degree at the graduate level (CAATE, 2017). This mandate will also impact 137 program directors that are currently teaching in undergraduate programs without having a clinical or academic doctorate (CAATE, 2017). As a result, their ability to teach courses at the graduate level may be stifled depending on institutional and regional accreditation bylaws.

This transition will also impact collegiate programs that rely heavily on graduate assistants as part of their workforce. For each undergraduate program, there are an equal number of collegiate athletic programs that may soon be forced to hire athletic trainers at market value, as opposed to staffing between two to four graduate assistants. This change will undoubtedly lead to budgetary constraints for the athletic program and the institution as a whole. There is a need to identify stakeholder perceptions on the impact

of this change related to the faculty, preceptors and students so that administrators can strategically plan to enact change over the next four years.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of program stakeholders in one baccalaureate level athletic training program facing nationally mandated changes requiring a master's degree as the entry-level degree for certification in athletic training. Through a series of interviews and focus forums, the researcher sought to understand the experiences and perceptions of faculty, preceptors, and students as they share their stories about the personal and professional impact of this change. This study has the potential to inform the national debate regarding how institution and program administrators can effectively implement this change.

### *Research Questions*

Although the NATA's strategic planning committee has implemented various means by which to understand the professional degree transition, there is insufficient research detailing how the transition impacts those who are stakeholders of undergraduate athletic training programs. Once acquired, such information will inevitably inform policy and guide programs in the midst of developing or implementing strategic plans for adhering to the professional degree mandate. To address the lack of existing research-in large part due to its infancy, the researcher has sought to understand the level of impact the professional degree transition has on program stakeholders through an analysis of the roles in which they serve. To address the purpose of this study, the researcher sought answers to the following research questions:



*Research Question 1.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact institutions of higher education that currently offer an accredited undergraduate degree program?

*Research Question 2.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact athletic training faculty teaching in undergraduate degree programs?

*Research Question 3.* What is the impact of the mandated professional degree transition on preceptors affiliated with undergraduate athletic training programs?

### *Procedures*

This study utilized a basic interpretive approach with data collected from stakeholders in an undergraduate athletic training degree program. Initially, the institution's athletic training program applied for accreditation at the baccalaureate level and received CAATE accreditation in 2017. While the first cohort of students is being served in this program, there was a decision to continue offering the undergraduate program and then transition to an accredited master's degree program. Thus, this institution presents a unique opportunity to understand how the stakeholders in one institution responded to the mandated changes in professional training programs for athletic trainers. To access this information and to answer the research questions, various forms of qualitative data gathering were implemented. Interviews were conducted with athletic training faculty members, including the Program Director (PD), Clinical Education Coordinator (CEC) and an additional athletic training faculty member. The PD and CEC represent the leadership team of the athletic training program. In addition, they serve as the link between the college administration, preceptors and students.

There were a total of two interviews conducted with the faculty, one as an individual interview and the other as a joint interview. The first interview focused on their professional backgrounds and focused life experiences in the athletic training profession (Siedman, 2006). This also afforded the researcher an opportunity to develop rapport with the faculty members. The joint interview served as an investigation of the faculty members' perception of a change in the professional degree transition and how they believe it will impact them personally and professionally.

In addition to the interviews, two focus forums were held, one for preceptors and another for students. This provided an opportunity for these groups to present a unified voice concerning the professional degree transition. As a precursor to the focus forum, information gathered from the interviews with faculty members were used to inform each focus forum session. The result provided a cohesive story for how the institution is being impacted as a result of a change in the professional degree.

#### Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is embedded within the current state of affairs regarding the professional degree for the athletic training profession. As the professional degree mandate is being implemented, baccalaureate programs are expected to dissolve and or transition to the new professional degree. As a result, there will likely be a demand to improve the level of education or training for current practitioners and for athletic training educators who will be expected to teach new content that accompanies a change in the professional degree (Mayhew & Ford, 1974). At first sight, the brunt of this change involves students and faculty members. However, this change will inevitably extend to parents of students, institution administrators, and other program stakeholders.

Of growing concern is how this degree transition will impact collegiate athletic programs that utilize graduate assistants as staff members. Individuals serving in this role traditionally work more than 40 hours per week and are exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act (United States Department of Labor, 2016). An understanding of the stories the faculty, students and preceptors shared while undergoing this change has the potential to inform program faculty and college administrators of how to navigate the change process. It will also be beneficial to policy makers at CAATE, providing them with a deeper understanding of resources and support that may be needed to assist institutions in making this transition.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model for this study is an adaptation of the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Hall, Wallace & Dossett, 1973). In this model, the impact of a change innovation can be assessed through evaluating the stages of concern among faculty, students, and preceptors. Initiated by the NATA’s Strategic Alliance, the professional degree transition is intimately involved with the institution that hosts an accredited athletic training program.

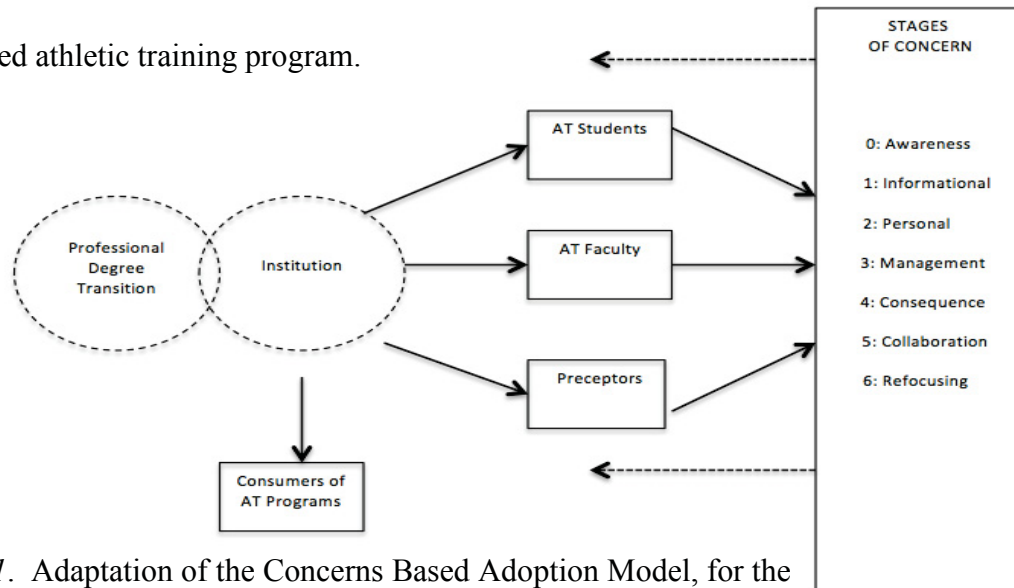


Figure 1. Adaptation of the Concerns Based Adoption Model, for the Athletic Training Profession.

The overlap between the professional degree transition and institution in Figure 1 represents the partnership between the CAATE and the institution that houses an accredited athletic training program. In the middle, are stakeholders from the athletic training program: faculty, students, and preceptors. Additionally, the consumers of athletic training programs, which include athletes and patients, are impacted by the decisions made at the institution level.

Next are the stages of concern. The lines pointing towards them represent a probing of stakeholder's opinions related to the mandated change in the professional degree. Soliciting and analyzing information from these individuals determines their preparedness for change and their ability to adapt and become situated within the change. As these individuals discuss and provide their perception of the innovation, leadership within the institution is better informed when making decisions. The information gathered through probing is represented by the lines pointing from the stages of concern towards the institution. Figure 1 represents an adaptation of the Concerns Based Adoption Model.

The CBAM tenants place emphasis on understanding, implementing and assessing change for “colleges, universities, public schools and industry” (Hall et al., 1973, p. 7). Existing research utilizing this model places emphasis on individuals involved in the change process, including: faculty, staff, administration, students and community stakeholders (Hall & Hord, 2011).

Fuller (1969) investigated the concerns of pre-service and in-service faculty regarding their role as teachers. The manner in which teacher's processed and responded

to change was based upon three central constructs: self, tasks, and impact (Fuller, 1969; Hall & Rutherford, 1983). Specifically, the teachers wanted to know how change would impact them personally, their daily tasks and how a given change initiative would impact their students (Bogges, McBride, & Griffey, 1985; Hall & Rutherford, 1983).

There are three foundational tenants of the CBAM: Stages of Concern (SoC), which has a direct correlation with Fuller's research, Levels of Use, (LoU), and Innovation Configurations (IC). Embedded within each of these tenants are three overarching assumptions: 1) A careful collaborative effort to initiate change has been generated, 2) representatives from all stakeholders have been included in this process and 3) resources have been identified and acquired to allow for implementation of the change (Hall & Rutherford, 1983). In this study, the perceptions of program stakeholders, along with identifying their concerns regarding the change were used to understand the impact of the professional degree transition. Their stories and responses were analyzed from semi-structured interviews and focus forum sessions.

#### Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions pertain to the athletic training profession, those who serve roles within the profession and additional terminology of importance to understanding the educational system in which an athletic training program functions: *Board of Certification (BOC)*: The BOC is the regulatory body responsible for the establishment and review of standards for the professional practice of an athletic trainer. This regulatory body is also responsible for establishing and disseminating the certification examination for students enrolled in an accredited athletic training program (BOC, 2015).

*Commission on the Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE):* The CAATE is the accrediting body for athletic training programs (ATP), formerly known as athletic training education programs (ATEP). This regulatory body oversees the programmatic and educational standards for accredited institutions, ensuring that minimum standards are met for entry-level practice of athletic trainers.

*Clinical Education Coordinator:* The clinical education coordinator is an educator within the athletic training program. This individual educates preceptors on their roles and responsibilities and ensures adequate progression in student's clinical education experiences.

*Entry Level Master's Program:* This term relates to existing programs that offer entry-level education at the graduate degree for individuals interested in becoming athletic trainers, who were not enrolled in a CAATE accredited undergraduate athletic training program (Delforge & Behnke, 1999).

*Post-Professional Degree Program:* This term relates to existing programs that offer continuing athletic training education after one has completed an accredited entry-level athletic training program. The degree designation for such programs is at the master's level (Delforge & Behnke, 1999).

*National Athletic Trainer's Association (NATA):* The NATA is the national membership association for athletic trainers. This organization functions to advocate for the profession and support its members both nationally and through district associations (NATA, n.d.).

*Program Director:* The program director is an educator within the athletic training program. This individual is responsible for all facets of the program, including but not

limited to ongoing compliance with standards, programmatic budget and assessment of didactic and clinical education.

*Strategic Alliance:* The strategic alliance represents the joint effort of the National Athletic Trainer's Association, the Committee on the Accreditation of Athletic Training Education, the Board of Certification along with the NATA Research and Education Foundation. Together, these organizations made the concerted effort to transition professional education of athletic trainers to graduate (master's degree) level coursework (NATA, 2015).

### Organization of the Study

This study is organized in chapter format. Chapter 1 provided the rationale, significance and research questions for this study. Chapter 2 includes a review of the athletic training profession, literature pertaining to reform in healthcare and a rationale for the transition to graduate level education in athletic training. Supplementing this information is a review of principles and theories regarding change. The methods for data collection and analysis can be found in Chapter 3. Descriptions of the participants and results are found in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of results and recommendations for the profession and private colleges transitioning to graduate level education.

## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature relevant to the history of athletic training and its professional degree is presented in this chapter. The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of program stakeholders related to the professional degree transition for the athletic training profession. Currently, there is a mandate by the athletic training strategic alliance to transition the professional degree by 2022, from a baccalaureate program to a master's degree program (NATA, 2013). Select institutions have voluntarily employed this mandate to be in compliance, and maintain accreditation (NATA, 2013). Although recent literature examining stakeholder perceptions related to the degree transition exists, there is a lack of research detailing how this mandate impacts a single institution. Included in this review is a historical examination of reform in healthcare education, followed by theories on change management and an overview of the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) to provide context for the evolving healthcare profession.

#### Healthcare Education Reform

*To Err Is Human*, was written as a collaborative report by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), a collection of healthcare professionals from varying professions (2000). The purpose of the report was to provide a rationale for the creation of a comprehensive national strategy to address medical errors occurring in the healthcare system. In the foreword of the report, Dr. Kenneth Shine, the IOM president stated,



“errors can be prevented by designing systems that make it hard for people to do the wrong thing and easy for people to do the right thing” (Institute of Medicine, 2000, p. xi).

The errors noted within the report are categorized according to four primary themes: diagnosis, treatment, prevention, and other (Leape, Lawthers, Brennan, & Johnson, 1993). Within the report, diagnostic errors include incorrect diagnosis of injuries, ailments, or delay in the injury evaluation processes (Leape et al., 1993). Treatment errors included improper administration of prescription drugs, or the inappropriate application of treatment, either delayed or the failure to provide treatment when appropriate (Leape et al., 1993). Errors in prevention include an inability of practitioners to adequately prevent the incidence of injuries within their respective fields and or to provide proper follow-up care (Leape et al., 1993). Errors classified as “other”, highlight inadequate use and failure to integrate technology as a means of communication with other healthcare professionals, for the benefit of the patient.

As a result of the findings in *To Err is Human*, healthcare professionals from the IOM issued a report in 2001 titled, *Crossing the Quality Chasm: A new health system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. This report is a response to a system in which healthcare providers demonstrated an “inability to translate knowledge into practice, to apply new technology safely and appropriately, and to make best use of its resources—both financial and human” (Greiner & Knebel, 2003, p. 19). As a result of the findings in this report, allied health, nursing and pharmacy professionals developed a taskforce to craft core competencies central to all healthcare professions. The core competencies include: “patient-centered care, work in interdisciplinary teams, employ[ing] evidence-based practice, apply[ing] quality improvement approaches, and [utilizing] informatics”

(Greiner & Knebel, 2003, pp. 45-46). The task force concluded that these core competencies should be integrated into education programs, in an effort to repair a fractured healthcare system.

As postulated by the IOM taskforce, the core-competencies will improve the quality of healthcare and better align healthcare education with societal needs (Greiner & Knebel, 2003; Phelps & Gerbasi, 2009). The integration of these core competencies are most likely to be accomplished through clinical education, where students in professional programs apply their didactic experience to a patient base for real-world application.

The first competency, “patient-centered care”, implores healthcare professionals to focus on the patient holistically. In many ways, this requires professionals to look beyond the presented injury or ailment, and recognize patients’ inherent needs: to be respected, to understand their value and to provide quality care (Greiner & Knebel, 2003). Secondly, “work in interdisciplinary teams” points to the need for practitioners to work in concert with those in their field, and on occasion other healthcare professionals to ensure consistency in the care delivered (Greiner & Knebel, 2003). Thirdly, “employ[ing] evidenced-based practice” highlights the importance of using the most applicable, reliable and up-to-date research to advance treatment and patient care (Greiner & Knebel, 2003). Through its implementation, patients are more likely to recover as quickly and as safely as possible. Fourth, is “apply[ing] quality improvement approaches”, which calls for healthcare professionals to understand errors in treatment, and to develop processes to circumvent such errors (Greiner & Knebel, 2003). Lastly, “utilizing informatics” is the IOM taskforce’s charge to ensure healthcare professionals are prepared to succeed in the twenty-first century, utilizing information technology as a

means to diminish error and enhance communication between healthcare professionals (Greiner & Knebel, 2003).

The examination of a potential professional degree transition for the athletic training profession included a review of certification exam scores between 2010-2012. The results revealed entry-level masters programs yield higher three-year, 70 percent aggregate first-time pass-rates (91%) compared to undergraduate programs (73%) on the National Athletic Training Association's Board Of Certification (NATABOC) exam (CAATE, 2015; NATA, 2013). In the absence of substantial evidence for enhanced patient care based on degree-level, this outcome suggests that graduate-level education better prepares students for professional practice and as a result, patient-centered care (NATA, 2013). Also, there is a disparity in the number of academic programs at the undergraduate level that engage in consistent inter-professional education (NATA, 2013).

In theory, a transition to graduate studies would allow all athletic training programs to be housed academically with peer professions, increasing the likelihood for students to work in interdisciplinary teams, an IOM core competency (NATA, 2013). This collaborative effort is thought to enhance a commitment towards utilizing the best, most current research to inform professional practice. This represents the use of evidence-based practice and informatics, which includes integrating technology, reviewing research and data analysis to improve the quality of healthcare delivered (NATA, 2013).

Allied healthcare represents an “alliance of many essential health care professionals who serve as critical partners, or allies” to physicians, nurses and or physicians' assistants (Thomas, Mclean & Debnam, 2011, p. 2). This includes but is not

limited to fields of practice such as: athletic training, audiology, and occupational and physical therapy (2012). Though broad in the litany of professions that classify as allied healthcare, overarching skills and expertise include preventative care, injury evaluation, diagnosis, and physical rehabilitation, to name a few (2012).

With an extensive scope of practice, many ATs are being called upon to serve a diverse and growing number of patients (NATA, 2012; NATA, 2013). As a result, it has become increasingly important to ensure adequate education and clinical preparation for those entering the athletic training profession. To achieve this goal, significant efforts have been forged to improve student's professional preparation through advancing the level of education to graduate-studies.

### Athletic Training

One of the prominent and most rapidly growing allied healthcare professions is athletic training. Athletic trainers are "highly qualified, multi-skilled healthcare professionals" working collaboratively to provide healthcare for the physically active population (NATA, 2011b, p. 1). Specifically, this field of practice for athletic trainers is distinguished from physical and occupational therapy because of its focus on the prevention, management, treatment, and rehabilitation related injuries and illnesses.

As supported by Delforge and Behnke, the evolution of athletic training begins with the foundation of its governing body, the NATA (1999). The founding principle of the organization is to "build and strengthen the profession of athletic training through the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and methods of athletic training" (O'Shea, 1980). With the sharing of ideas and concepts as the cornerstone of the profession, this concept was also integrated as the framework for by which ATPs, formerly referred to as "Athletic

Training Education Programs, (ATEPs) were created” (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). With the NATA being founded in 1950, subsequent years made room available in which to support and establish programs for individuals seeking entry into the profession.

Through the efforts of William E. Newell, of Purdue University and other leaders of the profession, a committee was founded in 1955 to oversee the implementation of educational programs centered on athletic training (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). This committee was primarily responsible for developing a curriculum, or a set of specific courses, which would ideally prepare the student for a minimal standard of knowledge in which to be proficient in the profession. Initially, the primary set of courses or curriculum placed emphasis on prospective students becoming secondary-level teachers. In fact, this was “largely due to a recognized need for employment of athletic trainers at the secondary-level” (Delforge & Behnke 1999), as these institutions offered a litany of athletic participation options for students- thereby creating a need for specialized individuals to provide care. Perhaps, it is this innate need that brought rise to the description of athletic training programs as “ATEPs”, considering the inclusion of an educational component, in the curriculum (Schwank & Miller, 1971). This requirement to obtain a teaching certificate or take such courses is no longer required (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). As further mentioned by Delforge and Behnke, one of the committee’s primary focus was the professionalization of the field, opting to make acquisition of a national certification a top priority, as it would ensure that those practicing athletic training, have received standardized educational preparation, which would permit a standard of care being provided to athletes and or patients (1999).

To organize the curriculum, recommendations were made not only to have the AT prepared as an educator in the secondary-education setting, but recommendations were also made for those aspiring to become ATs, to seek further study in schools of physical therapy, “as a means to provide improved healthcare, not only for the student athletes, but for the entire student body” (Schwank & Miller, 1971). To provide a foundational format for coursework related to the profession, attention was given to existing classes offered at colleges and universities. The beginning curriculum was primarily based in physical education, featuring courses such as: First Aid, Nutrition and Foods, and Personal and Community hygiene (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). Additionally, this curriculum, established in 1959, was infused with courses specific to athletic training and highlighted by pre-requisite courses for physical therapy school such as Physics, Biology and Social Sciences (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). However, over the coming years, the profession desired to make an identity of its own, as opposed to relying on other disciplines to disseminate knowledge. This began through narrowing the focus of coursework to those specific to athletic training. This change eventually led to the recognition of both undergraduate and graduate athletic training programs by the NATA in 1969 and 1972, respectively (Delforge & Behnke, 1999).

Even with the successful implementation of the didactic component, clinical experiences were added to the educational framework to help solidify the legitimacy of the profession. Eventually, the certification exam was implemented in 1970 providing a means to denote effective entry-level practice (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). This was further supported through educational competencies to institute mastery of the desired skills and behavioral components that should be expressed by future practitioners

(Delforge & Behnke, 1999). The NATA educational competencies, currently in the fifth edition provide “educational program personnel and others with the knowledge, skills, and clinical abilities to be mastered by students enrolled in professional” athletic training education programs (NATA, 2011b, p. 3).

Such advancements within the profession cannot be adequately described without mention of the individuals, subcommittees and organizations that have played a role in the foundation of the athletic training profession and the education of aspiring ATs. Specifically, it was the efforts of William E. Newell of Purdue University, who was instrumental in the development of educational programs for aspiring ATs. His work was accomplished through the first appointed position as the National Secretary of the NATA, where he and others also helped to organize and formulate the Professional Education Committee (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). Through these vital moments of the profession’s history, the athletic training profession gained formal recognition as an allied health profession through the American Medical Association. In essence, these advancements have been integral to the establishment of the athletic training profession and for it to grow and continue making changes for the betterment of the profession, those who function within it and those who are beneficiaries of the services and expertise.

Currently, to gain entry into the profession, a student must apply to an accredited athletic training program (ATP), which may be housed in an undergraduate degree program or in an entry-level master’s (ELM) program. Once a student has gained admittance, he or she begins didactic coursework, which focuses on the domains of the athletic training profession: “prevention, clinical evaluation and diagnosis, immediate and emergency care, treatment and rehabilitation, organization and professional health and

well-being” (NATA, 2012, pp. 2-3). In concert with didactic coursework are clinical experiences, which afford students an opportunity to apply concepts and skills taught in class to a patient-base, under the direction of practicing ATs or appropriately credentialed healthcare professionals, known as preceptors (NATA, 2012).

Once students have successfully completed the ATP, they become eligible to sit for the NATABOC exam, a national assessment that serves to recognize that an individual has met the minimum didactic and clinical requirements needed to function and practice as an AT. Upon successful completion, the student will earn the “ATC” credential, standing for “Athletic Trainer, Certified” (NATA, 2012). The board sponsoring this exam is recognized by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies and is the only accredited certification program for athletic trainers” (NATA, 2012, pp. 1-2). After being awarded the ATC credential, the student must apply for licensure in the state he/she resides if they want to practice athletic training.

#### *Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education*

The Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) functions to support and govern the educational aspect of ATPs. CAATE accomplishes this goal by accrediting and reaccrediting ATPs and providing standards that guide athletic training education and ultimately the profession. As noted by the NATA, historically, professional athletic training education has occurred at the baccalaureate-level (NATA, 2013), comprising 370 programs nationally (CAATE, 2017). In addition, there are 27 entry-level master’s programs (ELM), which provides a graduate route for interested students to become an AT. In addition to ELMs are post-professional graduate programs in athletic training. These programs are also accredited through CAATE and



reserved for students who have completed an accredited baccalaureate program. The focus of these programs is the further development of the athletic trainer beyond the required minimal standards. As a result of the professional degree transition, the only programs that will exist are professional master's programs, the only entry-point into the profession.

*Evolution and Rationale for Graduate Education in Athletic Training*

In the early years of the athletic training profession, there were four entry points for an individual to become an AT; these routes included: 1) the completion of an apprenticeship program, 2) graduation from a school of physical therapy, 3) 5 years as an “actively engaged” athletic trainer and, 4) graduation from an accredited undergraduate or graduate ATP (Delforge & Behnke, 1999). Eventually, acceptance and graduation from an ATP, coupled with successful completion of the NATABOC exam became the only means by which to gain the ATC credential.

An interest in graduate programs for ATs emerged during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, professionals that completed an apprenticeship as a route to certification were encouraged to expand their knowledge base beyond the required minimal standards (Wilkerson, Colston & Bogdanowicz, 2006). The answer to this call became evident in post-professional master's programs, given that those enrolled were current professionals seeking a master's degree in Athletic Training. These programs were attached to graduate assistantships, which provided students a stipend, reduced education cost, and the opportunity to practice athletic training with collegiate sports teams (Wilkerson et al., 2006).

Today, students completing undergraduate studies in athletic training are often advised to obtain a master's degree regardless of the academic discipline, in order to obtain a graduate assistantship (Wilkerson et al., 2006). This recommendation highlights three assumptions related to athletic training education:

1. That an undergraduate athletic training education program develops all of the discipline-specific knowledge needed for future professional practice.
2. That a graduate assistantship will provide a good opportunity for professional advancement.
3. That attainment of a master's degree in an area of study other than athletic training will enhance the student's qualifications for future professional opportunities (Wilkerson et al., 2006, p. 39).

Given these assumptions, questions have emerged regarding what the appropriate degree designation should be for the profession. Furthermore, students and employers are asking how preparation differs for ATs through undergraduate and graduate programs (2006). A distinction between the two occurs in higher order thinking skills for the graduate-student (2006). A three-level hierarchy of medical knowledge is utilized to describe the focus of each degree-awarding program. This model includes: level III, a representation of fundamental information on a given skill; level II describes having knowledge related to an intervention that should be used and level I, an understanding of "how [an intervention] works and why it should be done" (Wilkerson et al., 2006 p. 39). Undergraduate instruction in athletic training prepares students to become proficient in levels II and III (Wilkerson et al., 2006). Obtaining level I concepts is in alignment with

IOM core competencies and should afford students an opportunity to be reduce the risk of possible errors and improve patient-centered care (IOM, 2000; Wilkerson et al., 2006).

Further evidence to support a transition to graduate education is evident in the development of students improving from being novice to expert clinicians. In research presented by Neibert (2009), a qualitative investigation into the theoretical foundations of graduate education was explored. Through the investigation, Neibert interviewed thirteen athletic trainers who graduated from post-professional graduate programs in athletic training. Neibert's results confirmed the six principles of graduate education in athletic training, facilitated progression of ATs from novice to expert practice (Neibert, 2009).

These principles include:

1. Mastery of subject: Graduate education facilitates master over the content and skills of the discipline at a level appropriate to the degree sought;
2. Critical thinking: Graduate education develops and refines critical thinking skills including thorough knowledge of the assumptions of the discipline and understanding of viable assumptions.
3. Theoretical understanding: Graduate education develops and refines critical thinking skills including thorough knowledge of the assumptions of the discipline and understanding of viable assumptions.
4. Proficiency in research and or creative activities: Graduate education develops proficiencies that advance the knowledge of the activities of the discipline. These proficiencies that advance the knowledge and activities of the discipline. These proficiencies include good writing skills as well as the ability to present original insights and creative expressions.

5. Service orientation: Graduate education instills responsibility to return the special benefits of graduate study to the larger community.
6. Diverse representation of perspectives: Graduate education provides for intellectually and culturally rich encounters within the discipline. Study and inquiry are conducted in a context sensitive to ethnic and cultural diversity. (Niebert, 2009, pp. 378-379).

The ATs interviewed for this study spoke to graduate education providing a rationale to the interventions employed within the profession, along with an ability to take information gathered utilizing informatics to make decisions on preventing injuries (Niebert, 2009). Participants also indicated, “undergraduate education is the time for learning skills and developing; in graduate education, we begin to question practice and present some of our own ideas and start to advance the profession” (Niebert, 2009, p. 384). Niebert’s study suggests an alignment between the goal of the professional degree transition, the IOM core-competencies and what professional education should encompass for healthcare professions.

#### *Athletic Training Educational System*

As described by Bertalanffy (1968) and Frick (2004), a system is either open or closed and is made up of both internal and external components. The athletic training education system is indeed an open system, meaning that it has a constant stream of inputs and outputs that allow it to function optimally. The internal components represent a closely-knit interaction among individuals to achieve a common goal or to produce a specific product (Bertalanffy, 1968). Within this system are two sub-components, didactic instruction and clinical experiences. Didactic instruction is the exchange of

knowledge and information between athletic training faculty and athletic training students. This interaction is manifested through coursework that includes a strong foundation of health related sciences and additional courses specific to the profession (NATA, 2011b). Clinical experiences consist of interactions between athletic training students and preceptors; in this capacity, preceptors function as the implementation bridge between the set educational standards and skill students are exposed to for entry-level practice. With this in mind, it is also helpful to identify the external components of this system, which include but is not limited to: administrators at the host institution, athletes and patients. Together, individuals representing the internal and external components are recognized as stakeholders of the athletic training program.

#### The Professional Degree

This study will investigate the perceptions of the professional degree transition of those functioning within the internal component of the athletic training program, which includes athletic training faculty, preceptors and athletic training students. The athletic training educator is typically identified by one or more of the following titles: Program Director (PD), Clinical Education Coordinator (CEC) or as an athletic training faculty member, at large. As the title suggests, the PD is responsible for all aspects of the athletic training program, which include teaching, maintaining the program's accreditation and managing budgetary concerns. At many institutions, the PD works collaboratively with the CEC to oversee the day-to-day operations of the program. The CEC's responsibilities also include teaching and assigning athletic training students to clinical experiences. Athletic training students are typically classified according to their academic rank (i.e., sophomore, junior, senior).

In 2015, Deranek used a multiple case study design to investigate the perceptions of institution administrators, athletic training faculty and staff regarding the internal and external influences that led to the development of accredited ELM programs. The findings from this study suggest that the internal influences include: *institutional support*, *availability of resources* and *department location*. Institutional support emerged as one of the leading factors of successfully creating or transitioning an ATP to graduate education. As evidenced by PDs, having at least one faculty and or administrator that supports the development of a program, is essential (Deranek, 2015). It is this individual that is empowered to communicate the purpose, mission and vision of the program along with promoting how the program is of benefit to the institution, (2015). The availability of resources indicates the importance of having an adequate number of faculty members to teach within the program. This includes, depending on the institution having doctorally-trained faculty to teach students within a master's degree program. Within this study, four of the six programs were located in an equivalent college of health sciences, which facilitates the ease of inter-professional education, and better utilization of institution resources (2015).

The external influences identified within this study include: *government*, *institutional accrediting agencies* and the *market*. The government's role in influencing the creation of ELM programs is tied directly to its affiliation with accreditation agencies. For some public institutions, significant changes to educational programs must first be approved by state or local governmental agencies to ensure adequate resources are available prior to implementation (Deranek, 2015). Once approved and accrediting agencies' standards are met, the program becomes fully operational. Equally important is

the demand from the market; it regulates the number of career opportunities for ATs, and as a result creates a demand for high quality professional education.

To adequately meet the demand for competent healthcare professionals in athletic training, ATPs must retain students in order to maintain accreditation and subsequently prepare students to enter the workforce. In a study conducted by Bowman, Hertel, and Wathington, an investigation of the retention rate for athletic training students nationwide was assessed by exploring PDs perceptions on programmatic design (2015). In this study, of the 177 program directors included, the student retention rate was identified as 81% +/- 17.9 % (Bowman et al., 2015). Through analysis of the data, researchers identified four variables that successfully predict 38% of the variation in the self-reported retention rates of programs. These factors include: the timing of formal admission to the ATP annually, the number of years the ATPs are accredited, a lower number of students admitted annually, and the number of years program directors held their positions. In essence, when students are admitted into the program after having completed pre-requisite courses, when the program has maintained a long-standing record of accreditation and stability with its leadership, student retention rates are high (Bowman et al., 2015).

In a follow up study, Bowman, Hertel, Mazerolle, Dodge, and Wathington sought to understand why PDs did or did not believe retention was a problem for ATPs (2015). To investigate this aspect of the earlier study, eight PDs who identified retention as a problem and eight who did not view retention as a problem were randomly selected for inclusion. Through interview transcripts and data analysis, the researchers identified two themes relating to why retention of students is problematic: a *lack of information*, and the

*rigorous coursework*. Lack of information is defined in this study as a lack of knowledge about the job responsibilities and time commitment required for the athletic training profession. The only created theme to explain the reason PDs did not believe retention was a problem related to the secondary admission process required to gain admittance into the program (Bowman et al., 2015). In other words, students apply with prerequisites designed to introduce them to the profession before they commit to the program. In an additional follow up to the aforementioned study, Bowman, Mazerolle, Pitney, Dodge and Hertel (2015), compared the retention rates of athletic training students at undergraduate (80.98% +/-17.86%) and professional (88.5% +/- 10.68%) master's degree programs. It was also determined that a significant difference exists between undergraduate (71.32% +/-18.47%) and graduate (88.5% +/- 10.68%) career placement percentages.

An investigation into why professional master's degree students persist and leave the profession was investigated. Through analysis of telephone interview transcripts, the researchers developed two themes related to reasons why master's degree students persist in the profession: their "commitment to the profession, and the interpersonal *relationships* they build with other stakeholders within the program" (Bowman, Pitney, Mazerolle, Dodge, 2015, p. 59). The generated themes utilized to identify reasons why professional master's program students leave the profession is due to program rigor, "a change in career aspirations, and financial concerns" (Bowman, Pitney, Mazerolle & Dodge, 2015, p. 59).



### *Perceptions of Students*

A study investigating undergraduate athletic training students' influences on career decisions after graduation was conducted. This study included a survey of twenty-two undergraduate athletic training students that graduated in May 2010, from thirteen different accredited programs. The premise behind this study was based on a decline in the number of athletic training students that remain within the profession. Through this investigation, the researchers identified factors that led to individuals persisting or leaving the profession. The results of the study indicate that of the 22 students, 12 persisted while 10 left the profession, to pursue careers in other healthcare professions, such as physician's assistant, occupational therapy, and nursing studies (Mazerolle, Gavin, Pitney, & Casa, 2012). To provide an explanation for this trend, Mazerolle created themes relevant to both persisting and leaving the profession. Themes related to persisting include: *professional growth, real-world experience, career goals, faculty and preceptor support, and marketability*. The researcher created themes to explain why undergraduate students have decided to leave the profession included: *low compensation, lack of respect, and time commitment*.

### *Perceptions of Multiple Stakeholders*

The first study to assess the perceptions of multiple stakeholders in ATPs included 18 athletic training students, 15 preceptors, and 17 faculty members. Of the 18 students included in the study, 10 (62.5%) identified as students in undergraduate degree programs, while 6 (37.5%) identified as students in professional master's degree programs (Mazerolle, Bowman, & Pitney, 2015). This study began with an assessment of stakeholder's knowledge related to the professional degree transition. Data analysis of

the completed surveys revealed that 9 of 18 (50%) students, 4 of 17 (26.7%) preceptors and 3 of 17 (17.6%) faculty members had not read the white paper proposition concerning the professional degree transition (Mazerolle, et al., 2015). Although, these statistics do not indicate an absence of knowledge related to the professional degree transition, it does provide a frame of reference for increasing efforts to inform stakeholders of this seminal change initiative.

Support for the transition of the professional degree was noted from 31 of the 50 (62%) participants. Of those that remained, 14 (28%) were opposed to the degree transition and 5 (10%) were neutral or undecided. Of particular interest is the indication from 6 of the 18 (33.3%) students that they would have not selected the athletic training program, had it been offered at the graduate level (Mazerolle, et al., 2015). Survey results from students indicated that 17 (94%), believe that a transition of the professional degree would better align athletic trainers with peer healthcare professionals. 9 students (50%) believe that advanced coursework would better prepare students for professional practice and 14 (77%) believed a professional degree transition would improve retention within the profession. However, students did not agree that a degree designation would have any impact on the maturity of students recruited for professional practice (Mazerolle, et al., 2015).

Athletic training faculty members shared the same response of students related to alignment with peer professions, advanced coursework, and improved retention. However, 13 (76.4%) faculty members believed a transition to graduate level instruction would solicit a greater number of mature students. For preceptors in ATPs, 9 (60%) believed that advance coursework would better align athletic training with peer

professions, whereas none of them believed advance coursework would be an advantage of graduate instruction. However, 10 (66.6%) of the preceptors believe a degree transition will lead to better program retention; 13 (86.7%) believe it will lead to better recruitment of mature students, after having first completed undergraduate students.

Through open-ended response, identification of disadvantages of the professional degree transition was noted. Preceptors included *limited autonomous practice*, as a negative result of the transition. This in theory would occur because graduate assistantships would no longer be a viable option for students to gain additional clinical experience (Mazerolle, et al., 2015). Confirming the preceptors' perception, students indicated that their primary goal for obtaining graduate education was to gain more clinical practice, as they were not yet confident functioning independently. Students also communicated financial concerns, indicating the amount of salary that it would cost to add one additional year of graduate school. A disadvantage noted by faculty members included the lack of evidence to support higher salaries, or substantial evidence to prove a need for a transition to graduate studies (Mazerolle, et al., 2015).

### Change Management

Change is a multi-step, complex phenomenon that serves as the driving force behind educational reform. This phenomenon has been studied over the years and is presented here to inform the study. A presentation of change models begins with the earliest known model by Kurt Lewin and subsequent models are presented in order from the latest to earliest designs. Next, is a presentation of change principles by educators, Hall and Hord expand on the process by introducing principles in its relation to

education. Information is also provided on the Concern's Based Adoption Model (CBAM) and the conceptual framework for this study.

*Theoretical Basis for Understanding Change: Lewin*

The earliest model associated with organizational change evolved from the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin. His original work on the field theory served as the impetus for describing the process of managing and implementing planned change (Lewin, 1997). Expressed in notation form,  $B=f(p, e)$ , this theory suggests that behavior is a function of the person and his or her environment (Burnes & Cooke, 2013; Lewin, 1997). In essence, through an analysis of individuals and the environment in which they function, organizational behavior is understood. Supplementing this theory are forces that govern organizational behavior:

1. The forces that change a given standard are equal to and opposite the forces that maintain the standard.
2. The forces against raising a standard increase with the amount being raised. The forces against lowering a standard decrease with the amount of lowering.
3. To modify the existing forces, opposing forces should be diminished (Burnes & Cooke, 2013; Lewin, 1997).

The first two foundational tenants describe organizations as quasi-stationary, indicating a relatively constant internal resistance to change (Burnes, & Cooke, 2013). The third tenant implies that by removing opposing forces, change can be guided in a desired direction. Emerging from this theory is Lewin's three-stage change process, which includes: "unfreezing", "moving" and "refreezing" (Lewin, 1997). The first stage is meant to disrupt the standard operating procedures of an organization by "unfreezing"

customary practices. This process begins with creating an awareness of why the change is needed and its potential benefits (Burnes & Cooke, 2013; Lewin, 1997). The second stage is “moving”, which affords stakeholders an opportunity to become active participants in the change process. This includes exploring implementation options and putting the plan into action (Burnes & Cooke, 2013). The third stage involves “refreezing”; at this stage, the change has been implemented and to avoid it being short-lived, the change must be solidified as part of the new, normal operating procedures (Lewin, 1997). This leading theory serves as the foundational theory of its successive models.

*Theoretical Basis for Understanding Change: Kanter, Stein, & Jick*

A ten-step change model developed by Kanter, Stein and Jick present a philosophical contrast to Kurt Lewin’s change model and his definition of organizations. In Kanter’s model, change is defined as a non-linear process by which organizations are unfrozen, fluid entities (Kanter et al., 1992). This perspective departs from the rigid nature of moving in three distinct phases in order to initiate planned change (Lewin, 1997; Kanter et al., 1992). Instead, Kanter’s model proposes that Lewin’s three stages of change, in actuality “overlap and interpenetrate one another” (Kanter et al., 1992, p. 10).

This model, known as the ten commandments of change include:

1. Analyze the organization of its need for change
2. Create a shared vision and common direction
3. Separate the past
4. Create a sense of urgency
5. Support a strong leader role

6. Line up political sponsorship
7. Craft an implementation plan
8. Develop enabling structures
9. Communicate, involve people and be honest
10. Reinforce and institutionalize change

The first four steps of this model are analogous to Lewin's first stage, "unfreezing". However, this model begins with an analysis of the organizations' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to determine how change impacts structure and efficiency (Kanter et al., 1992). Next, organizational leaders must communicate how the proposed change benefits stakeholders in the present and future. Once this vision is communicated, there must be a transition away from the present culture in order to establish a new system of organizational principles (Kanter et al., 1992). To rally stakeholders, a sense of urgency must be proclaimed. Otherwise, there will not be sufficient buy-in to activate the desired change (Kanter et al., 1992).

Steps five through seven are analogous to Lewin's second stage, "moving". These steps represent a process that must be guided by a strong leader who creates a vision for the organization and rewards those who move towards the attainment of that vision (Kanter et al., 1992). However, leadership alone cannot implement planned-change; it must be accomplished through the collaborative effort of administrators, those who have the inventory and power to enact change and stakeholders, those directly affected by the change (Kanter et al., 1992). Through open communication between each party, a mutually beneficial plan detailing the procedures and timeline for implementation can be crafted (Kanter et al., 1992). Once the plan has been initiated, the final three steps

of this model, analogous to Lewin's "refreezing" stage offer opportunities to sustain the newly crafted change. This begins with offering continuing education programs, incentives and most importantly maintaining an open line of communication, to ensure continuing progression towards a shared vision (Kanter et al., 1992).

*Theoretical Basis for Understanding Change: Kotter*

The eight-step change process developed by John Kotter is formatted to help organizations avoid the common pitfalls of implementing change (Kotter, 1996). Of the eight steps, the first three are collectively referred to as the initial steps in defrosting the status quo, a phrase that borrows from the work of Kurt Lewin's first step, "unfreezing" (Kotter, 1996; Lewin, 1997). Steps four through six are analogous to Lewin's second step, "moving", and the act of introducing a new practice for adoption. The final steps-seven and eight, direct attention towards anchoring the new practice in the organization's culture (Kotter, 1996). This eight-step process entails:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Putting together the guiding coalition
3. Developing vision and strategy
4. Communicating the change vision
5. Empowering broad based action
6. Generating short term wins
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture

As noted by Kotter, this process is often met with unwarranted modifications, which include skipping or implementing phases without anchoring the change (1996).

When change doesn't flow in these eight sequential steps, it doesn't build or develop in a natural way (Kotter, 1996). In turn, the change feels forced and rigid instead of being a natural progression of behavior (Kotter, 1996). Another common error is moving ahead without establishing a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996). To combat this practice, sources of complacency must be removed. These factors include, but are not limited to, the absence of an observable need, having too many resources and or having easily obtainable standards (Kotter, 1996). Likewise, the lack of a leadership team to direct the change initiative is a common error made by organizations. With leadership and a clear vision in place, the direction of change becomes evident and employees are motivated to take action, regardless of their rank or position (Kotter, 1996). Equally important in this process is establishing short-term goals to continue upward momentum.

#### *Theoretical Basis for Understanding Change: Senge*

Peter Senge describes organizations as relatively stable, yet developing organisms (1999). In other words, organizations grow at a steady rate, but eventually slow down as they reach maturity (1999). To illustrate this concept, Senge's change model likens organizations to trees that experience growth due to environmental factors such as water, soil, sunlight and space (Senge, 1999). In the absence of these factors, the growth process is inhibited (Senge, 1999). According to Senge, organization leaders seldom devote attention to the limiting factors embedded within the change process:

1. Initiating Change
2. Sustaining Momentum
3. Redesigning & Rethinking



Factors that inhibit initiating the change include: a lack of time, a lack of assistance, focusing on irrelevant tasks and organizational leaders who fail to model the shared vision they proclaim (Senge, 1999). A lack of time becomes problematic due to requisite time for strategic planning and implementation (Senge, 1999). Without sufficient time to devote, employees' commitment to the process decreases (Senge, 1999). Similarly, a lack of assistance from leadership can be just as detrimental. This limiting factor becomes evident when leadership fails to provide assistance, knowledge and expertise to implement the desired change (Senge, 1999). In response, employees begin to focus on irrelevant tasks, diverting attention away from the change initiative.

Anxiety and assessment of the change initiative can impede the ability to sustain meaningful change (Senge, 1999). After an initiative is put into practice, those implementing the change develop the confidence to ask in-depth questions about the process and whether or not the purpose is being accomplished (Senge, 1999). This learned skill typically uncovers errors of implementation or issues not previously addressed (Senge, 1999). After the change occurs, it is essential for organizational leaders to redesign or rethink the manner by which organizations should govern (Senge, 1999). This third step is most important because the need for change will always exist; without it, organizations are limited in growth and functional capability.

### Principles of Change

Change initiatives occur either because "it is imposed, or because we voluntarily participate or even initiate the change" (Fullan, 1993, p. 20). Nevertheless, the complexities are seldom understood. Therefore, a need exists to understand change on an individual and systems level. To address the phenomena of change, Hall and Hord

developed ten principles termed, “principles of change”, which brings understanding to why it is implemented, how it is implemented and what it means for the system at large. Moreover, each of these principles adequately addresses the proposed change initiative that would impact the allied healthcare educational system. The principles are as follows:

1. Change is learning.
2. Change is a process, not an event.
3. The school is the primary unit for change.
4. Organizations adopt change--individuals implement change.
5. Interventions are key to the success of the change process.
6. Appropriate interventions reduce resistance to change.
7. Administrator leadership is essential to long-term change success.
8. Facilitating change is a team effort.
9. Mandates can work.
10. The context influences the process of learning and change (2011, pp. 6-10).

Through examination of each principle, it becomes abundantly clear that change first impacts individuals and subsequently impacts the system as a whole (Hall & Hord, 2011).

As it relates to the “Change is learning” principle, Hall and Hord state, “to make things better...change is introduced and learning makes it possible to make the change” (2011, p. 6). This principle stems from reasons why change may be implemented, which includes but is not limited to: desire, improvement or necessity (Hall & Hord, 2011). For each of these motivating factors, individuals or organizations must identify that which needs to be learned in order to successfully implement or sustain change. Fullan posits,

every individual within an organization should be a change agent, given that change is not optimally achieved through one individual (1993). As it relates to the athletic training profession, the need for change is borne out of the need for improvement. According to the NATA, improvement can be made in terms of student retention, alignment of the profession with peer professions, along with a need to produce a more effective educational system (2013). Therefore, learning or identifying the areas in which change is needed makes the change possible. However, individuals must implement the change, so that it is actualized, hence the term “change agents” (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Fullan, 1993; Hall & Hord, 2011).

The second principle of change, “Change is a process, not an event” speaks to the manner in which change is implemented; it further denotes that grief is often a component of change, and what often seems to be resistance is in actuality sadness--requiring people to begin learning and functioning outside of their comfort zone (Hall & Hord, 2011). Furthermore, this principle sheds light on how change should be implemented. The most effective way to implement change is “when it is strategic in nature” and occurs over a three to five year timeframe, allowing for the appropriate resources and planning to enact the change (Hall & Hord, 2011). On the other hand, the least effective manner to enact change is if it were an event-sporadic with little to no opportunity for clarification or occurring after one learning session (Hall & Hord, 2011). Within the field of athletic training, the professional degree mandate for institutions has been announced, being fully implemented in the year 2022 (NATA, 2015). As a result, the NATA encouraged individuals within the field to be empowered as change agents, learning and gathering resources to further inform the transition to graduate level

instruction (NATA, 2012; NATA 2013). Although the professional degree is being mandated, the conversation on the subject is ongoing and includes a call for additional research to be conducted (NATA, 2013).

“The school is the primary unit for change” and is representative of the third change principle, which suggests, “the key organizational unit for making change successful is the school” (Hall & Hord, 2011, p. 12). This principle is especially evident within the athletic training profession, as previous reform efforts have been initiated through the educational system (Delforge & Behnke, 1999; Ray, 2006). However, Hall and Hord (2011) continue by painting a larger image of how change is implemented, indicating, it is “the school staff and leaders that make or break any change effort, regardless of whether or not the change is initiated from the inside or outside” (p. 9). Therefore, it becomes important to consider those who will implement or be a part of the change process. Moreover, it is important to note that those involved in the process extend beyond the organization, and includes administration, community members, and others who are beneficiaries of the educational system (Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2011).

The fourth change principle includes aspects of the previous three, and is summed by the title, “organizations adopt change-individuals implement change”. As depicted by Hall and Hord, the implementation bridge uniquely describes this concept, representing the medium by which organizations progress from current practices to desired outcomes (2011). For the athletic training profession, crossing this bridge will require a collective effort from educators, students, and administrators, as each represent a central component of the athletic training educational system. In this system, administration may extend beyond faculty members and include the department chair and or dean; although these

individuals are not directly responsible for instructing students, they play a vital role as “intellectual leaders”, “cultural and emotional leaders” and “strategic leaders” (Hargraves, Earl, Moore & Manning, 2001 p. 176). For that reason, effective leadership is vital to any change initiative.

To cross the implementation bridge, “interventions are key to the success of the change process”- this fifth principle amplifies the importance of the intervention, which Hall and Hord describe as a collection of “activities that support individuals in gaining the requisite capacities for behaving in new ways. Without these interventions, the change is doomed unless attention is given to them” (2011, p. 12). Interventions may be as broad as offering instructional sessions, or as focused as offering individuals involved in the change process an opportunity to discuss their story, or how they may be impacted by the change (Hall & Hord, 2011). Specifically, interventions should be viewed in a cyclical nature, existing continuously throughout a change initiative. These interventions begin with leadership, whom must develop and share the vision of change, articulating how it serves to benefit the organization and those functioning within it. Furthermore, this process involves providing the appropriate resources for individuals so that change can be actualized; subsequently, those within leadership must evaluate the change process and provide continuing assistance for those implementing the change (Hall & Hord, 2011).

Resistance to change is common, and may impede the change process. As a result, it is imperative that appropriate interventions are used to address the perception of change-assuming it is ethical and of substance. Resistance occurs primarily because an individual or organization is being pushed outside their comfort zone or because

individuals have concerns about whether the impending change will lead to improvement (Hall & Hord, 2011). Regardless of the presentation-it is imperative that resistance is addressed on an individual level. With this in mind, those in leadership positions should select the most appropriate means to address individuals concerns (Hargraves et al., 2001). For those within the athletic training profession, potential resistance is best understood through one's account of how change impacts them as an individual and the system by which they function (Hall & Hord, 2011). If successful at garnering one's account, there should be little resistance or pain--and large gains as the conversation should indicate whether the initiative is flawed or worthy of implementation (Hall & Hord, 2011).

The seventh change principle works in concert with the fourth, pointing to administration having an integral role in a given change initiative. In today's educational system, the common school of thought advocates for a "bottom-up change- [one where] those nearest the action have the best ideas of how to accomplish the change" (Hall & Hord, 2011, p. 13). While this rationale has merit, it is best met with assistance from administration to sustain such efforts. Analogous to this principle is the eighth, "Facilitating change is a team effort" and involves not only those in leadership positions, but others in the given system. Each system is comprised of both internal and external components. The internal components include individuals that work collaboratively on a consistent basis to achieve desired outcomes. On the other hand, those in external roles "can and do, make significant difference" but function in a supportive or supervisory role (Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2011; Hargraves et al., 2001).

The ninth change principle, “mandates can work”, addresses the common implementation of change, especially within the school system. This strategy is often known as the “top-down” approach, and describes change initiatives that extend from the external components of the system, in hopes of improving the internal components. Hall and Hord posit, when a mandate is accompanied by “continuing communication, ongoing learning, on-site coaching and time for implementation, it can work” (Hall & Hord, 2011, p. 15). With change being possible, it is worth studying, as it presents a complex process that must be fully understood prior to implementation.

The final change principle considers, “two important dimensions that affect the change efforts of the individual and the organization” which include *physical features* and *people factors* (Hall & Hord, 2011, p. 15). Physical features describe the system and considers size, policies, resources and structure; people factors entail the “attitudes, beliefs, and values” of the individuals within the system (Hall & Hord, 2011, p. 15). Collectively, both dimensions create an initial snapshot of how successful a change initiative can be. In essence, the “context influences the process of learning and change” and informs the impact change has on a given system.

#### Concerns Based Adoption Model

Developed at the University of Texas Research Development Center for Teacher Education, the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) provides a framework for understanding, describing, and measuring the process of change (Anderson, 1997). Supported by a classification of systems: resource, user and collaborative, this model also serves as a mechanism in which organizations are empowered to enact change (Hall et al., 1983). Fundamentally, it represents a process of exchanging information for action.

The resource system is considered the established party-harnessing resources, tools and information to facilitate an unobstructed change innovation (Hall et al., 1983). Its purpose is to act, providing these resources to the user system. On the other hand, the user system represents the organization responsible for carrying out or modeling the innovation (Hall et al., 1983). The user systems' function includes sharing information related to the concerns, needs, capabilities and usage of the innovation to the resource system. When efficient operation is noted between both systems, the collaborative system is established (Hall, et al., 1983). This system is considered to be temporary, existing until the user system has the capability of thriving on its own accord with the new innovation in effect. Unique to this model is the attention devoted to individual's perception of change. Hall and Hord (2011) confirm, noting that change must first be addressed on an individual level because it is the collective of individuals that enact the change.

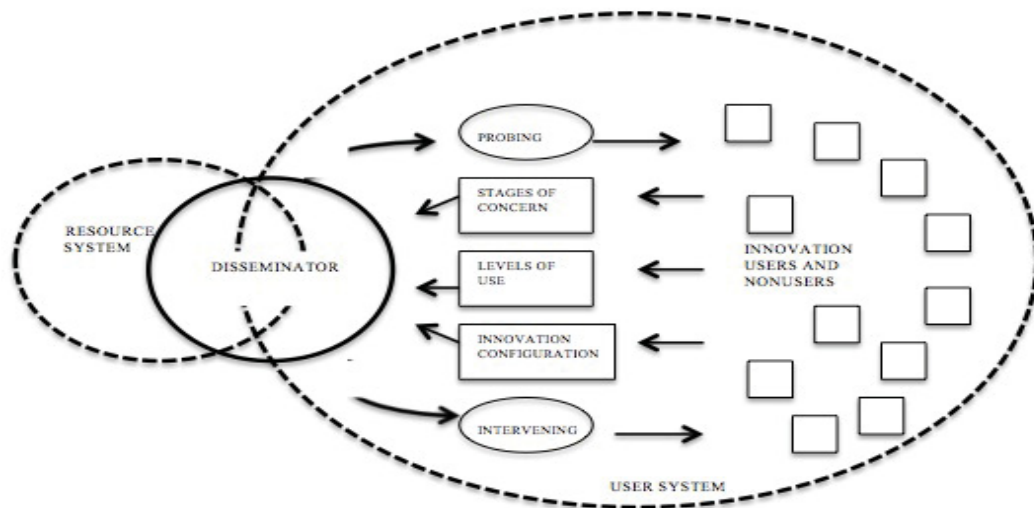


Figure 2. Adaptation of the Concerns based adoption model. Loucks, S. F. (1983). *The Concerns- Based Adoption Model (CBAM): Series Paper (Number 2)* p. 16. Copyright 1983 by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



### *Stages of Concern*

Individuals' stages of concern can be assessed utilizing two techniques according to Newlove and Hall (1976), the stages of concern questionnaire (SoC-Q) or the use of open-ended concerns statements (Newlove & Hall, 1976; Loucks, 1983). Often utilized as a hierarchical structure of adapting to change, the SoC are expressed, according to Loucks (1983) from a bottom up approach: Awareness (Stage 0), Informational (Stage 1), Personal (Stage 2), Management (Stage 3), Consequence (Stage 4), Collaboration (Stage 5), and Refocusing (Stage 6). Each successive stage represents the tapering of self-related concerns, progressing to emphasis being placed on the tools, and information needed to successfully execute the tasks. As the individuals adapt to the innovation, concerns shift towards how the innovation benefits those who will be the primary recipients of the innovation (Fuller, 1969; Loucks, 1983).

The stages of concern are built on the premise that if change is not first addressed with individuals, the innovation may be thwarted, suppressing potential outcomes (Anderson, 1997). When applied to the athletic training profession, it becomes clear that these stages of concern need to be assessed by stakeholders of undergraduate degree programs such as students, faculty and staff. By acquiring such information, disseminators can more readily address concerns and better inform those who function within the system, affording them time to gradually adapt to the imposed change.

### *Levels of Use*

The "levels of use" is also evident in hierarchical structure, from a bottom-up approach and includes: Nonuse (Level 0), Orientation (Level I), Preparation (Level II), Mechanical Use (Level III), Routine (Level IV-A), Refinement (Level IV-B), Integration

(Level V) and Renewal (Level VI). This component of the CBAM moves away from focusing on the specific innovation and seeks to understand individuals' behavior or use of the innovation (Anderson, 1997; Hall & Rutherford, 1983; Loucks, 1983). In essence, this process can be divided into two categories, individuals who are considered users and those who are considered to be non-users of the innovation (Roach, Kratochwill & Frank, 2009). Assessment of this component is similar to that of stages of concern; as individuals move away from self-reflection regarding change and move to higher levels of use regarding the innovation, attainment of the innovations objectives become more likely.

The levels of use can be assessed through implementation of an interview protocol, followed by identifying statements and or themes that suggests the specified level of use by the organization. As it pertains to the athletic training profession, this component of CBAM is feasibly implemented when speaking with athletic training educators-as they are responsible for carrying out and or modeling the transition to graduate level education.

### *Innovation Configurations*

Innovation configuration, the final component of the CBAM was established through evidence that suggests disseminators rarely implement the same innovation, in the exact same manner (Anderson, 1997; Roach et al., 2009). Specifically, this component of the CBAM assesses the individual strategies, materials and procedures an organization utilizes to implement the innovation. Because of the variability that can exist with implementation, innovation configurations seek to have facilitators create an image of the model program, what it looks like and how it functions, so they are

empowered to execute the tasks. As a result, there is increased efficiency when implementing the innovation.

To craft this image, either interviews and or observations can be utilized to determine how organizations organize and implement the innovation. This process often begins with identifying the components of the innovation, and determining variations of each component (Hall & Hord, 2011). Once completed, variations are labeled, indicating the level of acceptance, whether ideal, sufficient or needing revision (Anderson, 1997). As it pertains to the athletic training profession, this component of the CBAM can be utilized to plan for implementing the professional degree transition and or assess its current implementation.

#### *Collective Efforts in The Transition of A Professional Degree*

As it pertains to the professional degree transition for the athletic training profession, the resource system is made up of the NATA Strategic Alliance- the collaborative efforts between the NATA, CAATE and BOC. Collectively, these organizations will help to usher in the new professional standards for professional practice associated with graduate level education. Additionally, it will be up to the Program Director and Clinical Coordinator of undergraduate programs to determine if a transition to graduate level education is feasible. If it proves feasible, these individuals will also be responsible for educating stakeholders about the innovation along with developing the graduate level curriculum.

#### Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter provided a foundation for understanding the complexities of change, both in education and allied healthcare. However, there are

currently no conceptual models that provide a joint approach for exploring and understanding these topics simultaneously.

In the literature reviewed, there are few studies that examine the perceptions of program stakeholders related to the professional degree transition. The studies that do exist however, utilize stakeholder perceptions to validate the advantages and disadvantages of the degree transition. Secondly, these studies investigate why the change is taking place, through an analysis of programmatic design, retention rates, and career decisions for students after graduation.

The profession's rationale for transitioning to graduate level education can be traced back to research presented by early change theorist, Kurt Lewin (1997) and modern-day theorist in education, Hall & Hord (2011). Together, their work highlights the importance for organizations to adapt and become amenable to change in order to maintain permanency and or strive towards becoming preeminent. Although the reviewed literature explores topics of change and stakeholder perceptions, there is limited research on exploring how the mandated change impacts program stakeholders at a single private college.

In Chapter 3, the methods, procedures and data analysis utilized for this study is discussed. This is followed by a review of the results in Chapter 4. The results are followed by a discussion of the findings, implications for further research and recommendations for the profession and private colleges planning to transition from undergraduate to graduate education in Chapter 5.

## Chapter III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of program stakeholders in one baccalaureate level athletic training program facing nationally mandated changes in the professional degree for the athletic training profession. This chapter begins with a description of the research design along with the phenomenological approach that guided this study. Next is a presentation of the research questions, a description of the research setting and data collection procedures. Also included within this section is a description of the approval and consent process. This is followed by a description of the sampling procedure, participant selection and the process for conducting interview and focus forums. Concluding this chapter is a description of the data analysis, procedures, validity and ethical considerations.

#### Research Design

Qualitative research is most appropriate for this study as it uncovers how “meaning is socially constructed by individuals through interaction with their world” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 3). In other words, a qualitative study effectively captures the essence of one’s experience and provides substance to discussions on program evaluation and decisions regarding policy (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). To bring forth understanding related to the professional degree transition, emphasis is being placed on perception. Precisely, the researcher intended to understand the perceived impact this change would have on the educational system, and those functioning within

it. According to Moustakas (1994), perception “is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted” (p. 52). Therefore, one’s consciousness, awareness or perception of an event is worthy of being explored, as it represents an absolute truth (Moustakas, 1994).

The basic interpretive approach was the ideal approach for this study, as it allows the reader to investigate and understand how individuals make meaning of phenomena- “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, make sense of it and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). This study provided an opportunity for participants to share their stories, their experiences and their perceptions, allowing the researcher to interpret how it impacts the institution.

### *Research Questions*

To accomplish the purpose of this study, the following research questions were addressed:

*Research Question 1.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact institutions of higher education that currently offer an accredited undergraduate degree program?

*Research Question 2.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact athletic training faculty teaching in undergraduate degree programs?

*Research Question 3.* What is the impact of the mandated professional degree transition on preceptors affiliated with undergraduate athletic training programs?

### Setting

The setting for this study is a private liberal arts institution with a total of two campuses and a population of 2,266 students in the southeastern United States (NCES,

2017). Of the total number of students, 1,295 (48.5%) are at the undergraduate degree level and 971 (42.8%) students are at the graduate level (NCES, 2017). Located in what is described as a rural city, the institution is home to four schools: Arts & Sciences, Business, Education and Nursing and Health Sciences. This institution is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS) (NCES, 2017). The athletic training program at this institution is accredited by the Commission on the Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE, n.d.).

### Data Collection

This section outlines the procedural steps that were utilized to conduct this study and includes a description of the approval and consent process along with the selection of research participants. This section also includes a description for how the data was gathered and maintained.

#### *Approval to Conduct the Study*

Prior to beginning this study, full approval was obtained by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), as well as the IRB at the institution in which this study was conducted (see Appendix A). This study adhered to the policies, procedures and protocol involving human subjects, and was compliant with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR § 46.102 (2009). This asserts that the study was deemed appropriate and of minimal risk to human participants and that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the study was not greater than any ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of any routine physical or psychological examination or test.

### *Consent to Participate*

All participants in this study were at least 18 years of age. At the beginning of each interview and focus forum, participants were read a letter of consent to participate in the study (see Appendix B). This letter was also provided to each participant for his or her own records. The reading of this letter detailed a description of the study, the benefits, confidentiality measures, and the length of time the data would be stored. The researcher provided each participant an opportunity to pose questions about the study and informed them of their right to stop responding to or discontinue their participation in the interview or focus forum. The reading of this information was also included in the audio recordings of each interview and focus forum session.

### *Sampling Procedure*

The nature of qualitative research lends itself to purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves selecting “individuals and sites for study because they can inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). As supported by Merriam and Associates (2002), this approach also provides the opportunity to select individuals that offer the most information rich data. To understand the implications of a professional degree transition, it was imperative to select individuals who are typically associated with an athletic training program (Merriam, 1988). For this reason, the researcher selected a typical sample. This type of sampling “highlights what is normal or average” about a setting, institution, or group of people (Creswell, 2013, p. 158).

The sample included athletic training faculty members, preceptors, and students affiliated with the athletic training program at the host institution. The rationale for



selecting these individuals is because of the similar role they have with others in accredited athletic training programs across the nation. As a result, this provided the researcher an opportunity to increase the generalizability of the results to the broader population. In addition, a private liberal arts institution was chosen for this study because it is among the minority of institutions housing an accredited athletic training program nationally. This provides an opportunity to ask, “What's going on here?” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 75).

Selecting the sample size based on the purpose of the study is a practice supported by Kvale (1996) and Patton (2002). This technique was utilized in this study and afforded the researcher an opportunity to begin with individuals most likely to be impacted by the professional degree transition. This approach allowed the researcher to focus initially on the quality of the participant and not the quantity. However, if after conducting the study, a saturation point had not been met, the researcher was willing to increase the sample size until this point was reached (Patton, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). However, this was not necessary. Saturation was noted in this study through the reoccurrence of themes within and across both interview and focus forums.

#### *Participant Selection*

The researcher contacted the Program Director (PD) about the purpose and the nature of this study and solicited her approval to utilize the athletic training program at this institution for the purpose of this study (see Appendix C). The PD is responsible for every aspect of the athletic training program, so her willingness to participate in this study provided the researcher access to solicit the participation from the remaining faculty members, which includes the Clinical Education Coordinator (CEC), and the third

athletic training faculty member. Furthermore, this provided the researcher access to recruit preceptors and students affiliated with the athletic training program.

The primary stakeholder groups in an athletic training program are the faculty members, preceptors and students. Each of the faculty members affiliated with the program was included in this study. However, the researcher worked directly with the CEC to send a recruitment letter (see Appendix D) via e-mail to both preceptor and student groups. Within the recruitment e-mail, the researcher provided an electronic link for those interested in participating in the study, asking preceptors to supply their name, clinical setting (i.e. Clinic, High School, College, Industrial, and Hospital) and e-mail address. Students were asked to supply their name, academic classification (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior) and e-mail address.

After this information was gathered from the electronic form, the researcher included all participants that indicated an interest to participate in the study. The researcher was able to secure the participation of three out of the four preceptors that work directly on the college campus, and one additional preceptor who is affiliated with the program but works at a local high school and hospital. The electronic link sent to preceptors provided options to select the time of day in which the focus forum took place. The researcher selected the time that allowed each preceptor to participate. The electronic link sent to the student group provided the specific day and time in which the focus forum would take place. This time and day for both groups was determined in consultation with the faculty members included in this study.

### *Interviews*

A total of three faculty members were included in this study. The researcher began by completing individual semi-structured interviews (see Appendix E) with each faculty member; an approach Seidman (2006) calls the focused life history. It is here that the researcher described the participants in context of the phenomena of interest. This interview also provided an opportunity to establish rapport with the faculty. The subsequent semi-structured interview with faculty (see Appendix F) members was a joint interview, focusing on their perceptions regarding the professional degree transition. Specifically, this provided an opportunity to address any potential concerns the faculty have about this change and how it will impact them and the system in which they function. The format of both interviews utilized a semi-structured interview protocol, which provides maneuverability to explore topics and or stories that emerge throughout the interview process (Patton, 2002). As suggested by Seidman (2013), a ninety-minute interview provides a unit of time that does not lead to research participants “watching the clock” as they would be more inclined to do with a one or two hour time frame. Furthermore, Seidman reports that this unit of time has proved ample to garner thick-descriptive accounts of a phenomenon (2013).

### *Focus Forums*

There were a total of four preceptors and ten students that participated in this study. According to Krueger and Casey (2015), focus forums provide an opportunity for individuals of similar position to share what they think or how they feel about a particular issue. For this study, a separate session was utilized for both preceptors and students and was structured based on the single category design (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This

design relates to the uniformity of individuals within a session, providing them an opportunity to interact with peers and project a unified voice. Each focus forum session was conducted utilizing a semi-structured interview for both preceptor (see Appendix F) and student (see Appendix G) groups.

Similar to the interviews with faculty members, the purpose of the focus forum was to uncover potential concerns among preceptors and students regarding the professional degree transition. Moreover, the researcher wanted to understand their perceptions of how this change will impact them both on a personal and professional level. In line with the interviews conducted for the faculty members, each focus group session was allotted a ninety-minute time frame for participants to reconstruct their experiences and share their thoughts, opinions and beliefs about this change (Seidman, 2006). Also, both focus forums were recorded with an audio recorder, and the recordings were utilized as a reflective piece for the researcher and for transcription purposes.

#### Methods of Analysis

Heeding the guidance of Patton (2002), Maxwell (2013), and Yin (2014), the objective of data analysis is to identify various patterns and insights related to a given topic. With this in mind, the researcher intently focused on patterns that were similar in the stories, experiences and perceptions of participants. This enabled the researcher to uncover the essence of how a change in the professional degree impacts an institution. The data analysis for this study began with an audio recording for each interview and focus forum. Throughout each, the researcher recorded hand written notes of topics phrases or statements to prompt further discussion or to ask follow up questions. The researcher was prompted based on gestures, mannerisms, and behaviors that are not

easily noted in an audio recording. Purposefully, the researcher limited the amount of note taking during these sessions in order to remain fully engaged in the discussions taking place.

At the conclusion of each interview and focus forum, the researcher listened to the audio recordings to ensure the clarity of sound and to ensure that the entirety of the session was captured. The memos completed after each session were immediately transcribed (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Next, the audio recordings were transcribed. After these interviews were transcribed, the researcher listened to the recordings multiple times to ensure accuracy between both the audio and the transcribed data. As a result, the transcribed data was analyzed and coded to develop constructed themes (Maxwell, 2013; Vagle, 2014). This process of reduction was initiated through the “whole-part-whole” process, which provided a holistic perspective of the phenomena (Vagle, 2014).

The first phase of this process is a holistic reading of the text; here, the researcher sought to gain familiarity with the text itself. In this regard, time was invested into reading and reflecting upon the data in its entirety, without intently analyzing participant’s responses to each question (Vagle, 2014). The second phase, termed, line-by-line reading began with re-reading the text and making note of words, quotes or phrases that appear to describe the essence of participants experience or perception (Vagle, 2014). After having completed this step, the researcher completed a second, line-by-line reading of the text. However, this time the researcher began to make meaning of the information identified in the first phase of this analysis. Lastly, the researcher completed a third, line-by-line analysis, which manifested in the early analysis regarding how the phenomenon was being uncovered (Vagle, 2014).

At the conclusion of the third line-by-line reading, the researcher progressed to the final stage of the whole-part-whole process, known as subsequent reading. In this stage, the researcher compared the stories, perceptions and experiences of those who participated in this study with one another. Through this process, the researcher utilized a categorical qualitative matrix (Maxwell, 2013) and began utilizing codes that bridged information contained within the literature and conceptual framework to describe the impact of the professional degree transition on stakeholders affiliated with this institution.

### Validity

The concept of validity describes the integrity involved with designing, conducting and analyzing research (Maxwell, 2013). In order to maintain a high degree of validity in this process, the researcher began by confirming the accuracy of the data to be analyzed. This was achieved by ensuring that the audio recordings of interviews and focus forums were properly aligned with the transcribed data. The transcribed data also represents a rich description of the phenomena being investigated. According to Maxwell, such accounts are inherent within qualitative research (2013).

### *Researcher's Experiential Knowledge*

The researcher is a certified athletic trainer and an athletic training faculty member that began serving in the role of CEC at the time this study was being conducted. He was drawn to this study as speculation for a change in the professional degree surfaced at state and regional athletic training conferences.

Although the National Athletic Trainer's Association (NATA) published a white paper detailing the necessity and rationale for a change in the professional degree, there were still more questions than answers for stakeholder groups.

As one of the three faculty members in an athletic training program, the researcher has received numerous questions from parents, students, faculty members and other athletic trainers about why a change in the professional degree was taking place and what benefit it provided to stakeholder groups. While answers were provided to these individuals, the researcher was not able to provide a single answer as to how this change would impact a single institution housing an athletic training program.

The researcher was drawn to the institution in this study because of its liberal arts designation, as his alma mater and his place of employment share this designation. The researcher's hope through conducting this study was to determine how a change in the professional degree impacts similar schools and to provide a thorough description for stakeholders regarding the breadth and depth of this change.

#### *Researcher-Interviewer*

Qualitative research operates under the premise that the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2002). Because qualitative researchers typically conduct studies in areas of personal interest, it is commonplace to have assumptions and beliefs related to a given topic. Therefore, it was imperative that the researcher identifies his subjectivity, which is attributed to his beliefs about the professional degree transition and his experience as an educator in an accredited athletic training program. As a result, the researcher refrained from sharing his personal views about the professional degree and remained open to the thoughts, attitudes and opinions expressed by the participants in the study. This practice helped to limit the researcher's subjectivity from influencing the data gathering and analysis process. To further limit the influence of the researcher's subjectivity, member checks and memos written at the conclusion of interview and focus

forum sessions were utilized (Maxwell, 2013). These measures do not completely eliminate threats to validity. However, they are effective measures for reducing the potential of inaccurately interpreting the data and basing conclusions off of prior knowledge and current assumptions. As noted by Maxwell (2013), subjectivity is impossible to completely eliminate. In many ways, the researcher's subjectivity helped him be intentional about asking certain questions and to have participants expound on their responses.

#### *Member Checks*

As supported by Maxwell (2013), soliciting feedback from research participants helps to ensure that the conclusions are representative of their thoughts, opinions and attitudes. This process, also known as respondent validation was utilized during and after the data gathering process. In both instances, the participants were provided with the opportunity to verify the researcher's understanding of their statements. Overall, this practice helped to increase the validity of the study and provided an additional means to minimize the researcher's personal biases from influencing the results of this study.

#### *Ethical Issues*

In an effort to ensure that this study was conducted with the highest regard for ethical considerations, the researcher completed human subjects' research training. In addition, several measures were taken to ensure that this study was ethically sound. Prior to beginning the study, the researcher sought and was granted approval to conduct research from the Institutional Review Board at Valdosta State University and at the institution in which this study was conducted. The researcher also explained to the participants how their information would be stored and that their personal information



would remain confidential. To protect each participant's identity, their names were replaced in transcriptions and other forms of documentation with pseudonyms. Also, prior to conducting the interview and focus forum sessions, the participants provided verbal consent to engage in the study.

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of program stakeholders in one baccalaureate level athletic training program facing nationally mandated changes requiring a master's degree as the entry-level degree for certification in the athletic training profession. In this study, a basic interpretive approach was utilized. Data gathering was acquired through the use of interviews with faculty members and focus forums with both preceptors and students. The study took place at a private liberal arts institution in the southeastern portion of the United States. Each participant volunteered for this study and was not compensated for their time. The data for this study was acquired over a three-month time period.

This chapter has detailed the methodology of this study, described the setting in which the study took place and presented the process utilized for analyzing the data. Chapter 4 will begin with a summary of the results from the study and will be followed by Chapter 5 which will include a discussion of the findings, the conclusions and recommendations for further research.

## Chapter IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of program stakeholders in one baccalaureate level athletic training program facing nationally mandated changes in the professional degree for the athletic training profession. Through a series of interviews and focus forums, the researcher captured an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of faculty, preceptors, and students as they shared their stories about the personal and professional impact of this change. This study has the potential to inform college and university personnel along with program administrators in how to effectively implement change, including how to effectively transition from undergraduate to graduate-level instruction.

A total of three faculty members, ten undergraduate athletic training students and four preceptors were included in the interview process. Analysis of the data was initiated through listening to the digital recordings multiple times, followed by transcription of the interviews and coding the data using a “whole-part-whole” analysis, which included a holistic reading of the text, line-by-line analysis and the consideration of how participant responses were situated within in context of the study (Vagle, 2014). Participant responses were then placed into a matrix and themes were developed from studying the data. Based on the information from the interviews, profiles were developed for each of the participants.

## Research Questions

To accomplish the purpose of this study, interview questions were formulated to provide answers to the following research questions:

*Research Question 1.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impacts institutions of higher education that currently offers an accredited undergraduate degree program?

*Research Question 2.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impacts athletic training faculty teaching in undergraduate degree programs?

*Research Question 3.* What is the impact of the mandated professional degree transition on preceptors affiliated with undergraduate athletic training programs?

## Data Analysis and Findings

### *Results of Faculty Member Interviews*

The athletic training faculty members were interviewed on two separate occasions, once individually and together as a group. Each faculty member represented typical roles within athletic training programs: Program Director (PD), Clinical Education Coordinator (CEC), and athletic training faculty member. Of the faculty members, two are female and one is male. In relation to race, each faculty member is Caucasian. The criteria used to create each participant's profile included gender, title, and the number of years as a certified athletic trainer. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to maintain anonymity. Table 1 provides information regarding the pseudonyms used, the gender of the participant, his or her programmatic title and the number of years as a certified athletic trainer.

Table 1

*Faculty Member Profile Table*

Pseudonym	Gender	Title	Years Certified
Dr. Mary Jordan	F	Program Director	21
Mr. Peter Krause	M	Clinical Education Coordinator	12
Mrs. Jane Ferris	F	Athletic Training Faculty Member	10

*Brief Profiles of Athletic Training Faculty*

*Dr. Mary Jordan.* Dr. Jordan serves as the Program Director for the athletic training program (ATP) and has been a certified athletic trainer for twenty-one years. She began teaching athletic training courses as a Clinical Education Coordinator in 2001. She holds a bachelor’s degree in physical education-teacher education, a master’s degree in athletic training and a doctorate in education. Her interest in teaching developed early, as many of her family members are educators. However, her passion for the profession developed during her undergraduate years-having been recruited as a multi-sport athlete.

In the summer before her collegiate career began, she suffered a dislocated shoulder. Shortly thereafter, she had her first encounter with an athletic trainer who designed and implemented the physical rehabilitation process for her injury. Soon, she enrolled in an Introduction to Sports Medicine course and realized that she loved athletic training. Uniquely, she has been involved in several iterations of education reform in athletic training. She entered the profession through the internship route- a pathway to certification that preceded the development of a standardized athletic training curriculum.

She notes the differences between education now and then by saying, “it seems like the pendulum is swinging back” noting that recent graduates “aren't necessarily making the best first employees because they don't have that self-confidence, that experience.” In other words, she points to the need for education reform to improve the level of competence for athletic training students. The remedy, she suggests, is to afford students an opportunity to gain more practical experience, and notes the transition to the professional master’s degree as an appropriate means to provide students with a thorough preview of what they’re committing to, in addition to having athletic trainers more appropriately recognized as healthcare professionals.

*Mr. Peter Krause.* Mr. Krause has been a certified athletic trainer for twelve years and currently, he serves as the Clinical Education Coordinator for the institution’s athletic training program. He holds a bachelor’s degree in athletic training and a master’s of science degree in exercise science, while progressing towards a doctorate degree in education. When asked about his introduction to the profession, he mentioned having an original interest in becoming a physician, but ultimately deciding against it. In an effort to satisfy his desire for being involved in medicine, he served in the military as a medic and during this time he began learning about the athletic training profession. Enthused about a profession that would allow him to integrate his love for sports and his passion for medicine; he went to school with the intent of becoming an athletic trainer. After completing the curriculum and earning his certification, he served as the athletic trainer at one of the largest high schools in the area. As part of his work responsibilities, he also spent time working in a clinic alongside physical therapists, who he says recognized “his ability” as an athletic trainer. He credits this clinical experience in helping him to expand

his clinical knowledge and abilities-which ultimately built his confidence. When asked what served as the impetus for him to seek a career in education, he credits having the opportunity to teach classes as a graduate assistant. He received positive reviews about his ability to make course content relatable. He also noted the lack of flexibility in the athletic trainer's schedule that led to an increased desire to pursue teaching within the profession. Peter's first appointment in an athletic training program began three years ago at the institution being explored in this study.

*Mrs. Jane Ferris.* Mrs. Jane Ferris has been a certified athletic trainer for ten years, and currently serves as one of the three athletic training faculty members at the institution. Jane holds a bachelor's degree in athletic training and a master of science degree in exercise science. She is also progressing towards a doctorate degree in education. Jane credits her mother for sparking her interest in athletic training, stating, "I'm pretty sure my mom made my freshman year schedule. She put me in an Introduction to Athletic Training class." Although her mother may have had some leverage in the courses she took, Jane selected the school she attended largely because of her desire to play volleyball. Prior to teaching within an athletic training program, Jane served in a variety of positions as an athletic trainer, including being an adjunct instructor. She credits her experiences teaching students majoring in applied health sciences, sports and fitness administration, healthcare administration, cardiovascular technology and athletic training, as the driving force to help both her and her students become well-rounded practitioners. When asked what led to her interest in becoming a full-time educator, she prefaces by saying, "I miss the clinical side still, and sometimes I wish I could do both, because I do think that's important." She continues, "Because

sometimes, when the educators are too far removed from it, that doesn't make you a very good educator." Although she notes the value and desire to serve as both a clinician and educator, she softens her stance by saying, "I've changed over for personal reasons. I got sick and it was just easier to not have to travel all the time." Jane's current academic appointment began two years ago at the host institution.

### *Answering the Research Questions*

*Research Question 1:* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impacts institutions of higher education that currently offers an accredited undergraduate degree program?

The first research question was designed to investigate how changing one component of the athletic training educational system would potentially impact other components of that system. Because athletic training educators are seen as the primary source of education and athletic training students are the primary recipients, applicable interview questions were posed to both faculty and athletic training students. Transcripts of three interviews, which separately included faculty and students, were analyzed by underscoring key terms, phrases, or quotes from participants that address how the institution as a whole will be impacted because of this change.

Three themes were constructed regarding the impact of the professional degree transition on institutions currently offering an accredited undergraduate degree program. First is the potential for growth. This is supported with statements from faculty members regarding the existing leadership at the programmatic and administrative level. Although the faculty members in this study mention that their administrative leadership has little knowledge about the athletic training profession, they all describe the program as being

well supported financially. This support enables the program to obtain resources vital for the faculty to educate students and meet accreditation standards. Second, an opportunity exists to effectively advance the profession by transitioning to the professional master's degree. This is evidenced by the mandate from the Athletic Training Strategic Alliance, a conglomerate of organizations committed to advancing the profession, which includes the Board of Certification (BOC), the Commission on the Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE), the National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA) and the NATA Research and Education Foundation. This mandate is to ensure athletic trainers are best equipped for the emerging workforce, which has now been substantiated to occur with graduate level instruction (Athletic Training Strategic Alliance, 2015). Third is the ability for accredited undergraduate-degree programs transitioning to graduate level instruction to be an example for navigating the change process.

### *Potential for Growth*

Leadership personnel and the level of support an institution provides to its athletic training program characterize the “potential for growth” that exists. In this way, leadership can be identified utilizing two categories: the athletic training faculty, as they lead the didactic and clinical aspects of the program, and the institution's administration, which has a direct impact on the program's sustainability in terms of its budget, recruitment and operations. The “potential for growth” also describes pre-requisites that are needed in order to successfully transition to graduate level instruction. Table 2 presents representative quotations from faculty members that describe the existing leadership at the institution.



Table 2

*Descriptions of Programmatic Leadership*

Theme	Quotes
Strong Programmatic Leadership	“Obviously our program director is 100 percent.” (P. Krause)  Nobody does anything but Peter and I. I mean like honestly for the program nobody does anything [programmatically].” (M. Jordan)

Additionally, Dr. Jordan referenced her initial work experience to describe the culture among the athletic training faculty. Of her previous experience, she mentions, “I hated not knowing what the big picture was. I hated not knowing long-term strategy or plans.” She also mentioned that information was only shared from the PD on a need to know basis. She credits these undesirable experiences for moderating the way she leads now, stating, “So, at [my previous institution] and here I have been very cognizant of making sure that everyone is in the loop.” She goes on to mention that she trusts and assigns various roles to each faculty member and or preceptor stating:

So being able to trust your faculty and delegate to your faculty or your preceptors, whatever it is, I think it’s crucial. Our head athletic trainer Steven, he’s fantastic. If there is something that needs to change in the way that preceptors on campus are doing something, just simply have a conversation with Steven and it gets done. I think that is the biggest thing is having that trust, that rapport, whatever

you want to call it, that your faculty, your preceptors own their responsibilities. They own their jobs. They own their responsibilities and they have the freedom to do it.

In addition to gaining an understanding of the program’s culture, the faculty members spoke about their perception of the administration’s leadership. The comments made by Dr. Jordan were very optimistic stating, “I think there is really good support here at the institution. I think they understand that it is an important allied health field. The president supports. Obviously in getting our initial accreditation was incredibly helpful.” While Dr. Jordan’s comments highlight the administration’s support in establishing the program, the comments from Mr. Krause and Mrs. Ferris spoke to the current perception of the administration. Overall, their descriptions describe an indistinct administration. Table 3 provides quotations that represent examples of this theme.

Table 3

*Descriptions of the Administration’s Leadership*

Theme	Quotes
Indistinct Administration	<p>“Our dean is new. So our dean has only been here for one year, and is primarily all nursing.” (P. Krause)</p> <p>“...there is a lack of understanding about what athletic training is...” (J. Ferris)</p> <p>“...But some of the things that we are asked to do, or not do, it just speaks to the</p>

fact that they don't understand the program.” (P. Krause)

“I think that’s where, if someone where to perceive that they did not support us, I think that’s where that would come from.”  
(J. Ferris)

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Despite an indistinct administration, the athletic training faculty was appreciative of the support they have received. As suggested by Mrs. Ferris “part of our job is to just make people understand what we do.” Overall, the comments provided by program faculty indicate that the program has institutional support, which is imperative in supporting an athletic training program at the graduate level. Representative quotations supporting the presence of institutional support as a theme are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Descriptions of Institutional Support*

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Theme	Quotes
Staying Power	“We're usually a talking point because exercise science and athletic training are two of the five top majors for recruiting on campus, for bringing in new freshman.” (M. Jordan)
Consistency in Budget	“I can say with 99.9% confidence that this will not change our budget.” (M. Jordan)

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## Financial Support

“It’s just a very different financial model at private school.” (M. Jordan)

“We are a good recruiting tool if nothing else. If we are the seventh highest generator of new students walking in the door, even if the students don’t stay up for their training if they stay at...” [this institution, it is beneficial] (M. Jordan)

“We’ve had pretty good support as far as supplies, you know I was given a pretty good chunk of change.” (M. Jordan)

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The program faculty members were asked to describe ways in which they envision the professional degree transition impacting course offerings for students. Included within the discussion was the potential added cost for students pursuing a graduate education and how the transition will manifest differently for public and private institutions. Dr. Jordan recalled her experiences working at both public and private colleges, stating “It’s just a very different financial model at a private school.” She continues by stating, “It won’t necessarily add to the financial component because as a private school, students pay a flat rate.” Within the conversation, Mrs. Ferris mentioned her concern about students incurring greater debt having to pay for both undergraduate and graduate degrees, stating “Now that’s a lot of money and a lot less experience you get which is another problem.” However, the faculty members believe they have an

ability to retain students in spite of potential added costs. Dr. Jordan mentions the ability they have as a 501c-3 non-profit organization to assist in offsetting some of the cost for students that demonstrate a financial need. “We have a really good discount rate for students with financial need. We have a current student in the program who pays zero dollars; she has a meal plan, she lives on campus because of her financial need.”

### *Advancement of the Profession*

As the conversation continued, excitement was expressed from each faculty member regarding the role students will play relative to the professional degree transition. From the discussion, three themes were constructed that describe how graduate students will assist in the advancement of the profession. This theme is established by three descriptors, first the ability to attract quality students. Secondly, the ability to improve the “face” of the profession and thirdly, the opportunity to be leaders in improving the scope of practice for the athletic training profession.

The first descriptor, attracting quality students, was established within a discussion amongst the faculty. Within the discussion, differing views regarding the number of students they may attract was examined. However this was immediately alleviated with discussion about the quality of students that would come aboard. Mrs. Jane Ferris stated, “I could see the numbers being a little bit lower truthfully, but I do think that it would be someone who truly knows that that’s what they want to do.”

Additional quotes from each faculty member describing the type of the student they hope to acquire are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Beliefs of Program Faculty about Incoming Graduate Athletic Training Students*

Theme	Quotes
Dedicated Student	<p data-bbox="870 415 1333 527">“I think it will be a different type of student.” (P. Krause)</p> <p data-bbox="870 562 1411 890">“...the students that we’ll look at that are coming in from the outside that’s going to change positively. They are going to come and they are going to stay for the whole two years.” (P. Krause)</p> <p data-bbox="870 926 1414 1255">“The student that we’ll get will be committed and will hopefully know, ‘This is what I want to do so let me put my best effort into it’, so that’s a benefit.” (J. Ferris)</p>

As discussions continued with the program faculty regarding the number and quality of students, Dr. Jordan mentioned her concern about the small liberal arts institutions that would be negatively impacted because of the professional degree transition. She mentions that a colleague who teaches in this setting is concerned about his program having to close. She states, “That program has been there for 20 years, they do a great job but their school doesn’t offer masters degrees. I’m afraid we’re going to lose a lot of small liberal arts institutions that are doing a fine job.” From this moment,

the conversation shifted to discussing the competition that would evolve for an increase in the quality of students but a potential decrease in the number of programs and students available. Dr. Jordan mentions, "...a lot of this also depends on what the schools around us do"-a reference to two institutions within close proximity. The question then becomes how do existing programs differentiate their programs to compete for and attract high quality students?

With the conversation shifting away from recruiting and retaining quality students, the faculty members were asked about the potential impact of the professional degree transition on the community--specifically those who benefit from the care and assistance from athletic training students. Mr. Krause commented, "I don't think it would impact the community. I just go back to thinking about the type of student being at those clinical sites." The other faculty members agreed but began to mention that the more mature student would play an integral role in promoting the profession. Table 6 provides quotations that represent examples of students improving the face of the profession.

Table 6

*Beliefs of Program Faculty Regarding the Mature Graduate Student*

Theme	Quotes
Enhanced Impression	<p data-bbox="870 1440 1276 1619">“[This would] give a very good impression of...our training and programs, the school.”</p> <p data-bbox="870 1661 1016 1692">(P. Krause)</p> <p data-bbox="870 1734 1390 1839">“The face of the profession to the community, that will help.” (P. Krause)</p>

“I hope that the graduate, being a graduate program might raise our currency let’s say with those sites to allow them to have better visibility and to allow those clinical sites to say, ‘Huh, this is a masters level student, they actually can take this blood pressure.’ ” (M. Jordan)

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The maturity of the student was a recurring point of discussion in the interviews. However, Dr. Jordan affirmed, “I don’t think it’s that our students are showing badly I think it’s just, Well, they’re an undergraduate student how can they possibly know how to take blood pressure and they’re not an nursing student or they’re not a insert other profession here”. Dr. Jordan’s comments point towards a lack of public understanding about the profession. Mrs. Ferris points out, “The sportscasters are maybe getting a little bit, but the allied health professionals with whom we are supposed to be working with in this whole process of preventing, recognizing and treating injuries, they aren’t getting it.” Mr. Krause adds, “People don’t understand what we do, that we’re qualified to do these things. That we could teach them and they could teach us.” As a whole, each faculty member’s response indicates that an improved perception of the profession becomes all the more feasible by transitioning to graduate-level instruction and by attracting a mature, dedicated student.

Supporting this belief is a discussion about what graduate education provides for students. Specifically, the faculty was asked, “In what ways, if any should undergraduate



and graduate level instruction differ for athletic training programs?” All of the faculty members agreed that undergraduate education should provide foundational knowledge-allowing students to become proficient in anatomy, physiology, and other related course work. As mentioned by Mr. Krause, “By the time you get to the master’s degree hopefully you had that foundation”, and now “graduate education should then marry theory and practice.” Table 7 includes quotes from faculty members that describe how graduate education can improve the scope of practice for athletic trainers.

Table 7

*Improving the Scope of Practice Through Graduate-Level Education*

Theme	Quotes
Application of Knowledge	<p>“Should be more application.” (P. Krause)</p> <p>“This is what I know [undergraduate degree], what I’m supposed to do with it that’s what should be in the master’s degree.” (P. Krause)</p> <p>“I think it would just be more immersive I guess...” (J. Ferris)</p> <p>“Its athletic training and its medicine its that all day every day, hopefully your critical thinking can increase.” (J. Ferris)</p>
Immersive Clinical Experience	<p>“But we changed the sequence of clinicals...the amount of [time] in class</p>

kind of goes down [while the student spends more time being fully engaged in/at their clinical site.” (M. Jordan)

“I think it would just be more immersive I guess...” (J. Ferris)

“They actually have a better understanding of what the whole day of an athletic trainer is like and not just, “Well I can only come from 3:00 to 5:00 or I can only come on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays” or whatever it might be. They have that more full scope of [athletic training].” (M. Jordan)

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The athletic training faculty explained the concept of an immersive clinical education experience; the plan moving forward is to offer a three plus two program. This option affords students who begin their undergraduate studies at the institution to potentially earn an undergraduate degree in three years, and complete the graduate athletic training program in the remaining two years. Additionally, this option affords students who did not complete their undergraduate studies at the institution to apply and gain admittance into the graduate program. This option not only impacts the didactic experience for students, but also the clinical education component as well. As expressed by Dr. Jordan, the students will be gaining new content knowledge in their first two

semesters; she states, “They are having orthopedic assessment class, [therapeutic] modalities class, rehab class...” Concurrently, students will accumulate clinical education hours, which afford them an opportunity to apply the content their gaining in the classroom to an actual patient base, under the tutelage of a preceptor. Dr. Jordan states, “We changed the sequence of clinicals so that the first year, their first two semesters are only 150 hours each semester.” From here, students complete their summer internship, and as they continue progressing through the program, the amount of class time of decreases, while the amount of time students’ gain hands-on-experience increases.

### *Navigating Change*

When asked about additional plans that have been formulated to address the mandated professional degree transition, Dr. Jordan took the lead, first describing the proposed educational standards and competencies drafted by the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE). These educational competencies define what should be taught within the athletic training curriculum. With a transition to graduate level instruction, the CAATE has provided open forums for feedback on proposed standards. Dr. Jordan states, “There were not that many that were terribly terrifying. I mean, the cardiac meds, suturing that was a little worrisome...” Mrs. Ferris also commented, if “we don’t have the expertise to teach them that, [it] means someone needs to teach me. Or I’m gonna have to get someone else, outside of the profession, to teach you this.” While the program faculty has a plan regarding the structure and functionality of the program, they are awaiting particulars on what they’ll need to teach

students once their transition is complete. Table 8 provides quotations that represent examples of the faculty members' responses to the themes that were constructed.

Table 8

*Beliefs of Faculty Members as it Relates to Navigating the Change Process*

Theme	Quotes
Uncertainty Regarding Standards & Competencies	<p>“At the end of the day, whatever competencies are the ones given to use are the ones we are going to deal with.” (M. Jordan)</p> <p>“...so kind of hands in the air at this point.” (M. Jordan)</p>
Willingness to make Adjustments	<p>“We’ll look at where they would align with different courses and we’ll make adjustments. We’ve made adjustments in the last three years as we figure out, ‘Well gosh this isn’t working here or they should have a little bit of this there.’ ” (M. Jordan)</p> <p>“I think it would just be more immersive I guess...” (J. Ferris)</p>

*Research Question 2.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impacts the institution and athletic training faculty teaching in undergraduate degree programs?

This second research question was designed to investigate how changing the professional degree in athletic training may potentially impact faculty as it relates to their workplace responsibilities, which commonly include: teaching, scholarship, and service. Moreover, this question was also formulated to determine how, if at all, this change might impact faculty members' lives outside of work. Within this discussion, faculty members began by discussing their personal views related to the professional degree transition. Their perception then serves to inform their belief about how the transition impacts their experiences at and outside of work. As the faculty members discussed this topic, two themes were constructed. One theme, "uncertainty amid change" describes the overall perception of the professional degree transition, and the second theme, "consistency amid change" describes how the program intends to function in respect to the professional degree transition. Table 9 provides quotations that represent examples of these two themes that were constructed from the faculty member's responses.

Table 9

*Faculty Members Perception of the Professional Degree Transition*

Theme	Quotes
Questionable Transition	"I don't think it really carries weight one way or the other, because I don't believe that it's going to achieve the end that they think it's going to." (P. Krause)

## Concerning Transition

“I really think that they believe it’s going to make athletic training more recognizable, or more powerfully recognizable as an athletic healthcare field. I don’t think that the degree is what should be doing that.” (P. Krause).

“I think one of my biggest concerns and why I’m not sold on it yet...[most students] will have two years of clinical practice time before they’re sent into the real world.”

“So doing this is essentially eliminating graduate student positions.” (J. Ferris)

“My concern is their lack of hands-on, real world things.” (J. Ferris)

“I don’t think we need to be the jack-of-all trades, because then you’re never an expert about anything. So we need to be experts at what we know and then if we add a couple of things, I don’t think it’s going to hurt.” (J. Ferris).

## Unknown Impact of Transition

“If that helps push us up over that proverbial hill, to change that

classification then absolutely. I think it's positive." (M. Jordan)

"...my concern is that we don't have a clear picture of what their expectations are. We've all been asked to jump through this hoop, but we don't know what's on the other side." (M. Jordan).

"We don't know what the competencies are going to be. We don't know what the prerequisite course work is going to be. There are all of these unknowns, so it's almost like we're trying to jump through the hoop but the hoop is slowly moving." (M. Jordan)

#### Unknown Expectations

"...there is so much unknown, I don't know anything about anything that's about to occur over the next like five years so I don't really know how it's going to affect anything...." (J. Ferris).

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Although the faculty members point to an uncertainty amid change, they are also able to find consistency amid change. When discussing faculty member's roles and how it may change because of the professional degree transition Dr. Jordan says, "The

CAATE currently has standards that we have to meet and prove that we are meeting and they will continue to have standards for us to meet and prove that we are meeting.” The faculty members agreed, noting that they don’t foresee changes in what is done, but perhaps changes in how certain tasks are completed. As the program faculty thought through potential changes in the way they function, they mention possible, yet subtle changes in their approach to and classes they teach. Table 10 provides quotations that represent examples of this theme.

Table 10

*Descriptions of Consistency Amid Change*

Theme	Quotes
Programmatic Consistency	<p>“I don’t think the role, the mechanics of it or logistics of it is not going to change much.” (P. Krause)</p> <p>“I don’t think my role as an administrator will change significantly, my role as an educator depending on what these new magical standards and criteria are going to be might change.” (M. Jordan).</p> <p>“I don’t think it’ll change any more... every single year I change something that I’m doing in the classes. It’ll be just like...normal.” (J. Ferris).</p>



“...what I have to teach that’s probably going to change or just be a little bit different or be a little bit more.” (P. Krause).

Institution Consistency, Requirements

“That question is still very much up in the air right now because no one; faculty senate, administration can determine what is the appropriate ratio for scholarship teaching and service.” (M. Jordan).

“I don’t know that we’re really forced to do anything with scholarship...” (J. Ferris)

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### Results of Athletic Training Students’ Focus Forum

The athletic training students participating in this study represent three different academic classifications: sophomore, junior, and senior. At the host institution, students begin observational clinical site rotations as a sophomore, and as the students’ progress into their junior and senior years, their clinical site rotations involve hands on application of skills. Of the ten athletic training students, eight are female and two are males. In relation to race, each athletic training student is Caucasian. The criteria used to create each students’ profile, includes gender and academic classification. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to maintain anonymity. Table 11 presents the profile for each student.

Table 11

*Athletic Training Student Profile Table*

Pseudonym	Gender	Academic Classification
Sarah Hasty	F	Senior
Rebecca Sanders	F	Junior
Meredith Winters	F	Junior
Abigail Hart	F	Junior
Karley Milam	F	Junior
Elizabeth Gilbert	F	Sophomore
Tara Singleton	F	Sophomore
Kimberly Seton	F	Sophomore
Travis Morrison	M	Junior
Wesley Richards	M	Sophomore

*Research Question 1.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact institutions of higher education that currently offers an accredited undergraduate degree program?

The first research question was designed to investigate how changing one component of the athletic training educational system would potentially impact other components of that system. Because athletic training educators are seen as the primary source of education and athletic training students are the primary recipients, applicable interview questions were posed to both faculty and athletic training students.

### *Description of the Athletic Training Students*

While the athletic training students participating in this study vary in terms of gender, background, and academic classification they share a common story in terms of their interest in the field of athletic training and their clinical experiences. As a whole, the students agreed that their interest in the profession is connected to being former and or current athletes, having gone through physical rehabilitation, or a passion to combine their interest in the medical field with their love for sports. Additionally, some of the students say that sports is what brought them to the institution. Three of the five junior athletic training students currently play sports for the college, while others either chose the school because of its small size or having been referred to the school by an Athletic Trainer.

In addition, the students shared stories about their first clinical experience, which occurred at the collegiate or high school setting. Sarah Hasty reflects upon her first clinical experience, which was at a small high school, saying, “We had broken backs, broken legs, and broken ankles”. Sarah continued, “They don’t have much treatment options...so it was interesting to see [their] limitations...and how much [they] had to reach out to other people to get [their] needs met.” Karley Milam, one of the current athletes in the program described her experience playing sports, managing her course workload and completing clinical rotation hours, saying, “You just go for it. There’s not really much juggling. When you have time to go get your clinical hours, you do.”

The students also shared their experiences with their preceptors. Meredith Winters states, “I had an incredible first preceptor...On top of teaching the exercises and stuff like that, she was really open about real life”, calling it the most valuable thing she

learned. Others added that their preceptors were instrumental in developing their confidence, while some noted the challenges of learning from a first time preceptor. Elizabeth Gilbert added about her preceptor, “He had never had students before or anything and he doesn’t talk. We had to force it out of him, especially since he was new. I really had to beg him almost to include me and that didn’t help my confidence very much...” Overall, the students had very positive experiences. Travis Morrison commented about his preceptors, “They’re really good about instilling back my confidence in things where if you do something wrong, they’re going to explain why, then for the next time make sure you know what you’re doing thereon.”

#### *Student Perspective of the Professional Degree Transition*

In the focus forum, students shared their immediate thoughts when they heard about the professional degree transition. Sarah mentions, “I feel like it will make students more well-rounded for the job field. They will have a leg up because they know this, this and this, [compared] to athletic trainers from bachelor’s degrees.” Sarah’s comment speaks to the fact that students completing new professional degree programs are expected to have greater knowledge than what seasoned athletic trainers were taught. Rebecca adds, “I would say that it makes students more competitive with other fields such as physical therapy and OT [occupational therapy],” which she credits to these programs being offered at the graduate-degree level. In addition, it’s her belief that the degree transition will bring greater awareness to the profession. Travis states, “It’s kind of necessary because in the age we’re in now, if you don’t have a master’s degree, you can’t have [certain] jobs... then you feel like you’re obligated to get your master’s degree regardless.”

The conversation shifted towards a discussion about the financial implications of the students needing a bachelor's and master's degree in order to become an Athletic Trainer. Sarah commented:

I'd say yeah it is going to be a lot more money, but I think what's good about our school here...Most of us, I don't know if I can say for all of us, we get a lot of scholarships for bachelors. I don't know if it's the same for master's degree, but yes it is going to be more-- but what's good, like I said, is that we get scholarships to help cut down the cost.

Rebecca comments by saying, "It's going to be well worth it in the end, even if you are paying for as much schooling." While Tara adds, "Yeah, cause you'll end up coming out of college being able to get that higher paying job." The students' comments speak to an expectation that earning a master's degree in athletic training yields higher salaries. Although this presumption is stated within the NATA white paper, the claim of higher salaries has not yet been substantiated (NATA, 2015, Mazerolle, Bowman, Pitney, 2015). While several spoke without regard to the additional cost, one student, Meredith disagreed, insinuating that the current model was more advantageous. The current model she is speaking of is the traditional undergraduate degree program. Once students graduate, they have an option of earning a graduate assistant position, which allows them to receive tuition at a reduced cost or no cost at all and a monthly stipend. In addition, these positions provide students with additional hands-on work experience under the tutelage of seasoned Athletic Trainers.

*Seeking Alternative Routes*

When asked if students would elect to enter an athletic training program knowing about the professional degree transition beforehand, students answered according to their professional aspirations. Many still expressed their interest in completing an athletic training degree, while others would elect to seek alternative career options. Table 12 provides quotations that represent examples of the student’s responses to the constructed theme.

Table 12

*Student Descriptions of Alternate Plans if Deciding Between Athletic Training and other Healthcare Professions*

Theme	Quotes
Seeking Alternative Routes	“Personally because my goal is to be in PA school...” (Meredith W.) “Especially with a five year program, I’d probably go and finish out the athletic training [program]. If I started working somewhere, then [I’d] still also go get my PT degree.” (Tara S.) “Yeah I have to go against that because for me, yeah my dream’s been to do PT.” (Abigail H.) “My goal in this program is not to become an athletic trainer. It’s to become a

prosthetics person for amputees and to enter into the military.” (Elizabeth G.)

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Of the ten students, one was undecided, one desires to pursue a career in prosthetics, two have a desire to become physician assistants, two are interested in careers as physical therapist, and four expressed an interest the acquire a master’s degree and work as an Athletic Trainer in the high school or collegiate setting.

*Results of Athletic Training Preceptor Focus Forum*

The athletic training preceptors were interviewed once as part of a focus forum. Three of the preceptors are employed at the host institution as the Head Athletic Trainer, Associate Athletic Trainer and Assistant Athletic Trainer. The fourth preceptor serves as the Head Athletic Trainer at a local high school, but is employed by the nearby medical center. Of the preceptors, two are female and two are male. In relation to ethnicity, each faculty member is Caucasian. The criteria used to create each preceptor’s profile include: gender, title, work setting and the number of years as a certified athletic trainer. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to maintain anonymity.

Table 13

*Athletic Training Preceptor Profile*

Pseudonym	Gender	Title	Work Setting	Years Certified
Steven Albright	M	Head Athletic Trainer	College	12
Tyler Gibson	M	Associate Athletic Trainer	College	5

Madeline Turner	F	Assistant Athletic Trainer	College	5
Vanessa Swanson	F	Head Athletic Trainer	High School	4

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*Brief Profiles of Athletic Training Preceptors*

*Mr. Steven Albright.* Mr. Steven Albright is in his third year as the Head Athletic Trainer at this institution and he has been affiliated with the athletic training program since its inception. Although Steven was unsure about what he wanted to do initially career wise, he knew that he wanted to work in the healthcare field. After spending time in a health class and shadowing physical therapists, he knew that those professions would not be the best fit; after speaking with an instructor who recommended athletic training, he found his passion. Since that moment, he says, “I haven’t looked back.” Steven’s first experience as a preceptor was as a graduate assistant. However, he was unable to continue serving in that capacity for the next six years of his career simply because the institutions he worked for did not have an athletic training program. Since being employed here, he felt a need to be instrumental in this process knowing that it was a new, developing program along with a sense of giving back to the profession.

*Mr. Tyler Gibson.* Mr. Tyler Gibson is entering his fifth year in the profession and it is his second year at the host institution. Prior to joining the athletic training staff, he served as a graduate assistant and spent time working with teams in the National Football League (NFL). Tyler credits his interest in athletic training due to subjects such as nutrition, exercise physiology and biomechanics. Tyler’s professional focus is to provide a holistic approach to the prevention, care and rehabilitation of athletic injuries



through dietary and corrective movement techniques. Tyler credits a desire to be a role model and a mentor for current and future athletic training students just as others did for him, saying, “I just kind of want to pay it forward.”

*Ms. Madeline Turner.* Ms. Madeline Turner is also entering her fifth year in the profession and her second year at the host institution. Prior to this position, she accumulated a wealth of experience providing athletic training services to collegiate, high school and clinic settings. Madeline mentions that she was initially interested in a career in physical therapy. However, her direction changed when she met with her college advisor who was also an Athletic Trainer. During this meeting she was encouraged to take the Athletic Training 101 class, which inspired her to pursue a career in athletic training instead. Madeline credits her desire for wanting to be a preceptor because she realized the value that it brought to her educational experience. She states, “you learn a lot in class, but definitely at clinicals [is] where you kind of learn the important stuff”.

*Ms. Vanessa Swanson.* Ms. Vanessa Swanson is in her fourth year at the local medical center; she has been affiliated with the host institution’s athletic training program for three years. Vanessa was initially a “Pre-Physical Therapy” major, but spent time working in the athletic training room, as part of an on campus job. Initially she applied to several physical therapy schools. She mentions however, having a moment where her focused shifted career wise and she decided to pursue a career as an Athletic Trainer. Vanessa is also a product of a graduate athletic training program, which she credits for well preparing her to excel in the profession. Her desire to be a preceptor stems from having had excellent and terrible preceptors, noting that both shaped her idea of an ideal preceptor. However, she credits teaching students how to be a productive member of

society, whether at work or at home as being one of the most important takeaways from serving in this capacity.

*Research Question 3.* What is the impact of the mandated professional degree transition on preceptors affiliated with undergraduate athletic training programs?

This research question was designed to investigate how changing the professional degree in athletic training would impact preceptors. Because preceptors serve as the “bridge” between didactic instruction and clinical application, it is appropriate to understand how this change would impact these individuals personally and how it would impact their role as preceptors. The transcripts of the focus forum were analyzed by underscoring key terms, phrases, or quotes from participants that address how preceptors as a whole will be impacted because of this change. Themes were then constructed to provide meaning.

When asked to share their initial reaction when hearing about the professional degree transition, three of the four preceptors expressed their initial frustration, resentment and disappointment of the news. Their overall response is appropriately summarized utilizing the theme, “uncertainty amid change.” Although mixed emotions were shared, each preceptor’s response led to the emergence of two themes that speak to the perceived benefits of the professional degree transition. These benefits are appropriately summarized as an “improved quality of education” along with “improved patient care.”

#### *Uncertainty Amid Change*

The preceptors’ initial reaction to the professional degree transition was similar to those made by the athletic training faculty. Both groups raised questions about its

purpose and intended outcomes. Common among the faculty, student and preceptor groups were concerns about the longevity of graduate assistantships. Steven Albright reflected on his experience saying, “That’s where I learned how to do the job and actually had somebody there that I could still fall back on [when] I really don’t know what I’m doing right now and I need some help.” Steven’s comments underline a larger issue that he notes with the professional degree transition. As the Head Athletic Trainer, he would be responsible for hiring new graduates that theoretically would have little experience outside of their educational clinical experiences. He notes that he would plan for them to have more questions, and would expect to help facilitate the care they would provide; care that he’s used to Athletic Trainers providing independently. Of his undergraduate experience, Steven remembers feeling confident in his knowledge and skills after completing the program and passing his certification exam. However, his comments point towards a gap between acquired knowledge, coupled with educational experience and consistent practical application. When reflecting on the current educational system, where students complete their undergraduate studies, and apply for a graduate assistantship- this gap still exists. Vanessa provides two different perspectives, stating, “I think the profession is losing out a lot by getting rid of that.” But she also expresses that a belief that the professional degree transition will pay off, serving as a means to increase professional’s knowledge base and to better distinguish athletic training as a medical profession. Table 14 provides quotations that represent preceptors’ responses about student’s ability to transition to practice and concerns about the professional degree transition, overall.

Table 14

*Preceptor Beliefs About the Professional Degree Transition and Students' Transition to Practice*

Theme	Quotes
Unfulfilled Transition	<p>“I don’t think the outcomes that they want for being entry level is necessarily what’s going to happen as far as like salary, jobs and everything.” (M. Turner)</p>
Rushed Transition	<p>“The more that’s come out about it, I do feel better about it, but I still kind of think it was a knee jerk reaction in a way.” (S. Albright)</p>
Domino Effect of Change	<p>“I’m not a huge fan of it. I see their reasoning but I don’t think their reasoning is...when you change one thing, there’s a lot of other things that are gonna happen.” (T. Gibson)</p>
Uncertainty in Transition to Practice	<p>“...our seniors that we graduated last year. I can see 100% where the might be worried.” (S. Albright)</p> <p>“Or even these next two classes...GA positions are becoming slim and they’re like ‘Crap.’” (M. Turner)</p>

“I was kind of sold on the GA positions as you kind of paying your dues to get your foot in the door at least you’re getting an education while you’re doing it.” (T. Gibson)

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When asked how the professional degree transition might impact the preceptor’s personal life outside of work, none of the preceptors identified areas of concern or change. However, in their reflection, they were able to identify how it may impact others. Madeline commented, “I think it makes those that took the time to get their master’s less marketable now.” From this comment, Madeline went on to explain that pursuing her master’s degree is what set her apart from other students she graduated with. Now, future students will possess the same degree and have the same credentials that she has, with less experience. Madeline’s concern may also be the concern of seasoned Athletic Trainer, that they are less marketable, or less knowledge, in terms of new skills than recent graduates.

When discussing how the professional degree transition would impact their role as preceptors, Madeline states, “I don’t want a student coming at me with sutures. I don’t even want to touch that with a ten foot pole.” Madeline’s comment speaks to proposed educational competencies that will accompany the new professional degree. Considering that Vanessa has graduated from a graduate athletic training program, she notes, “So, I think I have a different opinion. I am suture certified. I’m phlebotomy certified and first assistant surgery, and that was part of our curriculum. So, I don’t think it’s a bad idea to

learn those things ‘cause I think it makes you way more marketable when you graduate.”

The differing views expressed between Madeline and Vanessa point to a potential discrepancy between preceptors who will be prepared to handle advanced educational competencies, and those who are not. The preceptors agreed that learning these competencies would be unique to learn, but did not see how applicable they would be in clinical practice. Regardless, they all recognized the ability of the professional degree transition to assist in improving the level of education, and the level of care patients receive. Table 15 provides representative quotations of this theme.

Table 15

*Preceptors’ Perceived Benefits of the Professional Degree Transition*

Theme	Quotes
Better Equipped Student	“I was really excited, I’m a product of entry level masters...I felt like our students were heads and tails above the rest.” (V. Swanson)  “I do think the quality of student that comes out, just because they’ll have more time and it’ll be a little more in depth for certain classes...you’ll see a higher level of understanding of the knowledge that’s required.” (V. Swanson)
Enhanced Clinical Education	“I think the rigor of those classes [core classes] can take away from the athletic

training based classes so I think almost having them separate is gonna help them to actually focus on athletic training.” (M. Turner)

“You may see a little more where they’re trying to get that hands-on experience, they’re trying to give themselves the opportunity to learn, versus, I got homework...?” (V. Swanson)

Perceived Confidence & Abilities, Patient Perspective

“Athletes can tell the difference in the confidence and someone’s ability”. They’re gonna know you’re gonna walk away from this with a master’s degree as opposed to a bachelor’s degree, they’re expectations are automatically higher.” (T. Gibson)

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### Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the results of the completed interviews and focus forums with faculty, students and preceptors. These findings revealed that faculty and preceptors have similar concerns and outlooks about the mandated professional degree transition. Their concern is centered on whether or not the professional degree will achieve its desired outcomes. Their combined outlook on the professional degree

transition is that it will help to advance the profession and improve the quality of education students receive. The majority of the athletic training students indicated a desire to pursue the profession, despite having to acquire a graduate level degree. Data gathered from these sessions were utilized to address three research questions designed to understand how the mandated professional degree transition impacts the stakeholders at one private, liberal arts institution. Overarching themes were constructed through combining the central ideas from each group in response to each of the research questions. In Chapter 5, the results and implications of this study will be discussed and recommendations for future studies will be made.



## Chapter V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter includes a review of the study's purpose, research design and data analysis. In addition, it includes the limitations of the study and implications for program faculty in the planning or implementation stages of the professional degree transition. The findings of this study are utilized to answer the research questions, along with recommendations for future research.

#### Purpose of the Study

Healthcare education reform has become prevalent in allied healthcare professions such as occupational and physical therapy. These professions have all made transitions to a single entry point in their respective professions, now implemented through graduate-level education. In 2011, the National Athletic Trainer's Association's (NATA) Strategic Alliance produced a white paper detailing the recommendations for a nationally mandated change requiring a master's degree as the entry-level degree for certification in the athletic training profession. This change calls for accredited undergraduate athletic training programs to either transition to an entry-level master's degree or to cease admission into its programs by the fall 2022 academic term. Although the profession has supported the transition to graduate level education and although research studies have investigated the potential impact of this transition, the impact this change has on one single institution has been underexplored.

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of program stakeholders in one baccalaureate level athletic training program facing this nationally mandated change requiring a master's degree as the entry-level degree for certification. Through a series of interview questions, the researcher sought to understand how stakeholder perceptions could be utilized to understand the impact of the professional degree transition on their roles, how it will impact the institution and profession as a whole. This study was guided by three research questions:

*Research Question 1:* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact institutions of higher education that currently offer an accredited undergraduate degree program?

*Research Question 2:* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact athletic training faculty teaching in undergraduate degree programs?

*Research Question 3:* What is the impact of the mandated professional degree transition on preceptors affiliated with undergraduate athletic training programs?

### Research Design

A purposive sampling was utilized for this basic qualitative interpretive study, including primary stakeholder groups such as faculty, students and preceptors at one private liberal arts institution. Prior to embarking upon this study, the researcher attended state and regional conferences where members of the NATA Strategic Alliance presented information and addressed concerns of professionals about the degree transition. Also, in the researcher's previous role as a Clinical Education Coordinator, he was enabled to hear the concerns and the opinions of preceptors about the degree transition. It is through

these means and discussions with colleagues that the concept of this study emerged. In an effort to select personnel that were intimately connected or impacted by this change, the researcher selected an institution that recently gained its accreditation, but now within the same year has begun preparing to transition the degree to an entry-level master's program. The researcher sent an e-mail to the Program Director, outlining the purpose for this study, along with a rationale for selecting this institution. The Program Director complied with this request and helped facilitate the interview with the faculty members, students and preceptors.

For each faculty member, the researcher conducted three separate interviews. The interview for Dr. Mary Jordan, Mr. Peter Krause and Mrs. Jane Ferris were 52, 45, and 44 minutes respectively. This first interview allowed the researcher to develop rapport with the faculty members and provide a focused life history of the participant, which aimed to situate their role and perspective of the professional degree transition. Each interview session was designed and delivered using a semi-structured, open-ended interview. The second interview for faculty members was conducted as a focus forum, providing an opportunity to understand their perceptions of the professional degree transition and how it may impact their institution. This focus forum session lasted 90 minutes.

Two additional focus forums were conducted, one with athletic training students and the second with athletic training preceptors. The purpose of each focus forum was to understand both groups' perception of the professional degree transition, and how it would impact them personally and their role within the athletic training program. Both of these focus forums were conducted utilizing a semi-structured, open-ended interview

format. The preceptor focus forum lasted for 80 minutes, while the student focus forum lasted for 48 minutes.

### Data Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed and yielded a total of six transcripts, containing the responses of three faculty members, ten athletic training students and four preceptors. At the conclusion of each interview or focus forum, the audio recordings were replayed and read through to ensure the audio and written text corresponded. The researcher began analyzing the data by first reading and reflecting on the data, gaining familiarity with the transcribed text. After gaining familiarity with the text, the researcher completed line by line reading of the text, making note of phrases or comments that described how the professional degree transition may impact each individual personally, their role in the athletic training program or the profession as a whole. Following this step, the researcher developed codes by grouping similar thoughts or responses together and placed them in a matrix to condense the data. Themes were then constructed through studying the codes, as a means of providing understanding to the written text.

### Limitations of the Study

Although sound practices were utilized in the design and implementation of this study, there were some limitations. However, the predominant strength of this study is the use of qualitative inquiry in comparison to quantitative methodologies. Qualitative methods provide a means to describe how individuals perceive and experience life as opposed to numerically measuring their response to it (Vagle, 2014). The first limitation of this study was the sampling process. Although this study included purposive

sampling, it only included one private liberal arts institution. Moreover, there are other public colleges and universities that host accredited undergraduate athletic training programs that are not represented in this study. While the sample includes the entire athletic training program faculty, it does not include all of the students or all of the preceptors affiliated with this program. Including a larger sample of students and preceptors may provide a more in depth understanding for how the professional degree transition impacts each individual and the institution overall.

Researcher bias was the second limitation of this study. Maxwell (2013) indicates the importance of the researcher being aware of how personal values, beliefs and experiences may influence the design, implementation and analysis of a given study. To lessen the impact of these biases, Maxwell (2013) recommends the completion of a researcher identity memo. This memo serves the purpose of identifying possible disadvantages these biases may create and how to deal with them appropriately. The researcher completed this memo prior to the implementation of this study, which limited the impact of these biases on the design and analysis of the study.

The third limitation of this study was the level of comfort participants had with the researcher. While individual interviews and a focus forum were conducted with faculty members, only one focus forum was conducted with both students and preceptors. This single session for both groups may have hampered the level of comfort and rapport established with these respective stakeholder groups. As a result, the participants may have been hindered in the extent and breadth of discussion related to the professional degree transition.

## Results

The results of this study led to the development of eight themes that appropriately address each of the research questions established for this study. In answering the first research question, faculty members were asked about their opinion of the professional degree transition in addition to their perception of the administrations' level of support for the athletic training program. Three themes were constructed according to their responses. The first theme relates to the potential for growth that this athletic training program has, in terms of meeting the professional degree mandate. The comments made by faculty members suggest that they are well equipped in terms of program faculty, and administration to offer graduate-level instruction for athletic training students. The second theme identifies the faculty member's belief that the professional degree transition has the potential to advance the profession in terms of the educational and clinical preparation for athletic training students. Their perspectives on this are in response to internal discussions about their transition to graduate level instruction. The third theme relates to the faculty member's current state of being related to the professional degree transition, which is navigating change. In this sense, while the faculty members have accepted this change, they remain unaware of the new competencies and standards that will be required for accreditation for new entry-level master's degree programs. However, they demonstrate a willingness to make adjustments.

The second research question for this study was answered through the combined responses from faculty members and athletic training students. Faculty members were asked to describe the impact of the professional degree transition on student enrollment,

budget, and course offerings. The students were asked to describe how the professional degree transition would impact their academic careers and their personal lives. In total, three themes were constructed. Two of these themes summarize the responses from faculty members, which include uncertainty amid change and consistency amid change. These themes suggest that while there is a level of uncertainty about the impact of the professional degree transition, along with upcoming standards and competencies, there will be a level of consistency in spite of the mandated change. In relation to the students' response, one theme wholly captures the perspective of the students, which is navigating life. This theme accurately reflects the conclusion that students must now begin navigating life because of the mandated professional degree transition. This includes students understanding how this change will impact their lives and deciding whether or not they should persist in athletic training or pursue alternative career choices.

The third research question in this study also led to the development of three themes that encompass the beliefs, attitudes and opinions of preceptors. During the focus forum, preceptors were asked to expound on their beliefs about the impact of the professional degree transition, how it may impact them, their students and the level of care provided to their athletes or patients. The first theme is the uncertainty amid change, which refers to the preceptor's uncertainty about the necessity, haste, and outcomes of the study. The second theme is the improvement in the quality of education and patient care that will be provided for athletic training students. Both of these themes echo the feedback provided by faculty members. As a whole, the preceptors believe that graduate level students will be better equipped to serve the athlete and patient base, and will have improved interaction with the preceptor.

## Discussion

The following section presents a review of the research questions that guided this study and answers the questions based upon the analysis of data from both interview and focus forums. Additionally, this discussion links the findings of this study to those that precede this one, which provides an opportunity to continue the discussion on the monumental transition of the professional degree in athletic training.

### *Discussion of Results for Research Question 1*

*Research Question 1:* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact institutions of higher education that currently offer an accredited undergraduate degree program?

Accredited undergraduate degree programs in athletic training include key stakeholder groups such as faculty, students and preceptors. The impact of change is best understood when stakeholder groups share how a change impacts them personally and their roles within an organization. To effectively understand the extent of change, an understanding of the context in which stakeholders function is paramount. For this study, the context is a private, liberal arts institution. According to data from the Commission on the Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE), 43% of accredited athletic training programs are housed within private colleges, while the remaining 57% occur at public colleges and universities (CAATE 2016). The findings of this study make a clear distinction regarding the impact of the professional degree transition on public and private institutions. It is important to note however, that not all private or public institutions will be impacted in the same manner.



As a result of the professional degree transition, accredited undergraduate degree programs have a unique opportunity to develop or modify the existing curriculum to serve as pre-requisite coursework for graduate athletic training courses. These courses should also serve as a means to prepare them for the higher order learning that would take place in an entry-level master's program (Wilkerson et al., 2006). In this study, the program faculty are adopting a "3+2" option, which affords students an opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree in three years and a master's degree in two years. Similar to the faculty in this study, this option has been noted by other program administrators as being ideal in terms of students obtaining dual degrees and lessening the potential of financial hardship on students and their parents (Deranek, 2015).

The program faculty, students and preceptors in this study suggested that there will be an improvement in student retention and persistence. For example, program faculty and preceptors expect a level of consistency in student enrollment due to attracting a more mature student, who is committed and has a greater understanding of what athletic training, is, and what it entails. Of the students included in this study, some noted that they would rather attend professional programs in other disciplines such as physician's assistant and physical therapy programs, rather than selecting the entry-level master's program. These findings suggest that students are more likely to pursue and persist in athletic training, when it is offered at the graduate level and when it is their intended profession. This is consistent with research conducted by Bowman, Pitney, Mazerolle, and Dodge (2015), which indicates that graduate students in professional programs persist due to a commitment to the profession and the interpersonal relationships they develop with program stakeholders.

Nationally, many states are home to multiple athletic training programs and depending upon their proximity to one another, there is a potential for competition in regards to the number and quality of students admitted each year. This competition may currently exist among programs but may be intensified when comparing graduate tuition rates, credit hours, and how programs distinguish their curriculum. The faculty in this study note, that there are two larger public institutions within relatively short distance from their campus. They note that their ability to recruit and retain students may be heavily dependent upon how other schools respond to the professional degree transition.

*Discussion of Results for Research Question 2*

*Research Question 2.* In what ways do the mandated professional degree transition impact athletic training faculty teaching in undergraduate degree programs?

The program faculty in this study share similar sentiments when asked how the professional degree transition will impact their role and responsibilities. As the administrative personnel for the program, Dr. Jordan and Mr. Krause note that there will be a level of consistency as it relates to their role and responsibilities for maintaining program accreditation. Mr. Krause mentions that in his role as the Clinical Education Coordinator (CEC), the nature of what he does will not change, but perhaps the way he does it will change. Specifically, he was referring to a potential expansion in his role. Elaborating on this, Dr. Jordan, who serves as the Program Director (PD) mentioned that he would have a greater level of responsibility implementing of their immersive clinical experience. The purpose of this experience is to provide athletic training students with substantial hands on experience that improves upon the one offered at the undergraduate degree level. Through this immersive clinical experience, the faculty plans to allow

students an opportunity to complete internships virtually anywhere in the United States for an extended period of time. This change in the clinical experience for students suggests that the PD and CEC may need additional resources and oversight to ensure the quality and effectiveness of students receiving clinical instruction in other parts of the country.

In addition to improvements in student's clinical experience, the program faculty also noted the potential for changes in the content they teach due to new educational competencies. Although these competencies have not yet been published, preliminary drafts have been shared with professionals in order to solicit feedback. Dr. Jordan expressed relief knowing that some of the proposed competencies had been removed, including the administration of cardiac medications, and suturing. She notes a need for the profession to distinguish between entry-level practice and advanced practice. In other words, the emphasis should be on providing education that is consistent with what new professionals in the field should be able to do. Consistent with research presented by Niebert (2009) the faculty members agree, education at the master's degree should focus on application, be immersive and enhance critical thinking skills. As Dr. Jordan mentions, there may be unique opportunities to offer advanced practice skills in the profession's Doctor of Athletic Training programs.

Plans to provide the immersive clinical experience and imminent changes to the content faculty members teach will afford students an opportunity to gain mastery of the subject and to develop critical thinking skills (Neibert, 2009). However, the faculty members mention that with the impending changes to the educational competencies, there is a need to seek certifications, skills or formal education to teach these skills to

students. The need for continuing education is not new for those in athletic training, as it is part of the requirements to maintain certification, but perhaps there is also a need for the athletic training educators to obtain a terminal degree depending on their regional accreditor, or institution directives for teaching graduate students.

*Discussion of Results for Research Question 3*

*Research Question 3.* What is the impact of the mandated professional degree transition on preceptors affiliated with undergraduate athletic training programs?

The preceptors in this study believe the professional degree transition will lead to enhancements in student's clinical education, which ultimately will improve patient care and advance the profession. Similar to the faculty members in this study, the preceptors believe that education at the graduate level will attract a more mature student and lead to improvements in the preceptor-student interaction. In other words, instead of helping students learn foundational knowledge, they can assist with applying course content to actual patient cases. The change of the professional degree also leads to change in the educational competencies faculty members teach; within this study, the preceptors identified a potential gap in preceptor's preparedness to address these competencies. As suggested by Vanessa and Madeline, in order to bridge this gap, preceptors will need to learn new skills and or obtain additional certifications. As noted earlier with faculty members, this provides an opportunity for preceptors to complete continuing education courses that expand their clinical knowledge.

As the Head Athletic Trainer, Steven noted potential changes in his practice as a professional and administrator in the sports medicine department, where he is responsible for hiring and managing staff. Of particular interest, is his belief that he or other

seasoned athletic trainers will be obliged in more closely supervising new graduates of master's degree programs. Steven notes that he is thankful that his current staff came to him with at least two years of experience, post education. He now fears that new professionals will have more questions and need nurturing, support he feels is adequately provided for during graduate assistantships. However, because of the professional degree transition, the graduate assistantship model will soon fade away, and a more prominent route will be needed for new professionals to gain the work experience employers seek.

#### Implications for Practice

The stakeholder groups in this study, which include faculty, students and preceptors, suggest that they will be directly impacted by a change in the entry-level degree for the athletic training profession. In other words, changing one component of a system requires changes in other components of that system (Bertalanffy, 1968). This phenomenon links to Lewin's change theory, which describes change as a force that raises its own counter force (1989). For each stakeholder group, statements were made about how this change would impact their roles and responsibilities. In addition, it provided a glimpse as to how it will impact the institution and profession as a whole.

When the preceptors and faculty members were asked to discuss their opinions about the professional degree transition, both groups questioned the purpose, scope and intent of the change. Kotter (1996) warns against the implementation of change without establishing a sense of urgency. In other words, communication must be clear, given in advance and explain why the change is needed and what it will accomplish. If this approach is overlooked, the potential exists for a lack of buy-in from those responsible for implementing the change (Kotter, 1996). This highlights the importance of ensuring

that a strong leadership team guides the change process and communicates the intent of the change to stakeholder groups (Kanter et al., 1992; Senge, 1999). Coupled with this, stakeholder groups should be invited to share their perspectives and have their voice heard regarding any potential change initiative (Kanter et al., 1992). Although the NATA's strategic alliance has communicated the change of the professional degree, program administrators must be mindful in how they present and implement this change in their respective institutions.

The Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) is a diagnostic tool that can be utilized to assess the implications or outcome of a change initiative. A modified version of this model is presented in this study for the athletic training educational system. Its use is appropriate for assessing the concerns stakeholders have regarding a change. As identified through the completion of this study, understanding the stories and concerns of stakeholders provides an opportunity to determine its appropriateness and the level of preparedness for change. Without an assessment of change, it cannot be sustained and its outcomes cannot be met (Senge, 1999). Utilizing this model, program administrators are encouraged to probe stakeholder groups about how a change impacts them personally, their role and responsibilities within the organization, which serves to inform the change process.

Following any change initiative, an opportunity must be presented to sustain the change (Kanter et al., 1992). Considering the intent of the professional degree transition, which is to advance the practice of athletic trainers and improve patient care, the weight of responsibility begins with those in the profession. For athletic trainers, sustaining this change means taking responsibility for advancing their own practice, seeking additional

certifications, training and expertise to better serve their patients. After completing an educational program, a commitment to growth and development must remain. Existing avenues to sustain this change include the completion of residencies, internships, and continuing education opportunities.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined the impact of the professional degree transition at one private, liberal arts institution. It has identified the concerns of stakeholder groups, while also confirming that this change will advance the profession and improve patient care. The following recommendations provide suggestions for how future research can expound upon the results of this study.

First, research in this area should begin with an investigation of how the professional degree transition impacts stakeholders at single public colleges and universities. These institutions typically have a greater number of faculty, students and preceptors to account for, and as a result may provide a broader perspective for how similar institutions will be impacted because of this change. Additionally, expanding the sample to include stakeholders such as college administration and the athletic training patient-base at institutions can help to better inform the impact of this change.

Secondly, future research should investigate alternatives to the current graduate assistantship model that is utilized in many colleges' athletics program. This model customarily relies upon new athletic training professionals, who are provided with a tuition waiver and a monthly stipend to supplement the existing staff. These individuals are typically working full time and are also full time graduate students. According to participants in this study, this model has been mutually beneficial. They believe the

value of their graduate degree along with the experience they have gained far outweigh the brunt of the work they endure. However, this will no longer be a viable option after 2022, considering entry into the profession will occur at the graduate level. A study investigating the viability of residencies and internships to provide professionals with an adequate income, and a means to gain valuable work-related experience is needed.

Thirdly, this study suggests that faculty members and preceptors may need additional education or training to meet the demands of new program standards and educational competencies. This provides an opportunity to investigate the feasibility of adding to or revamping the profession's continuing education system. Currently, many of these opportunities are conducted in lecture formats, and while some offer hands on training and experience, a need exists to identify whether or not the content and skills presented are being translated into actual practice. If not, a suggestion is for the development of continuing education tracks, which afford professionals an opportunity to complete a sequence of courses that assist in developing proficiency in a specific area. A study investigating this idea would help to sustain the improvement in patient care that is being sought through a change in the professional degree. Support from the NATA Strategic Alliance to examine the educational competencies and to assist in providing training will help strengthen both professional and continuing education for athletic trainers.

A final recommendation would be to follow up with this institution four years after a transition to graduate level instruction. This would allow for the program to have data on more than one graduating class, to determine salary, career placement, and graduates' perception of their preparedness to practice and advance the profession.



## Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate the impact of the professional degree transition is institution specific. It also confirms that primary stakeholder groups such as faculty, students and preceptors are all impacted because of this change. Furthermore, it supports the supposition that the professional degree transition will advance the profession, serve to align athletic training with peer professions, and improve patient care. However, to implement this change effectively strong leadership within the program and support from college administration is essential. This study also suggests that a more mature student will be interested in the profession, will likely persist and have improved didactic and clinical education experiences. Furthermore, this study identifies and provides recommendations to support the professional growth and development of faculty and preceptors who will work directly with students, preparing them to succeed in an evolving healthcare workforce that values patient centered care.

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APPENDIX A:

Institutional Review Board Protocol Exemption Report



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
for the Protection of Human Research Participants  
PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT**

**PROTOCOL NUMBER:** 03477-2017

**INVESTIGATOR:** Mr. Justin Adeyemi

**SUPERVISING  
FACULTY:** Dr. Karla Hull

**PROJECT TITLE:** *The Athletic Training Professional Degree: A Case Study of the Perceptions of Program Stakeholders at a Private College.*

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:**

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. You may begin your study immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator ([irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:**

- *Upon completion of this research study all compiled data (transcripts, email & data lists, etc.) are required to be maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *As part of the informed consent process, audiotaped interviews must include the Researcher reading aloud the consent statement to participants. Transcripts must document reading of the consent – as this will be the required documentation that participants were informed.*
- *In order to maintain confidentiality participants should be reminded not to identify themselves, or others during the audio taped interviews and/or focus group sessions.*

*If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) to ensure an updated record of your exemption.*

**Elizabeth W. Olphie**

**05/09/2017**

*Thank you*

*for submitting an IRB application.*

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator      Date

*Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-259-5045.*

APPENDIX B:  
Consent Forms

## Verbal Consent Script for Interviews

You are being asked to participate in a qualitative research project entitled, “The Athletic Training Professional Degree: A Case Study of the Perceptions of Program Stakeholders At a Private College” which is being conducted by Justin Adeyemi and I am doctoral student in the Leadership program at Valdosta State University.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. The research involves a 60-90 minute interview. The interview will be audio recorded. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the audio recording will be destroyed. The transcripts will be stored on a computer and back up hard drive that is password protected to keep data secure in the case of loss or theft. I will be saving transcripts for the designated time frame of three years as required by the IRB, once that time frame has passed each of the transcriptions will be permanently erased from the secure hard drive.

You will be given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Your name will not appear on any document associated with this study, including the transcription of the recorded interview. Please note that in an effort to maintain confidentiality.

You may choose not to partake in the interview, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you choose to leave the study your audio taped conversations, and any written information linking them to the research study will be destroyed/shredded.

You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may be contacted after the interview if I have any additional questions to ask relating to your experiences and feedback.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Justin Adeyemi at [jaadeyemi@valdosta.edu](mailto:jaadeyemi@valdosta.edu). This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-259-5045 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

## Verbal Consent Script for Focus Forums

You are being asked to participate in a qualitative research project entitled, “The Athletic Training Professional Degree: A Case Study of the Perceptions of Program Stakeholders At a Private College” which is being conducted by Justin Adeyemi and I am doctoral student in the Leadership program at Valdosta State University.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. The research involves a 60-90 minute interview. The interview will be audio recorded. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the audio recording will be destroyed. The transcripts will be stored on a computer and back up hard drive that is password protected to keep data secure in the case of loss or theft. I will be saving transcripts for the designated time frame of three years as required by the IRB, once that time frame has passed each of the transcriptions will be permanently erased from the secure hard drive.

You will be given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Your name will not appear on any document associated with this study, including the transcription of the recorded interview. Please note that in an effort to maintain confidentiality.

You may choose not to partake in the interview, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you choose to leave the study your audio taped conversations, and any written information linking them to the research study will be destroyed/shredded.

You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may be contacted after the interview if I have any additional questions to ask relating to your experiences and feedback.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Justin Adeyemi at [jaadeyemi@valdosta.edu](mailto:jaadeyemi@valdosta.edu). This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-259-5045 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

APPENDIX C:  
Initial Correspondence

Greetings Program Director,

I am writing to inform you of a research study being conducting for my dissertation entitled, “The athletic training professional degree: A systems based approach of understanding” through Valdosta State University in Valdosta, Georgia.

The purpose of this study is to explore the proposed professional degree transition for the athletic training profession and how it may impact the athletic training education system. For this study, the system is defined as the combination of individuals within an athletic training program, specifically athletic training educators, preceptors and students.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated as it may help to provide insight into one of the most controversial discussions within our profession. If interested, participation would include you as the program director, the clinical education coordinator, those who serve as preceptors and athletic training students at your institution.

Also, it is my due diligence to inform you that there are no known risks associated with this study. Your name, those who would also be willing to participate and the institution’s name will remain confidential should you decide to participate. Moreover, your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal will not affect your relationship with Valdosta State University in anyway.

Please feel free to take the appropriate time to discuss the prospect of engaging in this research with those at your institution. Attached is the sample timeline for the completion of this study along with a synopsis of the study.

I will plan to follow up with you in one weeks’ time to discuss the possibility of our adding meaningful dialogue to the professional degree conversation.

Respectfully,

Justin Adeyemi  
jaadeyemi@valdosta.edu



APPENDIX D:  
Letter of Recruitment

Greetings Athletic Training Preceptors,

My name is Justin Adeyemi and I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University in the department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Technology.

I am conducting a study on the perceptions of athletic training program stakeholders regarding the change in the athletic training professional degree. You are receiving this e-mail because you have valuable information to contribute related to this topic and the athletic training profession.

You are being invited to attend a focus forum to discuss this topic with other individuals in the athletic training profession. Your participation in this study is voluntary and any and all information shared during this time will remain confidential.

The focus forum will take place: College's Athletic Training Laboratory

The forum will last approximately 90 minutes and a series of questions will be posed at the forum to generate discussion on the topic. This focus forum will be audio-recorded but all information will be confidential and your name will not appear in any written document associated with the study.

Please respond by completing the attached questionnaire form to indicate your interest in participating.

Once you have completed the form, I will send you additional information regarding the study.

Thank you in advance,

Justin Adeyemi

Preceptor Questionnaire Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please select your clinical setting:

- College
- Clinic
- Hospital
- High School
- Industrial

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please select the time frame you will be available on Monday, July 17, 2017:

- 9:00am-10:30am
- 11:00am-12:30pm
- 1:00pm-2:30pm
- 3:00pm-3:30pm

Thank you for your response, I will select the time frame that works best for each participant. Once each participant has completed this form, a confirmation of the focus forum time will be announced.

Justin Adeyemi

Greetings Athletic Training Students,

My name is Justin Adeyemi and I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University in the department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Technology.

I am conducting a study on the perceptions of athletic training program stakeholders regarding the change in the athletic training professional degree. You are receiving this e-mail because you have valuable information to contribute related to this topic and the athletic training profession.

You are being invited to attend a focus forum to discuss this topic with other individuals in the athletic training profession. Your participation in this study is voluntary and any and all information shared during this time will remain confidential.

The focus forum will take place: College's Athletic Training Laboratory

The forum will last approximately 90 minutes and a series of questions will be posed at the forum to generate discussion on the topic. This focus forum will be audio-recorded but all information will be confidential and your name will not appear in any written document associated with the study.

Please respond by completing the attached questionnaire form to indicate your interest in participating.

Once you have completed the form, I will send you additional information regarding the study.

Thank you in advance,

Justin Adeyemi

Athletic Training Student Questionnaire Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please select your academic classification

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please select “yes” or “no”. I will be in attendance for the focus forum on Monday, August 10, 2017 from 11:00am-12:30pm:

- Yes
- No

Thank you for your response, I look forward to meeting you. Prior to the focus forum, I will send a reminder e-mail regarding the date, location and time of this session.

Justin Adeyemi

APPENDIX E:

Individual Athletic Training Faculty Interview

## **Interview Guide: Athletic Training Educators**

1. How long have you been an athletic trainer? What lead to your interest in the field?
2. What is it about the field of athletic training that keeps you engaged in the profession?
3. Can you tell me about your first job as an athletic training educator?
4. What were your reasons for becoming an athletic training educator?
5. What stories can you share about your experiences working clinically (in the field)?
6. As a student, what factors did you consider when selecting an athletic training program to attend?
7. What was your reaction when you first learned about the mandated professional degree transition?
8. How do you describe your role as an athletic training educator (Program Director/Clinical Coordinator)?
9. What stories can you share about your experiences in your current role?
10. What is your perception of the administration's level of support for the athletic training program?
11. In your opinion, is the mandated-professional degree transition a positive step for the profession? Why? Or Why not?

APPENDIX F:

Joint Athletic Training Faculty Interview



## **Interview Guide: Athletic Training Educators**

1. In what ways do you believe your role or daily tasks might change because of the professional degree transition?
2. In what ways might the transition to graduate level instruction impact your teaching, scholarship and service to the institution?
3. In what ways might the professional degree transition impact your personal life, outside of work?
4. In what ways do you believe the mandated degree transition will impact student enrollment?
5. In what ways do you believe this transition will impact the department or college's budget?
6. In what ways do you envision this change impacting course offerings for students?
7. In what ways might the professional degree transition impact administrators, faculty and staff college wide?
8. In what ways might the community be impacted as a result of the professional degree transition?
9. In what ways, if any should undergraduate and graduate level instruction differ for athletic training programs?
10. What plans if any, have you and the staff formulated to address the mandated professional degree transition?
11. Are there any existing resources at the institution that enable the program to transition to graduate level instruction?

APPENDIX G:  
Preceptor Focus Forum

### **Focus Forum: Preceptors**

1. How many of you have been an athletic trainer for at least two years? Five years?  
10 years?
  - a. Continued until all attending preceptors have been accounted for.
2. What were your reasons for becoming an athletic training preceptor?
3. How would you describe your role as a preceptor within the athletic training program?
4. I want you to think back to the students you encountered when you first started the role of preceptor. Were any of you surprised by student abilities or attitudes? Tell me about that.
  - a. If no response: What was your initial reaction to the level of support these students needed?
5. What factors did you consider when selecting an athletic training program to attend?
6. What was your initial reaction when you learned about the recently mandated professional degree transition?
7. In what ways do you believe your role or daily tasks might change because of the professional degree transition?
8. In what ways might the transition to graduate level instruction impact the athletes and or patients you provide care to?
9. In what ways might the professional degree transition impact your personal life, outside of work?

APPENDIX H:  
Student Focus Forum

### **Focus Forum: Students**

1. What influenced you to make the decision to enroll in an Athletic Training program?
2. Why did you select the athletic training program at this college?
3. Tell me about some of your initial patient encounters at your first clinical site?
4. Towards the end of your first clinical experience, what areas did you need continued improvement?
5. What was your initial reaction when you learned about the recently mandated professional degree transition?
6. In what ways might your college experience(s) change as a result of the professional degree transition?
7. Would an institution transitioning to a graduate athletic training program impact your decision to attend that institution?
8. In your opinion, is this mandate a positive step for your future profession? Why?  
Or Why not?