

# Descriptive Qualities Of Athletic Training Education Program Directors

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**Context:** Limited literature explores professional preparation of program directors (PD) to lead an athletic training education program (ATEP).

**Objective:** To explore challenges, effectiveness, leadership, and PD role selection.

**Design:** Descriptive and qualitative exploratory email survey.

**Setting:** Educational.

**Participants:** Emails were sent to 345 PDs from a Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) listing.

**Main Outcome Measure(s):** Measures of central tendency were used to observe years of experience, role selection (applied versus appointed), education level, and gender. Program Director effectiveness, leadership, and challenges were grouped according to common themes.

**Results:** Most PDs (82.5%;  $n = 99$ ) reported having one to ten years of experience. Mean years of experience was 7.46 ( $\pm 6.36$ ) years. A majority, 61.7% ( $n = 74$ ), reported having applied for their

position. Educationally, 54.2% ( $n = 65$ ) held doctoral degrees compared to 45.8% ( $n = 55$ ) whose highest degree was a masters degree. Six themes emerged for PD effectiveness and challenges. Lastly, seven themes regarding leadership were described.

**Conclusions:** Program Directors should approach their role with savvy, caring, and humanistic attitudes, developed by professional preparation. Firm in their convictions and vision, PDs also are viewed as empathetic advocates for students. Program Directors play a critical role in the advocacy of the profession within institutions of higher education through professional preparation of students. Several themes pertaining to professional preparation of PDs may positively impact the profession. Future PD's should seek educational programs that prepare them for these challenges of the position, such as professional preparation in education and higher administration or curriculum and instruction.

**Key Words:** Administrative, Effectiveness, Higher Education.

Annual reports, student recruitment and retention, self-studies, accreditation, teaching, scholarship, and service are but a few responsibilities of athletic training education program directors (PDs). Administering an athletic training education program (ATEP) can be a complex process with a heavy emphasis on teaching and administration and less on scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Formal

preparation to assume these duties is poorly defined as each university/college may have specific requirements for the PD. In addition to teaching, service and research expectations, PDs may be trained to formally assume leadership and administrative duties.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Certified athletic trainers assume these administrative responsibilities when they become PDs.<sup>2</sup> With a growing number of ATEPs, a demand for highly qualified faculty members to serve as PDs to administer these programs is important yet problematic in terms of professional preparation in assuming this role.<sup>5</sup>

Many athletic training professionals are trained in specific content areas (e.g. biomechanics, pedagogy, exercise physiology), particularly during graduate preparation.<sup>6</sup> Part of this training includes a "professional socialization" process.<sup>7</sup> This process involves learning skills, values, attitudes, and normative behaviors as they relate to the profession and specifically one's job responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Certified athletic trainers may not always be



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prepared for the expansive administrative responsibilities assumed when they become PDs unless they have sought formal preparation.<sup>2,8</sup> These issues in other professions (e.g., health education and health promotion) also have also been noted in professional literature.<sup>3,8-10</sup>

At the time of the preparation of this manuscript, there were 12 doctoral-level programs with a focus in athletic training curricula (leading to traditional doctorates such as Ph.D., Ed.D., etc.) including; Indiana State University, Oregon State University, University of Florida, The Ohio University, Old Dominion University, Temple University, University of North Carolina Greensboro, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, University of Oregon, University of Pittsburgh, University of Toledo, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Kentucky and the University of Virginia; however, the need for preparation continues to drive the development of more programs.<sup>11</sup> Throughout higher education, faculty members are prepared for teaching and research; however, PDs and department chairs are being asked to assume administrative roles and responsibilities not included in their academic training.<sup>2,3,12</sup> Many PDs and department chairs excel at their positions, but transitioning from academic positions to administrative ones may add additional role strain and personal stress. Often, learning is *in situ* versus prior preparation.<sup>13</sup> Preparation at the doctoral level may also be assumed, which may not be the case at many colleges and universities.<sup>5,14</sup> In Passauer's research (2004), the highest rated PD preparation qualities were as mentors and leaders. The role of faculty developer (i.e., administrator) was rated much lower.<sup>2</sup>

According to the *Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) Standards and Guidelines for the Athletic Trainer* (2005), "The Program Director should have strong academic orientation and should have demonstrated a sincere interest in the professional preparation of athletic training students (p. 3-4)."<sup>15</sup> With this standard, one would think there to be a clearer path educationally to prepare professionals for roles in higher education.<sup>2,6</sup> Many PDs and similar positions (e.g., Department Chairs) have come to serve based on reputations, exemplary teaching and scholarship, or simply need.<sup>2</sup> Many PDs have been appointed to their positions and have had to learn *in situ* versus receiving formal training in higher education and administrative positions.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, some PDs who have applied for such positions often lack formal preparation as an administrator according to Passauer.<sup>2</sup> Administrative positions in athletic training pose several unique challenges, such as allocation of resources, tracking student graduation rates, and compiling annual reports. In addition to common higher education practices, such as teaching, service, and research, the PD may become overwhelmed and possibly burnt out.<sup>5</sup>

Should PDs have standards by which to measure their preparedness as with clinical proficiencies set forth by CAATE?<sup>17,18</sup> In this approach, personal and professional experiences and day-to-day events are the basis under which people construct and see their world.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of this research was fourfold: to establish how PD's became involved in their role; to describe what makes an

effective PD; to explore common challenges faced by PDs; and to present strategies that can be implemented to enhance the role of ATEP PDs.

## Methods

### Approach

A descriptive and exploratory approach was used to gather data. In addition to collecting demographic data, open-ended responses were grouped into themes to interpret respondents experiences.

### Respondents

A non-probability, purposeful sample of all PDs of ATEPs accredited by CAATE as of May 2006 (N=345) were solicited via email to participate. Of the 345 email addresses, 312 were deemed useable (90.4%). Of the useable email addresses, 120 PDs responded to the descriptive, open-ended survey yielding a 38.5% response rate.

### Procedures

This study was approved by the Human Subjects Committee at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Implied consent to participate was established by virtue of the PD's completion of the survey. A list of CAATE-accredited athletic training education PDs was obtained through the CAATE webpage (<http://www.nataec.org>). Program directors were emailed a survey containing: a statement explaining the purpose and benefits of participating in this research and an electronic survey consisting of seven response items.

Surveys were sent out via electronic mail a total of four times requesting participation. Once a PD responded to the survey or refused to participate, their name was removed from the master list. Upon completion of the survey, the PD was asked to reply via electronic mail with their responses, which was collected by a third party to remove any identifiers with the data. This process took place over a period of six weeks to assure adequate response rates. Survey responses were entered into a database and quantitatively analyzed for demographic characteristics and grouped according to open-ended question themes.

### Instrumentation

The seven electronic survey questions are presented in Table 1. The survey was developed based on previous literature including demographic questions and content-specific questions for the PD. Questions were reviewed by a panel of five college instructors (two certified athletic trainers, two athletic training education PDs, and one department chair) to establish face and content validity as well as clarity and points of improvement prior to administration. All questions were deemed appropriate by the expert panel of reviewers. Data analysis procedures focused on single question items addressing single concepts, thus, internal consistency measures were deemed unnecessary.

**Table 1. Email Survey Questions**

Questions
1. How long have you been an athletic training education Program Director?
2. Describe how you became a Program Director (i.e. applied for, appointed).
3. Provide a brief statement on how to be an effective Program Director.
4. List the top five challenges of being an effective Program Director.
5. List the top five words/statements that make an effective (in terms of leadership) Program Director.
6. What is your highest degree earned (i.e. PhD, EdD, DSc, MS, etc.)?
7. Please indicate your gender (Male/Female).

*Data Analysis*

Due to the nature of the questions, we calculated means and percentages using Microsoft Excel™ (Microsoft XP, Microsoft Corporation, 2003) for questions yielding quantitative data. For open-ended comments, an open coding thematic process as advocated by Patton<sup>20</sup> was employed to identify emerging concepts and themes based on PD responses. The sample size ( $n = 120$ ) was deemed appropriate for this study.

*Open-ended Content Analysis*

Each question was analyzed using thematic open-ended question coding to identify emerging themes and trends. To insure trustworthiness, a qualitative expert with over 22 years of experience was asked to review the data and resulting themes and trends. Comparisons with identified themes, review of the literature, and expert review were used to triangulate our data.

**Results***Descriptive Analysis*

The overall sample yielded a 38.5% response rate ( $n = 120$ ) with 55% ( $n = 66$ ) males and 45% ( $n = 54$ ) females. Respondent demographic information as it relates to years as PD, how they came to serve as PD, highest degree earned and gender are presented in Table 2.

With respect to the number of years as PD, nearly half (46.7%) reported one to five years of experience with 35.8% reporting six to 10 years of experience. Twenty-one PDs (17.5%) reported having 11 or more years of service. The overall mean for years served as PD was 7.46 ( $\pm 6.36$ ) with a median of six years. Program director experience ranged from 1 to 30 years. Program directors were

**Table 2. Participant Demographics (N=120)**

Characteristics	<i>n</i> (%)
Years as Program Director	
1 - 5 years	56 (46.7%)
6 - 10 years	43 (35.8%)
11 - 15 years	8 (6.7%)
16 - 20 years	5 (4.2%)
21-25 years	4 (3.3%)
25+ years	4 (3.3%)
Mean Years as PD	7.46 ( $\pm 6.36$ )
How did you become a Program Director?	
Applied	74 (61.7%)
Appointed	46 (38.3%)
Highest Education Level	
Doctoral	65 (54.2%)
PhD	35 (29.2%)
EdD	28 (23.3%)
DA	1 (0.8%)
HSD	1 (0.8%)
Masters	55 (45.8)
MS	35 (29.2%)
MA	9 (7.5%)
M.Ed	8 (6.6%)
MS.Ed	1 (0.8%)
MSS	1 (0.8%)
MSE	1 (0.8%)
Gender	
Male	66 (55.0%)
Female	54 (45.9%)

asked how they came to serve in their role with 61.7% ( $n = 74$ ) indicating they applied for the position and 38.3% ( $n = 46$ ) indicating they were appointed. Educationally, 54.2% ( $n = 65$ ) held doctoral degrees while the remaining 45.8% ( $n = 55$ ) held masters degrees. Program directors reporting masters level training yielded 94.5% ( $n = 52$ ) as M.S., M.A., or M.Ed (See Table 1).

### Qualities of an Effective Program Director

Six themes were identified regarding PD effectiveness based on the frequency of word occurrence (Table 3). These themes, presented from most to least frequent include: professional credibility, professional preparation, support, professional

understanding, caring leader, and professional uncertainty. “Professional credibility” was the most frequent theme as the majority (84.2%;  $n = 101$ ) mentioned this PD quality in their responses.

**Table 3. How can a Program Director be effective?\***

Theme (with frequency and percentage)	Selected Supporting Comments
Professional Credibility ( $n = 101$ ; 84.2%)	“Stay involved! Practice what you preach and help the students learn more effectively by learning what they need from interacting with them.”
Professional Preparation ( $n = 89$ ; 74.2%)	“Learn from others; find a good mentor relationship and always strive to improve yourself. A PhD is important but clinical experience may be the critical factor. Being prepared with an administrative mind will speak volumes helping the program to grow.”
Support ( $n = 72$ ; 60.0%)	“You gotta [sic] have strong committed people around you; surround yourself with quality, intelligent people. A strong Clinical Education Coordinator is essential. You must also get the administration, faculty and all other stakeholders to ‘buy-in’ to your vision and program mission.”
Professional Understanding ( $n = 75$ ; 54.2%)	“We have to keep the program in pace with the changing profession; staying up-to-date with changes in the Standards but also with changes in higher education is essential to be effective in your role. Know your institution and advocate your vision and program’s mission.”
Caring Leader ( $n = 47$ ; 39.1%)	“Recruit well but always remember the student comes first and we must approach each with empathetic ear and heart but respond with a fair and consistent judgment.”
Uncertainty ( $n = 42$ ; 35.0%)	“Realize some things cannot be foreseen. I am not sure I am an effective PD . . . I wish I knew [what constitutes an effective Program Director/leader].”

\*Some comments were annotated from their original form

The second theme identified was “professional preparation” as a means to improve PD effectiveness, with 74.2% ( $n = 89$ ) of the respondents describing its importance. The third most frequent theme was related to “support.” Sixty percent ( $n = 72$ ) of the PDs identified support as a necessary element in directing a successful ATEP. A fourth theme related to “professional understanding,” emerged from 54.2% ( $n = 65$ ) of the PDs. The notion of the “caring leader” was the fifth theme that emerged from these data with 39.1% ( $n = 47$ ) of the responses indicating this attribute. The final theme differs from the aforementioned themes due to the nature of the question posed. When asked about PD effectiveness, several respondents (35%;  $n = 42$ ) indicated a level of “professional uncertainty” when asked about the qualities of an effective PD.

### Program Director Challenges

Six themes regarding *challenges* were identified. Themes included; administrative challenges, professional challenges, personal challenges, programmatic challenges, student challenges, and distractions. To support these themes, their conceptual constructs are presented in Table 4 in order of frequency of response. The most frequently occurring constructs overall,

included time ( $n =$ , 60%), changing educational standards ( $n =$ , 7.6%) and promotion and tenure requirements ( $n =$ , 5.3%).

### Program Director Leadership Qualities

Seven themes regarding *leadership* were described. A complete presentation of these themes and supporting conceptual constructs is presented in Table 5. Themes for PD leadership qualities included (in order of frequency) catalyst, humanistic, leadership, experienced, structured, personable, and visionary. The most frequently occurring constructs included; communication ( $n = 79$ , 65.8%), humanism ( $n = 66$ , 55.0%) of responses and organization ( $n = 64$ , 53.3%).

## Discussion

The purposes of this research were to establish how PDs became involved in their role, describe what makes an effective PD, explore common challenges faced by PDs, present strategies to enhance the role of PDs, and identify areas to improve PD

**Table 4. What are the top five challenges of being an effective Program Director?**

Theme (with frequency and percentage)	Subcategories (in order of frequency of response)
Administrative Challenges (n = 102; 85.0%)	Tenure & promotion, Faculty, Support, Unrealistic Demands, Learning University System, Fitting in, Bureaucracy, Lack of Autonomy, Mentoring Faculty
Professional Challenges (n = 96; 80.0%)	Credibility, Lack of Professional preparation, Being a Spokesperson, Working on Doctorate, Making Everyone Happy, Surveys, Continuing Education, Business Savvy
Personal Challenges (n = 91; 75.8%)	Time, Balance, Family, Lack of Rewards, Patience, Sanity
Programmatic Challenges (n = 88; 73.3%)	Changing Educational Standards, Quality Clinical Staff, Resources, Accreditation, Administrative Duties, Communication with Clinical Instructors, Assessment & Evaluation, Relationship with Athletics, Changes in Profession, Learning Over Time, Turnover, Curriculum, Enforcing Policies, Facilities, Technology, Changing Paradigms
Student Challenges (n = 62; 52.2%)	Recruitment & Retention, Motivation, Quality Clinical Experiences, Advising, Counseling, Diversity, Educational Limits, People, Respect, Tuition
Distractions (n = 34; 28.3%)	Burnout & commitment, Vision (lack of), Attention to Detail, Complains, Creativity (lack of)

preparation. Often, those who excel in their jobs are asked to assume administrative roles, such as PDs.<sup>21</sup> Selection for this role is not always a logical process. Because a person is a good educator does not correspond to being a good administrator and vice versa.

Findings from this research suggest PDs should have measurable standards by which to assess their level of preparedness to assume the role of PD. Essentially, the point of contention for this latter statement based on our findings is the diametrically opposed views of PDs sampled in this research. "Having strong administrative/managerial skills," was mentioned by some participants; however, this is a common trait in many head certified athletic trainers and not just PDs. More comments centered on whether PDs should be doctorally trained or have richer experiences in the profession. A terminal degree was viewed as more of a practical strategy to impact university administration when advocating for the ATEP. One participant noted, "Get a PhD! It is the only way to make a strong impact with your administration." Others referenced having richer clinical experiences to share with students. Clearly, objective standards are important when considering professional preparation for assuming the role of PD. The means by which to meet these standards are fairly subjective based on participant responses to this survey. Further exploration as to how other roles are viewed, such as with clinical education coordinators or other positions is warranted.

To date, there are no requirements set forth by any athletic training governing body (i.e., CAATE) for PDs to have a specific degree or level of training other than five years of certification and various recognizable roles within the institution. Another theme brought out in the data was that a doctoral degree commands a level of recognition and respect within academic units and departments. Respondents identified issues such as enhanced presence at meetings, voting and bargaining rights, and respect from administration and faculty in the presence of a doctoral degree. Based on our responses and the trend for PDs for obtaining doctoral

degrees, it appears a terminal degree is desirable but *not* essential in serving in the role of PD. Of note was the fact that many PDs felt that having a terminal degree was necessary depending on the type of institution (i.e., Carnegie classifications) at which they were employed.

Our data demonstrates a greater number of male PDs than females (n = 66, 55% and n = 54, 45%, respectively) compared to the overall National Athletic Trainers' Association membership at 50% for each gender. This trend has normalized when compared to the Leone et al<sup>14</sup> data in 2003 which revealed a marked difference in female student populations (63.9%) and the paucity of female PDs (37.9%). These findings are important when assessing program recruitment and student retention. We opted not to inquire about ethnicity in the interest of keeping the survey brief, which may be a future research topic in order to understand the diversity (or lack of) in the PD role.

A positive trend can be interpreted in that the PD seeks to obtain this role, with over 60% of PDs having applied for their position. With over one-third (n = 36, 38%) of PDs appointed, this calls into question their preparedness for that role. Having a PD vacate their position, take an extended leave of absence or a sabbatical often calls others to serve as acting or even permanent PDs. Preparedness for this role can be a challenge for some without formal administrative backgrounds. Many PDs have learned from other administrative experiences regardless of having a terminal degree. Moreover, many PDs responded with "adaptability" as a strong PD characteristic whether this role was applied for or appointed. Future research may elaborate on whether applied or appointed status as a PD correlates to job satisfaction or overall PD effectiveness.

Several respondents detailed how a PD should have at least three years of clinical experience. Others connected with this latter point describing PD *credibility* as it relates to "being there in the trenches" with the athletic training student. With approximately 7.5

years mean PD experience, PDs may in fact have enough clinical experience to remain “credible” in this role. The mean years served as a PD; however, should not be interpreted as 7.5 years of active clinical engagement, but, rather, a mixture of experiences (both clinical and academic). Past experiences are invaluable; however, the point must be made that students value current experiences so as to make daily connections in the profession. It is encouraging to note many PDs stressed this point in their responses with several explaining the need to connect didactic education with clinical exposures. One participant stated, “Being well-rounded will show the student you are a real athletic trainer and in it [the profession] with them versus strictly being an academic.” It may be interesting to further explore this point in terms of how many years have been spent in clinical experiences during or before assuming the role of PD.

### Limitations

As with any research design, there are limitations. Although it was not our intent to generalize this research, but, rather to describe, a response rate of 38.5% could be improved. Our response rate was adequate for a web-based survey; <sup>22</sup> however, non-response bias is a concern. Understanding perspectives of PDs opting not to respond to the survey can be as telling (if not more so) than a PD who did. Additionally, respondents may be less inclined to answer qualitative survey questions that are open-ended. Taking this latter point into consideration, a follow-up survey in a different medium may help address this concern, such as telephone or paper-based surveys. Another potential limitation to this research is response bias. Participants may have provided socially acceptable answers to the questions posed. We attempted to address this issue by having participants send their responses to a third party. A paper-based survey may increase the legitimacy of the answers and encourage more PDs to participate in future studies.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for research might include specific survey items developed from responses to this study or examining athletic student perceptions of the same qualities. Moreover, peer perceptions of programmatic needs and preparation to meet these demands also is another area of interest. Future research should explore how each of these factors correlate to each other, such as how many participants prepared with master’s degree were offered a PD position versus those who were doctorally trained; how many doctorally trained PDs were appointed; does type, size, and Carnegie classification of school make a difference; and does previous performance or roles at the school impact the tenure/promotion process despite degree level?

### Conclusions

We attempted to describe and explore the role of the athletic training education PD. Several conclusions can be drawn from these data. Program directors should not only approach their role with a

caring, humanistic attitude, but also with a forward thinking mentality. The PD is viewed as being an empathetic advocate for the student, but firm in their convictions and vision for the program for which they serve and the profession they influence. Themes (e.g., credibility, support, and humanistic leadership) were identified in this research, which may positively impact the profession by providing areas for improved academic and administrative preparation. Program directors play a critical role in the advocacy of the profession within institutions of higher education through the professional preparation of students. Further exploration as to how to best prepare PDs to meet current demands is warranted.

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