Factors Influencing the Decisions of Male Athletic Trainers to Leave the NCAA Division-I Practice Setting

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Turnover among health professionals is inevitable in any clinical setting, but it presents a substantial financial cost to the organizations that employ them.\(^1\)\(^2\) Beyond the financial consequences, clinician turnover has been documented to have a negative impact on the delivery of patient care.\(^3\)

A variety of factors are speculated to cause clinician turnover in health professions including role conflict, overload, and burnout, all of which can contribute to work dissatisfaction.\(^4\) Issues relating to time commitment, interpersonal conflict, and low salary were identified by Capel\(^5\) as reasons for leaving the athletic training profession.

Work-life balance issues and role overload are factors leading athletic trainers to resign from positions in the NCAA Division-I setting.

Four themes emerged from our data as reasons for leaving a position: (1) role strain, (2) work–family conflict, (3) role transition, and (4) lack of career advancement opportunities.

Concern about salary level, a desire for career advancement, and role transition are not uncommon reasons for position resignation among professionals, but in recent literature, female athletic trainers have not cited them as reasons for leaving the NCAA Division-I setting.

Goodman et al.\(^6\) were the first to examine reasons that female athletic trainers (ATs) leave the NCAA Division-I clinical setting. They found that work-life balance issues (i.e., difficulty balancing personal life with excessive work expectations) were factors influencing the decision to resign.\(^6\) Recent research findings suggest that male ATs leave the college/university setting, and other clinical settings, in their mid to late 40s, but the reasons are not understood.\(^7\) The purpose of our investigation was to identify factors that influence the decisions of male ATs to leave the NCAA Division-I clinical setting.

Key Points

- Work-life balance issues and role overload are factors leading athletic trainers to resign from positions in the NCAA Division-I setting.
- Four themes emerged from our data as reasons for leaving a position: (1) role strain, (2) work–family conflict, (3) role transition, and (4) lack of career advancement opportunities.
- Concern about salary level, a desire for career advancement, and role transition are not uncommon reasons for position resignation among professionals, but in recent literature, female athletic trainers have not cited them as reasons for leaving the NCAA Division-I setting.

Participants were recruited who met the following criteria: (1) at least 1 year of experience at an NCAA Division-I school, (2) male gender, and (3) a history of having either changed work settings or having discontinued their practice of athletic training.

A total of 8 individuals participated in our study, who had worked in 4 different athletic conferences, averaged 15 ± 11 years of NCAA Division-I experience, and averaged 66 ± 5 hours of work per week during the traditional sport season. The average age was 45 ± 11 years, all were married, and 6 of the 8 participants had children.

We used a semi-structured format to conduct telephone interviews (n = 5) or face-to-face interviews (n = 2). One participant
provided responses to interview questions in a Word document that was delivered by email. The interview guides were derived from the work of Goodman et al. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. All telephone and face-to-face interview responses were transcribed verbatim upon completion. Data analysis followed the procedures of a grounded theory study.

Multiple factors influenced each individual’s decision to leave our work setting, and 4 themes emerged from the data analysis (Figure 1).

“...having to re-prove yourself to new coaches. It didn’t matter how many years of experience you had, or what you’ve done in your tenure. Coaches basically want to know if you’re ‘their guy.’ I don’t think I ever had a problem relating to the athletes, or relating to administration . . . as the years went on, the focus was not necessarily on the student-athlete, but on the organization itself. When you build facilities and people donate a lot of money . . . they expect great things from coaches and everybody else too.”

Daniel had 28 years of NCAA Division-I experience. He related a reason for leaving as:

“...the conflict that constantly arose with coaches who really didn’t want you to do your job . . . I think that’s always going to be there . . . I had a great football coach when I left . . . but there were some difficult coaches.” He went on to state that with the “win at all costs” mentality that “athletic trainers should not be tied to coaches . . . where a coaching change is made, and the athletic trainer is let go . . . I’ve had too many good friends lose their job because there’s a new sheriff in town . . . we shouldn’t be involved in the winning and losing . . . we didn’t win a game and we didn’t lose a game.”

Barry spoke of an alternative model to address conflicts that may arise with coaches and athletic administration:

![Figure 1](factors_contributing_to_departure_from_the_ncaa_d-i_clinical_setting.png)