Athletic Trainer Recruitment and Retention

Insights and Solutions for Division III

NCAA DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

Contents

DIVISION III

DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

Purpose/Charge

The Division III Management Council created the Athletic Trainer Working Group in the summer of 2023 to consider the role and impact of athletic trainers in Division III and propose workable solutions for making Division III more supportive and inclusive for both student-athletes and athletic trainers.

The Issue at Hand

In recent years, many Division III institutions have expressed increasing difficulty in hiring and retaining athletic trainers. While data indicate that the pool of certified athletic trainers has not necessarily decreased, the following factors have contributed to the current challenges:

- The types of workplaces that employ athletic trainers (including K-12 schools, corporate settings, and military bases) have expanded.
  - Athletic trainers now have more options for employment.
  - The connection to the private sector has driven up salaries significantly.
  - The recruitment of athletic trainers has grown much more competitive.
- The COVID-19 pandemic became a breaking point for some athletic trainers to shift from athletics to other areas, as expectations regarding hours, duties and coverage increased dramatically. Those expectations have not relaxed significantly.
  - Stable hours and a stable workload are more attainable elsewhere.
  - The stopgap measures that used to exist, such as the use of graduate assistants and athletic training students, are no longer as available.

Educational Requirements

One of the expressed concerns the working group considered was the current educational requirements needed for an athletic trainer. During a stakeholder meeting between the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA), its credentialing groups and the NCAA, the participants discussed the issue of the profession's current academic requirements. Information provided during that meeting indicated that there is no evidence of any decline in the production capacity of the athletic training educational system. In fact, evidence indicates that students graduating from graduate-level programs are remaining in the profession and are not being lost to other health professions.

The working group also was informed that the athletic training profession has no appetite for reconsidering the professional degree level and considers the transition to requiring a master's degree to be necessary and final. Given this information, the working group determined that it was outside of its purview to make any recommendations regarding the current educational requirements.

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

2
NCAA is a trademark of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Fall 2024.

Why This Matters

As the health and safety of student-athletes continue to be a top priority for Division III institutions, the role of the athletic trainer is increasingly important. In addition to responding to athletics emergencies, traumas and treating, preventing and rehabbing athletics injuries and illness, athletic trainers have become frontline providers on mental health issues. The athletic trainer on many Division III campuses also serves as the designated athletics health care administrator, and many play a central role filling other duties in an institution's athletics department.

It is critical that the division develop and implement best practices that reflect the value and risk mitigation athletic trainers bring to the industry, protect and enhance their well-being, and incentivize their retention so that student-athletes continue to compete in a safe and healthy environment.

Data

In November 2023, the working group surveyed the athletic trainer and athletics director at each of the 435 Division III member institutions. Responses were received from 278 athletic trainers and 218 athletics directors. The survey helped identify what Division III athletic trainers value from their work environment and inform best practices and steps Divisions III institutions can take to help with recruiting and retaining athletic trainers.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- **78%** of athletic trainers responding to the survey have the title of Head Athletic Trainer/Director of Sport Medicine.
- There are an average of **four** full-time athletic trainers at a Division III institution.
- **61%** have been at their current place of employment for **seven or more years**.
- **78%** are employed by and report to the athletics department.
- **98%** are employed for a term of **10-12 months**, while 60% are employed on 12 months terms.
- **81%** serve as the NCAA Health Care Administrator.

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

Working Group Process/Final Recommendations

The working group met initially in July 2023 and later convened multiple times. The group considered available research and collaboration with topical experts and stakeholders to understand the challenges at hand and make informed recommendations. The November 2023 survey of Division III athletic trainers and athletics directors led the working group to establish four core areas to address (not listed in priority order):

- **Culture and Communication.**
- **Workload.**
- **Work-Life Balance.**
- **Compensation.**

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

Culture & Communication Recommendations

50% of athletic trainers indicated they are rarely or never consulted about the scheduling of student-athlete practices and schedules, while only 11% of athletics directors indicated that athletic trainers are rarely or never consulted.

41% of athletic trainers are given less than 24 hours' notice when changes are made to practice and competition schedules that are not weather-related.

1. Include the highest-ranking member of the athletic training staff as a member of the athletics department's senior leadership team to ensure involvement in the decision-making process.

2. Establish a process and/or policy that guides when and how changes to the timing (date and time) of practices and contests can be made and include the athletic trainer in such decisions.
   ○ The level of care and/or coverage may be affected by the change to the schedule.
   ○ The policy should provide clear direction on how much lead time is needed for any changes that are not weather-related.

3. Ensure that athletic training staff and other related staff (e.g., facilities, sports information) are informed and offered the opportunity to provide input regarding institutional, conference and NCAA legislative/policy decisions that may impact student-athlete health and safety and their workload/work-life balance.
   ○ Consult athletic trainers in conference- and NCAA-level discussions when considering legislative and policy changes that would impact student-athlete health and safety and their workload.
   ○ Engage athletic trainers at the conference level by adding them and/or institutional health care administrators to standing conference committees, subcommittees and working/advisory groups.
   ○ Broadly communicate (i.e., in Division III best practices documents and handbooks) that athletic trainers are encouraged to be engaged in decision-making at the institutional and conference levels. This should include regularly soliciting feedback from athletic trainers when considering positions on NCAA and conference policies and legislative proposals.

4. Provide professional development opportunities for institutional athletic trainers by maximizing existing resources available to support athletic trainers and student-athlete health care (e.g., Division III Strategic Initiatives Grant Program).

5. Ensure athletic trainers serving on the athletic department leadership team have titles consistent with other team members.

6. Create and consistently communicate expectations for interaction by staff and student-athletes with athletic trainers.
   ○ Include hours during which communication in nonemergency situations may occur.

47% of athletic trainers indicated they are always or frequently consulted on legislative or policy changes being considered by the conference or the NCAA.

NCAA
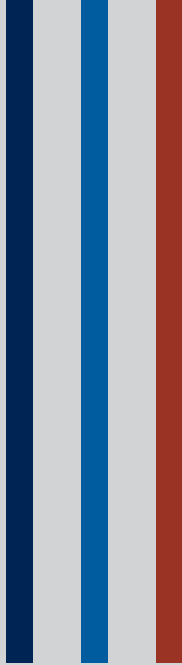DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

Workload Recommendations

Of the athletic trainers surveyed, responses indicated that **the average number of student-athletes for which the athletic training staff is responsible is 489, representing 21 sports**. They also indicated that they cover practices and competitions at eight venues on average.

1. Assess out-of-season activities that an athletic trainer must personally attend and identify and establish expectations.

2. Evaluate the impact of athletic trainer travel to away-from-home contests.

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

8
NCAA is a trademark of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Fall 2024.

3. Establish boundaries and expectations for athletic trainers when they are not in-season, on contract or on their day off.

4. Consider the following when evaluating and determining the appropriate level of heath care and staffing for student-athlete medical care:
   - Injury rates by sport.
   - Potential for catastrophic injury by sport.
   - Treatment/rehabilitation demands.
   - Year-round assessment of squad sizes, travel, traditional and non-traditional season practice and competition.
   - Strength and conditioning activities.
   - Number of sports.
   - Location of venues.
   - Additional job responsibilities.

5. Consider the impact on the current athletic training staff when considering roster sizes and/or adding sports.

6. Develop policies that clearly define when an athletic trainer must be present.
   - Include hours when a training facility will be open and when athletic trainers are expected to attend practice and competition in person.

7. Develop a data tracking system to help document workloads to determine areas where relief could be provided.

8. Review and adjust job descriptions to ensure they represent the duties expected of the athletic trainers and ensure staff, student-athletes and coaches are aware of their responsibilities.

59% of athletic trainers indicated that they are responsible for the health care of **more than 100 student-athletes.**

NCAA
DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

Work-Life Balance Recommendations

67% of athletic trainers noted that working more than 40 hours per week and week-ends as the reason colleagues have separated from their institution. This is second to salary at 73%.

1. Manage athletic trainers' time more effectively by establishing policies/expectations that set reasonable hours for practice times and training facility hours.

2. Value and support time off for athletic trainers.

3. Establish appropriate hours for communication with athletic trainers and discourage communication/response outside those hours.

4. Support using alternative models, such as outsourcing or per diem, to help augment staffing in all areas, including travel, summer camps and out-of-season activities.

5. Ensure all members involved in an institution's student-athlete health care (e.g., coaching staff, strength and conditioning staff) are certified annually in first aid, CPR and AED training and prepared to use the training if needed.

6. Consider additional training for coaches that focuses on preventing catastrophic injury and sudden death in sport, as outlined in the NCAA Interassociation recommendations (Preventing Catastrophic Injury and Death in Collegiate Athletics).

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

10
NCAA is a trademark of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Fall 2024.

Compensation Recommendations

1. Benchmark salaries based on the breadth of the athletic training industry, not just higher education.

2. Ensure compensation for administrative duties is consistent with institutional practices and policies.

3. Align contract length with the job description, recognizing that evolving performance training habits of student-athletes and expectations may expand the length of service for athletic trainers.

4. Consider the impact of benefits to ensure an attractive package for prospective athletic trainers from recruitment through career development. This may include:
   - Contributions to retirement accounts.
   - Moving expenses.
   - Medical benefits.

5. Ensure that professional development funds are available annually.

DID YOU KNOW?

When asked what has kept your athletic trainer at your institution, the reasons with the highest response rate were **health and retirement benefits, sports medicine culture-staff morale** and **overall department culture.**

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

11
NCAA is a trademark of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Fall 2024.

Supporting Information

NATA White paper on workforce issues.

June 21, 2023, Stakeholder Meeting on Athletic Training Workforce Issues report.

September 20, 2023, NCAA CSMAS Statement on Workforce Issues in Collegiate Athletic Training.

NCAA Division III Athletic Training Working Group survey summary.

NATA survey information.

2014-15 NCAA Sports Medicine Handbook.

Interassociation Recommendations – Preventing Catastrophic Injury and Death in Collegiate Athletics.

NCAA Guidance Medical Care and Coverage for Student-Athletes at Away from Home Events

NATA Athletic Trainer Employer Checklist

ACSM/NATA Joint Statement on Collegiate Athletic Trainer Workforce

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

Working Group Roster

Stevie Baker-Watson, Theodore Katula Director of Athletics and Recreational Sports, DePauw

Rick Burr, Director of Athletics Performance and Athletics Health Care Administrator, Babson

Ryan Callahan, Associate Athletic Director and Head Athletic Trainer, Wartburg

Josh Dreher, Associate Athletic Director - Student Wellness and Head Athletic Trainer, Texas - Dallas

Heather Grant, Associate Athletic Director and Senior Woman Administrator, Bridgewater (VA)

Steve Hillmer, Director of Sports Medicine, Wisconsin-Whitewater

Marybeth Lamb, Associate Vice President for Athletics and Student Wellness, Bridgewater State

Steve Mauro, President, Alfred State

Becky Roark, Co-head Athletic Trainer, Pomona-Pitzer

Mike Snyder, Director of Athletics and Recreation, Pacific Lutheran

Andrea Talentine (CHAIR), President, Augustana (IL)

Ashley Wagner, Director of Athletics and Wellness, Notre Dame (MD)

DIVISION III
DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE

DIVISION III

DISCOVER | DEVELOP | DEDICATE