Examining Mentoring Relationships within the Sport Management Academy: Perspectives of Mentors and Protégés

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“IT was the cornerstone. Absolutely, the key to my experience was my advisor.”

(Protégé D2, personal communication, June 19, 2009)

Mentoring has been widely studied in many contexts, with most of the mentoring literature emerging from studies conducted in business and industrial settings (Dickinson & Johnson, 2000; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). In contrast, fewer studies have explored the nature of mentoring relationships in academia (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). With respect to sport, many authors have studied mentoring in areas such as coaching (Avery, Tonidandel, & Phillips, 2008; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Miller, Salmela, & Kerr, 2002) and intercollegiate athletic administration (Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002; Young, 1990). In addition, Bower (2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009), along with her colleagues (Bower & Hums, 2003; Bower, Hums & Keedy, 2006), has studied mentoring in sport in a variety of contexts. Yet studies combining the areas of sport and academia are incredibly limited (e.g., Baker, 2006). A review of the literature did not yield any studies specifically examining the relationships between sport management dissertation advisors and their doctoral students.

Although there is a relative absence of studies examining mentoring in sport management academia, it is not because of a lack of importance of the topic, as acknowledged by a number of scholars. Weaver and Chelladurai (1999) stated that there had been "little emphasis on the mentoring process in educational institutions with particular reference to sport" (p. 25), while Pastore (2003) further emphasized the critical importance of mentoring, calling it an "essential area" for sport management educators. Consequently, this study attempted to qualitatively examine the nature of select mentoring relationships within sport management.

For the purpose of this study, mentors were defined as doctoral dissertation advisors while protégés were defined as former sport management doctoral students who had successfully defended their PhDs. The sample was delimited to include only individuals who were employed in faculty positions at academic institutions in North America. The sample of mentors was selected on the basis of high scholarly productivity and large aggregate numbers of former doctoral dissertation advisees, as determined by Dixon & Mott (2008). Protégés were randomly selected from a compilation of dissertation advisors’ former advisees.

This study sought to determine the mentoring functions that occurred between select sport management dissertation advisors and their former doctoral students. The study also sought to determine the nature of the current relationship between dissertation advisors and their former doctoral students; the characteristics desired in each member (mentors and protégés) of the relationship; and the outcomes of the mentoring relationship for both mentors and protégés.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four dissertation advisors and nine former doctoral students, for a total of 13 current sport management faculty members. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo 8 was used to facilitate the process of coding and analyzing the data. Inductive and deductive coding approaches were used to identify emergent themes.

Results indicate that both mentors and protégés benefitted from these mentoring relationships, despite the fact that many protégés were hesitant or unable to describe the benefits their mentors would have received. Mentors and protégés provided a wide variety of characteristics they desired in the other member of the relationship. Similarly, the nature of the current relationships between dissertation advisors and their former doctoral students also varied from being colleagues in the same academic discipline to being very close personal friends. In addition, results suggest that some of the functions initially proposed by Kram (1988) may appear in a different manner in academic mentoring relationships as compared to other settings such as business or industry.
This study will expand on the under-researched area of mentoring relationships between sport management dissertation advisors and their doctoral students. The findings may also act as the basis for subsequent, more detailed analyses of mentoring within this field. For example, researchers could examine the relationships between dissertation advisors and their current sport management doctoral students. In addition, prospective doctoral students seeking a dissertation advisor might be able to apply the insight gained on mentoring relationships to their own search. Lastly, current sport management faculty may increase their understanding of the mentoring functions that occur in other faculty-doctoral student relationships within sport management, and could potentially incorporate these findings when advising their own students.