Seeking Six Degrees of Separation: Women Mentoring Women with the Transition to the Professoriate

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Karinthy (1929) coined the six degrees of separation theory to explain the connectedness of people around the world through a chain of acquaintances. Though many of us have this “affiliation” through our graduate institutions, we have not successfully navigated academia in the same manner. One avenue for sport management practitioners and professors to perpetuate this theory is through the mentoring process. Specifically, women in our discipline are in need of mentoring empowering relationships. Given the fact that 30% of undergraduate sport management degree programs participating in a study by Jones, Brooks, and Mak (2008) reported having no female faculty members and many female sport management faculty members work in isolation or as minorities within their departments, strategic attention to mentoring female sport management faculty members seems to be in order.

According to Farren (2006), mentoring is learning and developing a partnership between a current professional with extensive experience/knowledge in a specific area toward a protégé who is on a quest of knowledge and guidance from the relationship. Farren believes “The more you can learn from the experts around you, the better you will do in your career.” (p.7). Dr. Tara Kuther, About.com’s correspondent on graduate school issues, states that graduate mentors often are a source of information and support as new graduates enter the world of work and are charged with the following responsibilities:

• provide you with support and encouragement
• offer opportunities for collaboration, joint presentations, and departmental talks
• help you to learn about writing and submitting manuscripts for publication
• be interested in your career area
• be able to provide support and training in your area
• model a successful academic career and training in your area
• be committed to help mentees make the next move in their career development
• demonstrate personal integrity
• introduce you to colleagues
• help you to identify and work with your strengths and weaknesses
• provide opportunities for you to develop independence.

Currently, there is a need for freshly-hooded professors to assimilate quickly and effectively to the demands higher education employment. Baker and Andrew (2007) contended that young professors need the backing of seasoned academicians. Balancing the triad (research, teaching, and service) on the path to promotion and tenure is critical to advancement and avoidance of burnout. Research on mentoring within our discipline has identified that mentoring remains elusive to some extent and that current faculty need to be aggressive in establishing a formalized system for mentoring new faculty (Massengale, 2009; Pastore, 2002; Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999). During the 2008 NASSM Conference a group of recent graduates hosted a roundtable discussion for current doctoral students on the transition to faculty status and the many intricacies that transition requires (relocation, load, negotiating your contract). But we cannot utilize the “one and done” scenario in hopes that our efforts are long-standing. As tenured, tenure-track and long-term contract faculty members, we are responsible for the future of our discipline.

If, what Farren defined as mentoring is our ultimate goal, then how are we doing? This roundtable discussion will focus on two purposes first to address those areas of greatest concern for newly hired professors and secondly, to establish a framework for implementing a mentor network based on Kuther’s list of responsibilities utilizing our professional associations like NASSM and Women in NASSM (WIN).