A Conceptual Framework for Mentoring African American Male Student-Athletes at Predominately White Institutions

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NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics have grown in size and stature and are a major stakeholder in American sport culture and educational system. African American male student-athletes, particularly those competing in revenue sports, represent a sizeable and central group within predominately white NCAA Division I institutions. While African American males may be highly successful on the court and field, they continue to struggle to have an excellent college experience overall. Only 49% of African American male student-athletes graduated from college in 2009 compared to 62% of white male student athletes (Zgnoc, 2010). There is great concern that these athletes are not receiving all of the benefits of a college education.

In addition to the academic struggles for African American male football players, there are numerous psychosocial and cultural issues these young men face in institutions of higher learning. Hyatt (2003) highlighted that commitment, discrimination, and isolation were some of the major barriers for African American student-athletes as they pursue a quality overall college experience. First, African American student-athletes’ commitment to their sport and to their institution are typically at odds with each other and these individuals have difficulty merging long-term career and life interests with short-term athletic career opportunities. Further, their extensive athletic commitments also lead to isolation, since African American male student-athletes are often less integrated into campus life and the academic setting. Last, African American athletes have expressed that they feel discriminated against by other faculty and students because of their race and perceived privilege of their status as college athletes.

Mentoring has been used as a tool for developing organizational members in many different contexts and disciplines such as business (Kram, 1985), higher education (Johnson, 2007), and sport management (Jones, Harris, & Miles, 2009). Effective mentoring relationships from single or multiple mentors can lead to benefits for the mentee such as psychological support, personal development, and career growth, while also creating meaningful relationships between organizational members (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999). While current literature presents research on mentoring within intercollegiate athletics, there is a greater need to research the mentoring of African American male-student athletes because of their unique status in the context of higher education. Mentoring may provide an effective method for addressing the specific needs and barriers facing African American male student-athletes. Mentoring has been utilized effectively in a variety of fields such as education (Fletcher, 2000), business (Ragins, 1997), and sport management (Jones, Harris, & Miles, 2009). The practice tends to focus on providing career guidance and personal investment in an individual’s career and/or life development. Mentors develop close one-on-one relationships with mentees to help show him/her how to navigate within an organization or group and make the right choices to help their prospects of advancement. While some mentoring programs have been developed at a few universities for student-athletes, in general (Broughton & Neyer, 2001), there are only a few programs geared toward African American student-athletes (Carter & Hart, 2010), and none could be found that focus on African American male student athletes in particular. Therefore, there is an unmet need both in the literature and in practice.

Further, since African American male student-athletes have an array of academic and psychosocial needs, researchers need to look beyond the traditional model of having one primary mentor and explore the potential of a “critical mass” or network of mentors. Academic mentors from within the athletic department cannot necessarily meet the psychosocial and developmental needs of African American male student-athletes, especially if the mentor and mentee come from two different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Likewise, an African American male mentor from the faculty may not be able to meet the athletic career development needs of these student-athletes. Therefore, it may be necessary to develop a model that incorporates several mentors that meet different needs and in a sense, make up a “personal board of directors” for the student-athlete. Higgins and Kram’s (2001) theory of developmental networks re-conceptualized the definition of mentoring and views it as a multiple relationship phenomenon that is unrestricted by organization, industry or profession and allows for diverse influences on the mentee’s career development. The developmental network theory posits a typology of developmental mentoring networks that can shape a protégé’s experience positively or negatively.
For the purpose of this presentation, I will employ Higgins and Kram's (2001) developmental network theory typologies and exemplify how it applies to the context of high profile, African American male student-athletes at predominately white universities. The four types of developmental networks are (1) entrepreneurial, (2) opportunistic, (3) traditional and (4) receptive. These developmental network types differ on the strength (strong vs. weak tie), number of developers (few vs. more), and diversity of relationships (same social system vs. different social systems). Entrepreneurial developmental networks are the most ideal as they typically involve highly motivated and involved protégés with strong ties to multiple and diverse developers. Work environment, individual-level, and other moderating factors can affect creation, maintenance and improvement of developmental mentoring networks. The developmental network theory of mentoring is a significant contribution to the management and organizational theory literature as it redefines mentoring as not just the traditional, single dyad relationship, but as networks of multiple dyad relationships demonstrating how protégés can gain access to varied information from different mentors. However, since this theory was conceptualized with the traditional organizational workplace in mind, there are some modifications that are necessary to apply this conceptual framework to the context of high profile African American male student-athletes at predominately white institutions (PWI).

The purpose of this study is to modify the developmental network theory and its typologies for the context of high profile black male student-athletes at predominately white institutions by including other major findings on mentoring from the organizational, higher education, and sport management contexts. The limitations of Higgins and Kram's (2001) will be discussed and new typologies will be hypothesized incorporating current research that is applicable to multiple developmental mentoring networks. In particular, the measurement of diversity will be expanded to not only include range (e.g. athletic department, faculty/staff, family), but also racial and cultural diversity due to the salience of race among African American male student-athletes at predominately white institutions. Specific suggestions for measuring multiple developmental networks in this context will also be made.

Future research is certainly needed to explore the outcomes of effective, developmental mentoring networks on African American male student-athletes at PWIs. The mentoring literature in the intercollegiate athletic context has not investigated all of the concepts related to multiple developmental mentoring networks. Additionally, empirical studies are needed to test and validate the existence and effectiveness of developmental mentoring networks in this context. The significance of this research is that it could lead to empirically based practical and replicable models that can address the holistic needs of African American male student-athletes attending predominately white NCAA member institutions and be utilized by athletic departments administrators and coaches to help with retention, academic performance, and graduation.