The Role of Mentoring in Career Satisfaction and Career Breakthroughs for Women in Intercollegiate Athletic Administration

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Women comprise 22.3% of Athletic Directors across three NCAA divisions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). While the percentages are still indicative of a nontraditional or male dominated occupation (United States Department of Labor, 2010), administrative structures of intercollegiate athletic departments appear less hierarchical and more inclusive of women than ever before (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Administrative structures include “the athletic director and all administrators who have a title that includes assistant, associate, executive, or senior athletics director” (Acosta & Carpenter, p. 42). The subtle shift in administrative structures could reflect that traditionally male-dominated industries and occupations, such as those in intercollegiate athletics, now “value talent over gender and offer a more level playing field” (Eagly & Carli, 2003, p. 827) for women seeking top management positions.

As more women seek jobs and careers in intercollegiate athletics, research has focused on factors contributing to or detracting from the advancement of women to top management positions. While gender and gender stereotyping, discriminatory hiring practices, limited opportunities for skill development, and work-life balance have been identified as barriers to the career advancement of women in college athletics (Aicher & Sagas, 2009; Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Hoffman, 2010; Hancock & Hums, 2015), collegial support, networking, and mentoring have been found to foster career tenure in athletic administration. Participation in networks and mentoring is integral for advancement within sport organizations, particularly, for women (Bower, 2009; Hums & Sutton, 1999; Shaw, 2006). Mentoring can occur with another individual in the athletic department (internal) or a person who works outside athletic department (external). While mentoring relationships have been identified as important, it is unclear as to how mentoring contributes to opportunities for advancement known as career breakthroughs (e.g., opportunities for new functional roles, opportunities for new projects, opportunities for supervision, committee assignments, sport oversight; Mainiero, 1994; Ohlott, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1994). Furthermore, mentoring may aid in career tenure, but little is known about if and how mentoring affects career satisfaction. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the role of mentoring as it pertains to career satisfaction and career breakthroughs.

As part of a larger study that examined women and leadership in intercollegiate athletics, this study was guided by the following research question: What is the role of mentoring as it pertains to career satisfaction and career breakthroughs? In support of the research question, the following hypotheses also served to address the larger purpose of the study.

H1: Internal mentoring will be positively related to job satisfaction, career satisfaction, and career breakthrough.

H2: External mentoring will be positively related to job satisfaction, career satisfaction, career breakthrough.

To serve the purpose of this study, a mixed-methods approach was utilized. First, qualitative data regarding the workplace experiences of athletic administrators were gathered from participants in four groups. Four focus groups were conducted on site during a national athletic administrators conference. Second, quantitative data was collected via an online survey disseminated to a professional listserv of 1,500 men and women in intercollegiate administration. Survey items were based on previously established scales that measured political skill, job and career satisfaction, professional relationships (e.g., mentors, networks), and career breakthroughs. Participants in the focus groups (n = 51) represented Division I (54.8%), II (19.6%), III (24.5%), held the titles of assistant athletic director/commissioner (33.3%), associate athletic director (43%), or athletic director/commissioner.
Participants identified as white (90%), black (9.8%), or Asian American (1.9%). Tenure within intercollegiate athletics averaged 12.5 years with organizational tenure of 6.1 years. Surveys were completed by 332 respondents (22.1% response rate). The majority of respondents were women (87.7%), identified as white (84.9%) with 9.9% identifying as black. Respondents represented Division I (66.6%), II (13.6), and III (16.6). Average tenure within athletic administration was 15.4 years with an organizational tenure average of 9.32 years.

Researchers engaged in a two-phase coding process to analyze focus group data. Following each coding cycle, the researchers convened to debrief, compare codes or themes, and clarify findings and meanings of coded data for 100% agreement. Across NCAA division and position (i.e., assistant, associate, or athletic director) focus group findings suggested having a mentor was highly desired. Developing a mentoring relationship with someone who is also within athletics was documented as important to participants. Additionally, having a mentor external to their respective athletic departments was also identified as beneficial. Women in the focus groups looked to mentors for support and encouragement and insight. Although hierarchical mentoring (e.g., a mentoring relationship with someone in a position higher than yours) was noted as important, the notion of peer mentoring (e.g., a mentoring relationship with someone in a similar position as yours) was also identified as an equally important type of mentoring relationship.

In addition to the focus group findings, survey data were analyzed using regression analysis. Results indicated that H1 was supported, as internal mentor support was a significant predictor of job satisfaction ($\beta = .52, p < .05$), career satisfaction ($\beta = .42, p < .05$), and career breakthrough ($\beta = .22, p < .05$). Additionally, H2 was partially supported, as external mentor support was a significant predictor of career breakthrough ($\beta = .13, p < .05$). In other words, administrators engaging in mentoring relationships were more likely to gain opportunities for new work projects, administrative roles, supervision, committee assignments, and sport oversight. Further, participants were asked to identify both an internal and external mentor(s) and answer questions regarding aspects of mentoring (e.g., help attaining desirable projects/work opportunities, mentor using his/her influence to assist participant, suggesting specific strategies for achieving career aspirations, giving advice on how to attain recognition, learn about other parts of organization/field of athletic administration).

The implications of the results of our study are important for female athletic administrators seeking opportunities for career advancement and strategies for career satisfaction. This presentation will also offer practical ideas for cultivating mentoring opportunities for women in intercollegiate athletic administration. We will also discuss how mentoring, and the idea of sponsorship can contribute to women’s advancement organizational structures of athletic departments.