Exploring the Roles of Mentoring Relationships on Female Student-Athletes’ Career Development

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Introduction
Reflecting the unique characteristics of student-athletes that they are simultaneously dealing with the dual role of being students and athletes, researchers have examined various issues related to student-athletes separating themselves from the general student population. In addition to their uniqueness, the substantial growing number of student-athletes is also another reason for capturing much scholarly attention. Notably, the participation of female student-athletes has been gradually increasing since the passage of the Title IX. There were 207,814 female student-athletes in all levels of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 2014, nearly equal to the number of male counterparts of 271,055 (“NCAA Student-Athlete Participation”, 2014). Considering the growing number of female student-athletes throughout the nation and the special circumstance of balancing between academics and athletics, female student-athletes’ career choice and development should receive more academic attention. Student-athletes as a whole have been extensively examined in the field of sport management yet relatively little is known about female student-athletes’ career-related behaviors. While there could be a variety of factors possibly influencing female student-athletes’ career choice, planning, and development, mentoring could be one of the critical elements in the context of career success for women. The benefit and positive impact of mentoring relationship have been well-documented throughout various disciplines, especially for women, yet how mentoring relationship affect female student-athletes’ career choice and development has not been explored. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the roles of mentoring relationship on female student-athletes’ career choice and development and barriers to mentoring relationship.

Literature Review
The act of mentoring refers to a mutual relationship between a more experienced person and a less experienced employee (Kram, 1985). Kram’s (1985) mentor-role theory, one of the seminal models of mentoring, claims that the career functions and the psychosocial functions are two primary roles of mentoring relationship in organizations. The career functions include sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and assigning challenging tasks. The psychosocial functions include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship (Kram, 1985). Both career and psychosocial mentoring functions have been consistently identified and demonstrated as most important functions of mentoring relationship for career development.

Previous literature indicated that mentoring relationship is a significant supporting factor for women to overcome stereotypes and barriers, which can lead them to career success in intercollegiate athletics (Bower & Hums, 2014; Grappendorf, Lough, & Griffin, 2004; Inglis, Danyelchuk, & Pastore, 2000). Particularly, An extensive amount of research demonstrated the positive influences and the benefits of mentoring relationship for women working in intercollegiate athletics in various contexts such as female coaches in women’s teams (Avery & Tonidandel; Bower, 2011; Greenhill, Auld, Cuskelly, & Hooper, 2009; Inglis et al., 2000), athletic administrators (Bower & Hums, 2014; Hancock & Hums, 2015; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002; Young, 1990), campus recreation (Bower & Hums, 2003; Bower, Hums, & Keedy, 2006), and international physical educators (Bower & Hums, 2009).

As much the roles and benefits of mentoring relationship have been highlighted in the context of intercollegiate athletics for women, on the other hand, the lack of mentoring relationship has been identified as one of the critical barriers for women’s successful career development or advancement to upper positions in organizations (Bower & Hums, 2009; Ragins, 1989).

According to Ragins (1989), women may not seek mentoring relationship as actively as men because they often fail to recognize the importance and potential benefits of mentoring relationships. In addition, mentors, especially males...
may not select female protégés because males tend to feel more comfortable developing a personal relationship with another male (Ragins, 1989). Other research found cross-gender mentoring relationship as a crucial barrier to initiate the relationship (Bower et al., 2006; Kram, 1985; Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999, 2002). In addition, Ragins and Cotton (1991) found five primary barriers for young women to mentoring relationship: Lack of access to potential mentors, fear of rejection by potential mentors, unwillingness of potential mentors, fear of disapproval of other people, and fear of sexual misinterpretation by potential mentors and other people.

Reflecting the review of literature and the purpose of this study, following research questions will guide this study to explore female student-athletes’ mentoring relationship experiences and its roles associated with career choice and development. 1) What characteristics of mentoring relationship are identified as it pertains to female student-athletes’ career development? 2) What factors are identified as a barrier to mentoring relationship for female student-athletes? 3) What factors are identified as a barrier to initiate the mentoring relationship for female student-athletes? 4) What strategies do female student-athletes utilize to cope with those perceived barriers to mentoring relationship?

Methodology
Considering the exploratory nature of the study, researchers decided to employ a qualitative approach. Grounded theory is an appropriate qualitative research method for the study and will serve as the major theoretical framework to focus on individual experiences and stories from participants and to interpret the meanings of the stories (Creswell, 2013). Participants of the study will include approximately 11 female student-athletes who are enrolled full-time at one large university located in the Rocky Mountain Region of the United States, while the number of participants will vary depending on the saturation point of the common themes. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be conducted to collect data, and each interview will take approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Follow-up questions will be asked in order to grasp deeper and broader understanding of their mentoring relationship experiences when needed. Data analysis will independently analyze the collected data using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell, 2012), and afterwards will use peer debriefing, rereading the data, and the constant comparative analysis in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis and to minimize the researchers’ bias.

Significance of Study
Results of this study will add a theoretical and practical contribution to this area. First, obtained knowledge about female student-athletes’ mentoring relationship and its roles on their career-related behaviors will contribute to the body of literature on female student-athletes’ career development. From a broader perspective, the results of this study will also contribute to literatures on women’s career path and development in sport industry, especially utilizing a qualitative design based upon grounded theory. Second, grasping a better understanding of female student-athletes’ mentoring relationship will be beneficial for people who work closely with female student-athletes such as advisors, counselors, and coaches to continue to engage in mentoring relationships. Furthermore, any identified perceived barriers of mentoring relationship will be a helpful source for mentoring program developers as they are able to utilize the information, assess the effectiveness of formal mentoring programs in athletics, and enhance the program based upon identified barriers. The results will be further discussed in the presentation.