A Comparison of the Mentoring Characteristics and Functions Important to the Advancement of Men and Women within Intercollegiate Athletic Administration

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Researchers have consistently demonstrated how the mentoring relationship provides substantial benefits associated with an array of positive career outcomes for people working in the sport industry (Bower, 2011; Bower & Hums, 2014; Sagas, Cunningham, & Pastore, 2006; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2001, 1999). The dynamics of mentoring relationships may best be explained by social exchange theory (Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993) and mentor role theory (Kram, 1985). Social exchange theory “views the interaction between two people as an exchange where the cost of participation in the relationship is compared to the perceived benefits. The basic premise of the social exchange theory indicates that if an individual perceives greater rewards than cost, he or she will be more inclined to develop the relationship” (Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993, p. 2). The social exchange in a mentoring relationship results in both career development and psychosocial benefits.

According to mentor role theory (Kram, 1985), career development functions (sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments) facilitate the protégé’s ability to advance in the organization. Psychosocial functions (role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship) contribute to the protégé’s personal growth and professional development (Kram, 1985). Applying social exchange theory and mentor role theory to an intercollegiate athletic administration setting, an Assistant or Associate Athletic Director may select a mentor based on certain desirable characteristics and/or competencies with the anticipation of receiving career and psychosocial benefits. While mentoring relationships can benefit any employee, when looking at the predominantly male make-up of intercollegiate athletic administration, one could ask whether men and women experience these benefits similarly or differently. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gather and compare information from both male and female athletic administrators on mentor characteristics, career benefits, and psychosocial benefits that could guide them in advancing in intercollegiate athletic administration.

The participants of the study were 518 women and 778 men working in intercollegiate athletic administration at NCAA Division I, II, III, NAIA schools, NCCAA schools, and junior colleges. The National Directory of College Athletics provided the email addresses of the participants. The researchers sent the Female Sport Manager Career Survey [FSMCS] (Bower & Hums, 2010) to the female participants. The FSMCS, containing modified language, was sent to the men. For example, the women were asked, “What mentoring characteristics were most often identified as important to the success of the female intercollegiate athletic administrator?” while the men were asked “What mentoring characteristics were most often identified as important to the success of the male intercollegiate athletic administrator?” The demographic data indicated the majority of men in the study were (a) athletic directors (34.6%), (b) worked at the Division I level (48.7%), and (c) were an average age of 35-44 (32.5). The majority of the women in the study were (a) associate athletic directors (37.9%), (b) worked at the Division I level (45.9%), and (c) were an average age of 45-54 (30.2%).

Demographic data frequencies were calculated using SPSS 19.0. A three-step content-analytic procedure was then used to analyze the qualitative data. The researchers organized and condensed the data by uploading the data into Hyper Researcher 2.7. The investigators independently analyzed and coded the data. The researchers used constant comparative analysis to review the applicable comments from all the content areas (mentoring characteristics, career functions, and psychosocial functions) and identified similarities and differences among the data, coding and sorting into appropriate categories (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). Each content area of interest was reviewed and similar comments were categorized into groups. The researchers used inductive reasoning by examining the categories that emerged from the data rather than placing comments into predefined categories. Once the comments were
categorized, themes were assigned a name to capture the meaning of the groups of comments. The trustworthiness of the study was strengthened by using multiple strategies of analysis introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The credibility (internal validity) was strengthened by the use of constant comparative analysis (Neuman, 2010). The transferability (external validity) of the study was strengthened by examining and tallying comments to establish themes (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The dependability (reliability) of the study was strengthened by each researcher independently examining the data and debriefing to discuss the themes and categories. Finally, the confirmability (objectivity) of the study was strengthened by limiting bias of making any premature conclusions about the themes and/or categories, by reading and rereading the data, using constant comparative analysis, and research debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants’ responses offered opportunities for comparisons by gender. The men most frequently reported wanting mentors whose characteristics included being trustworthy, supportive, respected, and good listeners. The women most frequently reported wanting mentors whose characteristics included being supportive, hardworking, and knowledgeable. The male respondents most frequently indicated the mentoring career functions of coaching and challenging assignments as most important for helping them succeed, while the female respondents most frequently discussed exposure/visibility and coaching. For psychosocial functions, men and women both identified counseling, role modeling, and acceptance/confirmation as essential for helping them with personal and professional development.

Although the results support previous research with women in intercollegiate athletic coaching (Bower, 2011; Inglis, Danylichuk, and Pastore, 2000), intercollegiate athletic administration (Bower 2011; Bower & Hums, 2014; Smith, Taylor, & Hardin, 2016), and sport management doctoral students (Chester & Mondello, 2012), there are no studies in sport specifically examined these same questions with men. Mentoring research outside the sport industry is mixed but would support that men are more likely to value characteristics related to career benefits and women are more likely to value characteristics related to psychosocial functions (Allen & Eby, 2004; Burke, 1984; Noe, 1988). This is not the case for the current research study as men discussed more characteristics related to psychosocial support than did the women. In both cases, the combination of the psychosocial and career functions reported by the men and women supports the tenets of social exchange theory (Olian et al., 1993).

The results of the study provided implications for intercollegiate athletic administrators who are considering working with a mentor. First, the potential protégé needs to reflect on whether a mentor has the characteristics and career and/or psychosocial skills necessary to help him/her achieve the goal of advancing in intercollegiate athletic administration. For example, the Athletic Director in the protégé’s athletic department may not be the best match as mentor. If this is the case, the protégé needs to look elsewhere to find someone who can help with developing the necessary career and psychosocial functions to assist in his/her career advancement. Second, learning about career and psychosocial functions is an important element in any mentoring relationship (Kram, 1985). Seeing that men and women differed regarding which of these functions they see as most important for their career development, sport organizations may benefit from implementing formal mentoring programs that encourage the use of career and psychosocial functions to address unique elements that take into account gender differences in the workforce.