Mentoring Young Women for Success as International Physical Educators

by Glenna G. Bower and Mary A. Hums

Abstract

The study identified knowledge and skills important for young women faculty as International Physical Educators. The study focused on three research questions, (a) what teaching advice would a mentor provide to a young woman faculty member? (b) what advice would a mentor provide to a young woman faculty member? and (c) what service advice would a mentor provide to a young woman faculty member? A phenomenological design and constant comparative analysis were used to examine the mentoring relationship \((N = 5)\). Results indicated the knowledge provided to protégés outweighed the teaching of skills and women were more likely to nurture the psychosocial benefits of mentoring.

There is no universal definition when it comes to defining mentoring, however, it appears terms such as facilitate, assist, help, and reciprocity seem to describe this ancient term that was first predicated in the classical vision of Odysseus (Wright & Smith, 2000). The term “mentor” actually derived from the character named Mentor. Mentor was a faithful friend of the Greek hero Odysseus in Homer’s epic story The Odyssey. When Odysseus left for war, Mentor was left behind to serve as a tutor to his son, Telemachus. Mentor served in this role, earning a reputation of being wise, sober, and loyal. The classic understanding of the term “mentorship” evolved from the relationship of these two characters. This myth embodied many of the positive attributes associated with the mentoring relationship (Wilson & Elman, 1990). Research has consistently demonstrated that mentoring provides substantial benefits to both protégés and mentors within business (Allen, Potteet, Eby, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000), academia (Baker, 2002; Miller & Noland, 2003), and the sport industry (Bower, 2004; Bower, Hums, & Keedy, 2006; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002). One area of particular importance within academia where mentoring has played a role in skill development is within physical education departments (Bower, 2006; Bower, 2007b).

If one was to define mentoring as it relates to academia, the definition may go as follows, “the practice of mentoring is to advise and guide another, providing wisdom and inspiration as a result of experience” (Miller & Noland, 2003, p. 84). Mentoring is of particular importance to women due to the perceived barriers to forming a mentoring relationship (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Weaver & Chelladurai, 2002). Mentoring young women faculty is important early in an academic career because a mentoring relationship can provide guidance to the protégé about the world of “academia” and the respective university (Miller & Noland, 2003). The guidance may come by way of two distinct sets of mentoring functions – career and psychosocial (Kram, 1985).

The career functions include sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and providing challenging assignments. Sponsorship occurs when the mentor highlights the young woman faculty to help her build a reputation within the organization. Exposure and visibility would allow the young woman faculty to become acquainted with higher administration such as the dean of her school or college. Coaching is provided through feedback on projects or presentations. During the protection phase, the mentor would shield the young woman faculty from making mistakes while taking the blame if she makes a mistake. Finally, challenging assignments help the protégé gain valuable teaching and research skills. All the career functions are most directly associated with three areas where women lag behind their male counterparts: (a) promotions, (b) salaries, and (c) power (Kram, 1983).

The psychosocial functions include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, and friendship. Role modeling happens when the mentor effectively performs tasks or interacts with superiors, subordinates, and peers. Once the young woman faculty observes the mentor’s values, attitudes and behaviors, the mentor serves as a role model. Acceptance and confirmation occurs where the mentor expresses confidence in the young faculty by creating a mutual trust, leading to support and encouragement. The mentor helps the young faculty member solve personal conflicts which are distracting from effective performance through the counseling function. Finally, the friendship function is characterized by social interaction (Kram, 1985).

Problem Statement

Although the largest body of research on mentoring has been conducted in education (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998), limited research has focused on mentoring young faculty within physical education in North America (Bower, 2006; Bower, 2007b; Savage, Karp, & Logue, 2004; Silverman, 2003). Therefore, the purpose of the study was to identify the knowledge and skills important for the success of young women faculty as International Physical Educators. The study focused on three research questions with regard to international physical education, (a) what advice would a mentor provide to a young woman faculty member to improve her teaching? (b) what advice would a mentor provide to a young woman faculty member to improve her scholarship? and, (c) what advice would a mentor provide to a young woman faculty member to improve her service?

Method

Phenomenological Genre

A phenomenological genre was chosen to examine the lived experiences of a small number of people living a phenomenon. By utilizing the traditional German philosophy, the researchers sought to understand the deeper meaning of international academic leaders and how they articulated their mentoring experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). These mentoring experiences often dictate how one may mentor future protégés in academia (Bower, 2006; Bower, 2007b).
International Academic Leaders

The International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW) board of directors were contacted to identify potential mentors for this study. A total of five (N=5) academic women from various countries were chosen to be interviewed at the IAPESGW 2005 Congress. Sample size was based on the recommendations for a phenomenological study by Rossman and Rallis (2003), who indicate it is unwise to recruit more than three to five individuals because of the three very long interviews. The study also provided saturation of the data where there was repetition in the information being reported (Seidman, 1998).

Pilot Study

The three phenomenological interviews used in this study have been used quite frequently in business settings by their creator Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs (1997). The phenomenological interviews have been tailored to meet the needs of sport and mentoring women and were introduced by Bower in 2004. Since then the interviews have been used in sport settings to study mentoring women (Bower, Hums, & Keedy, 2006), in physical education academic settings (Bower, 2006; Bower, 2007a; Bower, 2007b), and with students (Bower, Hums, & Keedy, 2006). For this pilot study, the researchers allowed an expert in the area of international physical education to examine the questions followed by interviewing one prominent international academic leader. The prominent international academic leader was asked the original proposed set of questions and, following the interview, the questions were revised.

Data Collection

Demographic information along with in-depth interviews were collected for the data analysis. An explanation of the interviews used to collect the data follows.

Demographic Information. The demographic information was asked during the first interview and consisted of age, race, number of years within academia, number of years as an international physical educator, and number of years within international sport.

Interviews. The phenomenological genre required extensive and prolonged engagement with the international academic leaders through the use of intensive, iterative in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2003). Each of the interviews served a particular purpose in examining the mentoring relationship. The first interview provided a description of the personal life history of the mentor as a protégé. During the interview, participants were first asked general demographic information and then about the dynamics of their protégé experience. The second interview focused on the present and highlighted the mentors’ current relationships. This interview provided details on how the mentor guided women protégés in teaching, scholarship, and service to succeed within international academia. Finally, the third interview brought the two interviews together in providing a reflective piece. How did the mentors’ experience as a protégé influence the way they mentored young women faculty within international academics?

Results and Discussion

The Protégé Experience

The personal life history of the mentor as protégé was examined during the first interview. This interview was conducted to establish some baseline demographic information on the mentor, and to examine the dynamics of the mentoring relationship as a protégé. Understanding the dynamics of the relationship may help determine how their mentoring relationship might have influenced ways to mentor women in regards to teaching, scholarship, and service within international academia.

For this study, two mentors were from Canada, two were from Germany, and one was from the United Kingdom. The mentors were involved with international sport for an average of 30 years and in academia for an average of 28 ½ years. All the mentors indicated they experienced an informal (unstructured) mentoring relationship as a protégé. A mentor talked about structured and unstructured mentoring programs in Europe,
still a new practice in Europe, because I think I have heard this word maybe 15 years ago and not 25 to 30 when I started my career.

Research indicates protégés perceive their informal mentors (unstructured mentoring relationships) as more effective than formal mentors (structured mentoring relationships) and they also perceive that they receive greater compensation than protégés of formal mentors (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). These attributes would support the career functions of coaching and challenging assignments mentioned in the study.

The career-related functions of sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments (Kram, 1985) are often present in the life of a new faculty member, however for this study only coaching and challenging assignments were evident. For example, the mentor provided coaching by guiding the mentor as protégé to learn how to deal with future teachers, “well she [mentor] was a leader in the field of teaching, and I learned a lot about how to deal with future teachers of physical education by watching her.” This coaching function supports research conducted with first-year faculty, presenting evidence mentors may provide knowledge and skills, as well as productive feedback on teaching skills, projects, manuscripts, and presentations to first-year faculty (Bower, 2006; Bower, 2007b).

One mentor explained the challenging assignments she received from her mentor related to physical education and dealing with people with disabilities, “I started in the 1960’s and it was very unusual for someone in physical education and sport to deal with people with disabilities. . . I had encouragement from a teacher at the university to go to other places and participate in courses to learn more about disabilities.” These courses were challenging to the mentor and provided her with greater responsibility to learn about a subject that was hardly known by her teachers, “These mentors themselves were not always the experts . . . they were interested to know more about it [physical education and people with disabilities].” This supports challenging assignments of first-year faculty who were given more responsibilities by their mentors to prepare them for greater responsibilities (Bower, 2006; Bower, 2007b).

Although career functions were present, they were not mentioned as often as the psychosocial functions of role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, and friendship displayed in this study. Research indicates psychosocial functions are very important during a young protégé’s educational period or early career (Allen, Russell, & Maetzke, 1997). Bower’s (2006) research indicated young faculty felt the most important functions provided by their mentors were encouragement, increasing their self-confidence, and serving as positive role-model functions typically psychosocial in nature.

The psychosocial function of role modeling was evident as a mentor explained the concept of what role modeling from her protégé has meant to her,

It is important for young women to have female role models. . . I have had fantastic male role models. And they have been very valuable and I have appreciated the experience they have passed and I think I’ve appreciated people like my female mentors more in some ways, because they understand what they had to do in addition where they they’ve been. My role was easier because of what they have done.

Weaver and Chelladurai (1999) explained psychosocial functions as social interactions between the mentor and protégé. This interaction requires the protégé to share personal and work experiences with the mentor. Trusting the mentor to share personal and work experiences involves role modeling by the mentor where the protégé desires to follow.

Acceptance and confirmation were evident by the nurturing characteristics displayed by the mentors. One mentor explained,

She [mentor] was a huge mentor for me. She was a very generous person and I never realized until later how generous she had been in giving me the space to develop and giving me support when I had new ideas. . . . she was encouraging because she wanted people to develop.

The nurturing characteristics are not uncommon in the academic setting. Baker (2002) suggested nurturing characteristics of a mentoring relationship as a means for reducing isolation for the young faculty member. Bower (2007a) found common characteristics of mentors included those that were nurturing: having the ability to be supportive, provide encouragement, to be empathetic and picking out the strengths of others within physical education settings.

Friendships often developed between the mentors and protégés. For example, “I would say that with most of my mentors I have a friendship relationship. It was not maybe in the beginning, but came over the years.” Kram (1983) indicates of the five phases of the mentoring relationship, the redefinition phase (mentoring relationship turns to a friendship) will take place and provide new roles and responsibilities for the mentor and protégé. In this case, the protégé may take on the role of mentoring young faculty. The mentor will eventually come to be valued as a colleague and a resource to the former protégé. These results also support studies by Baker (2002) and Marshall, Adams, and Cameron (1998) on women in Canada and Australia who valued the importance of friendship and support as effective characteristics of a mentoring relationship.

The Mentor Experience

The personal life history of the mentor was examined during the second interview. This interview was conducted to reflect on the present and highlighted present mentoring relationships with women in international physical education departments. The focus was on detailing how the mentor guided women protégés to succeed in teaching, scholarship, and service within international physical education departments.

Knowledge and Skills – Teaching. The mentors were asked about the knowledge and skills they provide in terms of teaching to young women in physical education within international academic setting. The mentors introduced two themes as important for women teaching physical education in this environment. The mentors talked about the importance of learning pedagogy. The first category discussed was the need to expand teaching capabilities by attending other colleagues’ lectures,
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Go out and listen to lectures in other areas and other disciplines. I think this is something that kind of broadens your horizons. We sometimes tend to specialize and specialize and specialize and that’s okay, but also have a broader perspective and if you can develop some language skills, then that’s absolutely necessary.

The second category dealt with ways to test students fairly. A mentor explained, “I would say to my protégé [young faculty member], you should be looking for different ways of testing students, what kind of exams, how to mark, and grade fairly.” The third category established the importance of an evaluation system for young faculty to improve on their teaching, “I recommended people coming in and evaluating the young woman faculty while they were teaching and to see if there was something different they could be doing.” Finally, the fourth category included being aware of using inclusive language while teaching. A mentor explained, “I worked hard at mentoring young faculty to get to use inclusive language. . . teaching health issues can have some pretty sensitive issues, like eating disorders, sexuality, or alcoholism.”

The second theme included teaching the young women faculty to be professional. First, the mentors established the importance of not having personal relationships with students. A mentor explained,

You don’t mix work and personal relationships, particularly professional relationships and I’ve been in that as well, particularly between students and staff, you know, it’s a no-no and yet it’s so frequent, sadly. Because I think the power relationship’s abused in that respect.

Second, the mentors discussed the importance of establishing morals and ethics in terms of making decisions. The participants suggested not allowing students to play on your emotions when making decisions in terms of changing a grade, missing class, or changing a policy. A part of being professional is making a decision that is morally and ethically right. For example,

I teach young women faculty about morals and ethics in terms of decision making. Be cautious about emotion based decision making. It (decision making) is all about making the right decision and suffering the emotional consequences.

Finally, the mentors stressed the importance of a young woman understanding gender equity. A woman described what this means,

I think it’s a betrayal if women to use their femininity to beguile, for instance, or cry gender and equity if it’s not there. I mean if it’s there, cry it loud and clear, but either way, I think you have to be professional.

These teaching attributes are related to career functions of coaching and challenging assignments (Kram, 1985). Mentoring behaviors such as these are more directly related to enhancement of the task-related aspects at work and facilitating career success (Allen et. al, 2004). These teaching attributes are not uncommon in the academic literature within physical education. Bower (2007a) reported on chairs mentoring young faculty within physical education departments. Similar teaching attributes found in Bower’s (2007a) study included developing a teaching style, understanding course evaluations, and developing and changing exams. Miller and Noland (2003) also found similar recommendations on improving teaching through observation of good teachers and obtaining feedback.

Knowledge and Skills – Scholarship. The mentors were asked about the knowledge and skills they provide in terms of scholarship for young women in physical education in an international setting. The mentors introduced one theme important in terms of scholarship for young women in physical education in this work setting. The mentors discussed the importance of research early in a young woman’s career. The first category consisted of developing a research agenda. The mentor focused on stressing to the young women faculty to establish a research agenda with awareness that we are living in a multicultural society. A mentor explained,

I think we are living really in a multicultural society with people with disabilities, from other religious and cultural backgrounds, all this I think is very helpful in maybe developing your own agenda for the future, but also your research agenda in a way.

The second category consisted of the importance of working with students on research projects, but the ethical obligation of a faculty member providing credit for the paper when that credit is necessary. A mentor explained her story about how she was introduced to publishing and established a set of rules for herself,

I got to know it [publishing] in the beginning like this - it was like you write a paper and the professor is publishing it. I totally disagree with this. I totally disagree. However, all the papers that people have written under my direction, were published under their name and not under my name. If we wrote it together, then it’s both names.

The third category discussed the importance of a research assistant position following graduation to gain additional experience in teaching and scholarship. This mentor explained her experience as she would to a fellow protégé,

When I was finished with my studies, I graduated and I got a position as a research assistant at this university for five years. I was a teaching staff at the University. I was not only providing seminars but also teaching volleyball, rowing, skiing . . . In addition to that, I could also do seminars for students on particular topics like sports and physical activity for children with disabilities and so on. This was parallel to teaching at a special school and not a full time job. For ten years I was not only a research assistant, but I was teaching at a special school for children with learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities.

According to Ransdell, Dinger, Beske, and Cooke (2001) scholarship usually refers to research funding, number of
professional presentations, publications of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, and monographs, and training graduate students to be researchers. The mentors in this study focused on the research agenda, what to focus on, and the ethics and morals of student research. This is slightly different than the study conducted by Bower (2007a) and Miller and Noland (2003) who indicated it was important to establish a research agenda, but it was also important to present and work with other faculty to publish as well.

Knowledge and Skills – Service. The mentors were asked about the knowledge and skills they provide in terms of service for young women in physical education within an international setting. The first category they introduced related to how service was not going to be an issue for young women faculty entering international academia. For example, “I told the protégé [young woman faculty] she would not have an issue with serving on committees because there would be many of them.” The second category stressed the importance of choosing committees wisely. A mentor explained, “I told the protégé [young woman faculty] that she would be asked to serve on many committees every year . . . she would need to pick and choose and be smart about it.” Finally, the third category expressed the importance of making sure the young woman faculty does not get involved in too many committees early on in her career. A woman explained, “Be careful of your service components, because it should not be your main area of interest . . . you do not want to be on too many committees.”

The mentors provided detailed information when it came to service in terms of committees. The committee involvement provides young women faculty an opportunity to grow professionally through building skills, keeping current in the field, and making connections (Miller & Noland, 2003). The mentors provided a good example of the career function of “protection” phase where the protégé does not accept too many responsibilities. This protection phase is especially important for first-year faculty in staying off burn-out and reaching true potential (Bower, 2006).

The Mentoring Relationship

The third interview focused on examining the protégé and mentoring experience. This conceptualization helped in determining how the mentors’ experience as a protégé influenced the way they mentored young faculty women within international academics. The protégé experience provided career and psychosocial functions. However, there was a stronger emphasis on psychosocial support. This result is nothing new to the female population in academics. The mentors’ experience as a protégé did influence their decision to mentor young women today. A mentor explained,

I believe in giving back. I believe there is responsibility especially for young women who don’t necessarily see possibility in themselves and I would say that you have to help them see that possibility. I would say also I just think that it is important for young women to have female role models.

The majority of studies indicate mentors note the desire to help others is a primary means for mentoring (Allen, et al, 1997). This type of mentoring is often associated with “other-oriented empathy,” “which is defined as the tendency to feel empathy and responsibility for the welfare of others” (Allen, et. al, 1997, p. 83). This “other-oriented empathy” is not uncommon in sport and physical education in North America (Bower, 2004; Bower, 2006; Bower, 2007b; Bower, Hums, & Keedy, 2006).

Implications and Future Research

The study provided some interesting implications from a global standpoint for those women entering a physical education department. First, the study supports a mentoring relationship in helping women obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to strive within physical education departments. The career functions are important as the mentor and protégé work towards improving teaching, scholarship, and service. Future mentors may want to consider the importance of providing knowledge versus teaching skills. The knowledge (being professional, understanding gender equity, etc) mentors provided the protégés outweighed the teaching of skills (teaching pedagogy).

Second, although career functions were important the study indicated women were more than likely to nurture the psychosocial or emotional benefits of the mentoring relationship. Mentors need to take this into consideration when mentoring women. Women are often engaged in mentoring that is strongly associated with a psychosocial relationship developed between the mentor and protégé (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). However, the provision of psychosocial mentoring is strongly associated with the protégé’s satisfaction with the mentor (Allen, et. al., 2004).

The results reveal a number of opportunities for future research. Future research should include protégé interviews to determine why they enter mentoring relationships. Second, a broader sample should be selected and a different method used for obtaining data. For example, a quantitative study could be conducted where the mentoring relationship could further be examined within international academia. Third, a closer look at the career and psychosocial functions need to be examined with women in other industries. Do women tend to lean more towards the psychosocial functions than the career functions in other industries?

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to identify the knowledge and skills important for the success of young women faculty in international Physical Education Departments. The results revealed interesting findings supporting the knowledge these mentors provided protégés as opposed to the skills needed to succeed in the academia. The psychosocial functions cannot go unnoticed when mentoring women. Therefore, it is important to continue expanding our understanding of the mentoring relationship in order to develop our future scholars.

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References