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Perspectives of mentoring: The Black female student-athlete

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand Black female collegiate athletes' perception of mentors and the characteristics of their current mentors. Understanding their definition of a mentor and the persons whom fulfill the psychosocial and career mentor roles will provide insight on the mentor–mentee relationship. In addition, the researchers found it necessary to ascertain the persons whom fulfill the athletic mentor role due to the collegiate athletic status. This study is approached from a critical feminist lens, utilizing a qualitative questionnaire to capture and analyze the voice and perceptions of the Black female athletes ($n = 38$) from two Division I universities. Critical race theory and Black feminist thought were employed to capture the "multiple jeopardies" of the Black female athlete, thus recognizing race, or racism, and gender, or sexism, are at the fore of their daily experiences. The findings revealed Black female athletes' definitions of a mentor were characterized by the traditional mentor qualities such as a guide, a supporter, and a role model. Further analysis indicated the women had three distinctly different persons to fulfill each mentor dimension to include: career/academic support, psychosocial support, and athletic support. However, the characteristics of those persons who fulfilled each dimension were family members, with greater influence by the coach on the athletic support dimension. Based on the findings it would benefit administrators to recognize these characteristics and persons of influence when providing support services and developmental programs for the Black female collegiate athlete.

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1. Introduction

"Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it might be a diamond in the rough" Mary McLeod Bethune (Newman, 2000).

It has been stated that Black women in society are experiencing "double jeopardy", or marginalization, based on their racial and gender status (Beale, 1970). King (2007), professor in sociology, has expanded this notion to "multiple jeopardy", to include class marginalization; and, as such, the Black female collegiate athlete is no exception. In addition to societal marginalization, the Black women is often silenced and "longing or yearning for critical voice and empowerment" (Smith, 2000, p. 174). Emphasizing the significance of empowerment, this paper examines the concept of mentoring, and the mentorship of the Black female collegiate athlete. The concept of mentorship has numerous definitions much of which is dependent on the context. The purpose of this paper is to discern how the Black female collegiate athletes whom attend a predominantly white institution (PWI) define mentorship and the factors they desire when choosing a mentor.

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In the realm of higher education, the Black female still faces limited opportunities and daily challenges, and as such she is deemed an at-risk population (Packard, 2003; Simon, Bowles, King, & Roff, 2004). Administrators and faculty have acknowledged the racial and gender disparity within the ranks and the need for increased diversity within predominantly white institutions. By utilizing mentoring theories, efforts have been made to rectify the disparities and assist in the recruitment and retention of people of color (Johnson-Bailey & Cevero, 2004; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005; Simon et al., 2004).

Limited studies have investigated mentoring effects for Black women; however, there are a few studies which acknowledge the challenges and barriers in the advancement of Black women in academe (e.g., Atwater, 1995; Bowman, Kite, Branscombe, & Williams, 1999; Jennings, Martin, & Vroom, 1998; Simon et al., 2004). For example, Simon et al. (2004) discuss Black women faculty have limited opportunities and access than the dominant (e.g., White/Caucasian) population. These factors are few but significant, and the concepts of mentoring are attributable to the lives of the Black female student-athlete.

According to Person, Benson-Quaziena, and Rogers (2001) the student-athletes of color and female student-athletes, like the aforementioned faculty, "are the most visible of historically underrepresented groups in higher education" (p. 55). The high visibility and marginalized treatment is often characterized by stereotypes, alienation, and isolation (Harrison, Comeaux, & Plecha, 2006; Hawkins, 2001; Lawrence, 2005; Sailes, 1998). Thus, student development practitioners promote a culturally sensitive and holistic approach when serving students (see Person et al., 2001), or cultural competence (see Cross, 1991; Pinderhughes, 1989; Sue & Sue, 1990). Considering the factors described, the concept of mentoring could prove a worthy option for academic, social, and athletic achievement for the Black females whom participate in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) governed programs within the PWI.

1.1. Defining mentor

The term mentor has numerous definitions, which is dependent on the context. Through researching the term, we found several operational definitions dating back as far as Greek mythology (Kram, 1985). Thus, it is necessary to present the various definitions; while, at the same time presenting definitions pertinent to the current study and the collegiate athletic environment.

The first attempt to explicate the concept "mentor" was Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978), *Seasons of a Man's Life*. This seminal work, which began in the psychological discipline, attempted to lay the foundation for the mentor relationship stating:

> The mentor relationship is one of the most complex, and developmentally important, a man can have in early adulthood. . .The term 'mentor' is generally used in a much narrower sense, to mean teacher, advisor, sponsor. . . .Mentoring is defined not in terms of formal roles but in terms of the character of the relationship and the functions it serves. (pp. 97–98)

Thus, mentor was characterized as a necessary guide for an individual growing into adulthood. Other disciplines adopted and built upon the foundational definition, such as management, organizational behavior, sport management, and higher education.

In reference to management and organizational behavior, Kram (1985) conducted further research establishing mentor had originated from Greek mythology, characterizing mentorship as a bond between an older experienced adult with a younger adult. Ultimately, describing a mentor as one whom ". . .support, guides, and counsels the young adult as he or she accomplishes this important task" (Kram, 1985, p. 2). Levinson et al. (1978) and Kram (1985) present a broad, yet comprehensive operational definition for a mentor. Conversely, there is a dearth of research and subsequent definitions in sport (e.g., Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Perna, Zaichikowsky, & Bockneck, 1996) and sport management (e.g., Pastore, 2003; Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999).

Sport and sport management researchers have examined the mentoring relationship with practitioners (e.g., academic professors), administrators (e.g., collegiate athletic coaches), and the student-athlete (e.g., Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Bloom et al., 1998; Harrison et al., 2006; Pastore, 2003; Perna et al., 1996; Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999). That stated, Weaver and Chelladurai (1999) provide an operational definition which states mentoring is "a process in which a more experienced person (i.e., the mentor) serves as a role model, provides guidance and support to a developing novice (i.e., the protégé), and sponsors that individual's career progress" (p. 25). Therefore, sport practitioners and administrators are not resistant to mentoring, as it is a necessary factor in academic success and career development. Nevertheless, how does this translate into the collegiate athletic context?

Few studies specific to mentoring have been conducted within the context of collegiate athletics (see Bloom et al., 1998; Comeaux & Harrison, 2006, 2007; Harrison et al., 2006; Perna et al., 1996). For the purpose of this paper, research examining mentoring, the student-athlete, gender, race/ethnicity, and the intercollegiate environment is of interest (see Comeaux & Harrison, 2006, 2007). More specifically in 2006, Comeaux and Harrison examined the relationship between gender (e.g., male and female) and sport participation in the realm of higher education. This quantitative study found few differences between gender interaction and contact with university faculty; still, the authors' recommended the need for qualitative research to explicate student-athletes' relationships with university faculty and to determine the intricacies of the institutional environment.

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