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A Descriptive Study of Athletic Training Students' Perceptions of Effective Mentoring Roles

William A. Pitney, EdD, ATC [1] Greg Ehlers, MSEd, ATC [2] Stacy Walker, PhD, ATC [3]

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, College of Education, Northern Illinois University
2. Clinical Specialist, Medtronic
3. Assistant Professor, School of Physical Education, Sport and Exercise Science, Ball State University

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Abstract

Context: Mentoring relationships are commonly thought to promote the learning of a professional role. Mentors can perform a variety of roles and possess many different personal characteristics, but there is limited literature related to athletic training students' perceptions of effective mentoring roles and characteristics. **Objective**: To explore who athletic training students identify as a mentor and describe the students' perceptions of the mentoring role and personal characteristics. **Design**: An online survey was used to collect students' perceptions. **Setting**: The study was initiated from a large mid-western university and included a national sample of athletic training students with published e-mail addresses. **Participants**: Student members of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) with a published electronic-mail address (N=3285) were surveyed and a total of 807 students accessed the online survey for a return rate of 24.56%. **Main Outcome Measure(s)**: Likert scale survey items measured the extent to which students agreed with the questions; descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies, means and standard deviations, were used in the analysis. **Results**: The majority of students identified a current practitioner as their mentor. Role modeling, communication, feedback, encouragement, listening, providing advice, support and challenges were roles associated with effective mentoring. Students generally disagreed that similar ethnicity and gender were important personal characteristics in a mentoring relationship. **Conclusions**: Practitioners play a key role in mentoring athletic training students; though the mentoring role of practitioners is multidimensional. The effectiveness of a mentoring relationship can likely be improved by provided consistent availability and contact, by caring about a student's development, and by taking adequate time to communicate effectively. While doing this, athletic training practitioners should be cognizant that athletic training students do not necessarily value the mentoring roles of providing tutoring, friendship, confrontation, information delivery and problem solving assistance in comparison to the other mentoring roles evaluated. Furthermore, the focus should be on the development of a professional and nurturing relationship that is not overly confrontational but is challenging.

Introduction

Mentoring has long been regarded as an effective way to promote the learning of a professional role in the allied health education setting.[1] Indeed a great deal of teaching and learning occurs through mentoring relationships[2] that commonly involve an experienced person interacting with a less experienced person. Mentoring is a developmental process based on a relationship between two people, specifically a mentor and a protégé. According to Cohen, mentoring typically progresses through four phases: 1) early phase; 2) middle phase; 3) later phase; and 4) last phase. The early phase is relational in nature and is characterized by developing a trusting relationship. The middle phase is characterized by sharing information relative to the protégés goals and professional objectives. The later phase emphasizes a more confrontive relationship in that the mentor carefully challenges a protégés decision making in order to facilitate self-evaluation of their actions.[3] The mentor motivates the

protégé to pursue his or her own goals, objectives, and professional vision characterizes the last phase.

In a landmark qualitative study on mentoring relationships, Kram also identified four phases of mentoring: 1) initiation; 2) cultivation; 3) separation; and 4) redefinition.[4] The initiation phase marks the beginning of the mentoring relationship whereby a protégé seeks the guidance of a senior member of a particular group, or a senior member selects a protégé based on specific characteristics. Both career functions and psychosocial functions characterize the cultivation phase. The separation phase begins when the protégé seeks autonomy or independence and both parties realize that the current relationship has served its purpose. Finally, a redefinition occurs whereby the mentor and protégé become lasting friends and peers.

The benefits of a mentoring relationship for protégés is well reported in the literature and includes increased self-confidence, increased career and/or job satisfaction, decreased stress levels, improved competence, enhanced effectiveness, and also a better sense of professional identity.[5-11] Similarly, there are benefits to being a mentor. These include rejuvenated interest in work, increased competence, and enhanced self-esteem.[12] Moreover, Kram suggested that entering a mentoring relationship with a young adult allows a mentor to redirect their energies and address some of their own developmental concerns.[4] That is, individuals who become a mentor can better face the challenges of reviewing past accomplishments and coming to terms with them as well as readjusting future dreams.

The potential benefit of mentoring has prompted many investigations, and the phenomenon of mentoring is well documented in education, business, medicine, administration, and nursing literature.[4,7,9,13-23] The mentoring literature has identified many roles a mentor may perform and characteristics that a mentor may possess. The roles may include, for example, providing support, encouragement, counseling, advice, and friendship.[4,7,9,13-23]

However, a majority of the mentoring literature focuses on graduate education or an organization's work environment.[1] Fewer studies have researched the effect of mentoring on undergraduate students. In athletic training, mentoring is considered a tacit component to the professional socialization and/or professional development process.[24] A more thorough understanding of mentoring roles and characteristics from the perspective of athletic training students will perhaps further our understanding of this phenomenon. Subsequently, the development and application of mentoring relationships among educational staff can be improved to enhance students' professional growth and development. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore who athletic training students identify as a mentor and describe their perceptions of a mentors' role and personal characteristics. The following central questions guided the study:

1) Who, if anyone, do athletic training students identify as their mentor?
2) From the students' perspective, what mentoring roles do students relate with effective mentors?
3) Do students perceive that mentors must be significantly more experienced than a protégé and should they be available on a daily basis?
4) Are similar and/or same ethnicity, age, and gender important characteristics in an effective mentoring relationship?

METHODS

Participants

To gain direct access to athletic training students, student members of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) with a published e-mail address (N=3285) were identified through the NATA's membership database. Permission to use this database was obtained from the appropriate NATA district secretary. Each student member received an electronic letter inviting him or her to voluntarily participate in the study by accessing the on-line survey via a URL provided to them. The study received appropriate institutional review board approval from Northern Illinois University prior to data collection.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using an electronic instrument that we created, called the Athletic Training Students Perceptions of Mentoring Effectiveness (ATSPME). The ATSPME items were based on a review of related literature and included four parts. Part 1 asked participants to identify whether they currently had a mentor and who they considered to be their mentor. Participants were not to include names but rather a title such as head athletic trainer, program director, faculty, coach, etc. Part 2 of the ATSPME was based on related literature that identified various mentoring roles and characteristics.[4,7,9,13-23] Although a somewhat subjective term, we framed the study and instrument using the word "effective" to guide students in considering those mentoring relationships that have been useful or helpful to them as an athletic training student. Part 2, the core aspect of the instrument, asked students, using a Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1), to rate mentoring roles that students felt were significant. Each item was structured to expose a mentoring role based on what students found useful in a mentoring relationship and then rate that role. Examples of the items included "effective mentors befriend a protégé," "an effective mentor gives helpful advice," and "an effective mentor gives feedback to a protégé about his/her performance as an athletic training student." Part 3 was more general in nature and asked students to answer Likert scale items related to

aspects of a mentoring relationship such as a mentor's gender, experience, ethnicity, and age. Additional items in Part 3 asked students to comment on whether a mentoring relationship was more effective when monitored by faculty, when a student can select who mentors them, and when mentors are available on a daily basis. Part 4 solicited demographic data on the participants including age, gender, ethnicity, and educational background.

An expert panel consisting of four athletic training faculty members with an understanding of, and experience with, educational research reviewed the instrument for face and content validity. Based on their suggestions, the instrument was slightly edited for grammar and presentation. Also, operational definitions were added to the beginning of the survey to frame the concept of mentoring. In addition, the items in the survey were obtained from the results of previous peer reviewed studies examining roles associated with mentorship, thus reinforcing the instruments construct validity.

Prior to using the instrument in the current study, a pilot study was performed with 32 athletic training students (ATS) from two institutions. That data was then used to analyze the instrument's internal consistency. The alpha coefficient for the core items of the questionnaire was .851 and the alpha coefficient for the peripheral items was .811.

Procedures

During the spring, 2003, each student member of the NATA with a published e-mail address (N=3285) received an electronic letter broadcast from the NATA member services inviting him or her to voluntarily participate in the study by accessing the on-line ATSPME via a URL. The online version did not require a password or any information that would identify the student thus the survey responses were anonymous. A follow-up e-mail reminder was sent to all of the participants approximately two weeks after the initial broadcast.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics including Mean and Standard Deviations for all research questions except one and three. We also conducted a content analysis for answering research question one, *"Who, if anyone, do athletic training students identify as their mentor?"* The open ended data were examined and then organized into like categories using the mentors' title (i.e. head athletic trainer, staff athletic trainer, program director).

RESULTS

Of the 3285 e-mails that were broadcast, a total of 807 students accessed the online survey for a return rate of 24.56%. Seven of the surveys were deemed unusable due to incomplete responses. Of the remaining 800 respondents, 747 (93%) were undergraduate students and 53 (7%) were graduate students. Descriptive data gathered from the participants appears in table 1.

Mentors Identified by Students

Research question one asked, "Who, if anyone, do students identify as your mentor?" A total of 793 responded to this question and 581 (73.26%) students stated that they currently had a mentor. Of the 53 graduate students, 31 (58.5%) currently had a mentor. Of the 745 undergraduate students, 555 (74.3%) documented currently having a mentor. Table 2 presents the results of the content analysis which reveals that the majority of students identified a practitioner, either the head athletic trainer or an athletic training staff member, as their mentor. The third highest category was "multiple" indicating students identified more than one individual as a mentor.

Students' Perceptions of Mentoring Roles

Research question two asked "From the students' perspective, what mentoring roles do students relate with effective mentors?" Part 2 of the ATSPME addressed this research question and the descriptive data is presented in table 3. Students strongly related many different characteristics with effective mentoring, with the highest rated being that of a role model. In addition, other highly rated roles included providing communication, feedback, encouragement, listening, advice, and providing both support and challenges. Also, providing trust was highly rated. The lowest rated roles included tutoring, confronting a protégés decisions, and providing information.

Students' Perceptions of Mentors' Characteristics

The remaining research questions asked, "Do students perceive that mentors must be significantly more experienced than a protégé and should they be available on a daily basis?" and "Are similar and/or same ethnicity, age, and gender important characteristics in an effective mentoring relationship?" The students' responses are provided in table 4. The results suggest that students were slightly above a neutral response with respect to mentors needing to be significantly more experienced than a protégé (M= 3.7) and being available on a daily basis (M=3.7). Students were also slightly above neutral with respect to sharing similar values and beliefs (M=3.63). Interestingly, students generally disagreed that similar ethnicity (M=1.95) and gender (M=2.12) were important characteristics in a mentoring relationship. Students were generally neutral with respect to mentors needing to be of similar ages (M=3.02).

Table 1. Participant Demographic Data

Demographic	Combined		Undergraduate Respondents		Graduate Respondents	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sex						
Female	547	69.5	510	68.3	37	69.8
Male	240	30.5	224	30.0	16	30.2
Unspecified	0	0	13	1.7	0	0
Ethnicity						
White	681	87.1	638	87.5	43	81.1
Hispanic	31	4.0	28	3.8	3	5.7
Black	26	3.3	22	3.0	4	7.5
Asian or Pacific Islander	20	2.6	18	2.5	2	3.8
American Indian	4	.5	4	.9	0	0
Other	20	2.6	19	2.6	1	1.9
College Standing						
Graduate	NA	NA	NA	NA	53	100
Senior	NA	NA	461	63.41	NA	NA
Junior	NA	NA	165	22.70	NA	NA
Sophomore	NA	NA	84	11.55	NA	NA
Freshman	NA	NA	17	2.34	NA	NA
NATA District						
1	54	6.8	51	6.8	3	5.7
2	72	9.0	63	8.4	9	17.0
3	75	9.4	71	9.5	4	7.5
4	143	17.9	139	18.6	4	7.5
5	102	12.8	98	13.1	4	7.5
6	53	6.6	50	6.7	3	5.7
7	48	6.0	45	6.0	3	5.7
8	74	9.3	63	8.4	11	20.8
9	82	10.3	75	10.0	7	13.2
10	30	3.8	27	3.6	3	5.7
Unspecified	67	8.4	65	91.3	51	96.2

Table 2. Mentors Identified by Students

Mentor	Combined (N=584)		Undergraduate Students (n=554 reporting)		Graduate Students (n=30 reporting)	
	N	%	n	%	n	%
Head Athletic Trainer	209	35.79	196	35.4	13	43.33
Staff Athletic Trainer	167	28.60	163	29.4	4	13.33
Multiple	84	14.38	79	14.3	5	16.67
Program Director	55	9.42	52	9.4	3	10.0
Graduate Assistant Athletic Trainer	25	4.28	24	4.3	1	3.33
Peer	18	3.08	17	3.1	1	3.33
Faculty	14	2.40	14	2.5	0	0.00
Clinical Coordinator	5	.86	5	.9	0	0.00
Other (family member, advisor, physician, Physical Therapist)	7	1.2	4	.7	3	10.0

Table 3. Students' Perceptions of Mentoring Roles

Mentoring Role	Mean Rank	Combined (n=800) Mean	Combined (n=800) SD	Undergraduate Students (n=747) Mean	Undergraduate Students (n=747) SD	Graduate Students (n=53) Mean	Graduate Students (n=53) SD
Provide role modeling	1	4.71	.500	4.71	.495	4.62	.562
Provide effective communication	2	4.67	.529	4.66	.529	4.75	.515
Provide encouragement	3	4.65	.530	4.65	.531	4.66	.517
Provide listening / sounding Board	4	4.62	.539	4.63	.527	4.55	.695
Provide performance feedback	5	4.62	.538	4.61	.543	4.68	.471
Provide helpful advice	6	4.60	.508	4.60	.507	4.60	.531
Provide a challenge	7	4.59	.569	4.60	.562	4.57	.665
Provide support	8	4.56	.543	4.57	.538	4.50	.610
Provide trust	9	4.54	.615	4.55	.605	4.49	.750
Provide or encourage brainstorming	10	4.47	.593	4.47	.591	4.42	.633
Provide tests of knowledge and skill	11	4.44	.637	4.45	.631	4.40	.716
Provide inspiration	12	4.42	.691	4.42	.682	4.34	.807
Provide networking opportunities	13	4.20	.694	4.20	.693	4.15	.718
Provide rejuvenation/energy	14	4.18	.769	4.18	.764	4.11	.847
Provide exposure to employers	15	4.09	.780	4.09	.779	4.06	.795
Provide problem solving assistance	16	3.98	.785	3.98	.777	3.92	.895
Provide information	17	3.89	.823	3.90	.810	3.85	.988
Provide confrontation to a protégé's decision	18	3.87	.815	3.88	.808	3.75	.897
Provide friendship	19	3.74	.919	3.75	.916	3.51	.933
Provide Tutoring	20	3.41	.869	3.41	.863	3.45	.952

Note: 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=undecided, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree.

Table 4. Students' Perceptions of Mentoring Characteristics

Mentoring Aspect	Mean Rank	Combined (n=800) Mean	Combined (n=800) SD	Undergraduate Students (n=747) Mean	Undergraduate Students (n=747) SD	Graduate Students (n=53) Mean	Graduate Students (n=53) SD
Mentoring is more effective when a mentor is significantly more experienced than the protégé	1	3.72	1.10	3.70	1.010	4.08	1.10
Mentoring is more effective if a mentor is available to a protégé on a daily basis	2	3.71	.938	3.71	.936	3.72	.968
Mentoring is more effective if a mentor and protégé share the same professional values and beliefs	3	3.63	.935	3.63	.936	3.60	.927
Mentoring is more effective when a protégé is allowed to pick who mentors them	4	3.36	1.05	3.36	1.05	3.27	1.07
Mentoring is more effective when the mentor and the protégé are of similar ages	5	3.02	1.23	3.00	1.22	3.23	1.37
Mentoring is more effective when it is monitored by a faculty member or administrator	6	2.84	1.00	2.85	1.00	2.68	1.01
Mentoring is more effective when a mentor is the same gender	7	2.12	.910	2.13	.912	1.92	.860
Mentoring is more effective when a mentor is the same ethnicity as the protégé	8	1.95	.914	1.96	.903	1.77	1.05

Note: 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=undecided, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree.

DISCUSSION

Effective Mentoring Relationships

The results of this study suggest that mentoring relationships involve an amalgamation of many roles and characteristics on behalf of the mentor to be effective, regardless of the level of student. We found that role modeling, communication, feedback, encouragement, listening, and providing advice, support, and challenges were characteristics germane to effective mentoring. The characteristics of role modeling, communication, and feedback are consistent with the findings of Pitney & Ehlers.[25] They identified that facilitating knowledge and skill development was a critical part of the educational dimension of mentoring athletic training students. Students suggested that feedback and communication allowed them to understand how to improve their clinical decision-making. Moreover, role modeling facilitated the students' full understanding of their future professional role.[25] Similarly, our current findings are quite interesting in that the majority of students identified practitioners in the field as their mentors, and acknowledged role modeling as a key characteristic. Perhaps students seek to learn the full depth and breadth of their future roles and seek out individuals immersed in those roles to guide their learning.

Mentoring Relationships and Clinical Education Experiences

Curtis, Helion, and Domsohn examined athletic training students' perceptions of positive and negative teaching behaviors by clinical supervisors.[26] Four main themes of positive and negative behaviors including mentoring, professional acceptance, nurturing, and modeling were found. Helpful incidents of mentoring included explaining, demonstrating and providing feedback. Interestingly, these areas of effective behaviors were closely related to our results of important mentoring roles. Providing effective communication, encouragement, and providing performance feedback were within our top five most important mentoring roles. Curtis et al. also found what students termed "modeling" to be an important behavior.[26] The current study also found role modeling to be important, actually the most important, role of the mentor. It is interesting to note that many of the same behaviors that athletic training students perceive as being important to clinical teaching situations are the same as those that are important to mentorship of athletic training students.

More evidence exists in the athletic training literature to support the idea that characteristics of positive clinical instruction may be closely related to the characteristics that describe an effective mentoring relationship. Laurent and Weidner found that modeling and having a humanistic orientation to be extremely important to be effective in the clinical teaching role.[27] Although Laurent and Weidner did not provide a definition for their term "humanistic orientation," it can be argued that providing effective communications, providing encouragement and providing a listening/sound board are humanistic-oriented roles.[27]

Psychosocial Aspects of Mentoring

We found encouragement, listening, and providing advice and trust were also highly rated by the students. We believe these relate to the psychosocial functions of counseling and acceptance identified by Kram.[9] Kram stated that psychosocial functions are possible when an interpersonal bond is created that has mutual trust as a foundation.[9] Interestingly, the participants in the current study also rated support and challenge fairly high as effective mentoring roles. Daloz stated that offering support and challenge must be done in a balanced manner.[16] If, for example, more support yet few challenges are provided, a student may become complacent or stagnant in his/her learning. While Pitney and Ehlers found that athletic training students identified more with the supporting role of mentors, our current findings indicate that students need challenge from their mentors as well.[25]

Implications

This research project has implications for mentors of athletic training students. These mentors, as mentioned earlier, frequently are practitioners of athletic training who are involved with athletic training student education in the clinical setting. Athletic trainers who educate students in the clinical setting need to realize they may be viewed as a mentor to a young and impressionable future professional. These athletic trainers need to be cognizant that they are acting as a role model and, thus, everything they do while working may be closely observed and reflected upon by students. Furthermore, athletic training practitioner-educators should recognize the importance of solid interpersonal skills in a mentoring relationship and clinical education. Being an effective communicator, providing encouragement, being a good listener, and providing feedback were all highly rated by the surveyed students. These interpersonal characteristics can likely be provided through consistent availability and contact, by caring about a student's development, and by taking adequate time to communicate effectively. While doing this, athletic training practitioners should be cognizant that athletic training students do not necessarily value the mentoring roles of providing tutoring, friendship, confrontation, information and problem solving assistance in comparison to the other mentoring roles evaluated. It seems likely that the lecturing of specific information does not need to occur within the mentoring relationship. Furthermore, the focus should be on the development of a professional and nurturing relationship that is not overly confrontational but is challenging. What is professional and nurturing to one student may not necessarily be to another so this is an area where some flexibility is necessary in the learning environment.

Limitations and Future Direction

Although over 800 athletic training students accessed and completed the survey, the response rate was still well below 30%; thus the information should be interpreted with caution. Moreover, there were substantially fewer freshman and sophomore students who participated so additional research may be necessary to understand their perceptions of mentoring. This study is descriptive in nature and did not address any cause and effect relationships or the extent to which a relationship existed between the students' perceptions and various demographic characteristics. Future studies could potentially explore the relationship between mentoring and student competence, self-confidence, stress, and/or professional identify. In addition, research should focus on how and why certain student-mentor relationship develop and are successful. This study is also limited in that only the students' perceptions were explored. Future studies that examined the mentors' perceptions might uncover new insights related to the form and structure of a mentoring relationship and whether it influences the students and/or mentors professional development.

Despite the tremendous advantages of mentoring, the literature purports many disadvantages, including consumption of time, the possibility of reproducing the status quo, and lack of autonomy.[8] Furthermore, if a mentoring relationship is not properly conducted a mentor may not allow a protégé to have adequate time for self-discovery and may even dominate the interactions that take place leading to a lack of independence. Future studies should examine the potential negative effects of mentoring relationships to fully understand its influences.

CONCLUSION

Athletic training students identified practitioners in the field (i.e. head or assistant athletic trainer) as their mentor and indicated that role modeling was an effective mentoring characteristic. Students also indicated that other effective mentoring roles included communication, feedback, encouragement, listening, advice, and providing both support and challenge. It is not clear whether a mentor needs to be significantly more experienced than a protégé, available on a daily basis, be of similar ages, or share similar values and beliefs to that of a protégé to be effective. However, it is clear that the same gender and ethnicity are not important characteristics in an effective mentoring relationship. The information provided here is important for practitioners to understand when interacting with less experienced students and can serve to enrich the mentoring experience for both the student and mentor.

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