

SAME-GENDERED LEADERSHIP MENTORING IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Stacy Edds-Ellis

Associate Dean of Academic Affairs
Owensboro Community & Technical College
Owensboro, Kentucky

Ric Keaster

Professor of Educational Leadership, Administration, & Research
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study provides insight into the perspective of female leaders in higher education who have participated as protégés in same-gendered dyads in a nationally recognized formal mentoring program. Data collected through interviews reveal the memorable messages received and gender-related advice offered by mentors. Examining the types of mentoring messages and advice exchanged in a same-gendered formal mentoring program in higher education provided insight into educational leadership and illuminated perceptions about achieving success and balance as female leaders.

FORMAL MENTORING AND SAME-GENDERED DYADS

One avenue for preparing and increasing the number of female leaders in higher education is drawing on the career and leadership experiences of current female leaders through mentoring. Researchers have noted that mentoring assists protégés with adopting an organization's cultural norms, increasing career opportunities and mobility, and expanding their professional networks (Lyons & Oppler, 2004; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wanberg, Kaymeyer-Mueller, & Marchese, 2006). Research suggests that women may obtain the most benefits from same-gendered mentoring dyads (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002). Developing relationships with experienced female leaders allows aspiring female leaders to develop important knowledge about the expectations and complex roles of leadership in higher education. According to Allen, Day, and Lentz (2005), same-gendered mentorships lead to higher satisfaction and more interpersonal comfort than different-gendered mentorships.

According to relatively recent reports, women are still in the minority where leadership in higher education is concerned. In a 2008 report, 23% are leading colleges and universities in the United States with women making up 45% of senior administrators and

38% of chief academic officers. The growing numbers of women in senior level positions in academe have afforded aspiring female leaders a new insight into how to balance leadership and gender in educational administration. The study detailed below suggests that for these numbers to increase, it might be necessary to formalize the mentoring of females in these leadership roles, and the suggested format is for females to mentor other females. The benefits of same-gendered dyads emerged from the data collected and analyzed in the study.

The subjects in the study were eight female college/university administrators who participated in the American Council on Education (ACE) Fellows Program (ACE, 2008) and who served their fellowships under the guidance of a female college/university president. ACE is well respected among higher education leaders as the premier leadership preparation program in academia and the organization has a stellar record in that regard. Mentoring is well established in the literature as one of the most effective means of not only encouraging individuals to move into administration (or higher levels if already serving in an administrative role), but to effectively train those aspirants as well. The concept is not new but dates back to the Greek literature of Homer, where Mentor (yes, that was his name) served as

the wise and trusted counselor to whom Odysseus, King of Ithaca, entrusted the education of his son, Telemachus.

MEMORABLE MESSAGES

A mentor serves as transfer agent to the protégé by providing a mechanism for understanding. One avenue for assisting protégés with learning and navigating cultural norms, values, and expectations is through the memorable messages that mentors provide to their protégés during the mentorship. Memorable messages are short discursive units that articulate appropriate or inappropriate behavior and conduct and can take the form of proverbs, colloquialisms, and “rules of thumb” (Barge & Schlueter, 2004). Stohl (1986), an early pioneer in this area of communication, defines memorable messages as “a communication process by which requisite orientations are transferred to organizational participants” (p. 234). Stohl argues that memorable messages have a major impact and lasting influence on people’s lives. Furthermore, Stohl contends that memorable messages provide information regarding the norms, values, expectations, rules, and requirements of a particular context that allows individuals to create sense-making mechanisms and provide a structure for modeling their behavior.

Memorable messages can act as a form of socialization within an organization or culture (Barge & Schlueter, 2004). Memorable messages originate from themes embedded in historical, political, and cultural conditions. Examining the formal messages that female leaders in higher education recall their mentors delivering can provide insight into the advice a protégé incorporates from her mentoring experience into her current leadership attitudes and behaviors (i.e., her leadership). Influential support tactics and advice provided by a mentor become memorable messages that the protégé recalls about one’s mentorship experience. Examining the types of mentoring advice exchanged in a same-gendered formal mentoring program in higher education provides insight into female leadership and illuminates the advice and experience same-gendered dyads share with one another about achieving success and balance as female leaders.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to understand and provide new insight into the perspective of

female leaders in higher education who have participated as protégés in a nationally recognized formal mentoring program. The specific research questions within the study included (a) How do women describe their experiences as a protégé in a formal mentoring program? (b) What are the memorable messages female protégés receive from female mentors? (c) What are the types of gender-related advice offered from female mentors to female protégés? and (d) To what extent has the mentoring experience shaped the protégé as a leader? A gap exists in the area of memorable messages regarding what messages are shared in same-gendered mentorships. Exploring memorable messages through a gender lens, creates new understanding for aspiring female leaders regarding the messages of socialization within leadership in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study, such as this, does not provide data that are representative of the entire population of female leaders in higher education. Commonalities across the Fellows’ perspectives provide the mentoring literature base with a consistent picture of what types of information, advice, and memorable messages mentors share with their protégés. Data were used to generate theory through a thematic analysis.

The participant criteria included that the Fellow (a) had worked with a female mentor during her ACE Fellowship; (b) had completed the Fellowship within the last 6 years; (c) had held a leadership position in higher education following her Fellow experience, and (d) was geographically located within the established research criteria. For the purpose of this study, a leader was defined as an individual who is currently serving or has served as a president, vice president, provost, or director at a college. Eight participants met the criteria and were interviewed for this study.

All participants were asked the same semi-structured, open-ended interview questions with probing or follow-up questions determined by responses. Interview questions focused on participants’ mentoring experience, gender, and advice received when participating in the formal mentoring program. Data were collected via in-person interviews; one interview was conducted via telephone due to inclement weather.

Content from all eight interviews were compared and ultimately categorized to yield nine emerging

themes. Multiple measures were employed during this study to build trustworthiness of findings which include the conformability (member checks), transferability (information-rich participants and open-ended questions), dependability (audit trail and reflexive journal), and credibility (authentic researcher and reflexive journal).

STUDY RESULTS

The positive experiences shared through stories lead to the unraveling of the memorable messages the protégés' recall up to 6 years after completing the Fellows Program. Memorable messages in this study's context took the form of experiences in the mentoring program, advice received, and actions observed as a part of the same-gendered formal mentoring relationship. Nine themes emerged from key findings.

#1 Formal mentoring structures create a meaningful leadership development experience for aspiring female leaders.

All eight participants shared accounts of the positive and career-shaping experiences as ACE Fellows. The ACE Fellows Program provided the specificity and structure necessary to build the foundation of a meaningful mentoring experience. The formality of the mentoring program emerged as the first theme that created a positive experience for the Fellows. The formality of the ACE Fellows mentoring program creates an environment ripe for a positive mentoring experience. Each protégé had to apply to be accepted into the formal mentoring program and then work to find a mentor or mentoring site that matched the leadership experience and/or location the protégé desired. Applying and being accepted to a prestigious program brings additional credibility to the process found within a formal mentoring structure. Once selected to participate in the program, the protégés selected a mentor from institutions, who as members of ACE, understand the value and expected results of the mentoring program. Protégés made their mentor selection based on a variety of characteristics from mentor, institution, learning interests, and convenient location.

These findings suggest that formal mentoring structures may create a greater climate for leadership development than informal mentoring structures. Being a protégé in a formal mentoring program that specifically targeted aspiring lead-

ers in higher education provided the participants with confidence in their leadership abilities, a clearer picture of the responsibilities of leaders in higher education, a deeper understanding of their particular strengths and weaknesses as a leader, and an appreciation of the demanding job of college president or other senior level leaders.

#2 Same-gendered mentorships create a communication interaction dynamic that impacts mentoring benefits received.

The same-gendered dynamic emerged as the second theme regarding the creation of a positive experience with mentoring. The women's experience as a protégé in a formal mentoring program was influenced by the same-gendered dynamics present in the mentorship. Two of the protégés selected their mentoring experience based on location, rather than on mentor, or more specifically, same-gendered mentors. Protégé F believed that the mentoring experience was not about "female" it was about the "experience." However, for those protégés looking for a specific leadership learning experience, the structure of this mentoring program allowed the protégé to connect to that specific experience, such as female leadership. For many protégés, selecting a mentor of the same gender was paramount to the desired learning experience. Six of the eight protégés expressed that their experience as a protégé in a formal mentoring program would have not been the same if they had pursued a male mentor. Protégé B expressed that it was important to her to see how a female leader in higher education "pulled off" an effective collaborative style of leadership. Protégé E believed that the same-gendered dynamic of her mentorship allowed her to learn from other women who "had come along in a generation where there were some real obstacles to women in leadership." The same-gendered commonality between the mentor and protégé created a level of interpersonal comfort that further facilitated a positive experience.

The female-to-female exchange within the formal mentoring setting provided the opportunity to shape the protégé as an individual, leader, and future mentor through a female interaction and perspective. Participants in this study all agreed that the formal mentoring experience with a female mentor was a positive career-altering experience that enhanced their professional growth. Due to receiving professional and psychosocial functions in the mentorship, all study partici-

pants expressed satisfaction with their mentoring experience.

#3 Interpersonal comfort impacts communication and the interaction between the mentor and protégé.

In addition to the formality structure and same-gendered themes, the theme interpersonal comfort within a same-gendered mentoring dyad emerged from the data. The mentor and protégé sharing the same gender established similarities and commonalities, thus creating a level of interpersonal comfort in life experience that appeared to build an instant rapport between the mentor and protégé within the formal mentoring structure. Protégé B expressed the value of same-gendered mentorships the best by stating, "If I am going to be an administrator, I want to see how to be a woman administrator." The level of interpersonal comfort between the same-gendered dyad impacted openness, subjects discussed, and travel situations throughout the mentorship.

The protégés expressed the openness they experienced in the mentorship to discuss gender-related subjects with female mentors and the commonality of barriers that both the mentors and protégé faced as female leaders in higher education. Protégé H emphasized this by stating, "We understood each other and the difficulties of female leadership in higher education." Protégé E described this level of interpersonal comfort when she talked to her mentor about "How difficult it could be for women in higher education leadership" and that the protégé "Knew she [the mentor] understood and I understood what she was saying." Protégé A expounded upon this theme by stating that she was able to talk with her mentor about how it felt to be "underestimated and unnoticed" as a female leader. She also said that a female mentor is aware of issues that "sometimes males are not aware of." Had they not had the commonality of gender within the mentoring dyad, these female protégés did not believe they would have been as apt to discuss gender-related issues such as gender barriers, family dynamics, and personal issues (breast cancer, sexual orientation, and business attire) with a male mentor. Protégé A shared that she and her mentor talked about "things that wouldn't have been something that she [protégé] would have never talked about with a man because sometimes men just are not aware of it [the subject or topic] or they think "Oh, this is another whining female."

Subjects discussed with female mentors varied across the participants. However, subjects mainly revolved around personal appearance, family, gender issues, common interest topics, and college administration. Seven out of the eight protégés expressed that they talked about the importance of personal appearance with their mentor. Personal appearance themes ranged from "working out" and "staying fit" to a certain brand of high-end women's suits that is known to look presidential to the decision for female leaders to "wear pants." Seven of the eight protégés expressed that they talked about family issues with their mentor. Family themes included children, grandchildren, and significant others. For example, the protégés "swapped stories about children and grandchildren" and shared stories of similar "tough experiences" their families were going through such as coping with a family member with an addiction. Four of the eight protégés discussed how to "multi-task" and "balance" a family while holding a demanding and visible leadership position such as college president.

All protégés addressed the ease and interpersonal comfort present when traveling with a female mentor that is not always present when traveling with a male. Stereotypically, the culture within society has created a level of discomfort in the interactions of male and female colleagues by creating a double standard of acceptable interaction between same- and cross-gendered colleagues. Both males and females must be aware of compromising situations, such as travel, that could lend themselves to violating societal standards of male and female interaction. For example, when referring to traveling with her female mentor Protégé A state, "I never thought anything about it and there was real comfort in that." The other mentors shared many stories of travel on not only a professional level, but also a personal level with their mentor. Participants suggested such invitations for travel may not have been offered as often nor would they have been as meaningful in a cross-gendered mentorship.

#4 Memorable messages serve as a vehicle for understanding the norms, values, and expectations of higher education leadership.

The memorable messages gained through the mentoring experience served as a self-assessment tool for leadership for the protégés and provided the protégés with short discursive units that are

easily recalled and applicable to leadership situations experienced as a leader. Regarding leadership, the following are some clips from the mentors' transcripts; not all of these are related to gender-specific issues:

- Before you get out in front on something, you need to be sure that you have at least a couple of allies in the room.
- If everybody thinks the way you do, then everybody else is superfluous.
- You do not help people by not trusting them. A part of the leadership role is to develop other leaders, and you do not develop other leaders by not letting them do anything.
- Be sure to get enough information before making a decision, but do not be afraid when it is really time to make the decision.
- Never act as though you are the smartest person in the world.
- Males and females in leadership should be impeccably dressed.
- People will judge whether they like you first and then they will judge your competence; but if they do not like you, they will never know whether you are competent or not because they will never get to know you well enough to make that judgment.
- I have to multitask. One evening, I was baking cupcakes for my daughter while reviewing and practicing a very important work presentation for the next day. I had large sheets of paper taped all over the kitchen.
- I can tell from observation at home with my husband and at work with other men that they [men] can handle one or two big things and you just have to leave them alone until they get one done. Women, on the other hand, can keep up with everything and therefore made better multitaskers and ultimately leaders.
- Motherhood is a great preparation for leadership roles because you have to be able to multitask and constantly be interrupted, have no one appreciate what you are doing, and only be focused on what they need from you.

- Personal time can get away from you so quickly. Find time for personal time or reflection, whatever it is, whether it's spiritual, whether it's mental relaxation, or physical activity. As a leader make sure that you always carve out that personal time.

#5 Memorable messages serve as a vehicle for understanding the opportunities and challenges associated with female leadership.

Fellows shared that in their experience they found that female leadership was more collaborative and team oriented than traditionally masculine styles of leadership. Furthermore, they expressed female leadership was not viewed as competitive or as concerned with who gets the credit for leadership results. The women in this study learned to combine feminine leadership with masculine values to find ways to operate as effective leaders in higher education. The findings embedded in this theme raise the question as to whether or not organizations have moved toward a more androgynous culture or if minorities, such as women, are merely learning how to operate as a leader in a stereotypically Caucasian, masculine culture often known as the "good old boys system."

This advice clearly reveals that there are different leadership standards for males than there are for females. Due to these different standards, females must approach leadership differently. This mentor's advice suggests that if women are not "liked" as leaders, they will not be accepted as leaders. On the other hand, participants expressed that male leaders are judged on the basis of competence rather than likeability. Protégé G received advice from her mentor not to seek a job "but to do the job before you well and if you do the job before you well, another opportunity is liable to open up." Although this advice worked for her mentor, it was a passive (stereotypically feminine) approach to climbing the leadership ladder.

The above advice sheds light into the cultural dynamics in which women pursuing leadership positions in higher education find themselves operating. Ultimately, the ability to model traditional or untraditional leadership advice and embrace memorable messages from current female leaders

is influenced by the culture in which the protégés work.

#6 Same-gendered formal mentoring influences a protégé's pursuit of professional goals.

All eight participants expressed that they felt the experience had provided them with the confidence that they could do the job of president. However, the majority of the participants were not interested in pursuing a college presidency at the time of the study. Ironically, the ACE mentoring program prepares leaders for the college presidency, but perhaps the norms and values of what it means to be a college president do not seem as attractive once an individual has the opportunity to shadow the experience as a protégé.

All eight of the protégés interviewed cited that the formal mentoring program created the confidence within them to know that they had the skills necessary for successful leadership and that they could be a president within higher education if they selected to pursue a presidency. This confidence was cultivated at a personal and professional level. On a personal level, two of the protégés expressed how the experience pushed them out of their comfort level because they were away from home for a long period of time and had to learn how live in a new city and rent an apartment. On a professional level, protégés expressed the experience had increased their confidence to lead and understand the inner workings of a college or university.

All protégés also commented that the mentoring program helped them to focus more narrowly on what type of institution (public/private, small/large, urban/suburban) where they would like to pursue a presidency. At the time of the interview for this study, one protégé was in the final stages of interviewing for a presidency. Three protégés had no desire to pursue a college presidency. The first of these three protégés, Protégé A, stated the following:

I don't know if I ever want a Presidency. The ACE Fellows Program shows you some of the things you don't want to be. I think when you talk about 12th-grade work when you are in 8th grade, it is sometimes hard to fathom. I think I have moved beyond 8th grade. But I am not sure I want 12th grade. I have the ability to be a President. I think

I have the ability to be a Provost. I am not sure I want to be President. I may want to be a Provost some day.

The second protégé, Protégé B, who expressed that she did not desire to become a president, felt a disconnection between having the ability to remain loyal to herself and her beliefs, while being loyal to the institutional beliefs as a president. This protégé believed that self and institution were not always congruent. For example, this protégé felt strongly that military should not be allowed to recruit on campus. However, if she were to become a president at an institution that receives federal funds, she would have to allow recruiters on campus. She could not make decisions as a leader that were incongruent with her core beliefs. The third protégé, Protégé C, who was not interested in pursuing a college presidency, related her decision to her career path.

I guess [my reasoning for not pursuing the presidency] is tied to me not being a full professor . . . I think I look at what I want for my whole life. I do not just look at what I want for my career.

Four protégés expressed a consideration of pursuing a college presidency. However, all four noted that the decision would depend on personal factors. Protégé D expressed the following:

I do desire to maybe someday be a president. The purpose of the ACE Fellows Program for me was to help sort that out if I would actually like to be a president. These jobs are incredibly difficult. They take a major toll on your life, on your health, on your family and friends and it is really all consuming. So, you know you have to really think about it. You can't just say, "Oh well that is a nice salary, I am going to go for this job." It really is a huge commitment of time.

#7 Same-gendered formal mentoring shapes the protégé's perspective on mentoring other aspiring leaders.

The mentoring experience shaped the protégés by creating a desire to pay back their positive experience by serving as a mentor to other aspiring leaders. All protégés commented on the fact that the mentoring experience positively shaped how they view the role of mentoring, especially when others are looking to them as a mentor. Perhaps Protégé C captured the collective responses of the

protégés best while explaining the responsibility that accompanies individuals who are looked to as mentors, officially or unofficially, when she said individuals must be “careful with the power given” as a mentor.

And a lot of it [mentoring] really is just like with your parents. They can tell you from now to kingdom come – whatever – but people watch how you are and what you do. . . . It just happens in a position like this [leadership].

Furthermore, the protégés noted that the Fellows Program “fosters a hands-on approach to mentoring” and cultivates a “lend-a-hand approach” to other aspiring leaders.

Having been a protégé in a formal mentoring program, study participants have insight to offer to females who may look to them as a mentor. Study participants shared the advice (memorable messages) that they would want other aspiring female leaders in higher education to know. All protégés had expressed that they implemented, shared and/or modeled these memorable messages at one time or another in their role as a leader. This advice is based on a collection of experiences (memorable messages) through the ACE mentoring experience, as well as the protégés’ past and present work as a leader.

#8 Same-gendered formal mentoring shapes the advice protégés share with other aspiring female leaders.

The memorable messages received during the mentorship continued to mold other aspiring leaders as the protégés share the messages received with the aspiring leaders with whom they currently interact on a regular basis. The protégés noted receiving and sharing the advice listed below.

- Women make great leaders.
- Women leaders bring a different perspective.
- It’s not about you – get past having to be recognized.
- You can be a great leader and not be a man.
- Don’t compete with men on their terms.

- Quantity and quality can exceed male counterparts.
- Women leaders need supportive family structures.
- Protect yourself so your life doesn’t get out of balance.

#9 Same-gendered formal mentoring is influential to a protégé’s experiences outside of higher education administration.

Study participants noted that leadership skills were transferrable from outside to inside the organization and vice versa. Participants shared that the leadership skills learned through mentors were used in areas such as motherhood and community leadership. The skills gained through mentoring became ingrained into who these women were and impacted their interactions inside and outside of education.

In addition to the role of mentor, the formal mentoring experience influenced the protégés’ approach to other roles they might fulfill such as community member, significant other, and mother. Seven of the eight protégés shared how the mentoring experience, coupled with their lived experiences of working in higher education, influenced other roles they fulfill outside of higher education. Protégé A expressed that on a personal level this [ACE Fellow] experience has helped her be “civil and respectful” while not being “shy” about stating her opinion during her interactions inside and outside of higher education. Protégé B expressed that the formal mentoring experience shaped how she views her role in community groups by understanding others’ points of views. For example, Protégé B works with student groups on campus and works with ex-offenders of law in a half-way house off campus. She has learned through the mentoring experience to work to better understand people, and that to help them, you have to listen and understand their worldview. Due to her self-growth and reflection about her experience as a Fellow, Protégé C stated that the experience solidified her “authentic self” which permeates all that she does in her professional and personal life. Protégé D did not provide an example of how the mentoring experience influenced other roles she fills. Protégé E said that her experience as a Fellow has helped her in her “approach” to how she raises her daughter. Protégé E’s balance of leadership and family, as a female leader, was a positive influ-

ence on her daughter's ability to set and achieve her goals as she aspired to be a leader. Protégé F expressed that she placed an increased value and observance on her "personal time" with family. This increased observance of personal time was a result of advice from mentors and from watching other leaders who were and were not successful with carving out personal time as a leader, ultimately impacting their success as a leader and their overall health. Protégé G believes that her daughters have benefited from seeing her, while they were growing up, as a rising leader who multitasks. Protégé H stated that she believed her work as a female leader has "influenced" how her sons view females. Protégé H's sons were exposed to her success and difficulties of being a female scientist and leader while sharing the responsibility of balancing the family with her spouse. Growing up in this environment was influential in her sons' respect for female leaders and the challenges they often face. Additionally, Protégé H stated that her influential experience as a Fellow "permeates" everything she does on a personal and a professional level.

IMPLICATIONS

The data from this study yielded three implications for helping to shape the profession of higher education administration.

- Graduate schools preparing future leaders for educational administration should review their recruiting efforts, faculty demographics, and programs relative to the needs of women and other minorities groups in conjunction with formal mentoring programs.
- College and universities, as well as professional organizations connected to higher education leadership (e.g., local boards, state associations, national organizations, and accreditation agencies) could expand the accesses and entry into the administrative pipeline for women, as well as other minorities, by establishing leadership training programs and appointing/hiring individuals with diverse backgrounds.
- Current female leaders in higher education should actively sponsor and support other aspiring female leaders within the profession.

SUMMARY

This study, like the aforementioned analysis of the mentoring relationship between Mentor and Telemachus, has relied on the lived experience of these leaders to explore the transfer of skills, culture, and values through memorable messages that prepare females for life and leadership in higher education. These findings can be used to shape current and aspiring leaders on an individual level and influence the culture of leadership and mentoring within higher education on a national level, both professionally and programmatically. Such information will afford females a "head start" on their administrative careers with the knowledge gained vicariously through the experiences of others.

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