

Mentoring Experiences among Navy Midshipmen

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Previous research suggests that mentor relationships are facilitative of career success, career satisfaction, and retention in organizations. Yet, little research has been done to explore the prevalence or function of mentor relationships in military populations. In this study, preliminary data were collected regarding the prevalence of mentor relationship experiences among 576 third year midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy. Only 40% of respondents had ever experienced a mentor relationship. Most mentors were senior military personnel, and 87% were male. Most relationships were mutually initiated, and they tended to last for several years. Although both career and psychosocial mentor functions were present in these relationships, psychosocial functions were most notable and most highly correlated with positive appraisals of mentor relationships. Midshipmen viewed mentoring as extremely important and rated their own mentor relationships as extremely positive. Implications for further research on mentoring are discussed.

Introduction

The U.S. service academies celebrate a tradition of producing effective leaders. The concept of leadership and the determination of significant components that contribute to leadership development are long-term research interests. Leadership has been defined as an interaction between two or more group members that results in the restructuring of expectations, motivations, or competencies of the group.¹ Leadership involves articulating a vision to followers, illuminating the path to goals, enhancing confidence in followers' ability to achieve goals,² and persuading followers to forego individual goals in favor of group objectives.³ Historically, the predominant research endeavor has been investigation of personality characteristics predictive of effective leadership; however, empirical findings have been equivocal.⁴ More recently, the impact of mentoring relationships on the military leadership development of junior officers has been of interest.⁵⁻⁷ However, the specific contribution of this salient developmental relationship to the transmission and cultivation of junior officers' leadership potential is unknown.

The concept of mentoring has an enduring tradition originating in Greek mythology. Current interest in the concept of mentoring was rekindled after the publication of *Seasons of a Man's Life* by Levinson and colleagues.⁸ They described the mentor as a significant transitional figure who represents skill, knowledge, and accomplishment while serving as a guide, teacher, and

sponsor to the protege. Kram⁹ further developed the mentoring concept through an investigation of mentor relationships among senior and junior managers in the field of business. Kram concluded that mentor relationships were defined by two sets of functions that enhanced personal growth and career advancement. Career functions were identified as occurring within the organizational structure and included "those aspects of the relationship that enhance learning the ropes and preparing for advancement in an organization" (p. 22). Career functions encompassed sponsorship, coaching, exposure and visibility, protection, and challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions were defined as "those aspects of a relationship that enhance a sense of competence, clarity of identity, and effectiveness in a professional role" (p. 23). Psychosocial functions were interpersonal in nature and involved role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship.

Research concerning the functions of mentors has been extensive in the fields of business and academia. Burke¹⁰ investigated the functions of mentors in business organizations. He found five common mentoring functions: serving as a role model; building self-confidence; advocating for proteges; performing as a teacher, coach, and trainer; and using job assignments to develop proteges' skills. When Burke factor analyzed all of the functions performed by organizational mentors, three broad factors emerged: career development functions, psychosocial functions, and role model functions. The significance of the role modeling function in the transmission of complex information or behaviors to proteges was also emphasized by Bolton.¹¹ Wright and Wright¹² found that organizational mentors facilitated career advancement, increased proteges' professional networks, cultivated professional development, and stimulated personal identity formation. Furthermore, Jacobi¹³ determined that mentors show greater experience, influence, and achievement compared with proteges.

Research regarding the significance of mentor relationships has clearly demonstrated the benefits of the relationship for proteges. Cronan-Hillix et al.¹⁴ found a significant positive relationship between having a graduate school mentor and satisfaction with the graduate program, and recent graduates of psychology doctoral programs who were mentored were significantly more satisfied with their graduate school careers than those who had no mentor.¹⁵ In an investigation reported by Roche¹⁶ of top executives listed in the *Wall Street Journal*, nearly two-thirds reported having a mentor during their careers. Mentored executives reported higher salaries at a younger age and were more likely to achieve planned career objectives. Similar investigations in the field of business revealed that, compared with nonmentored individuals, proteges who are mentored have higher income levels,¹⁷⁻¹⁹ higher promotion rates,¹⁷⁻¹⁹ greater career success and satisfaction,²⁰ greater career mo-

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bility,²¹ more satisfaction with pay and benefits,¹⁷ and greater organizational policy influence and resource power within the organization.²²

Research in the area of mentor relationships in the U.S. military is sparse. Two previous studies evaluated the effect of mentor relationships on military personnel. Yoder,⁷ in an investigation of mentor relationships among Army nurses, found that 83% of respondents had one or more mentor relationships during their military careers. A majority of respondents indicated that the relationship had a significant influence on their professional lives. Although officer promotion rates were not attributed to the mentor relationship, mentored officers reported greater satisfaction with career progress than nonmentored officers. Similarly, Schwerin and Bourne⁶ explored the mentor relationships of officers commissioned in the U.S. Navy Medical Corps. Compared with those who had no mentor, mentored officers had higher ratings of job satisfaction and greater self-report of intent to remain commissioned in the Navy. These findings suggest that mentor relationships have a significant impact on the career satisfaction, and presumably the career performance, of U.S. military personnel.

Historically, senior officers' intentional investment in the leadership development of service academy students has been foundational for the cultivation and ultimate succession of a future generation of military leaders. One salient aspect of leadership development provided to students at U.S. service academies is exposure to military mentors and role models.²³ The significance of senior officers' role modeling of specific leadership tasks and decision-making strategies cannot be overstated.

The hypothesized connection between mentoring and military leadership development was articulated by Rosenbach⁵: "Strong leadership that motivates followers to perform beyond expectations is built upon personal identification with the leader, a shared vision of the future, and subordination of self-interests. . . . A culture of transformational leadership stimulates mentoring. Proteges are encouraged to believe in themselves and to achieve their leadership potential. Their success will ensure the continued influence, power, respect, and competitive advantage of the organization. Mentors affirm their self-confidence and view leader development as a part of their job. . . . With a supportive environment and the right attitude, mentoring can be a powerful force in leadership development" (p. 146).

Despite this impressive endorsement of mentor relationships as a significant component of military leadership development, no study has investigated the mentor experiences of students at U.S. service academies. In fact, the only empirical investigation of mentoring during officer training was conducted in Israel. A formal training program for the Israeli Defence Forces integrated role modeling into leadership development by requiring cadets to identify, analyze, and model themselves after superiors who possessed exceptional leadership qualities.²⁴ During an evaluation of the program, nearly all cadets emphasized the significance of a transformational or charismatic military role model in assisting them to crystallize their own roles as commanders. These results illuminate the powerful influence of senior role models in the leadership development of future officers.

In spite of the dearth of empirical studies of mentoring in the service academies, there have been a number of important narrative accounts of the marked impact made by academy men-

tors on the personal and professional development of renowned flag-rank officers.²⁵ Most recently, presidential candidate John McCain described the important contribution of the Naval Academy and relationships with senior military mentors to his success as a leader.²⁶

This study was designed to obtain preliminary and exploratory data regarding mentor relationships experienced by midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy. The intent of this study was to determine the prevalence, nature, duration, and overall evaluation of mentor relationships that may have been experienced by Naval Academy midshipmen.

Methods

Participants

Nine hundred thirty-two midshipmen in the third year (junior) class at the Naval Academy were asked to participate in a research project involving completion of a brief questionnaire on the topic of mentoring. Five hundred seventy-six midshipmen completed the questionnaire (62% of the class). The mean age for participants was 21 years. Eighty-five percent were men, and the majority were white (83%). Others were Asian American (5%), African American (5%), and Hispanic (4%). These demographic data suggest that the sample was largely representative of the Naval Academy's population of third year students, in which the mean age is 21 years and 85% are male. Also, 80% of the class is white, 7% is Hispanic, 6% is African American, and 5% is Asian American.

Instrument

All participants were asked to complete the Mentor Experience Survey (MES), a two-sided questionnaire created by the authors to assess the prevalence, formation, duration, and evaluation of mentor relationships experienced by midshipmen at the Naval Academy. The MES began with the following instructions and a definition of mentoring that has been used in previous survey research on mentor relationships¹⁵:

"The following questions pertain to your experience of having been mentored. Mentoring is a personal relationship in which a more experienced (usually older) individual acts as a guide, role model, and teacher of a less experienced (often younger) protege. Mentors provide proteges with knowledge, advice, challenge, counsel and support in their pursuit of becoming full members of a particular profession. In light of this definition, please answer the following questions."

The MES asked whether the respondents had ever had a mentor. Those who had experienced some mentor relationship in the past were requested to complete the questionnaire. Those who had been mentored at some point in the past were queried about the number of mentors they had and were then asked to complete the remaining items with a focus on their "most significant mentor." Respondents were queried about the mentor's gender, military status, and age. It was requested that respondents estimate the age difference between themselves and their mentor, the duration of the mentoring relationship, and who initiated the relationship. They were asked about the extent to which the mentor relationship included various "mentor functions" as delineated in Kram's mentoring research.⁹ Each of 15 mentor functions was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 =

strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). In addition, midshipmen were asked to provide an overall evaluation of their primary mentor relationship (1 = extremely negative, 5 = extremely positive) and an evaluation of the importance of mentor relationships in general.

Results

Two hundred thirty-one midshipmen (40% of the sample) reported having had at least one significant mentor relationship. Among those mentored, 74% were men. Although women midshipmen made up only 15% of the sample, women accounted for 26% of midshipmen who were mentored. This would indicate that women at the Naval Academy are at least as likely, if not more likely, than their male counterparts to be mentored. Of those who were mentored, the average number of mentor relationships reported was 2.79 ($SD = 2.27$, range = 1–16), indicating that having several mentors was not uncommon. Among these multiple mentors, an average of 1.41 ($SD = 1.40$) were military personnel. When asked about their most significant mentor, the vast majority of respondents reported that their mentors were male (87%), and nearly all were older than the respondent (93%) versus the same age (7%) as the respondent. None of the mentors were identified as younger than the respondent. Among those mentors who were older, the mean difference in age between respondent and mentor was 16.89 years ($SD = 11.12$). The majority of mentors were military personnel (60%). In terms of gender matching in protege-mentor pairs, 81% reported having a mentor of the same sex, 16% were female midshipmen with male mentors, and 3% were male midshipmen with female mentors.

Respondents were asked about who initiated the mentor relationship. The majority (65%) indicated that the mentor relationship had been initiated mutually, 27% reported that the

mentor had initiated the relationship, and only 8% indicated that they had been the primary initiators. In terms of relationship duration, 13% lasted less than 1 year, 36% lasted between 1 and 2 years, 20% lasted between 3 and 4 years, and 31% lasted more than 4 years. When asked if the relationship with their most significant mentor was difficult to terminate, only 23% indicated that it had been.

Based on the mentor functions hypothesized by Kram,⁹ all respondents were asked to rate their extent of agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) that several mentor functions were present in their primary mentor relationship. Table I lists the means and standard deviations for each of these salient mentor functions. The functions are grouped into career and psychosocial clusters. As a group, the psychosocial functions (provision of support/encouragement, self-esteem enhancement, and emotional support/counseling) received higher mean ratings than the career mentor functions. The midshipmen who had been mentored gave all mentor functions greater than neutral evaluations. However, the more relational and emotional qualities of mentoring were most likely to be present and appreciated in these relationships. Among the career functions, direct training, advocacy, and development of values (both personal and career) were most likely to define these relationships.

When asked to provide an overall rating of their primary mentor relationship, midshipmen in our sample were uniformly positive, offering a mean evaluation of 4.76 ($SD = 0.54$) on a five-point Likert scale (5 = extremely positive). Table I shows correlations between ratings of the presence of mentor functions and respondents' overall assessment of the mentor relationship. These results are striking and indicate that the three psychosocial functions are each highly correlated with the extent to which the mentor relationship is perceived as positive. Although 7 of the 12 career mentoring functions are also significantly correlated with the overall rating, the size and statistical signif-

TABLE I
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR MENTOR FUNCTIONS (N = 231)

| Function | Mean | SD | Correlation with Overall Rating ^a |
|--|------|------|--|
| Career/functions | | | |
| Provided direct training and instruction | 4.28 | 1.05 | 0.08 |
| Advocated on my behalf | 4.16 | 1.04 | 0.22 ^b |
| Developed my personal ethics and professional values | 4.11 | 1.07 | 0.19 ^c |
| Enhanced my military career development | 4.03 | 1.08 | 0.16 ^d |
| Increased my visibility/exposure in the organization | 3.95 | 1.13 | 0.12 |
| Served to protect me | 3.92 | 1.11 | 0.14 ^d |
| Enhanced my creativity and problem-solving skills | 3.88 | 1.10 | 0.16 ^d |
| Provided opportunities (e.g., "choice" assignments) | 3.73 | 1.18 | 0.16 ^d |
| Developed my military skills | 3.65 | 1.20 | 0.16 ^d |
| Assisted in establishing professional networks | 3.63 | 1.24 | 0.07 |
| Developed my academic skills | 3.46 | 1.15 | 0.09 |
| Helped me bypass bureaucracy | 3.41 | 1.20 | 0.03 |
| Psychosocial functions | | | |
| Offered me acceptance, support, and encouragement | 4.60 | 0.75 | 0.42 ^b |
| Increased my self-esteem | 4.38 | 0.84 | 0.49 ^b |
| Provided emotional support/counseling | 4.18 | 1.02 | 0.26 ^b |

^aOverall rating of mentor relationship based on a five-point Likert scale (5 = extremely positive).

^b $p < 0.001$.

^c $p < 0.01$.

^d $p < 0.05$.

icance of the correlations between overall assessment and psychosocial functions suggest that these more personal relationship factors may be the strongest predictors of subsequent positive evaluation of mentoring.

Similarly, when asked about the importance of mentor relationships more generally, our respondents rated them as extremely important (mean = 4.56, SD = 0.69). Student's *t* test analyses revealed no significant differences in overall evaluation of the mentor relationship or assessment of the importance of mentor relationships based on the gender of the respondent. Male and female midshipmen were equally positive about their experiences. Finally, there were no differences in overall evaluation of the relationship or assessment of relationship importance based on same or mixed gender pairing of mentor and protege. Midshipmen with opposite gender mentors were just as positive in their overall evaluations of the mentor relationship (mean = 4.83) as those with same gender mentors (mean = 4.75).

Discussion

This was the first study to offer a preliminary assessment of the experience of mentor relationships among students at a service academy. Of the 576 junior year midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy who completed the MES, only 40% reported having had a significant mentor relationship at some point in the past. The fact that 60% of these respondents had not had a mentor relationship by the end of their third year is both surprising and a matter of concern. In addition, a substantial proportion of identified mentors were probably not affiliated with the Naval Academy, meaning that they may have been parents, older family members, or high school teachers. Thus, the percentage of respondents mentored while at the Naval Academy is probably somewhat lower than 40%. Unfortunately, there are no comparative data from equivalent undergraduate institutions. Rates of mentor relationships in graduate education tend to be considerably higher.^{14,15}

The fact that most midshipmen do not view themselves as having been mentored (regardless of the source of the mentoring) is a concern for several reasons. First, literature from a number of professions suggests that individuals who are mentored experience a range of personal and career benefits such as higher pay, more rapid promotion, greater career mobility, and more satisfaction with both life and career.^{10-13,16-22} In addition, military personnel have reported that exposure to military mentors who may serve as role models is exceptionally important,²³ and military personnel in training report markedly positive outcomes from intentionally modeling themselves after respected senior supervisors.²⁴ Of course, it is possible that a majority of mentoring or indoctrination into the military officer profession occurs in the operational environment, i.e., after graduation from a service academy. In fact, a recent survey of all retired Navy flag-rank officers found that 67% had been mentored during their naval careers. Many of these admirals noted that their most important mentor had been their commanding officer during an early career assignment.²⁷ Although mentoring is important for career success and satisfaction throughout one's career, it appears to be especially significant early on. Mentorships that develop during an academy education and during the junior officer tours may have the most impact.

The current results indicate that both the career (training,

advocacy, provision of opportunity and visibility, and skill development) and psychosocial (acceptance, support, and encouragement, self-esteem enhancement, and emotional support) functions of mentor relationships⁹ are important to midshipmen. In fact, the three psychosocial functions were most likely to be present in mentor relationships and to be correlated with positive evaluations of the mentor relationship. Thus, in the view of Navy midshipmen, when acceptance, support, and affirmation are present in a mentor relationship, the relationship is more highly valued. This finding serves to remind us that mentoring involves a relationship first and foremost. Male and female midshipmen were equally likely to be mentored and were equally likely to view their primary mentor relationship as positive and mentor relationships in general as important. These findings were true regardless of whether the mentor was of the same gender as the protege.

Although this study provides a preliminary assessment of the prevalence of mentor relationships among service academy students, there are several limitations to the current design. First, the MES was not designed to assess outcome variables such that those who had been mentored and those who had not could be compared. Subsequent research should address this shortcoming by collecting meaningful outcome data such as academic performance, military performance, and satisfaction with the service academy for both mentored and nonmentored respondents. A second shortcoming is the lack of data available regarding the identity of mentors. Subsequent research should evaluate the prevalence of mentoring by academy faculty, company officers, senior peers, parents, and other mentors external to the academy. Future research should evaluate the impact of mentor relationships that occur in the educational environment versus those that occur in the fleet. It is possible that mentor relationships that develop during an officer's early career in the field may be the most meaningful and important. Finally, we recommend continued research regarding the relationship between mentoring and leadership development among military personnel.

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