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## Voices of Women in the Field--Obtaining a Higher Education Faculty Position: The Critical Role Mentoring Plays for Females

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# **Voices of Women in the Field— Obtaining a Higher Education Faculty Position: The Critical Role Mentoring Plays for Females**

Vicki VanTuyle and Sandra Watkins

This instrumental case study outlines the critical role a graduate female faculty member played in mentoring a female doctoral student in obtaining a graduate faculty position in higher education. For the female mentee, mentoring behaviors of “championing, acceptance and confirmation” (Levesque, 2005, p. 6) were valuable in increasing professional productivity, opportunities, and success. The career and psychosocial factors are clearly described along with the stages and step-by-step processes that were utilized by both the mentor and mentee to obtain this highly sought after position at one of the fastest growing programs for educational leadership.

## **Obtaining a Higher Education Faculty Position: The Critical Role Mentoring Plays for Females**

Mentoring female doctoral candidates to obtain access to positions in higher education has not been widely researched. Women often aspire to the professorship only to find limited access to these positions. Even though a doctoral degree is a vehicle for acquiring a career in higher education, the transformation from doctoral candidate to assistant professor is usually a long and winding road. While devoting hours to extensive course work, conducting research studies, and writing and rewriting dissertation drafts, it is not uncommon for graduate students to begin to imagine themselves as professors like the professors they have worked with in higher education. A commentary on mentoring at the graduate level focusing on literacy education by Cobb, Fox, Many, Matthews, McGrail, & Sachs (2006) found that while engaged in graduate programs, doctoral students began thinking about their “changing identities or roles” (p. 374). When thinking about their changing roles, students recognized the additional help they would need “navigating within the culture of the university” (p. 375). The students often looked to their professors to mentor them and show them the way. This commentary asserts that to get the most out of

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their graduate experience, students need to be “proactive in seeking mentoring experiences” (p. 376).

Mentors can be found in a wide range of educational settings that include preschool through graduate school, working with at-risk students, students new to schools or new to specific programs, first- and second-year teachers, new administrators, and graduate students. Kram, (2007) an early pioneer and researcher in mentoring, stated that there are two types of functions that mentors play in the mentoring process (Ragins & Kram, 2007). The first focuses on the career function, and the second serves a psychosocial function.

Career functions involve a range of behaviors that help protégés ‘learn the ropes’ and prepare them for hierarchical advancement within their organizations. These behaviors include coaching protégés, sponsoring their advancement, increasing their positive exposure and visibility, and offering them protection and challenging assignments. Second, mentors may provide psychosocial functions. Psychosocial functions build on trust, intimacy, and interpersonal bonds in the relationship and include behaviors that enhance the protégé’s professional and personal growth, identity, self-worth, and self-efficacy. They include mentoring behaviors such as offering acceptance and confirmation and providing counseling, friendship, and role-modeling (p. 9).

Mentors provide knowledge, assistance, and support until mentees have developed the personal capacity and confidence to function by themselves.

In the early 1970s women were just beginning to find a place of acceptance in higher education. Male role models advised male protégés to follow in their paths. Male protégés likely sought male advisors emulating their professional pathway. Brown (1986) noted that “these systems tend to function as ‘old boy networks’ in which male mentors guide male mentees” (p. 5). The direct encouragement of senior faculty women influenced and supported many female protégés. Brown (1986) cited that by 1981, college faculties were 26.8% women (p. 4–5). Figures retrieved from *Factbook of Higher Education* indicate that women comprised 32.7% of four-year college and university faculties in 1997–1998 and 39.2% in 2007–2008 (Southern Regional Education Board, 2009). This increase in the percentage of female faculty appears to replicate the results of Tidball’s (1973) study which asserted that women achievers beget women achievers. However, when these increased

percentages of women faculty members are disaggregated by rank and compared to male faculty members of the same rank, there is great disparity in percentages as rank was increased. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) reported that among full-time four-year Title IV degree-granting institutions during the academic year 2008–2009, among assistant professors, women represented 47%; among associate professors women represented 40%; among full professors women represented only 26%.

A 1983 report on the status of education of women describes a model for mentoring in higher education that is well suited to this study's mentor/mentee relationship.

In academe, the primary model for mentoring has been the sometimes lifelong relationship that can develop between an undergraduate or graduate student and a 'special' professor. Ideally, the professor takes the novice under his or her wing; helps the person set goals and standards and develop skills; protects the novice from others in a way that allows room for risk and failure; facilitates the novice's successful entry into academic and professional circles; and ultimately passes on his or her work to the protégé (Hall and Sandler, 1983, p. 3).

Levesque's (2005) study focused on desirable mentoring behaviors, the most frequently cited mentoring behaviors were: "coaching, information support, exposure, visibility, political assistance, and championing" (p. 6). The next most frequently mentioned behaviors were: "protecting, challenging, role modeling, motivating, and training" (p. 5). They also investigated gender differences and found women perceived the importance of the mentoring behaviors, "championing, acceptance and confirmation" (p. 6) as much more significant than men.

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this instrumental case study (Creswell, 2007, p. 476) was to document, from actual events, the evolution of a mentor/mentee relationship between a female doctoral student, Vicki Van Tuyle, and her female dissertation chair, Dr. Sandra Watkins, which led the mentee to the acquisition of a position as an assistant professor in higher education. This case study describes the mentor/mentee relationship from the time she enrolled in her first doctoral class as a practicing PreK–12 superintendent. Limited past research has examined the social aspects of female-to-female mentoring and the resulting professional achievements. The focus of the study was to illustrate and illuminate how a mentoring relationship became a pathway to a position in higher education.

Heinrich (1995) studied doctoral advisement relationships between women. Heinrich found that the value of these relationships was closely associated with each woman's self-efficacy and could have a profound impact on

each individual's scholarly development. The typical advisee participant in Heinrich's study was "a thirty-five to forty-five-year-old Caucasian, married woman with children, who lived in a suburban middle-class neighborhood" (p. 450). The women advisors in Heinrich's study were "between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five and at the assistant or associate professorial rank" (p. 450). The mentor and mentee in this case study were older than the advisors and advisees in Heinrich's study, and both had extensive public school administrative experience. Both the mentor and mentee were Caucasian women with adult children. The mentee lived in a rural, middle-class area. The mentor lived in a rural, middle-class community and held the rank of associate professor. Her public school and district leadership experiences were in both rural and urban settings.

### **Step One: Setting the Stage**

The genesis of this mentoring relationship was set when the I enrolled in Dr. Watkins' course, one of my first doctoral courses. The title of the course was "Facilitating a Vision of Excellence." The course was future-focused, capitalized on "out-of-the-box" thinking versus the typical "sit-and-get" lecture. The class was rigorous, relevant, and with 'cutting-edge' information. Dr. Watkins displayed high energy, encouraged the students to read additional articles and books, as well as the required five books and selected articles on the syllabus. She displayed enthusiasm for the topic which was contagious. There was electricity and synergy in the class, and as a student, I recognized that this experience was truly higher education as it should be. As a student, I watched, experienced, and realized that this higher education intellectual environment was the next goal in my educational journey. The mentor/mentee relationship began with this course and resulted in the selection of Dr. Watkins as my dissertation chair. A study conducted by Harris, Freeman and Aerni (2009) demonstrated that

Much of the success of the mentoring experience may rest upon the mutuality and authenticity of the mentor-protégé relationship. The extent to which a protégé feels that the mentor listens to and values her ideas and the depth of connection that the protégé experiences determine whether the mentor's advice is heeded (p. 25–26).

As I reflected on the courses taken and observed the behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge of past course professors, I recognized the chosen chair and mentor should be someone who had a shared sense of commonality in background, experience, professionalism, and values. Clark and Johnson (2000) conducted research on higher education doctoral students and found "women were more likely to select female mentors and reported receiving more sup-

port and encouragement from mentors” (p. 267). They also indicated that their research had practical implications:

Our findings suggest that faculty-to-student mentoring is beneficial to graduate students and that students who initiate mentor relationships are most likely to be mentored. In addition to developing assertiveness, prospective students would be well served to evaluate the extent to which programs emphasize mentoring as an important component of the department’s culture and training strategy (p. 267).

Heinrich’s (1995) study of advisee/advisor relationships noted this “shared experience” (p. 452). “Another advisee ‘purposely chose a female advisor because of a different kind of empathy.’ This empathy grew out of their shared experiences as women in the academy” (p. 452).

It was also recognized that the doctoral chair had to be someone who was politically astute in working with faculty in a department instituting its first cohort in a doctoral program. The chair needed to demonstrate skills of collegiality, active listening, and the ability to facilitate a productive dissertation committee. Again, seeking similar characteristics in an advisor were cited in Heinrich’s (1995) study of advisee/advisor relationships. A participant in the study “recounted how her ‘professional friend’ advisor mediated between two stubborn, strong male advisors to find a middle ground so the advisee could proceed with her dissertation” (p. 452).

The mentor/mentee relationship grew and flourished during the writing of the dissertation. Dissertation writing often presents many challenges. Finding time, understanding the procedures, and the performance expectations all required coaching behaviors from a mentor that would build confidence, provide constructive criticism and honest evaluation, while providing the needed time, expertise, and knowledge to guide the entire dissertation process. As I approached the completion of the dissertation, I finalized my decision to seek a position in higher education, teaching graduate classes in educational leadership. The challenge was: “Where do I begin with this process?” Dr. Watkins responded, “No problem. Let’s develop a plan.” Dr. Watkins had been a public school and district administrator and had experienced the transition from public school employment to higher education employment. She articulated a well thought-out plan. The plan included: co-writing journal articles, acquiring adjunct teaching experience in educational leadership, co-presenting at national, regional, and state level conferences, becoming an active participant in professional organizations as well as assuming leadership roles in these organizations, continued scholarly research activities, and actively applying for career opportunities in higher education. Dr. Watkins collaborated with me to develop and maintain the vision and the pathway for my journey into an educational leadership position in higher education.

Working through the shared plan, Dr. Watkins and I developed a “power with” relationship, essential to the success of a mentor/mentee relationship. Heinrich (1995) characterized female advisors in “power with” relationships as those who “shared power with the advisee, balancing task and interpersonal dimensions in a sensitive manner, and...by mediating...within the bureaucratic system” (p. 452). Heinrich’s study, however, also revealed that some female advisee/female advisor relationships did not share power. These ‘power over’ relationships could be characterized by ‘silent betrayal’ (p. 450) where advisees were reluctant to express their needs or ‘power disowned’ (p. 454) where advisors encouraged pursuit of the doctoral degree, but then withdrew support and neglected the advisee’s needs. While these ‘power over’ relationships were maintained and degrees were earned, greater female self-worth resulted from ‘power with’ relationships. Sharing power with me, the mentee, added a quality to the relationship that had a profound effect on my personal and professional development, being treated as an equal, scholarly professional.

## Step Two: The Real Journey Begins

On the day I successfully defended my dissertation in August 2008, I sighed with relief and looked forward to a vacation from academia, but that was not what Dr. Watkins had in mind. Dr. Watkins told me of an opportunity to teach at the university. The chair of the department had just learned of a fall course in need of an instructor. Dr. Watkins had already suggested to the department chair that I would be a perfect candidate for that assignment, having been through the program and being familiar with procedures at the university. She further offered to help me in any way to be successful. Dr. Watkins suggested I stop by the office of the department chair before leaving campus to offer to teach the class. Cherniss (2007) asserted emotional intelligence plays a key role when a mentor serves as an advocate for the mentee. He claims that

to provide “protection” to a protégé a mentor must effectively cope with the anxiety that might be associated with standing up for someone who lacks status in a corporate environment and providing the protecting in a skillful manner that minimizes negative fallout requires a high degree of sensitivity to emotional nuances in the organization. Similarly, while “coaching” often involves imparting information about the organization and the work, doing it in a skillful way so that the protégé truly understands and incorporates the message seems to require a high degree of emotional intelligence (p. 436).

Following Dr. Watkins’ advice, I stopped by the chair’s office and then followed up with a formal letter of interest. In a matter of days, I was offered the adjunct teaching position. I realized that if Dr. Watkins had not made the

suggestion and had not asserted her influence, it was doubtful that I would have been considered for the position.

I began the transformation from doctoral student to adjunct professor. While I did not have an office on campus, I was frequently in the department's office preparing for classes. In conversation one day with a former female professor, who also taught at the university, I spoke of my interest in teaching at the graduate level and of my lack of knowledge about entering this professional circle. The professor told me I needed to ask because professors cannot know what a student needs to know. Heinrich's study (1995) of advisor/advisee relationships cited an advisee's quotation that describes an advisor's similar attitude. "My advisor taught me how to survive. And if you couldn't survive on your own, you didn't make it" (p. 453). The difference between one professor's advice and that of an interested and committed, exemplary mentor is obvious. A mentor seeks to develop the potential of the mentee, providing information and support when necessary rather than when it is needed to survive. The importance of discerning the relational differences between mentor personalities is of significant importance to mentees interested in forging a mentor/mentee relationship. Heinrich (2005) cited "iron maiden advisors" (p. 453) known for 'clawing their way to the top' (p. 453) who "were disinclined to help other women" (p. 453). Mentees looking for mentors should be aware of women like this in academia. Students considering graduate programs should evaluate those graduates programs and the department professors based on the mentoring they offer. Results from Clark, Harden, and Johnson's (2000) national study of mentor relationships indicate "prospective students would be well-served to evaluate the extent to which programs emphasize mentoring as an important component of the department's culture and training strategy" (p. 267).

### **Step Three: Implementing the Plan**

Immediately after having my dissertation in its final form, Dr. Watkins and I selected calendar dates to write our first article. Dr. Watkins showed me where to find manuscript guidelines and encouraged me to read several articles on a related topic to envision how we might organize the article. While preparing many drafts and through many face-to-face meetings that included mutual editing and rewriting, I learned many key publication skills. Precise words and construction of concise sentences were developed to meet the high publication standards required to become a finished product. At the same time, Dr. Watkins collaborated with me in sending out proposals for national presentations to present the results of my research. This led to the acceptance of two presentations at both a national and a state women's conference.



After the journal article was completed and published, Dr. Watkins invited me to join her and another colleague in a research study. The research involved conducting focus groups with superintendents from a wide geographic area and afforded me the opportunity to lead these focus groups. The research process included modeling the facilitation of focus groups which I observed. After feeling confident in the procedure, I was encouraged to conduct a focus group on my own. Next there was collaboration and shared responsibility in conducting the focus groups. Cobb and others (2006) noted this same development of support, describing it as "learning for oneself with adequate support the first time so that he or she can do it alone the next time" (p. 377). During this process, through communication and collegiality, I began to feel that I had graduated from being a student to a contributing faculty member. Not only did this research experience provide authentic practice, it also enabled me to gain self-efficacy as a researcher.

Dr. Watkins encouraged me to join and become an active member in the state organization for professors of educational leadership. At the first meeting, I felt like a "fish out of water." I soon recognized familiar faces seated around the table: three retired male public school administrators who were now practicing assistant professors in educational leadership. Dr. Watkins acted as a host, introducing me to the members of the group. In attendance at this meeting were representatives from the state universities who were very active in policy reform. Their names were recognized as those that often headed search committees at the university level. This introduction was invaluable, as personal connections were made with influential people in higher education which eventually aided me in navigating the employment network. Levesque's et al. (2005) research also highlighted the importance females place on the championing behavior needed to gain access to networking. Women rated the behavior of championing significantly higher than men as a desired mentoring behavior.

First, the public nature of championing, involving a mentor advocating on behalf of a protégé, may be valued by women because they identify it as a critical factor in career success and/or compensation benefits that mentoring can provide. In addition, women may value the public recognition of mentoring more than men because they feel it can help them address the challenges stemming from occupational discrimination, exclusion from male-dominated financial networks, and other existing barriers to developing business skills (p. 6).

Dr. Watkins served as an executive officer in a state level organization. She sponsored me in joining and seeking the position of secretary of this organization. This resulted in my appointment to the secretary position. Another opportunity availed itself to become a director-at-large in a state women's educational leadership organization which I accepted.

Additional networking was established through presentations at national, regional, and state conferences. We committed to a rigorous agenda of five presentations that resulted in exposure for me as a researcher and presenter at the national, regional, and state levels. Forret, & Dougherty (2005) found in their research that

. . . although women may attempt to increase their internal visibility, they may be less able to infiltrate influential organizational circles than men. Meanwhile, exploratory regression results demonstrate that increasing internal visibility was significantly related to perceived career success for women but not for men (p. 432).

During this time, I was also gaining valuable experience teaching my first graduate level course. The introduction to this new world involved preparation that included reviewing and rewriting syllabi, researching new materials, evaluating textbooks, redesigning course assignments that were more practical and focused on the real job and met the needs of adult learners, and being evaluated by the students. End-of-course evaluations and feedback from students regarding my strengths and challenges prepared me to fine-tune my teaching skills and provided evidence of my abilities that led to being awarded two additional teaching assignments. Gaining confidence in my ability to successfully deliver graduate instruction at the university level and appreciating the satisfaction of involvement with colleagues and adult learners, confirmed my motivation to actively seek a higher education position. I learned through observation at other sessions how effective programs and synopses are written, how exemplary presentations are prepared, organized, and presented, and how audiences can be actively engaged. I also developed a more critical eye concerning the validity and reliability of research presented at the various conferences. This national exposure invigorated me and became another impetus in applying for higher education positions.

Upon confirmation of my ability to do the job and through the sponsorship and encouragement of Dr. Watkins, I began the job search. The guidance of Dr. Watkins assisted me in knowing when, where, and how to begin the search. The search required knowledge of university employment web pages, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and word-of-mouth in the state network of higher education professors. Coaching by Dr. Watkins was provided in how to write a vita for higher education positions, aligning real-world experiences with the job description, and the importance of selecting supportive and respected references. The utilization of networking and the importance of sponsorship by educational leadership faculty, as well as building confidence in myself, were instrumental in moving forward in obtaining an educational leadership position. Dr. Watkins encouraged me to continue to be active in research and scholarly activities, teaching, and service in state level

organizations, while I waited to hear from the institutions about the positions for which I had applied. There was a period of frustration as I waited months to hear from the job searches. Time passed slowly with no responses, while the desire to find a position became greater. Remaining optimistic was difficult while taking note of the presence of existing barriers and obstacles. Two positions were open at the university where I had received my degree. But current university policy did not allow the hiring of its graduates who had received doctorates from the university. As an adjunct professor, the greatest competition to obtain a position came from associate and full professors from other institutions who were applying for these positions as well. The need for continued support and coaching from my mentor cannot be underestimated at this step.

### Step Five: The Interview Process

I obtained an interview! The chair of an educational leadership search committee from the fastest growing educational leadership department at a state university called me to set a date for a telephone interview. In the interim, I contacted Dr. Watkins to inquire about preparing for the interview process. I then began to prepare for the telephone interview by reviewing teaching evaluations, research and scholarly activities, service in organizations, as well as documenting current research endeavors and future research interests. In addition, I studied current department course offerings, texts used in those courses, and the professional contributions of the current department faculty. The telephone interview was a success! I was invited for a formal interview on campus. Again, Dr. Watkins provided a briefing of the expected process. That briefing matched well with the formal two-day interview agenda provided by the university. A presentation of my research agenda was an expectation of the interview. The value of the research previously conducted, as well as the national presentations and active involvement in continued research, served me well in the interview process. These past experiences contributed to my self-efficacy during the interview process. I felt confident interacting with the people in higher education, because I had successfully experienced the teaching, the research, and the service they were looking for in a candidate.

Part of the on-campus interview included a dinner meeting with two of the department's professors. One of these professors, three years "new" to the educational leadership department and also a former school superintendent, asked me about my preparation for the interview and presentation of a research agenda. This professor related to me that she had not been as well-prepared. In hindsight, her research agenda could have been improved and her scholarly writing should have been greater. She recognized the value of

the mentoring the candidate had received in preparation for seeking a position as professor.

## **Step Six: Mission Accomplished**

Mission accomplished! I obtained the job as assistant professor! The mentor/mentee relationship realized its desired goal. Mentoring, sponsorship, exposure, visibility, and coaching resulted in the mentee obtaining a much sought after position in a highly regarded state university system. The competition was fierce, and in spite of this I was offered the position. I felt confident and competent in accepting the position and moving forward in my career. Resiliency paid off. If the position had not been obtained, the reality is that I would have needed to continue these experiences to sustain viable credentials necessary for obtaining a future position. Reflecting on this experience, it is extremely important for others to realize that this was the exception rather than the rule. First interviews at the university level usually do not result in the candidate obtaining the position, especially a candidate with no prior full-time faculty experience. It was realized at this point, had I not received the position, it would have been extremely important to persevere and to continue to teach as an adjunct professor, conduct scholarly activities, and give service in the public schools. We assert that it is of vital importance for the mentor to continue to build the resiliency of the mentee following any unsuccessful attempt at attaining a position and for any future setbacks that could occur in the new position. Olsen and Ashton-Jones (1992) addressed this challenge.

Becoming a colleague in an academic discipline is difficult and frustrating. It involved acquiring certain discipline-specific ways of thinking, of looking at the world, of talking and writing, and of interacting with colleagues—of “indwelling” in academic communities. However, it is often especially fraught with anxiety and anguish for women, both in graduate programs and in entry-level faculty positions. Negotiating for a professional identity confronts women with collegial expectations that are often grounded in gender stereotypes and discriminatory behaviors. As former mentor and mentee and current co-authors, our own professional relationship is somewhat typical of the many mentoring relationships that facilitate the entry of newcomers into academic disciplines. We each have experienced both the reward and the pain that a mentoring relationship can produce (p. 114).

## **Step Seven: Mentoring Continues**

As in any first year on the job, surprises will be a natural part of the position. I relied upon being able to discuss with Dr. Watkins any challenges I

encountered. We continue to work on research and scholarly activities. We believe that encouraging other capable women to pursue higher education as a career destination is essential. Through networking, active involvement in professional organizations, pursuing scholarly research, along with making presentations at national and state conferences, the importance of the mentoring relationship will be emphasized. We look forward to acting as role models for others demonstrating what a positive and productive mentor/mentee relationship can accomplish. An exemplary mentor/mentee relationship increases job productivity, provides intellectual capital, and demonstrates the importance of a true collegial relationship.

## Summary and Conclusions

Mentoring matters! Mentoring relationships have a profound impact on the career development and direction of doctoral students. This instrumental case study demonstrated how female-to-female mentoring of a doctoral student assisted the mentee to gain access to a position as a professor of educational leadership. Initially, the mentor acted as coach and advisor to the mentee, giving specific direction in the collaborative plan. The mentor acted as a champion and provided visibility for the mentee along with informational support and political acumen. The mentee accumulated a record of adjunct teaching, worked diligently on scholarly and professional activities, and became visible and active in professional organizations. As a result of her commitment and dedication, the mentee obtained a position in a highly regarded state university system as an assistant professor of educational leadership.

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