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# The Developmental Mentoring Relationship Between Academic Women

Jane E. Rheineck and Catherine B. Roland

*This exploratory study focused on the needs and attributes that female doctoral students, during their academic and professional careers, seek in mentoring relationships with female faculty. Two domains—personal and professional—were identified as essential components in the developmental mentoring relationship. As a result, the Rheineck Mentoring Model was created.*

Adult career development remains a multifaceted endeavor, often beginning with the advanced educational process. Returning to graduate school for an advanced degree can represent a time for both personal and professional transition. Mentoring can be an essential component in assisting the development of a professional identity and is often considered the “heart of a graduate education” (Kelly & Schweitzer, 1999, p. 130). Mentoring has been viewed as a kind of framework providing structure, definition, and direction on how to negotiate career development for any profession. Cronan-Hillix, Gensheimer, Cronan-Hillix, and Davidson (1986) postulated that academic mentors improve student performance and research productivity, and Tenenbaum, Crosby, and Gliner (2001) reported that psychosocial support from mentors increases students’ overall satisfaction with their graduate school experiences.

Doctoral students begin the learning process of how to navigate the world of academia through academic experience and eventually understand that it is a personal journey. The path from beginning doctoral student to professional colleague has been confusing for some. That path, when clarified and supported through positive mentorship, has allowed doctoral students to gain positive, confident levels of self-efficacy.

The personal development of doctoral students can be enhanced by the mentoring relationship, especially if it begins early. Not all doctoral students have received positive and heartfelt mentoring. The first author observed many peers experiencing anxiety and stress related to their professional development

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throughout their programs. Those students tended to withdraw, did not present at professional conferences, were not engaged in research, and were not networking with other professionals. The purpose of this study was to validate the importance of the mentoring experience and to assist faculty and doctoral students in understanding and using this crucial component.

## THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP FOR WOMEN

Academic mentoring has been defined as simply as a relationship that “facilitates learning” (McDade, 2005, p. 760) or as comprehensively as

A developmental, caring, sharing, and helping relationship where one person invests time, know-how, and effort in enhancing another person’s growth, knowledge, and skills, and responds to critical needs in the life of that person in ways that prepare the individual for greater productivity or achievement in the future. (Shea, 1994, p. 13)

According to Gilbert and Rossman (1992), mentoring is typically conceptualized as a developmental experience serving as a relationship that enhances both individuals and is often divided into two domains. The first domain—personal—is “relational in nature and centers around the notions of mutuality and enhancement” (Gilbert & Rossman, 1992, p. 234). This domain assists the mentee in developing self-esteem and self-confidence. The second domain—professional—relates to career and assists the mentee through coaching (guidance and teaching), protecting, and networking. Whereas the professional domain operates on a social system level, it is also personal in nature. The two domains interact to allow the mentee to enter and move successfully through the organizational structure (Gilbert & Rossman, 1992). Gilbert and Rossman constructed a dual process that entwined two domains that were not mutually exclusive. They defined mentoring as “a relationship between two people . . . [that] occurs within and is maintained and influenced by the roles, rules, and norms of the relevant social systems and institutional structures” (Gilbert & Rossman, 1992, p. 234).

Previous research (Burke, 1984; Kram, 1983, 1985; Tenenbaum et al., 2001) reported that the mentoring relationship can offer psychosocial benefits, normalizing the graduate school experience and providing support when self-confidence and self-efficacy may be lacking. In the psychosocial area, mentors can enhance mentees’ competence, allow mentees to experiment with new behaviors, serve as role models, and provide feedback (Noe, 1988). Noe also reported that mentors often play a dual role by serving as an outlet for personal concerns and facilitating informal and formal information gathering about work and nonwork issues.

Our review of the literature on women and academia revealed that discrepancies in salary levels and promotions between women and men seem to still exist

(Hill, Leinbaugh, Bradley, & Hazler, 2005; West & Curtis, 2006). Although the number of women attaining doctoral degrees and faculty appointments has increased, women still represent a disproportionate number of lower ranking positions (Misra, Kennelly, & Karides, 1999; Oleck & McNatt, 1999; Park, 1996; West & Curtis, 2006; Winkler, 2000). In addition, women are less likely to hold full-time positions and continue to be underrepresented in tenure-track positions. During 2005–2006 at institutions granting doctoral, master’s, and bachelor degrees, 39% of full-time faculty members were women, whereas 61% of full-time faculty members were men (West & Curtis, 2006).

For female counselor educators, Hill et al. (2005) explored encouraging and discouraging factors in academia. Their study supported previous assumptions that career satisfaction centered on “supportive, growth-producing interactions with students and other professionals” (Hill et al., 2005, p. 378). They also postulated that overall life satisfaction for female counselor educators was significantly affected by controlling their own destiny at work and influencing others in their profession. Discouraging factors such as a “sense of being overcontrolled by others” and “office politics” (Hill et al., 2005, p. 378) also influenced overall satisfaction significantly and shaped professional development. Hill et al. found that of the 10 factors that female counselor educators rated as most discouraging, 7 related to negative relationships. These results support the relational nature of how women work and assess their well-being.

## WOMEN MENTORING WOMEN

Many women feel overwhelmed and isolated regarding the graduate school experience. Female graduate students have reported feeling lost regarding the unwritten rules of social norms and professional culture of the counseling field (Cawyer, Simonds, & Davis, 2002; Ellis, 2001; Wilson, 2003). According to Packard, Walsh, and Seidenberg (2004), barriers still stand in the way of women’s access to mentoring because (a) men still predominate in higher level positions and are less likely to engage in mentoring relationships with women, (b) women may place more emphasis on role modeling and have difficulty finding mentors who integrate their personal and professional lives, and (c) women may find the traditional hierarchy of mentoring (with men) too constraining and resist the values and images created by men. Although men and women entering graduate school have achieved the same academic levels, women have often struggled more than men have with issues of low self-esteem, lower estimates of their intelligence, and vague professional expectations (Arnold, 1993; Cross, 2001; Hojat, Glaser, Xu, Veloski, & Christian, 1999).

Mentoring can be an integral part of acquiring the self-identity necessary for women’s personal and professional development. Previous research has indicated that women who were mentored by women often had higher self-confidence, enhanced awareness, and greater work self-efficacy (Reich, 1986). Schwiebert

(2000) also postulated that same-gender mentoring had unique advantages. Gilligan (1982) reported that women's psychological development emphasized the importance of forming connections with each other and to communicate within and cultivate caring relationships. Walker and Mehr (1992) emphasized that mentoring relationships have the ability to promote leadership skills, encourage exploration of and experimentation with ideas, and assist in development of vision and dreams.

Additionally, the women-mentoring-women relationship has often been desired because the benefits of role modeling have been an important component of mentoring. Women can model competence and professionalism in professional settings even as they demonstrate understanding and consideration of the culturally defined gender role (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992). Female mentors can facilitate the development of leadership skills, foster self-confidence and self-esteem, and encourage assertiveness. Female mentors can assist by valuing those traits that are often perceived as "deficiencies," such as nurturing, empathy, and relational skills, in addition to providing necessary skills, such as understanding the structure, players, and politics within the system and the individual role of these elements (Schwiebert, 2000).

Packard et al. (2004) suggested that women in particular have benefited from mentoring and that female faculty who mentor female doctoral students in counselor education programs can offer experiences to the students that are unique and invaluable to their personal and professional development. Women can offer women a forum to listen, provide feedback, and challenge their female students without the influence of gender bias and in a supportive environment (Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005; Greene, 2002).

Women who have taken on the role of mentor may be inherently more likely to understand and address the diversity in women's lives. The possibilities for academic and professional achievement for women have increased, but women have still struggled to define themselves (Gilbert & Rossman, 1992). According to Gilbert (1985), women sought same-sex mentors more than male students did and often reported that their relationships with their mentors were more important to their professional development than those of their male colleagues might have been. These results also support the importance of the relational piece in the mentoring relationship.

Mentoring can add the dimension of personal support to a student's pursuit of professional identity (Phelps, 1992). Informal mentoring has long been a practice among scholars; however, the changing demographics within the academy and the increase in the number of female doctoral students have challenged scholars to use mentoring as a training technique (Cronan-Hillix et al., 1986). Although fewer women in comparison with men hold full-time tenure-track faculty positions, 53% of doctoral degree recipients in 2004 were women. The discrepancies between the number of doctoral degree recipients and full-time faculty positions are a direct result of hiring practices (West &

Curtis, 2006). West and Curtis also found, in a model analysis based on data from the 1990s, that with the current hiring and retention trends, the number of women obtaining full-time faculty positions would never exceed the current numbers. The report provided by West and Curtis may support a paradigm shift in how universities promote, retain, and support women in the academy. Women who reported having academic mentors realized greater job success and job satisfaction than did women without mentors (Chandler, 1996).

Previous research has also indicated that women, in comparison with their male counterparts, reported that characteristics such as empathy for concerns and feelings were important. Women also reported that supportive personal mentoring was important, and female mentors were also viewed as more likely to provide that support (Chandler, 1996). In a study conducted by Wright and Wright (as cited in Chandler, 1996), female recipients of mentoring were less likely than male recipients to become mentors because of the women's negative experiences when mentored by men and the additional stressors of having to perform at a higher level to prove themselves.

Clark, Harden, and Johnson (2000) explored the nature of the mentoring relationship with clinical psychology doctoral students. In their study, 43% of the mentees reported that they initiated the mentoring relationship, 35% reported that the relationship was mutually commenced, 14% reported that they had been assigned a mentor, and 8% reported that their mentor had initiated the relationship. Considering that 66% of the 787 graduate students in the sample had been mentored, only 5% of all students in this study had been approached first in the mentoring experience. When applying the Clark et al. study findings to counselor education, that 5% can be viewed as alarming, considering that women who are entering doctoral programs in counselor education reported feelings of isolation, feeling overwhelmed, struggling with self-confidence, and looking for guidance to achieve success.

**METHOD**

**Survey**

To better understand the meaning of a mentoring relationship for counselor education doctoral students, the first author conducted survey research. Using Gilbert and Rossman's (1992) dual process, a 35-question survey was created. For 31 questions, respondents rated the level of importance of each attribute using a Likert-type scale with the following response categories: 1 = *not important*, 2 = *neutral*, 3 = *important*, and 4 = *very important*. Of the remaining 4 questions, 2 were dichotomous questions (yes or no) and 2 were open-ended questions that asked respondents to identify terms that described their mentor or their perceptions of what mentors should be. The purpose was to determine the needs that would promote success of female doctoral students in counselor education programs by using the academic mentoring relationship.

The survey was validated through a literature review and expert analysis as to what was deemed appropriate for the mentoring relationship of female graduate students. A demographic component was also included. Because previous research addressed personal attributes related to graduate school and its often personal experiences (Casto et al., 2005), questions pertaining to personal growth were included. The survey consisted of two domains—professional and personal—distinguished by expert analysis.

**Participants and Procedure**

The sample was obtained by contacting five counselor education doctoral programs representing different geographic regions of the United States: three southern universities, one midwestern university, and one western university. Students’ ages ranged from 24 to 59 years. Of the 21 female participants in the sample, 38% were 1st-year doctoral students, 33% were 2nd-year doctoral students, and 29% 3rd-year doctoral students. Additional demographics are noted in Table 1.

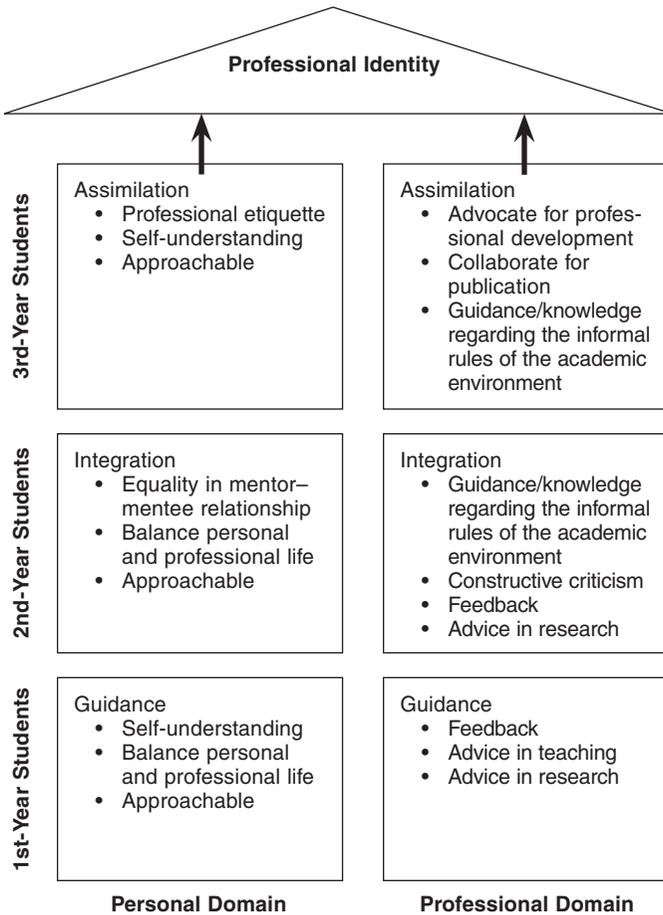
**TABLE 1**  
**Frequency and Percentage of Demographic Variables (N = 21)**

Variable	Frequency	%
Race		
Caucasian	18	86
Non-Caucasian	3	14
Current age		
24–32 years	11	52
33–41 years	4	19
42–50 years	1	5
51+ years	5	24
Year in program		
1st year	8	38
2nd year	7	33
3rd year	6	29
4th year	0	0
5th+ year	0	0
Relationship status		
Single	7	33
Partnered	1	5
Married	13	62
Family educational background		
First generation college	3	14
First generation graduate degree	5	24
Parents college educated	1	5
Parents educated beyond bachelor’s degree	12	57
Career goals <sup>a</sup>		
Advanced clinical work	15	71
Teaching on the college level	13	62
Teaching on the graduate school level	16	76
Full-time faculty status	9	43

<sup>a</sup>Participants may have provided more than one response.

**RESULTS**

Results showed evidence that the mentoring relationship was a developmental process that was dependent on the student’s year in school and supported Gilbert and Rossman’s (1992) dual process. The data collected revealed both personal and professional needs that were distinguishably different during different stages in the academic process. From these findings, the Rheineck Mentoring Model was created on the basis of both the dual nature of participants’ needs and their developmental trajectories (see Figure 1). The various aspects of their academic mentoring relationships that participants identified



**FIGURE 1**

**The Rheineck Mentoring Model**

*Note.* The model identifies the developmental stages of the mentoring process within the personal and professional domains on the basis of the student’s year in school.

as *important* and *very important* within the personal and professional domains are included in the model. According to the model, female doctoral students have had different developmental needs, which they perceived as essential to their academic and professional development, during each year of study. See Table 2 for overall percentages of attributes that were classified as *important* and *very important*.

Although the importance of mentors' being approachable and the unimportance of mentors being friends or parts of support systems were salient through all 3 years of graduate school, distinct differences in students' perceptions of attribute importance were identified. The personal domain consisted of personal attributes that may influence, reflect, or take on some importance for individuals' growth through graduate school. The professional domain included characteristics such as mentors being experts and assistance with professional planning that denote various aspects of academic and professional development for female doctoral counselor education students. Results indicated that advocacy for professional development was important to most respondents; however, more 3rd-year students rated this attribute as *very important*. Female doctoral students also sought mentors who are leaders in their professions, promote skill development, provide professional networking, and assist with professional planning.

The developmental process was evident when examining the meaning behind the actual survey results. Results were sometimes fluid. First- and 3rd-year doctoral students identified assistance in self-understanding as a high priority, but 2nd-year students identified that attribute as one of their least important attributes. Although important for both 1st- and 3rd-year students, the context in which assistance in self-understanding takes on such importance can be very different. Overall, on the basis of survey results, the first author postulated that

**TABLE 2**  
**Overall Percentage of *Important* and *Very Important* Mentor Attributes (N = 21)**

Question	<i>Important</i>	<i>Very Important</i>
Assists me in understanding myself	48	52
Provides constructive criticism	38	52
Provides feedback	38	62
Provides advice in teaching	29	48
Provides research advice	19	48
Provides assistance regarding professional etiquette	57	29
Collaborates on projects that may lead to publication	43	48
Assists me in balancing my personal and professional life	29	48
Provides me opportunities to further my professional development	52	43
Is approachable	5	95
Provides guidance and knowledge regarding the informal rules and politics of the academic environment	38	57

1st-year students were looking for self-understanding related to graduate school transition, whereas 3rd-year students were seeking self-understanding related to professional transition.

### **Personal Domain**

First-year doctoral students showed a clear need for formal and structured guidance. They often reported not having mentors but identified characteristics that would help them acclimate their personal self to the academic rigors of doctoral programs. In addition to their mentor being approachable, the most important attributes identified by 1st-year students were assistance in self-understanding and assistance in balancing personal and professional life.

Second-year students followed that same continuum but placed more emphasis on their mentors being approachable and less emphasis on assistance in self-understanding. They also valued assistance in balancing personal and professional life and equality in the mentor–mentee relationship.

Third-year students became even more focused. These students exhibited a more “evolved” approach to their personal growth. In addition to mentors being approachable, 3rd-year students valued personal attributes such as assistance in self-understanding and assistance regarding professional etiquette.

### **Professional Domain**

As with the personal domain, students’ needs seemed to become more focused as they progressed through their academic programs. First-year students identified what they needed from their mentors related to acclimating to graduate school and their programs of study: They needed information. Provide feedback was the attribute of the mentoring relationship that 77% of 1st-year students rated as *very important*; 66% of 1st-year students rated the attributes provide advice in teaching and provide research advice as *very important*.

The results of the survey showed that concern for professional development became part of the 2nd-year experience. In addition to the academic components such as provide feedback, provide research advice, and provide constructive criticism, 2nd-year students identified guidance regarding the informal rules of the academic environment as an important mentoring component. Third-year students and 2nd-year students were similar, valuing guidance regarding the informal rules of the academic environment, but 3rd-year students considered advocacy for professional development and collaboration on projects for publication as vital to their development.

### **Qualitative Responses**

The survey also contained two open-ended questions inviting participants to share what they found beneficial in their mentoring relationships and how they would describe their mentor. Supportive environment was mentioned consistently by students at all levels of graduate school. Students also wanted

guidance and lessons on what to expect both academically and within the profession. They also identified personal needs such as mentors who would listen, who could be trusted, who were role models, and who would pick them up when they were down.

Results suggested a developmental maturation process. Regarding what they viewed as positive attributes in the mentoring relationship, 1st-year students wanted mentors to give them information and tell them what to expect. Second-year students emphasized support, source of information, and assistance in learning about themselves. Third-year students wanted to be challenged, feel connected, and be assisted with their transition to professional self.

Third-year students used the words *nurturing* and *caring* to describe what they felt were important components in the mentoring relationship. Despite their focus on transitioning from personal self to professional self, these doctoral students wanted relationships that were connected and personal to help in their transitions to full professional. They wanted personal support to minimize their fear so they can face the arduous challenges ahead of them.

Women who had mentors were also asked to use three to five words to describe their mentors. Within the personalized responses, words such as *challenging*, *affirming*, and *safe* emerged. Other common responses included *supportive*, *helpful*, *informative*, *open*, *inspiring*, and *reassuring*. Overall, women considered their personal mentoring relationships as sincere, genuine, and enriching, both personally and professionally. Some attributes in both domains were also evident among students at all levels of graduate school. Professionally, these doctoral students identified advice, feedback, guidance, networking opportunities, knowledgeable, approachable, and source of information as important components of the mentoring relationship. From a personal perspective, participants wanted a mentor to listen, respect them, assist them in learning about themselves, and show concern for their welfare. The meaning behind the attributes did vary some. For example, *feedback* for 1st-year students referred to academic work but for 3rd-year students referred to the job interview process. Doctoral students also wanted a role model who could provide a standard of what a female counselor educator was both personally and professionally.

### Differences

Although many characteristics were consistent throughout both domains of the developmental process, some attributes took on different meanings depending on the context of their use. First-year students looked at support from mentors as essential for their academic success, whereas 3rd-year students wanted support for the transition into their professional identity. First- and 2nd-year students also placed strong importance on assistance in balancing personal and professional life but only 33% of 3rd-year students deemed that attribute as an important feature in the mentoring relationship.

The focus seemed to move away from personal self to predominately professional self; 1st-year students and, to a lesser extent, 2nd-year students operated in an academic mode. They focused on gathering information, developing techniques useful in the academic setting, and being graded. They continued to regard grades as reflections of their abilities. The technical writing and research skills they learned during their 1st year transitioned to necessary tools for conducting research, which is essential to their professional development. As shown in Figure 1, this suggested a developmental process, with mentors playing an important role in students' professional and personal growth.

## DISCUSSION

The results suggested a developmental process through graduate students' academic careers. First-year female doctoral students were not as concise regarding what they needed. Beyond their needs for approachability, feedback, and advice, respondents were unclear and unsure regarding the importance or influence of other attributes in the mentoring relationship. Their primary motivation was obtaining the necessary tools for academic success rather than the "professionalization" to counselor education. First-year students also sought guidance in negotiating the nuisances of graduate school and balancing school, work, and home.

Second-year doctoral students expanded their outlooks and identified professional growth as part of their development. Even as they continued to focus on the equilibrium of personal and professional self, they began to understand that matriculation through a doctoral program involved understanding and knowing the idiosyncratic nature of the professoriat. The assimilation of both personal and professional development crystallized in the 3rd year. Third-year students reported the desire for mentoring relationships whether it was guidance through the academic environment or the collegiality of collaboration in scholarship. They understood the role mentors could play in their professional transition and the need to have mentors as advocates. In conclusion, 3rd-year students moved from the academic domain to the professional domain in understanding self in relation to their professional identity and gaining the knowledge and skills that were essential to academy membership.

### Further Research

Data indicated that successful matriculation within an academic program is a developmental process and that an integral component of that process was the mentoring relationship. The survey in this study was exploratory in nature; it was an attempt to ascertain the needs or perceived needs for mentors as identified by female doctoral students. A comparison study between opposite-gender and same-gender mentoring would be useful to determine the specific differences and the implications those different relationships have.

Further research is necessary to continue to provide the best mentoring and support for adult female doctoral students. Research from the point of view of the female mentor may also add to the literature on the developmental, holistic, and relational nature of mentoring.

### Limitations

Participants in this study who did not have mentors had to speculate on what would be their needs in a mentoring relationship. Engaging a larger, more diverse sample may have been beneficial. Isolating diverse variables such as race, age, and sexual orientation may have provided additional information to enhance mentoring relationships.

### CONCLUSION

The graduate student–faculty relationship was viewed as a holistic approach that examined not only the graduate student’s academic progress but also their developmental process in the personal and professional domains. This preliminary research supported Olson and Ashton-Jones (1992) and Packard et al. (2004) in findings indicating that mentoring relationships were essential for academic success and that such relationships had become increasingly important for personal and professional development. Although this particular research considered doctoral students in a specific discipline, the findings may be helpful to any mentoring relationship.

“Mentoring relationships are typically intense, close, interactive and sometimes immensely complex” (Feist-Price, 1994, p. 13). They should be viewed as individualized, multifaceted, special relationships that involve both personal and professional components. Although the personal and professional domains are distinct, they are also interrelated and developmental. As the domains develop, professional growth and identity occur. This research indicated the importance of potential mentors taking more responsibility in initiating mentoring relationships. Mentees need to be challenged, supported, and guided through an often unknown journey that, in the end, will have helped define them personally and professionally. True mentors have variously filled the roles of confidants, professors, role models, and friends throughout the process and perhaps continuing after degree attainment. The developmental and professional growth that has emerged from positive and fulfilling mentoring relationships has proven through the years to be essential to career success and satisfaction.

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