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7-2019

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Ashley N. Greig

Winona State University, [agreig10@winona.edu](mailto:agreig10@winona.edu)

Barbara Holmes

Winona State University, [bholmes@winona.edu](mailto:bholmes@winona.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Greig, Ashley N. and Holmes, Barbara, "Impactful Mentoring of Women Graduate Students: Guiding the Development of Leadership Behaviors" (2019). *Leadership Education Capstones*. 23.

<https://openriver.winona.edu/leadershipeducationcapstones/23>

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# **Impactful Mentoring of Women Graduate Students: Guiding the Development of Leadership Behaviors**

**Ashley Greig, Winona State University, USA**

**Barbara Holmes, Winona State University, USA**

Women graduate students continue to express interest in developing as leaders and are looking to the university to provide support for this endeavor. In classroom discussions about leadership development, women graduate students indicate strong desire for professional mentoring for leadership development. Yet, there are no uniform ideas about what mentors should do or how mentors should support women graduate students. The need for mentoring is supported in the research literature. Bowling (2018) asserts that sustainable female leadership is best supported through mentorship. Bowling (2018) further explains that mentorship is a critical component of preparing women for the workplace and continued professional development.

Impactful mentorship is positive, mutual and reciprocal (Ragins, 2011). Ragins (2011) recognized that expertise fluidity among mentoring partners influences the quality of the mentoring relationship. Johnson and Smith (2018) contend that mentoring is not about rescuing women but is about building positive structures in which women can grow and thrive. The purpose of this study is to explore perspectives of women graduate students about what mentoring is needed to guide leadership development.

## **Literature Review**

While there is extant research on mentoring, there is little research on how mentoring impacts women graduate students. One reason may be that many women graduate students do not have mentors and may be unaware of just how critical mentoring is to career growth. Many women graduate students do not seek mentors because they may not know how to obtain one, are unable to connect with any faculty members within their program, no faculty members are interested or able to mentor, or the students feel that they do not need or want a mentor (Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney, 1997).

Individuals that have obtained a mentor report that having a mentor changed students' perceptions of the climate at the school (Kelly & Schweitzer, 1999). Those that had a mentor also tended to do better in school (Kelly & Schweitzer, 1999). However, mentors do not necessarily have to be faculty members, as graduate students could also gain reciprocal benefits from being a mentor to undergraduate students or other graduate students (Reddick, Griffin, & Cherwitz, 2011). The mentor and mentee would ideally learn additional skills from each other (Reddick, Griffin, & Cherwitz, 2011).

While each mentor brings a variety of knowledge to the mentoring relationship, the perception of the ideal mentor varied by age, gender, and citizenship (Rose, 2005). For example, international students tended to want a mentor that was culturally sensitive and patient; while

various age groups tended to view mentorships as less important the older they grew (Rose, 2005).

For impactful mentoring, having a system where mentors and mentees are matched based on needs and desired outcomes, compared to a mentor or mentee selecting their own individual, is important as it eliminates any biases (Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). In order to ensure mentor impact, research suggests that mentor and mentee relationships be monitored through an anonymous survey (Djerassi, 1999). Lastly, other mentors should be easily available if mentees want to change mentors (Djerassi, 1999).

### **The Many Forms of Mentoring**

Impactful mentoring seeks to provide sustainable support for women beyond one-time occurrences. This type of mentoring affects personal growth of individuals and provides role models throughout the organization. Management Mentors (2015) asserts that other types of mentoring include traditional one-on-one mentoring, resource-based mentoring, group mentoring, training-based mentoring, and executive mentoring. Traditional one-on-one mentoring, typically the most common approach to mentoring, is when one mentor is paired with one mentee through a formal program (Management Mentors, 2015). Resource-based mentoring occurs when mentees are provided a list of names of volunteer mentors and choose one to ask to be their mentor, which may lead to an insufficient number of mentors available (Management Mentors, 2015). Group mentoring, when a mentor works with multiple mentees at the same time, allows more individuals to be mentored, but is less personal than the other methods (Management Mentors, 2015). Training-based mentoring pairs a mentor and mentee together in order for mentees to learn specific skill sets that relates to the training program (Management Mentors, 2015). Lastly, executive mentoring paves the way for mentees to acquire executive level skills (Management Mentors, 2015).

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology for this study is grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR combines participation, action, and research. PAR is a methodology that encourages participants to reflect in order to understand a situation or concept, with the intent of trying to improve the situation (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). PAR promotes having participants involved throughout the research process and providing input on how to improve (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008).

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

For this study, twenty-five women graduate students from a southwest Minnesota university constituted the population for the study. Participants ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty years old. All but one of the participants enrolled in a graduate class focused on organizational leadership.

Participating students were administered a Qualtrics survey consisting of five questions. Participants were able to answer questions however they wished in a text box provided below the

specific questions. The survey was open for two weeks and nine participants voluntarily responded. Research questions guiding the study were:

Research Question #1: What behaviors are needed in professional mentoring?

Research Question #2: How can mentoring improve your professional development?

Research Question #3: How important is mentoring to your professional growth?

Research Question #4: What areas of leadership can a mentor help you with?

Research Question #5: How would you describe the ideal mentor?

## **Data Analysis**

The Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching explains that qualitative data consist of interpreting narrative text, pictures or observations. Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) enables the researcher to interpret and extract meaning from the data. Qualitative data analysis typically occurs simultaneously with the data collection. To discover themes within the participant responses, the responses were examined for any reoccurring words or expressed ideas. Reoccurring words were then highlighted in the same color for each reoccurring word. Those reoccurring words were then listed as the themes.

## **FINDINGS**

From the five questions asked in the survey, four themes appeared from the participant responses given.

### *Themes Formulated from Survey Data*

Theme	Theme Description	% of Participants Discussing Theme
Theme 1	Mentee Growth the Focus of Mentoring	100%
Theme 2	Mentoring Guided by Career Aspirations of Mentee	67%
Theme 3	Mentors Need High Communication Skills	67%
Theme 4	Mentors Model Leadership Behaviors	22%

### **Mentee Growth the Focus of Mentoring**

All nine participants discussed growth at one point throughout the survey. Growth appeared to be the main objective and end goal during a mentoring relationship.

### **Mentoring Guided by Career Aspirations of Mentee**

Six out of nine participants discussed their preference for a mentor that guided them based on their specific career aspirations.

### **Mentors Need High Communication Skills**

Six out of nine participants discussed the need for mentors to have high communication skills. These communication skills include the mentor being able to provide useful feedback and express knowledge to the mentee in a positive and productive way.

### **Mentors Model Leadership Behaviors**

Two out of nine participants indicated that mentors needed to model leadership behaviors.

### **Summary**

Survey responses indicated that participants viewed mentorship as important, as participants believed that mentors could help grow skills and knowledge. Responses suggested that the ideal mentor is one that communicates well, is knowledgeable on the subject at hand, has a genuine desire to be a mentor, and has the ability to help grow the mentee's skills.

### **Women Graduate Students' Perspectives on Mentoring**

Participant responses to the survey all discussed mentoring in a positive light. The only negative comment made was when one respondent indicated that "professional mentors can have a positive and/or negative influence" and that she can "learn from both."

Another respondent noted "With a well-rounded leadership mentor, it's much easier to grow individually to gauge and understand individual strengths and weaknesses. Mentoring can improve professional development by empowering individuals to identify their own leadership potential." Another respondent expressed a desire for the mentor to assist the mentee in matters regarding "work life balance, communication, dealing with difficult situations general organization understanding."

An additional respondent wanted a mentor to help the mentee in working with others, public speaking, reflection, and personal growth, and in achieving specific goals. It was also remarked that mentors need to help mentees gain situational awareness, suggest or provide career-growth opportunities, and help improve the mentee's soft skills. Lastly, participants concluded that having a mentor could also give the mentee more self-confidence.

Overall, survey respondents regarded mentoring as "very important for growth" and expressed how mentoring could prepare the mentee for leadership by allowing the mentee to learn and exhibit new leadership skills.

### **Desired Qualities in Mentors**

The survey responses indicated that women graduate students expressed a common theme when it came to listing their desired qualities in mentors. One respondent indicated that an ideal mentor would be "empathetic", a "great listener", and their "biggest supporter" while also "providing feedback", "being flexible", "and patient". Another respondent stated that, "The ideal mentor is someone who communicates their thoughts and expectations, holds you accountable, empowers individuals to explore their own leadership styles, and is honest even when the result may not be favorable." While another respondent stated that a mentor should be "someone who

leads and learns by example.” An additional respondent remarked that “The ideal mentor is down to earth, communicates well, respectful, honest, and has high levels of integrity. He/she must be a team player and be able to read people well. The ideal mentor knows how to lead an individual in the right direction and be able to grow a person to their full capacity.” Lastly, a respondent indicated that a mentor and mentee should seek to understand each other and be willing to exchange knowledge and help each other. “Understanding, good at giving instructions or suggestions, approachable, knowledgeable,” “Inspires others, committed, good communicator, accountability, delegation, creativity, honesty, and integrity,” “Personable, positive attitude, their work is meaningful, able to ask questions, help give me tools for success,” were also statements respondents expressed when asked how they would describe the ideal mentor.

The common themes explored in the above statements indicate that women graduate students’ desire mentors that are knowledgeable, supportive, personable, actively communicates, displays integrity, willing to help the mentee grow leadership skills, and are exemplary leaders.

### **Leadership Behaviors Women Graduate Students Want**

The survey found that women graduate students seek several leadership behaviors in professional mentoring. These behaviors include being empathetic, a good listener, supportive, accountable, positivity, personable, flexible, patience, knowledge, have a genuine interest in mentoring, and the ability to give honest feedback and guidance. These themes are very similar to the themes found when the respondents reported the qualities desired in a mentor.

### **Best Practices in Mentoring Women Leaders**

Several best practices emerge from the research on mentoring women leaders. As a best practice, mentors and mentees should collaborate to determine the specific objectives to be completed throughout the mentorship (Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008). One best practice is to not only give feedback to the mentee, but to also encourage the mentee to obtain feedback from their current department (Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008). The mentor could then review that feedback and make suggestions on how to improve, while also educating the mentee on a variety of subjects, such as leadership behaviors, leadership styles, and communication guidelines (Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008). Additionally, the mentor should also advise the mentee to seek formal educational opportunities, complete any organizational programs offered, and participate in any opportunities offered, such as international assignments (Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008). Lastly, mentors should encourage the mentee to network with organization and industry leaders, and assist the mentee in determining how to achieve career goals (Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Pomrenke (2010) summarized that impactful mentoring is essential to the success and career development of women graduate students. In a study of over a hundred graduate women, Pomrenke (2010) discovered that the majority of women graduate students reported a critical need for a mentor for not only academic direction but also emotional support. This current

inquiry also found that women graduate students are seeking intelligent direction and knowledgeable career guides.

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