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PAVING THE WAY TOWARD FACULTY CAREERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: STUDENT MENTORING RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCES WHILE COMPLETING DOCTORAL DEGREES ONLINE

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Paving the Way Toward Faculty Careers in Higher Education: Online Doctoral Student Mentoring Relationship Experiences

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored online doctoral degree graduates' mentoring experiences throughout their online degree programs and how these relationships prepared them for full-time, tenure-track employment in four-year, land-based institutions.

Key Words: online doctoral degrees; mentoring; e-mentoring; critical incident

Past research focusing on online doctoral programs in preparation for academic careers consistently revealed a perception that online doctoral degree programs lack opportunities for students to engage in social learning, mentoring, and submersion in the academic culture (i.e., Flowers & Baltzer, 2006; Good & Peca, 2007; Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009; DePriest, 2009). In addition, the value of mentoring within doctoral programs has been addressed in several empirical studies (i.e., Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006; Mullen, 2009; Hansman, 2012). However, little research has specifically attended to mentoring experiences of online doctoral students and their perceptions of how those experiences prepared them for tenure-track employment within four-year, land-based higher education institutions. The purpose of this study was to explore the existence and nature of mentoring relationships within online doctoral degree programs. Further, it explored how these relationships prepared online doctoral degree graduates for full-time, tenure-track employment in four-year, land-based higher education institutions. The following research questions guided this study: 1) How did graduates of online doctoral degree programs, currently employed as tenure-track faculty members at four-year land-based colleges or universities, experience mentoring while completing their online doctoral degree programs? 2) How did mentoring relationships prepare these graduates to become tenure-track faculty members in four-year, land-based colleges and universities? This topic holds significance for adult educators in that it explores the intersection of doctoral education, mentoring, social learning, and technology.

The study was informed by social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) as it explored the role and purpose of interpersonal mentoring relationships in supporting doctoral students and preparing them to serve as faculty in higher education. The research design employed basic interpretive qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews focusing on participants' critical mentoring episodes (Flanagan, 1954) to explore their experiences and perceptions. The lens through which findings were analyzed was social constructivism as doing so accounted for varied experiences and meaning making of individuals in their doctoral education mentoring relationships. The eight participants in this study reflected the profile of a typical online student (Singleton & Session, 2011) as they were non-traditional, mid-career professionals who already possessed a wealth of work experiences and contacts prior to their on-line doctoral degree program completion. In addition, over half the participants were already employed in higher education institutions when they began their programs, and many indicated they experienced socialization and community through their online programs, not only with their mentoring relationships internal to their degree-conferring institutions, but outside them as well.

Findings in this study suggested that meaningful and successful mentoring relationships

depended on the participants' knowledge to tap into their toolboxes of experiences and contacts, their abilities to seek out opportunities internally and externally for traditional and peer mentoring, and their willingness to proactively engage in social learning for degree completion as well as for their future career success. Based on the recommendations for practice, degree-conferring institutions could provide doctoral students with tools, technology, and knowledge to form peer mentoring relationships or develop cohort mentoring in which the faculty first initiates the mentoring formally, but peers also then facilitate learning.

Findings from this study could help online and land-based institutions adopting online doctoral degrees into their offerings better refine practices of communicating and mentoring at a distance. In addition, understanding the availability of mentoring in online doctoral programs will help prospective students craft questions regarding institutions and degree programs in which they may be interested. Ultimately, adult educators guiding online doctoral students may personally benefit from this discussion in helping them understand how they can be more proactive in helping students seek, build, and maintain mutually beneficial and rewarding mentoring relationships inside and outside their degree-conferring institutions. Future research should focus on best practices for integrating various forms of mentoring into online degree programs to benefit online students and leveraging multiple forms of technology to facilitate these relationships throughout degree completion as well as in preparation for tenure-track faculty employment.

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