FACULTY MENTORING AT A DISTANCE: COMING TOGETHER IN THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study explores how faculty in a virtual university experience the role of mentor working with doctoral students at a distance. This study uses faculty narratives to identify faculty actions that might be different from mentoring traditional doctoral students in a face to face program. In the new working adult universities, learners are not necessarily seeking initial careers through doctoral study but are enhancing established careers The study investigates the mentoring skills on line faculty bring to the virtual learning space and describes how a graduate faculty teaching in a virtual learning space perform the role of mentor.

Introduction

This case study investigates how faculty in a private distance education institution mentor adult mid career professional doctoral degree students. Faculty-student contact has been identified as a variable impacting persistence in campus based programs as well as distance education (Tello, 2003). A traditional definition of mentoring is that it is a process of interpersonal exchange between a faculty member and a learner, in which the mentor provides support, direction, and feedback as related to aspects of the mentee's professional, social and personal development (Schwiebert, 2000). The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the actions used by virtual mentors to support, direct, and encourage doctoral students.

This study investigated three research questions: What is the nature of the mentoring relationship in a virtual doctoral study environment for adult learners? What mentoring styles are found among virtual doctoral level faculty? What are the characteristics of a mentoring relationship for adult doctoral learners who have established careers and are enrolled in a virtual learning environment?

Mentoring in Higher Education

Faculty-student contact has been identified as a variable impacting persistence in campus based programs as well as distance education (Golde, 2002, Whitman, 1999). Most of the research in this area has focused on undergraduate education and has not considered the nature of faculty – learner contact at the graduate level. Research results with undergraduates have been inconsistent with regard to faculty initiated contact though trends indicated that faculty initiated contact had a greater impact on completion rates for students taking lower level courses (Towles, Ellis, & Spencer, 1993). In looking at systems to enhance the learning experience for the distance learner, Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992) supported the importance of effective interpersonal communications between faculty and students Thus communication between faculty and students seems to be an important variable in enhancing the learning experience.

Communication also plays an important role in the mentoring relationship. The specific duties of the mentor in a formal mentoring relationship are defined by the institution but the basic strategies are related to helping the learner locate resources, helping to navigate through the institutional policies and procedures, protecting the learner from making costly mistakes, and

active listening to the concerns and issues of the learner. However, in the distance learning space mentoring is too often equated with providing teaching and ways to enable the adult learner to better complete the instructional sequence (Whitman, 1999). Mentoring is crucial to success as a doctoral student (Golde, 2000). However, there is a lack of research on the effects of mentoring on faculty. Faculty are instrumental in building social integration, academic integration, and academic persistence. As on–line universities continue to attract adult learners and open access and availability, mentor actions will become more important in fostering learning and persistence in graduate education. Graduate education has been called a community of practice (Polin, 2004, Lincoln 2000) in which a primary role of the experience is to immerse students in the culture, norms, practices and relationships of the scholarship and the scholarly community. How are the values and norms of the academic community transmitted to doctoral students in the virtual campus? "Telementoring" allows faculty and adult learners to interact across space, time, and place dimensions (Guy 2002). However, it is possible that a mentor and adult learner may never meet face to face throughout the adult learner's entire academic career. Telementoring while having the potential to increase communication may also change the ways relationships are established, maintained, and implemented. The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the actions used by virtual mentors to support, direct, and encourage doctoral students.

Method and Procedures

This is a mixed methods study using a modified Principles of Adult Mentoring Scale (Cohen, 1995) as well as on-line interviews with distance learning faculty from an accredited distance learning university. The design used is characterized as Sequential Exploratory with the first phase collecting and analyzing quantitative data and the second phase on collecting and analyzing qualitative data. The integration occurs in the interpretation phase of the study. Equal priority was given to each of the data collection and analysis phases (Creswell, 2003).

Respondents: An email invitation was sent to all faculty at a distance learning institution. 48 faculty responded indicating an interest in the study. 25 faculty members completed all phases of the study including a mail questionnaire as well as an on-line focus group discussions conducted over a three week period. Follow up interviews were conducted with selected faculty. Faculty were distributed over the four schools of Education, Health and Human Services, Management and Psychology. 13 males and 12 females participated in the study. 21 of the faculty members have held positions at face to face institutions.

Instruments: The Principles of Adult Mentoring Scale (Cohen, 1995) was modified for use in the virtual environment. The 55 item scale uses a Likert Scale of Never to Always. An overall score is calculated with six subscales each of which identified a particular emphasis of the mentoring relationship: Relationship, Information, Facilitative, Confrontive, Mentor Model and Student Vision. Cohen provides a scoring matrix for the overall score and the six functions. Scores are measures of mentor and emphasis effectiveness.
The focus groups responded to three questions administered one per week over a three-week timeframe. The questions were: What is it like to mentor students in the distance environment? Describe strategies useful in mentoring students in the distance environment? Include feeling part of the academic community, fostering scholarly values, persistence.
How is it different mentoring new students from mentoring continuing students?

Findings

The Context for Mentoring

The faculty handbook from the distance university was examined for insights regarding the institutional view of mentoring. Mentoring is portrayed as a major responsibility and one which is linked to student retention and success. The 2003 catalogue describes the faculty mentor as "Facilitators, partners, coaches, and colleagues to their students and are the main source of guidance and support for students in doctoral programs. Faculty mentors also evaluate student work and performance. The University (sic) encourages students and faculty to foster the mentoring relationship equally. Students will gain the most from the relationship if the communicate frequently with their faculty mentor, solicit clarification from their mentor when ever necessary, and clearly articulate goals for their working relationship with the mentor" (p 30).

Mentors are assigned the tasks of: facilitating, guiding, and evaluating student learning and professional development, facilitating frequent and regular interactions with students at least twice per quarter, notifying students when they plan to be unavailable for longer than a week and arranging faculty coverage during their absence, as well as completing appropriate action on all materials received from students within ten working days. Mentors are also expected to respond to student inquiries within 24 hours.

From the institutional perspective mentoring is seen as a communicating, monitoring and evaluating process designed to be achieved in a collegial atmosphere. Mentors are selected by the program chair based on the academic, and practice interests of the adult learner and the availability of the mentor to work with students. Mentors usually come from the face to face university and may maintain employment with both a face to face as well as the distance university. While all faculty who wish to teach on-line must complete an extensive training program in both the design and conduct of on-line instruction, the institution does not provide any guidance on how to mentor in an on-line environment.

Virtual Mentoring Scale.

The overall score for all participants was 199.54 (sd = 32.61) which was scored by Cohen as Less Effective. The Median Score was 206 which was scored as Effective. There was no difference between the male and female respondents (t(25) = 0.17, ns). There was no relationship between time mentoring on-line and the overall score (= 0.156, ns); however, there was a moderate inverse relationship between total mentoring score and time mentoring in a campus program (= -0.277). It appears that the more time served as a mentor in a land university the lower the virtual mentoring score.

Table 1: Scores on the Virtual Mentoring Scale

	Relationship	Information	Facilitative	Confrontive	Mentor Model	Student Vision	TOTAL
STDEV	6.133786	6.398437	4.015802	9.166424	4.552289	7.393691	32.60276
Mean	38.20535	35.49594	21.88063	41.12666	22.34209	40.69575	199.5441
Median	39	38	24	42	22	43	206

Using the scale developed by Cohen (1995), a qualitative meaning may be given to each mean. The overall mean of 199.54 is viewed as being less effective in the mentor role. The factor of

relationship emphasis was defined by Cohen to mean conveying understanding and acceptance of the feelings of the student and creating a positive psychological climate for sharing. For this function, the overall score of 38.21 was also seen as being less effective.

The factor of information emphasis refers to ensuring that advice is based of accurate and sufficient knowledge and requesting that information from mentees. For this factor, the mean of 35.50 was seen as being less effective. The third factor, facilitative focus, is a focus on guiding mentees by reviewing interests, ideas, and abilities and assisting them in considering alternatives. The mean of 21.88 is seen as being in the effective range.

Confrontive focus refers to a respectful challenge of issues or lack of decision making relating to their education. The mean of 41.13 is in the less effective range. The Mentor Model is the sharing of oneself with the mentee which enhances the relationship. The mean of 22.34 is in the effective range. Student Vision relates to encouraging critical thinking as it relates to professional and personal development. The mean of 40.70 is in the less effective range. Faculty mentors seem to have skill in challenging role and in modeling the skills necessary to be a scholar. This would seem to be consistent with the roles performed in land based settings.

The mentor in the Instructor role- facilitative role

Mentoring is providing basic skills for learning in a technological space
The focus group interviews seemed to concentrate on the theme of the mentor as instructor and coach. Mentoring adult students in the distance environment seemed to revolve around diagnosing their instructional needs in the skills of learning on line. One faculty mentor expresses the frustration over the role of providing basic instruction in on line learning skills. While another faculty member sees mentoring as helping students deal with the newness of the technological space.

I spend a great deal of time (majority) training and helping graduate adult students set up email, using word, formatting a page, sending attachments. Basic computer bits and pieces. In a sense it is a waste of my time…really not in a faculty mentor's realm.

Many new students (doctoral) do not understand technology to the degree one would assume when registering for an on line degree. This continues to surprise me. But, I have learned that they often think the only means of communication will be through email. They often do not think about the many ways technology can be used at a distance….they must deal with the" newness of technology or sometimes their fear of it.

Mentoring is assisting adult learners to acculturate to an on line environment.
Other faculty mentors seen to find that their role is one of helping adult learners adopt the culture and norms of learning on line and adapting to the on line learning space

It is a huge emotional shift from the face to face relationship with a class and a professor to using primarily email and discussion. It feels much colder and less connected. It is sometimes difficult to get them invested in the courses as it is in face to face environments. This is a culture that students need to be acculturated to… they are not comfortable with or sometimes not competent with the technology and they have trouble making the emotional shift

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

In traditional face to face programs mentors often play the role of providing social support, collegial relationships, as well as providing guidance on professional roles and behavior (Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, Hill, 2003) yet in the on line environment, mentoring seems to be more about helping adult learners adjust and learn in virtual spaces. The emphasis on observing and participating in the scholarly work of the professoriate is de-emphasized in favor of career advancement (Maynard and Furlong, 1995). If a goal of graduate education is to develop a community of practice among on-line graduate students, then working to move the focus of mentoring to community building and developing a professional identification should be considered with working adults. Our finding of the moderate inverse relationship between time mentoring in the face-to-face environment and the total score on the mentoring scale may relate to negative transfer between mentoring skills learned in the face-to-face environment and those needed for the on-line environment. Institutions mentoring on-line may need to look at faculty development related to on-line mentoring skills when mentoring working adults.

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