

You Should—I Should: Mentoring Responsibilities as Perceived by Faculty, Alumni, and Students

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research
Association, San Francisco, 2006

Abstract

What do students and faculty say that they and each other should do to create an effective mentoring relationship? A collaborative team of eleven students, five alumni, and three faculty members interviewed multiple members of their constituency in a distributed learning doctoral program to find the answers. We used a stratified sampling frame that included gender, race, length of time in the program or graduation date, geographic location, and mentor to randomly select 20 percent of the students and 15 percent of the alumni to interview. Half of the 20 faculty members were randomly selected based on gender, race, and length of time working in the program. Student researchers interviewed 41 respondents (78 percent of the sample), alumni researchers interviewed 15 graduates (75% of the sample), and three faculty members interviewed 10 of their assigned colleagues (100% of the sample). Respondents spoke more readily about the responsibilities of mentors than of mentees. Overall, 62 percent of the respondents emphasized the mentors' communication responsibility, followed closely by mentees' communication responsibility (58%). The next most frequently mentioned enhancements all targeted areas of faculty responsibility: assist the student academically (48%), provide social-emotional support (36%), have certain positive attributes (32%), and work to establish a good relationship (32%). Only approximately a quarter of the respondents focused on student enhancements other than communication: bring positive personal attributes (29%), establish a good relationship (27%), engage academically (24%), and engage social-emotionally (21%). Areas of agreement and disagreement led to suggestions of ways that faculty and students can foster their interactions. Differences between the findings from the distributed learning setting that was the locus of the study and traditional universities suggest that mentoring researchers need to pay increased attention to the context of the setting, the type of students, and the particular respondent. (Twenty-nine references are included.)

Introduction

“In a distance program, people could feel isolated and not supported. I feel in distance learning, the mentor makes the difference.” (student)

The rapid growth of distance learning programs is opening academic doors for individuals who live far from a university and/or who do not have the time to spend on campus. The most recent statistics available from the National Center for Educational Statistics, school year 2000-2001, indicated that 2,320 colleges and universities or 56 percent of all postsecondary institutions offered online learning, and another 12 percent planned to develop courses. Online availability included 1,240 institutions that offered graduate/first professional degree programs designed solely for online completion. In the field of education, currently, students seeking a graduate degree can choose from 140 regionally accredited fully online programs, a number that is up 45 percent from last year (USNews.com, 2006). All indications are that online instruction will continue to increase.

While distance learning offers many individuals a new route to education, it can be a difficult path to academic success. It requires a high degree of self-direction, and students in the virtual environment frequently feel isolated, frustrated, and alienated (Abrahamson, 1998; Hudson, 2002; Stein & Glazer, 2003). One potentially helpful solution comes from the growing literature showing that mentoring benefits undergraduate and graduate students in distance learning, as well as students on campus (Boser, 2003; Gordon, Edwards, Brown et al., 2005; Kelly & Schweitzer, 1999; Stein & Glazer, 2003; Zeeb, 2000). In order to continue to build understanding of how mentoring can enhance learning at a distance, in this paper, we focus on ways to enhance the mentoring relationship at a distributed learning university.

The vast majority of research on mentoring relationships in higher education has been conducted in brick and mortar institutions. Researchers have examined such topics as the prevalence of mentoring (Busch, 1985; Harris, 2002; Lyons & Scroggins, 1990), the impact of mentoring (Campbell & Campbell, 2002; Cronan-Hillix, Gensheimer, Cronan-Hillix, & Davidson, 1986; LeCluyse, Tollefson, & Borgers, 1985), the components of the relationship (Busch, 1985; Harris, 2002; Jacobi, 1991; O'Neil & Wrightsman, 2001), and the roles of mentors and/or mentees (Busch, 1985; Hager, 2003; Harris, 2002). We found only one study by Stein and Glazer (2003) that, in addition to our own work (Gordon, Edwards, Brown et al., 2005), investigated the characteristics of successful mentoring of graduate students online. In addition, while one may intuit effective mentoring practices from some of the work cited above, exactly what mentors and mentees can do to enhance the relationship has not been a direct focus of the research. It was our goal in this study to gather this information.

A common understanding about academic mentoring relationships is that they are reciprocal in nature (e.g., Jacobi, 1991; Lyons & Scroggins, 1990; O'Neil, 1981; Wilde & Schau, 1991). Despite this perception, information about the relationship has largely been gathered from either mentors (Busch, 1985; Stein, 1981) or mentees (Bruce, 1995; Harris, 2002; Lyons & Scroggins, 1990; Stein & Glazer, 1983; Wilde & Schau, 1991). Campbell and Campbell (2000), who examined undergraduate-mentor dyads, and Hager (2003), who examined doctoral student-mentor dyads, reported that mentors and mentees had different impressions of some aspects of the relationship. In order to ensure a balanced understanding of the relationship, therefore, it appears that both mentors' and mentees' perceptions are necessary.

Several researchers have noted that the mentoring relationship changes over time. For example, O'Neil and Wrightsman (1982) found that the relationship moves through stages in which the parameters of the relationship change. Changes in mentoring have been explored in other settings (Kram, 1983; Shockett, Yoshimura, Beyard-Tyler, & Haring, 1983), yet not in graduate education. In their deliberate decision to study students mid-way in their doctoral studies because this period is an especially difficult time in the path to their degree, Stein and Glazer (2003) appeared to imply that at least mentoring needs may change over time. If differences in mentoring needs throughout a graduate program can be more clearly articulated, it may be possible to structure mentoring programs to be more helpful to students.

When we designed this study to examine the ways mentors and mentees can develop and maintain an effective relationship, we tried to account for some of the gaps in available information by gathering information from both sides of the relationship and by analyzing the data from the perspective of students who were in the beginning of the program, who were working on their dissertation, and who were recently graduated. We hope our study also will be useful in helping to sort out the aspects of graduate school mentoring that are universal and those, if any, that are unique for students learning at a distance.

Method

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the similarities and differences in perception of the roles of mentor and mentee in a virtual mentoring relationship, we conducted semi-structured interviews with students, faculty, and alumni at a private distributed learning institution. Heeding Hager's (2003) warning of interviewees' reluctance to provide relationship information to someone outside their own group, faculty interviewed faculty, alumni interviewed alumni, and students interviewed students.

Setting

The setting for this study was the School of Educational Leadership and Change (ELC) at Fielding Graduate University, a distributed learning university with offices located in Santa Barbara, California. ELC enrolls mature students from around the world who typically are well established in a career and are working full-time while earning their degree. The program requires a lot of self-directed, independent study.

During the site-based orientation session, every student chooses a "mentor," which is the official faculty title. Although students and mentors have occasional opportunities for face-to-face meetings, they work primarily via telephone and email to negotiate contracts for and work on courses called "Knowledge Areas" (KAs), which are akin to independent studies in more traditional universities. A mentor and mentee work together on one or two of the eight required KAs, consult about the questions for the student's comprehensive essays, and work on the student's dissertation, for which the

mentor is Committee Chair. The majority of students retain the mentor they chose originally through graduation. While every student has an official “mentor,” faculty members acknowledge that their role is to “mentor” all students.

ELC’s mentoring program is relatively successful (Gordon, Edwards, Brown et al., 2005). Students in the program reported that their mean number of effective mentoring relationships was 3.5 ($SD = 3.5$). Alumni reported an even higher effective mentoring relationship mean of 5.1 ($SD = 3.0$). Information from the same individuals, who are described below, is analyzed for this paper. Based on the high percentages of successful mentoring relationships they experienced, the students and alumni were well positioned to state what mentors and mentees should do to increase the effectiveness of a mentoring relationship.

Study Respondents

At the time the sample was drawn, ELC enrolled 255 doctoral students and had graduated 127 EdD recipients. We used a stratified sampling frame that included gender, race, length of time in the program or graduation date, geographic location, and mentor to randomly select 20 percent of the students and 15 percent of the alumni to interview. Half of the 20 faculty members were randomly selected based on gender, race, and length of time working in the program.

Student researchers interviewed 41 respondents, who represented 78 percent of the sample that was selected. Alumni researchers interviewed 15 graduates, which was 75 percent of the alumni sampled. Three faculty members interviewed all 10 of their assigned colleagues. Each sample group was representative of its constituency as a whole. For the student sample, the ethnicity was: Black, 37 percent; Caucasian, 37 percent; American Indian, 13 percent; Hispanic, 5 percent; Asian, 5 percent; and unknown, 3 percent. Sixty-three percent of the respondents were female. Their mentors included all members of the mentoring faculty. A third of the students reported that they had not started their dissertations, while several had just completed writing theirs.

The ethnicity of the alumni sample was: Black, 58 percent; Caucasian, 29 percent; Hispanic, 7 percent; and Asian, 7 percent. Eighty-six percent were female. The alumni had graduated in every year from 1998 through 2003. They spent from just over two to five years to obtain their degrees. Their mentors included all but two of the available faculty.

Half of the 10 faculty members who participated in the interviews were female, and 40 percent were Caucasian. These characteristics represented the faculty as a whole.

To begin the interviews, the interviewers asked the interviewees if they felt that they had had an effective mentoring relationship in the program, and if so, to describe the relationship in detail. Interviewees were also asked to describe how the relationship changed over time. In this paper, we focus on the next question, which concerned the roles of each member of the relationship. Students and alumnae were asked:

Looking from the beginning of your relationship to how it progressed over time, what did you do and what did the faculty member do to make it effective?

Because faculty members mentored many students, the wording of this question for faculty was changed. Faculty members were asked two questions:

What do you feel a student should do to make a mentoring relationship effective?
What do you feel a faculty member should do to make a mentoring relationship effective?

Data Analysis

To analyze the interviews, we used open coding to explore themes and relationships arising from the data (Glaser, 1965). With the use of ATLAS.ti software, the responses of each constituency to the question or questions were coded into thought segments that specified an action a mentor or mentee might take to enhance the mentoring relationship. Thought segments were then combined into sub-themes and themes, or families. Themes were developed from all of the respondents' statements, regardless of which constituency contributed the information. The coding and themes were checked repeatedly to determine that each one had integrity. Groupings were based on relevance to promising practices. For example, we felt that comments that the mentor should have background knowledge should not be subsumed, despite the fact that only three people mentioned it. In this coding process, some themes were collapsed and some added. The primary author did the initial coding, and the second author checked the theme appropriateness and confirmed that the response segments were aligned within each theme. Both authors agreed upon the changes.

A given individual may have made several statements about the same theme. In the analysis, regardless of the number of statements an individual made, the respondent is only listed once in the category. Our analysis, therefore, is based on the number of individuals who made one or more statements about a given responsibility. Faculty responses were compared with those of the alumni and students. In addition, responses from beginning students, and students at the dissertation stage and alumni were compared.

Overall, 66 respondents commented on ways to make an effective relationship. When we looked at the perspectives from the individual constituencies, while our sample of students was 41, our samples of 10 faculty and 15 alumni were small. Of course, this means that if percentages are compared, a difference in a single respondent makes a large percentage difference. Nevertheless, in order to give the reader an indication of the relative numbers of individuals responding to a given category, to help point out what appear to be meaningful differences, and/or to indicate the relative weight of a theme for a particular constituency, we have included some percentages in our analysis. While frequency of response is important because it can show like-mindedness, we are also mindful that the respondents' recommendations are spontaneous, not their reactions to a

common set of activities. A single individual or small group may have beneficial ideas that are worthy of further study. For this reason, relevant recommendations made by only a few individuals are noted.

Results

The ways in which mentors and mentees said they enhanced their relationship clustered in five themes that were similar for mentor and mentee: beneficial personal attributes, prerequisites to establishing a good relationship, social-emotional interactions (guidance for mentors, engagement for mentees), academic interactions (guidance for mentors and engagement for students) and communication. Communication enhancements were most frequently recommended. Overall, 62 percent of the respondents emphasized the mentors' communication responsibility, followed closely by mentees' communication responsibility (58%). The next most frequently mentioned enhancements all targeted areas of faculty responsibility: assist the student academically (48%), provide social-emotional support (36%), have certain positive attributes (32%), and work to establish a good relationship (32%). Only approximately a quarter of the respondents focused on student enhancements other than communication: bring positive personal attributes (29%), establish a good relationship (27%), engage academically (24%), and engage social-emotionally (21%).

In the analysis that follows, we examine the enhancements recommended for the mentor and then the mentee for each of the themes. The analysis starts with the attributes that faculty, students, and alumni felt the mentor and mentee should bring to the relationship, followed by the responsibilities they suggested for initiating and then effectively carrying out the relationship.

Mentor and Mentee Attributes

In their spontaneous responses about ways that mentors and mentees could enhance the mentoring relationship, many respondents mentioned a number of positive attitudes and personal characteristics that they wanted the partners to bring to the relationship.

Mentor attributes.

The mentor attribute that all three groups (alumni, 26%; faculty, 50%; students, 22%) most emphasized was the need for faculty members to be committed to helping the students and to truly caring for them. This attribute is exemplified by the faculty member who said, "Exude a profound interest in the mentee as a person, scholar, and professional. . . . This is not just my job; I care about you." An alumna observed that her mentor "was committed to providing service," and a student appreciated the fact that his mentor was "willing to accept and understand what I was working on and where I wanted to go." Only one or two members of each constituency mentioned other faculty attributes. These were the need for faculty to have extensive background knowledge and the need for faculty to hold high academic standards.

Mentee attributes.

The attributes that mentees should bring to the mentoring relationship, according to the respondents, were being open to receiving guidance from the mentor and having integrity (i.e., honesty, engagement, etc.). In addition to many faculty members (60%) mentioning the need for mentees to be open to guidance, the depth of their comments stressed the importance to them of students accepting this responsibility. This emphasis may be seen in this exemplary comment: “The most important thing is that the mentee makes a conscious decision that they will engage in a mentoring relationship and therefore makes a decision to trust the person and that they will be open to feedback.” Approximately a quarter of the alumni also mentioned the need for students to be willing to accept guidance, yet few students thought to mention this quality. One alumna explained, “For a mentoring relationship to be effective, the mentee must also be willing, able, and prepared to accept the guidance. Going into it, I wanted guidance. If I know everything, I am not going to learn. It is only when they help me to get better that I will improve. I must be willing to be able to accept.”

Small numbers of respondents also suggested other mentee attributes. These included personal integrity, being respectful and responsible, and doing high quality work.

Actions for Establishing an Effective Relationship

Alumni, students, and faculty highlighted the need to get the mentoring relationship off to a good start by suggesting actions that mentors and mentees could take to establish the relationship. From the suggestions below, it can be seen that the respondents believed that the mentor and mentee were mutually responsible for discussing guidelines for the mentoring relationship and making sure that they as individuals were compatible.

Mentor actions for establishing an effective relationship.

While 32 percent of the respondents overall mentioned actions that mentors should take in order to establish an effective relationship, this topic was important to 50 percent of the faculty. Faculty members indicated that it was vital for mentors to be knowledgeable about the mentee, build trust, and establish a mutual understanding about their relationship. Two typical comments were, “Stretch beyond your specialty to find out more about the mentee’s intellectual and research interests. This way, the mentor is not just friend and advocate but a kind of information and referral resource to their mentee,” and “Establish good trust and communication right away.” Faculty respondents noted, “They and we both need to figure out more what [mentoring] means in a distance environment.”

Students echoed the desire for their mentors to “know the student from the onset of the relationship” and to “remember what is important to me.” They also wanted to be

in a trusting relationship, and they wanted to have a “good fit” with the mentor. A few alumni also recommended having complementary “working styles.”

Mentee actions for establishing an effective relationship.

Twenty-seven percent of the respondents recommended ways for the mentee to establish an effective relationship. They noted that it was helpful for mentees to get to know the mentor, trust the mentoring relationship, establish a mutual understanding about their relationship, and make sure that their personalities matched. Faculty who wanted students to trust the mentoring relationship made comments such as, “Trust themselves and their ability to be in a relationship that is mutually beneficial.”

An alumna articulated the mutual benefits from establishing rules: “Once you establish the rules and make them clear from the beginning (what you want to accomplish from having this person as a mentor, what resources this person has, and how you are going to make it work), then you are in a better position. This went both ways. Once we had an understanding, the person did his job and did it well.”

Students also focused on the importance of having a standard agreement in place for the mentoring process. Interestingly, they were the only group that discussed the importance of mentees getting to know their mentors. The rationale was, “[Mentees should] know their mentors better, what makes each other tick, grow, and learn, for if you don’t know what they expect of you, then you may not achieve it.”

Mentors and Mentees Working Together Academically

As would be expected in a doctoral program, a relatively large percentage (48%) of the respondents mentioned ways that the mentors should engage academically with their mentees. Faculty members were most vocal with regard to mentor (70%) and mentee responsibilities in this area (70%), whereas alumni and students focused more on mentor responsibilities and less on student responsibilities (alumni, 40% vs. 13%; students, 46% vs. 17 %).

Strategies for mentors to assist students academically.

In their comments about how mentors support students academically, faculty emphasized ways to keep the student progressing. One faculty member said, “I insist that my mentees do their first KA with me so that I can see what strengths and challenges they have or familiarize them with our procedures and expectations.” Another focused more specifically on how guidance might work. He said, “Faculty should ask questions to them so they are stimulated to keep working hard.” Both faculty and students also mentioned faculty responsibility for critical feedback. The importance of this responsibility can be seen from the student who said, “My mentor could be more direct with me about what I was and wasn't doing.” Three students suggested that mentors should grant students autonomy, which one described as, “Always let me know that I have choices, and I am in the driver’s seat.”

Strategies for mentees to engage academically.

A much higher percentage of faculty (70%) than students (17%) or alumni (13%) placed responsibility for academic engagement on the mentee. As one faculty member stated, “Students have to have the will to be open and to respond to feedback.” An alumna elaborated on the mentee’s responsibility for engagement and how it was beneficial. She said, “I could ask questions. We could consider choices and think about it. I started asking a lot more questions and becoming more involved in my own program.”

Several members of each group discussed the need for faculty and students to engage in intellectual dialogue. A student summed up her role by saying,

I wasn't afraid to ask questions. I had something to offer the relationship. For instance, I would ask her, “Have you thought about this?” I wasn't afraid to “push the envelope” with her, and she was the same way with me. She respected what I “brought to the table,” and vice-versa. We would challenge each other.

In addition to the responsibility to engage in intellectual dialogue, some faculty and students also noted that mentees have the responsibility to participate fully in the program by taking advantage of all of the meetings and services that are available.

Responsibilities for Providing Social-Emotional Support and Building the Relationship

The respondents in this study made a number of recommendations in the area of social-emotional support. Mentor responsibilities, however, focused on providing social-emotional support for the mentees, encouraging and empowering them, and building a positive relationship, while mentee responsibilities focused on building a positive relationship.

Strategies for mentors to provide social-emotional support.

Members of all three constituencies noted the responsibility of mentors to build positive relationships with the mentees and to empower and encourage them. A high proportion of the faculty (70%) assigned themselves this responsibility, and approximately a third of the students and alumni agreed. Besides the frequency of mention, the importance of mentor leadership social-emotionally can be seen from the intensity of faculty comments. “The faculty member has to be prepared to be both critical and clinical, to recognize rifts and tears and scars in the student’s socialization.” The extent to which at least some faculty members saw this responsibility may be seen from the faculty member who recommended, “Take notice of personal things— birth, death, to sympathize and be with them. I even went to a funeral once of a family member, and it was greatly appreciated.”

The benefits of social-emotional support for mentees can be seen in the enthusiastic response of the student who reported, “My mentor is unbelievable. She calls me for no particular reason, just to encourage me,” and an alumna who commented, “The faculty member I am speaking of believed in me in a way that others did not. She believed in what I could accomplish and made me know that I could finish this program. She encouraged me to the point that I believed in myself.”

Strategies for mentees to build the relationship.

Faculty (40%) and alumni (47%), more frequently than students (7%), noted that the mentee bore responsibility to engage in and build the relationship with the mentor. As an alumna pointed out, “The relationship is two-sided. Mentee and mentor must work together.” In addition, a student confirmed, “You need to build a learning relationship with your mentor.” An alumna indicated both steps to make this happen and the positive outcome: “[Take] time to visit at [the annual national meeting] and other gatherings providing informal meetings. That really helped to build a sense of trust and build the relationship.”

Communication Responsibilities

The most frequently mentioned suggestions for enhancing the mentoring relationship dealt with improving communication. High percentages of faculty, alumni, and students mentioned the importance of both mentors and mentees communicating with each other in order to have an effective mentoring relationship. For the mentor, this meant being available to the mentee, being willing to communicate, and using effective communication techniques. For the mentee, this involved being proactive in seeking out communication opportunities with the mentor (i.e., returning phone calls and emails, contacting the mentor when needed, etc.), being willing to communicate, and using effective communication techniques.

Mentor responsibilities for communicating.

Sixty-two percent of the respondents mentioned the mentor’s responsibility for communicating with the mentee. The importance of this role to faculty can be seen by the fact that 80 percent of them specifically noted that mentors should be available to students. The extent and depth of two faculty responses exemplify the mentors’ understanding of just how critical contact is: “Responding to mentees in a timely fashion is very important and makes for a good mentoring relationship, not only in writing, but returning a telephone call, keeping an appointment, and if I have to break one, to reschedule. I really think it has meant a lot.” Another faculty said:

A lot of times, if somebody needs to be doing something, just the sound of the faculty member's voice kind of initiates thinking about what it is [the student is] supposed to be doing. You don't need to do a negative value-added. Just say, “How are you doing? How is your family? How is that thing we were talking about? What is going on with your kid at school?” They will just start blurting

out, “I didn't do this.” You don't have to make that the focus—just the fact that you are reaching out and establishing contact. Reconnect to the process. In this kind of learning environment, it's easy to put stuff down and get caught up in the demands of your life, and its weeks before you've touched it.

A large percentage of alumnae (66%) and students (56%) also remarked about the importance of contact. A third of the alumnae used the word, “available,” when discussing the mentor’s role. They also talked about the effective communication strategies that the mentor used: “She would ask deep, probing questions.” “The faculty member was an active listener; she listened with intent.”

Students discussed the benefits of being in frequent contact with their mentors and expressed appreciation for what frequent contact could bring. As one student remarked, “It was like an open door. The door was open, and I went in, and things were accomplished.” Another student noted, “I was doing a KA, and I hadn't really done anything with the KA in a little while . . . but then it got back-burnered. . . . The faculty member called me from thousands of miles away and didn't even ask me about the KA. ‘I haven't heard from you. How are you,’ and that meant so much.” A third student summarized, “I think effective communication on both parts [is important], and the comfort zone of the individuals, which automatically leads to bonding. Once you bond with an individual, you feel comfortable with them, and you can communicate effectively any time. The communication is very important.”

Mentee responsibilities for communicating.

As indicated by the last quote, communication involves both partners. Study respondents noted this, with high percentages of each constituency commenting not only on the mentor’s responsibility for communicating, but on the mentee’s responsibility, as well. A full 90 percent of the faculty specified that the mentee has the responsibility for being proactive and seeking out opportunities for contact. They recommended, “Just step up and do her part or do his part. The main thing is just to maintain the pattern of contact. That is the student's responsibility,” and “They need to ask for things if they are getting a doctorate, because in academia, they have to get out of us what we have to give by asking questions and being persistent.” A student who agreed that mentees should be proactive urged them to “be aggressive about getting your needs met.” Respondents also recommended that mentees enhance communication by returning phone calls and emails, asking questions, and communicating information about themselves.

Perceptions of the Mentoring Relationship Over Time

In order to look at changes in perceptions of the mentor-mentee responsibility over time, we divided the student respondents into those who had not yet started their dissertation (n=14) and those who were working on their dissertation (n=27). To see if perceptions changed with completion of the degree, we also compared recent alumni. To determine whether perceptions changed over time for each of the themes, we compared the recommendations of beginning students, dissertation students, and alumni.

For the most part, little difference existed between the groups. At the same time, a pattern in the data suggested that students working on their dissertations feel in particular need of faculty contact. Compared with students earlier in their academic careers, a higher percentage of dissertation writers noted the need for faculty to be committed to helping them and assisting them academically. A higher percentage of dissertation writers also wanted faculty to be empowering them, encouraging them, and building positive relationships with them, as well as being available to them and communicating with them. In addition, dissertation writers focused on the student role in helping to establish a good mentoring relationship and noted the importance of students engaging academically.

The alumni were more like the dissertation writers than the beginning students in their responses, except they more frequently mentioned that students should be open to guidance and should be proactive in communicating and seeking communication.

Discussion

The emphasis that our mentors and mentees put on enhancing communication, though it does not appear in the literature where mentors meet face-to-face, has support in other studies of distance learning. Abrahamson (1998) found that students in distance education like having personal contact with instructors. Hamilton-Jones (2000) discovered that students working on an in-house distance learning degree who received a great deal of help from tutor mentors were most successful, and Single and Single (2005) reported that protégés who were randomly assigned to receive weekly coaching messages were more satisfied than those who were randomly assigned to receive biweekly messages. The availability of the mentor appears to be the key factor, although mentors and mentees acknowledged that both partners have responsibility for enhancing the relationship.

What is not known is why mentors and mentees put such an emphasis on communication. Do distance learners, because of their relative isolation, need more contact? Can less be accomplished in online interactions than face-to-face, and/or does involvement in the electronic medium and its instant messaging set up expectations that site-based groups do not have? Additional research will be required to determine the cause(s).

Findings focusing on social-emotional concerns stood out as a group and underpinned what was expressed in prerequisites for an effective relationship with a depth of expression that gave added meaning. Again, the findings are similar to Stein and Glazer's (2003) study. They looked at the mentoring of doctoral students in a course-based program and an independent study program. Their students suggested three largely psychosocial actions that they felt the mentors could take, which were being responsive to the learner's needs, reassuring students that they can progress, and respecting students'

life situations. We are inclined to support Stein and Glazer's conclusion: "Mentoring [online] has less to do with developing in the learner subject matter expertise. It is more about providing guidance on becoming a scholar, expressing support for the learner, advocating for learner success and persistence, and mutually establishing roles and relationships" (p. 21). These findings, however, are not unique to distance learning programs. Psychosocial aspects of mentoring have been found to be important in undergraduate education (Harris, 2002; Jacobi, 1991), as well as doctoral education (Bruce, 1995; Hager, 2003). One of the difficulties in making comparisons here is that the terminology used for this concept varies from researcher to researcher. For example, Harris discussed personal support, Hager used acceptance and confirmation, counseling and friendship, and we discuss empowering and encouraging, and building positive relationships. While we may all be in the same "ball park," it is not clear whether the boundaries and composition of the park are similar for all researchers. We need to become more consistent across researchers in our definitions. Only when we do this will we be able to determine whether real differences exist between our studies, and if so, whether the differences are due to the learning environment, the mentoring relationship, and/or characteristics of the students.

In the area of academic guidance, mentors and alums placed emphasis on the mentees being proactive. Mentors suggested that mentees should engage academically, participate fully in the program, and engage in intellectual dialogue in order to benefit from the relationship. Harris (2002) also used open-ended items to examine undergraduate junior and senior psychology majors' perceptions of mentor and mentee roles. The five most frequent roles that students assigned to mentors were guidance, encouragement, advising, teaching, and listening. The most frequent roles that students assigned to the mentee were listening, questioning, following advice, and accepting suggestions, followed by learning and openness. While in our study, we found similar roles for the mentor, Harris' data did not indicate the proactive stance that our respondents assigned to mentees. This may be due to our students being doctoral students and older vs. her students being younger and undergraduates, and/or it could be due to the distance vs. campus learning environment.

We found some indications that students at different stages of their academic career have different perceptions of what is needed to enhance the mentoring relationship. Students at the dissertation stage wanted more contact with their mentors than students not at the dissertation stage. Longitudinal studies comparing mentee needs at different points in time would help to confirm these findings and uncover key changes in students' needs that might be anticipated ahead of time to facilitate steady progress toward degree completion.

Our findings also support Campbell and Campbell's (2000) and Hager's (2003) findings that mentors and mentees have different perceptions of the relationship. We recommend that researchers continue to ask both members of the partnership about the relationship and not rely on mentor or mentee alone.

Except for communication enhancements, all three constituencies assigned mentors more responsibilities for enhancing the relationship than the mentees. In addition, especially in the beginning, mentees were not viewed as being proactive. These findings suggest that mentors have an important leadership role, especially at the beginning of the partnership, to get to know the whole student, to discuss the relationship, and to build the desired trusting relationship.

At the same time, the respondents saw both partners as having a part in enhancing the relationship. The recommendations to examine the mentor-mentee match and to establish a compatible working relationship might make use of the mentoring approach that Leaver and Oxford (2000) found helped graduate teaching assistants to be more successful. They found that teaching assistants were more successful when mentors paid attention to such individual differences as the mentees' preferred learning style, personality type, and biorhythms. Research that focuses on the match of mentee and mentor styles might provide ways to increase mentoring success rates and/or enable partners to develop effective relationships more rapidly.

Several authors have called for training programs for mentors (e.g., Hansford, Ehrich, & Tennent, 2004). While we agree that mentors can benefit from training, our findings also indicate that given the benefits of an effective mentoring relationship, that it takes time and effort to start a new relationship, and that many of the mentoring enhancements and expectations can be readily learned, we recommend that institutions provide time for entering students as well as faculty to learn about and discuss their and their partner's mentoring responsibilities.

The interviewees spontaneously generated comments to answer our research question. The fact that one individual mentioned a particular responsibility and another did not leaves open the question of the importance of the comment to the second person. Further research should be undertaken to determine the priorities that different constituencies place on the responsibilities that are recommended.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings suggest that in order to enhance their mentoring relationship, it would be beneficial for mentors and mentees to take the following actions:

Mentors.

- Be committed to assisting mentees and caring for their individual needs
- Bring a high level of background knowledge to the relationship, and hold high academic standards
- Consciously build trust with the mentee, and be knowledgeable about the mentee

- Make sure that the personalities of mentor and mentee match, and establish a mutual understanding about the relationship at the outset
- Guide the mentee, provide honest, critical feedback, and give the mentee autonomy
- Build positive relationships with students by empowering and encouraging them, believing in them, and expressing interest in their personal and professional lives
- Be available for communicating with the mentee, and use effective communication strategies
- Take major responsibility for enhancing the relationship

Mentees

- Be open to accepting guidance from the mentor, and trust the mentoring relationship and the mentor
- Have personal integrity in the relationship
- Make sure that the personalities of the mentor and mentee match, get to know the mentor on a personal basis, and establish a mutual understanding about the relationship at the outset
- Engage academically with the mentor, which includes participating fully in the program and engaging in intellectual dialogue
- Be proactive in seeking out opportunities to communicate with the mentor, and use effective communication strategies

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