

# Mentor-Mentee Relationship in an Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at Lynn University

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## Introduction

Lynn University embraces the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) initiative, signature pedagogies and the development of scholarly practitioners. In response to the evolution of educational leadership, Lynn University values the need for doctoral candidates to understand the group process and to be able to work within a diverse group with differing strengths to deconstruct problems of practice. The goal is to prepare doctoral candidates to become scholarly practitioners and to learn how to be transformational educational leaders for the 21st century. Centered on the researched interests surrounding the needs of 21st educational leaders, a cohort of 11 Ed.D. students at Lynn University produced a comprehensive literature review and a doctoral informational iBook, concluding with writing two publishable research articles and an executive summary as part of their Dissertation in Practice (DiP). A key process in supporting the doctoral candidates is the role of the mentor and critical friends through the process of the DiP. This is even more vital when a group chooses to embark on a shared DiP. Critical friends (Reardon & Shakeshaft, 2013) help guide the process, model leadership skills and provide feedback for those pursuing this terminal leadership degree. The relationships developed during this process inspire and encourage life-long collaboration. Exploring the role of the mentor and mentee through the non-traditional dissertation along with doctoral coursework provides a framework for rethinking best practices in higher education Ed.D. programs. Through the experiences during the doctoral coursework and dissertation process, mentees return what is learned from their mentors and critical friends to a variety of settings.

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this action research study is to focus on the mentor-mentee relationships through a CPED DiP (Perry, 2012) at Lynn University.

### Problem Statement

CPED values the role of mentors through the process of pursuing the doctorate. The six principles of CPED state that the professional doctorate in education:

1. Is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice.
2. Prepares leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities.
3. Provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships.
4. Provides field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions.
5. Is grounded in and develops a professional knowledge base that integrates both practice and research knowledge, that links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry.
6. Emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice (Perry, 2010).

Embedded within the six guiding principles of CPED is the need for strong mentoring partnerships between critical friends. Sawyer & Mason (2012), along with Perry (2012) believe that earning an Ed.D. from a CPED institution should not end at graduation, but should inspire graduates to stay connected with the consortium and the universities from which they graduated. When the mentorship relationship is established, faculty advisors and dissertation chairs play important roles for students, even after graduation (Noy & Rashawn, 2012). Solidifying the mentor-mentee relationship throughout the doctorate encourages doctoral candidates to mentor future leaders once they complete the program.

### Research Questions

1. What is the mentor-mentee relationship between the dissertation chair and doctoral candidates in a group DiP at Lynn University?
2. What is the mentor-mentee relationship between the critical friends and the doctoral candidates in a group DiP at Lynn University?

3. How can the mentor relationships established during an Ed.D. program inspire doctoral candidates to mentor future doctoral students at Lynn University?

### Literature Review

Faculty advisors act as mentors and guides for doctoral candidates through the process of completing a doctorate. "The strength of the teaching and learning environment is fostered by a dynamic interplay between the mentor (scholar) and the mentee (student)" (Zipp, Chaill & Clark, 2009, p. 29). Dissertation chairs provide mentorship to doctoral candidates on many levels, from teaching critical thinking skills to writing letters of recommendation. They encourage, nudge and critique the work of students as they acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to become change agents in the field of education. Frequently faculty advisors will network for mentees and help support the development of scholarship and publication, using their connections to help further the careers of doctoral candidates they mentor. "Good mentors lead students on a journey that forever changes the way in which they think and act" (Pinto Zipp & Olson, 2008, p. 10).

A unique component of a CPED DiP involves using critical friends to support and empower scholarly practitioners by providing informed critiques and analyses of processes and practices (Swaffield, 2005). Critical friends view themselves as mentors and realize that learning requires constant feedback (Senge, 1990). This assessment feedback provides a clear vision about the learning performance in the eyes of the learner (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Critical friends build trust with the educator(s), listen well and honestly evaluate the work with the utmost integrity. By asking meaningful and thought-provoking questions, critical friends provide essential feedback to an individual or a group of people. During the dissertation process a critical friend also examines various types of data. Critical friends allow individuals to reflect and re-assess their current beliefs and practices in order to improve their craft, providing a powerful tool during the DiP.

### Methodology

Lynn University, located in Boca Raton, Florida, is a private university drawing from a large pool of international students. The university offers an Ed.D. program and is a member of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). The Ed.D. program at Lynn University has groups of small cohorts ranging in size from 10-15 students who stay together through the coursework. Currently there are six professors and approximately 60 doctoral students enrolled in the program. The participants in this study are the 11 members of Cohort 5.

A survey was created to elicit responses from these 11 doctoral candidates regarding their views of the mentor-mentee relationships established while attending the doctoral program. Three open-ended questions allowed the participants to respond in an unguided and authentic fashion. The survey was posted using Google surveys, thus allowing anonymous responses. The survey questions are:

1. From your perspective, how is the mentor-mentee relationship established between the dissertation chair and the doctoral student at Lynn University?

2. From your perspective, how does the dissertation chair mentor the doctoral student at Lynn University?

3. From your perspective, what is the purpose and role of critical friend(s) in the mentor-mentee relationship for the Dissertation in Practice (DiP) process at Lynn University?

After receiving responses from the survey the data were analyzed to determine the significance of the relationship between the dissertation chair/critical friends and doctoral candidates on the DiP process and on future practices, specifically looking at the responses for patterns, themes and discrepancies.

### Findings

Although there are 11 members in the cohort, only 10 were able to respond because the 11th was the research for this study. The 10 possible members that could respond, replied to the survey within the deadline given for submission. Survey responses were provided anonymously using Google forms. Time stamps ensured that members responded within allotted time.

The respondents understood and valued the role of the dissertation chair and critical friends in the mentoring process through a DiP. In response to the first question about how the mentor-mentee relationship is established between the dissertation chair and the doctoral student, their answers were consistent. All 10 participants felt that the relationship started as a connection established through the coursework. Three respondents also noted the dissertation chair also established the relationship through the interview and during the orientation before classes started. Seven commented the dissertation chair identified within the first few classes that she would chair each of the dissertations. One member of the cohort responded it was the relationship established through coursework that built the confidence and trust in the chair. Another member mentioned that a doctoral student could determine his/her chair by his/her connection to the mentor and his/her "ability to guide and inform the mentee in the subject of interest." The dissertation chair ensured each student felt comfortable, had her contact information and showed she was truly interested and available.

Overall, based on the first question, the mentor-mentee relationship between dissertation chair and doctoral student was established early in the program, if not before the program began. Students in Cohort 5 felt that the dissertation chair was welcoming and helpful throughout the DiP process. The dissertation chair showed by actions that the best interest of the students was the priority. The first class of the doctoral experience solidified the relationship between the dissertation chair and the students in Cohort 5.

The next question explored responses as to how the dissertation chair mentored the doctoral students at Lynn University. A consistent response was that the dissertation chair mentors doctoral students throughout the process of writing the dissertation. Six responded that the chair was easily accessible by e-mail, phone and in person to help guide and answer questions. Additionally, respondents felt that the dissertation chair held the student accountable to the process and stayed true to the content. Availability and "nudging" throughout the process were important to the respondents when discussing the dissertation chair and the role the chair played in the process of mentoring.

One respondent stated the dissertation chair "offered guidance, support, motivation, coaching and timely feedback." This was echoed by most of the respondents as important to the mentoring process through the dissertation. What is clear is that through the relationship students establish during the process, this helps to guide the mentor-mentee relationship through the dissertation. Seven respondents commented that establishing trust was important, the dissertation chair acted as a guide, and was a litmus test to accountability. The dissertation chair made sure people in the program stayed the course, fulfilled obligations and kept moving forward. Additionally, three respondents stated the dissertation chair also acted as a feeder for articles and additional information to supplement information provided in class. The relationship-building established rapport with all members in the cohort and continued to cultivate leadership characteristics for members of the cohort. Ten respondents wrote that the mentoring practices that guided the dissertation along helped to establish best practices in leadership.

The survey also looked at the role of the critical friend as presented by the CPED model to the dissertation process. Respondents viewed critical friends as people who already hold doctoral degrees and who can support candidates through the doctoral process. One respondent stated that the critical friend "is responsible for clearly communicating the expectations of the University for the requirements and the completion of the Dissertation in Practice." Another respondent stated that critical friends offer "guidance through the process with honest and concise, constructive feedback." Seven of the participants cited the critical friend as someone who provides a supplemental view to the dissertation chair, allowing for additional insights to strength the DiP. One respondent felt, "a critical friend acts as a buffer with the dissertation chair if necessary." The critical friend is honest and provides authentic feedback throughout the process and keeps the DiP on track. All Cohort 5 members felt the critical friends were invaluable in supporting them through coursework and the DiP.

## Conclusions

Looking at the mentor-mentee relationship through a DiP at Lynn University helps future professors understand the importance of this relationship. The dissertation chair, along with the doctoral students, believe that the role is critical throughout the whole dissertation process and begins at the beginning of the program, if not before, during the interview process. The cohort members and dissertation chair under-

stood and valued the role in the mentor-mentee relationship. Solidifying this relationship helps during the DiP and carries over to coursework and mentoring outside of the doctoral program. The cohort members enjoyed this process and believed it to be a key component to success.

The doctoral program in educational leadership at Lynn University works to the degree that all cohort members are supported. The doctoral program supports the view that community building is necessary for all members to succeed, and for all members to grow and excel. Students take with them the ability to practice these community building skills, problem-solving together, and with the understanding that until all voices are heard, we will not learn. The realization that we have an obligation to use each other's experience, and to do each other's critiquing, fosters the ability to model what a learning community ought to be.

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