



Faculty and Student Online Mentoring Preferences

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Abstract

Isolation of online doctoral students intensifies when they transition from coursework to the dissertation/capstone phase, limiting them to interacting with their mentors. A three-round modified Delphi study was conducted to examine mentoring preferences of online doctoral students and faculty. The first round provided qualitative data regarding the preferred mentoring practices for faculty and alumni. Round 1 qualitative data were organized into Likert questions and used in the second round, which resulted in data about frequency of mentoring practices for the same participants from Round 1. The third round provided data about importance of each preference rated by faculty and current students. Findings indicated a dichotomy was present in that mentees' academic self-esteem appeared to be tied to faculty being responsive. Faculty emphasized mentee autonomy while mentees wanted frequent contact with faculty.

Keywords: *online doctoral mentoring, dissertation, Delphi method*

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Introduction

The doctoral mentoring literature includes many studies about how online doctoral students should be mentored (e.g., Byrnes et al., 2019; Pollard & Kramar, 2021) with no consensus. Conceptually, mentorship is a mutual and interdependent relationship to achieve the desired outcomes. The mentee side of mentoring preferences is the missing link in the literature. In the current modified Delphi study, we attempted to reach faculty and alumni consensus on the responses to questions related to their experiences and preferences for the online mentoring. The literature identified several key factors that we used as the basis of the first round of qualitative questions.

Literature Review

Relational Mentoring

The first factor identified in the literature was relational mentoring, which included mutual and interdependent relationships using, “relational processes (e.g., reciprocity, mutual learning, and growth), interpersonal attributes (e.g., sensitivity, empathy, compassion, empowerment), and future-oriented developmental relationships (e.g., life satisfaction, balance, integration of conflicting roles)” (Li et al., 2018, p. 7). This relationship takes time, skills, and resources to build, due to the uniquely different needs, expectations, and perceptions (Akojie et al., 2019; Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006) of the individuals involved.

Akojie et al. (2019) found that nontraditional mentees (such as in online doctoral education) have a different support system from full-time on-campus students and noted that these students valued interaction with peers and instructors, perceiving these relations to be a very important support system. According to Zygouris-Coe and Roberts (2019), the role of a doctoral faculty (mentor) is to actively engage and socialize their mentees in various forms of collaboration with the scholarly professional community. It was noted that when both mentors and mentees took on relational responsibilities, the mentoring dialogue became a jointly transformative process that helped build positive learning climates, produce a supportive atmosphere that provided a sense of community, and allow for identity development within this educational community (Akojie et al., 2019; Zygouris-Coe & Roberts, 2019).

Psychosocial Development

The second factor was the mentees’ psychosocial development (Kumar & Johnson, 2017). This area focused on the emotional and social support for academic development. Kumar and Johnson (2017) identified the following key elements in this area: providing structure, group mentoring, using multiple means of communication, providing examples of dissertations, and providing feedback.

A strategy recommended by Kumar and Johnson (2017; also see Stadtlander, 2021) included use of synchronous sessions to group students based on their research interests or practice thereby creating supportive networks, collaborating, and sharing drafts of chapters for peer feedback. Using synchronous and asynchronous communication was considered a best practice as well. Additionally, providing prompt, timely, and constructive feedback to the student via track changes and student reciprocation and acceptance of criticism was helpful. Mentors found it helpful to share high-quality dissertation examples that fit the **student’s research topic and another for research design. The exemplar would demonstrate what would be expected of the dissertation students.** Being flexible and available to student needs and schedules were essential to their success because the average student will have, for example, different work schedules and family commitments. Finally, individualizing the process, reassurance, guidance, support, and encouragement were pertinent to the mentoring process (Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

The impact of pursuing a doctoral degree has demonstrated significant influence on students' mental health (Torres et al., 2021). For example, in a study (Liu et al., 2019) of 325 traditional-age doctoral students, 23.7% of participants showed signs of depression and 20% demonstrated signs of anxiety. The doctoral student participants indicated they were often plagued with (a) feeling a sense of stress, worry, and urgency concerning writing and publishing papers; (b) receiving financial support; (c) managing relations with faculty; and (d) planning for future employment. Further, during this time in adulthood, students may also choose to marry or raise children, which adds to additional stress and anxiety during their doctoral program (Cannon et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019). In contrast, online doctoral students are often older than traditional age, are employed, and may be caring for elderly parents as well as children (Jiang & Koo, 2020). This unique population has characteristics and circumstances requiring additional educational and psychosocial needs from their mentors.

Faculty Expertise

The third factor that we incorporated in our study is faculty's methodological expertise and knowledge about the content area. Previous research on mentoring has typically assumed that the mentoring faculty member has the requisite research skills and mentoring confidence, which logically may not always be the case. **Faculty mentoring in the United States has tended to follow the medical training model: "see one, do one, teach one."** This model may not be the best fit for the interpersonal and variable skills needed in research mentoring. A wide variety of skills is required of faculty in order to supervise and mentor students through the doctoral dissertation experience, including research expertise. The issue of faculty expertise particularly related to statistics, research methods, and research mentoring has been a concern to faculty and administration in multiple disciplines. Enlisting faculty for doctoral dissertation supervision who are competent in the mentoring and supervision of statistics and research methods is also necessary in order to facilitate evidence-based thinking and practice, particularly in the hard sciences, health, and behavioral sciences (Hassad, 2010).

Faculty may not have conducted any research since their own doctoral dissertation/thesis or may have a limited methodological background (Stadtlander et al., 2013). In a study of 236 online faculty from 38 institutions across the United States, Stadtlander et al. (2013) found that 40% of faculty with a PhD, currently working with Masters and Doctoral level students, reported not conducting their own research in the past two years. This suggests that these faculty members may be lacking confidence or be deficient in the requisite research skills to mentor students successfully through a doctoral dissertation. Yet often the only requirement for research mentoring is a willingness to do so; bringing into question whether the faculty member has an adequate skill base to mentor successfully.

There has been very little research explicitly examining the content or knowledge expertise of dissertation **mentors. In Crisp and Cruz's (2009) review of literature between 1990 and 2007, they suggested** one of the four latent constructs that are present in a mentoring relationship is academic subject knowledge support **aimed at advancing the mentee's disciplinary knowledge (e.g., helping the mentee acquire necessary skills and knowledge; educating, evaluating, and challenging the mentee; establishing a teaching-learning process; intervening on behalf of the mentee; providing visibility; taking blame and shielding from negative publicity; supporting the mentee's dream; Jaeger et al., 2011). Schichtel (2010) listed six competencies needed by an e-mentor, one of which was cognitive competence, which is the level of expert knowledge that is not only resident within the mentor but conveyed to the learner (Andrews, 2016).**

Communication

The fourth factor we explored was communication; the importance of communication between mentors and mentees has been well documented in the literature related to mentoring relationships. However, there is a need to more thoroughly understand the patterns of mentoring communication that occur within doctoral mentor/mentee interactions, particularly in an online setting (Byrnes et al., 2019; Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

The importance of the preference, tone, and intention of communications is an important consideration when dealing with diverse populations of students (Harris & Lee, 2019). In other words, how the communication occurs is just as important, if not more so, than the message being shared, particularly for students of color (Howard, 2017).

A recent literature review in this area (Pollard & Kumar, 2021) suggested that a challenge when mentoring students online is the potential for miscommunication and reduction of information exchanged during online interactions due to lack of social presence, the loss of non-verbal cues, and the one-way nature of asynchronous communication (Duffy et al., 2018; Kumar & Johnson, 2017, 2019; Lechuga, 2011; Ross & Sheail, 2017). Faculty mentors and their graduate students may feel anxious about the online relationship and less connected because of the absence of social presence within textual communication, and this may impede their ability to form a strong mentoring relationship (Sussex, 2008). Gathering additional insights into the communication tendencies and patterns among faculty and students, as in the current study, would aid in finding strategies that would be effective in supporting successful mentor/mentee relationships.

Motivation

Finally, we examined the role of motivation in the capstone process. Online doctoral mentees experience isolation, especially at the dissertation/capstone phase, when they start working only with their mentors (Stadtlander, 2021). Online doctoral mentees report that it is very easy to feel disconnected and lose motivation. When their mentors are the only connection and support system, the relationships between the mentees and their mentors become more important, especially for the mentees who are extrinsically motivated. Such mentees have reported needing more structure and support from external factors (Jameson & Torres, 2019). Mentors who are available for questions and provide timely and constructive feedback are perceived as more supportive and therefore more highly motivating (Kumar et al., 2013). Structured and timely communication with the mentors and peers improves the motivation of online doctoral students. Peer support helps students feel connected and stay motivated while meeting deadlines (Kumar et al., 2013).

Anekstein and Vereen (2018) suggested that the relationship and communication between the chair and **student often influence how competent the student perceives the chair to be. The chair's competency can motivate a student until the student's competency is equal to the task of completing the doctoral study** (Jameson & Torres, 2019; Muirhead & Metros, 2016). In the current modified Delphi study, we explored, especially during the third round, these areas of interest to examine the opinions and experiences of both faculty and doctoral mentees as to the areas they perceive as important for the capstone process.

Research Questions

Research questions for the current study focused on consensus about doctoral mentoring practices experienced by the students and the faculty from Round 3.

1. **What are the faculty's consensus rankings of their preferences/beliefs about mentoring?**
2. **What are alumni's/current mentees' consensus rankings of their preferences/beliefs about faculty mentoring?**
3. How do faculty and current mentees consensus rankings relate?

Methods

Study Design

The Delphi method has proven to be a reliable measurement instrument in developing new concepts and setting the direction of future-orientated research (Rowe & Wright, 1999). The technique seeks the opinion of a group of experts to assess the extent of agreement on an issue (Jones & Hunter, 1995) and to establish consensus across a range of subject areas (Vogel et al., 2019). Delphi studies may show variations, differing in administration procedures (Custer, et al., 1999), number of surveying rounds, data collection mechanisms (NgọcQuyên, 2014), or data analysis techniques. This is often called a modified Delphi method (Hsu & Sandford, 2010).

This three-round modified Delphi study examined the experience of doctoral mentoring through the expertise of experienced online doctoral faculty and alumni/current students. The first two rounds of data collection were conducted with the same faculty ($n = 8$) and doctoral alumni expert participants ($n = 12$). To recruit faculty, we placed **advertisements in the university's weekly faculty newsletter, as well as on the principal investigators' social media pages. Inclusion criteria for faculty were that they had mentored** doctoral mentees for at least 5 years and had graduated at least 3 mentees. Doctoral alumni were required to have graduated in the past 5 years and were recruited through social media and snowball sampling. For the third round, surveys were open to current students who had received institutional review board (IRB) approval with their proposal and additional faculty members with the same inclusion criteria used in Rounds 1 and 2.

In Round 1, based upon the literature, two separate survey series were developed and posted on SurveyMonkey. The faculty survey included eight demographic and 16 open-ended questions (e.g., How do you keep mentees motivated while they are working on their capstone? What are the most important factors that are needed from the committee for a student to succeed?). The **alumni's Round 2** survey had seven demographic and 13 open-ended questions (e.g., What are the 3 main outside factors (e.g., chair, family, student advisor, time, finances) that motivated you to complete the capstone? What resources from within the university were the most helpful while you were working on your capstone?). The questions addressed **motivational techniques and support practices with faculty, as well as the participants' definitions of** mentoring.

Following the first qualitative round, we analyzed data to create a list of statements and asked mentees and faculty to report how frequently they used them. Quantitative Likert surveys were completed by the same participants in Round 2. The survey consisted of 71 frequency of practice questions for faculty and 45 questions for alumni. The Round 2 participants were sent the link and completed the surveys posted on SurveyMonkey. Response data were ranked by the most to least frequent items (example of high frequency item: *I keep mentees motivated by providing timely, actionable feedback*. Low frequency: *I keep mentees motivated by finding ways to collaborate with mentees*).

After two rounds, a modification to the traditional Delphi method was used due to the small number of participants during first two rounds, to increase generalizability. A third round was conducted with online university faculty and current students. Faculty were recruited using the same methods as for Rounds 1 and 2. Doctoral students, who had at least received IRB approval, were recruited through a notice placed in their capstone classroom. In the third round, questions were restructured in Likert format as important to not important for 26 faculty and 208 students. In this round, students and faculty were asked to rate the importance of mentoring practices/preferences that they identified using frequently in the second round. For **example, "Rate the importance of each item as ways your committee has influenced your study's method section" for students. Similarly for faculty "How important are the following items in influencing your mentees"?**

Data Analysis

We used descriptive **statistics to describe participants’ demographic characteristics (see Table 1) and group responses to each statement in all three rounds.** The final data set from Round 3 was examined using percentages. The statements were separated into three groups depending on the percent agreement. For the **“most important” group the consensus was defined as >90% of participants agreeing/strongly agreeing with a statement in Round 3.** This level of agreement has been considered appropriate in previous Delphi studies (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004; Vogel et al., 2019). In the **“least important” group,** we defined consensus as <10% of participants disagreeing/strongly disagreeing with a statement in Round 3. All other statements that were not any of **these two groups were classified as “moderately important.”**

Table 1. *Study Demographics*

	Round 1 & 2 Faculty <i>n</i> = 8	Round 1 & 2 Alumni <i>n</i> = 15	Round 3 Faculty <i>n</i> = 26	Round 3 Doctoral Students <i>n</i> = 208
Gender				
Male	1 (12.5%)	2 (13.3%)	5 (19.2%)	65 (30%)
Female	7 (87.5%)	8 (53.3%)	21 (80.8%)	149 (68.7%)
Prefer not to answer	0	5 (33.3%)		2 (0.9%)
Mean Age in yrs.	57.88 yrs (<i>SD</i> = 9.2)	52.7 yrs (<i>SD</i> = 10.6)	61.4 yrs (<i>SD</i> = 11.2)	48.8 yrs (<i>SD</i> = 10.7)
Race				
Caucasian	6 (75%)	5 (33.3%)	22 (84.6%)	68 (31.3%)
African American	1 (12.5%)	5 (33.3%)	0	68 (31.3%)
Hispanic/Latino	0	0	3 (11.5%)	19 (8.8%)
Native American	0	0	0	1 (0.5%)
Other	1 (12.5%)	0	0	22 (10.1%)
Choose not to say	0	5 (33.3%)	1 (3.8%)	6 (2.8)
Faculty only				
Years at institution			5 yrs (<i>SD</i> = 1.6)	
Years as doctoral mentor	4 yrs (<i>SD</i> = 0.76)		4.6yrs (<i>SD</i> = 1.1)	
Number of capstone students	2.8 (<i>SD</i> = 1.1)		3.4 (<i>SD</i> = 1.6)	
Students only				
Are you employed				
Part time				26 (12%)
Full time				174 (80.2%)
Student only				16 (7.4%)
Stage of Dissertation				
IRB				7 (3.4%)
Data collection				49 (23.9%)
Data analysis				34 (16.6%)
Chapter 4				25 (12.2%)
Chapter 5				14 (6.8%)
Final stages				76 (37.1%)

Results

The results are based upon the importance ratings of statements first generated in the earlier rounds by both faculty and students in Round 3 of the modified Delphi study. This section is organized by faculty responses, student responses, and those items that allow for a direct comparison of the two groups' **responses**.

Faculty

Helping Students Succeed. Table 2 summarizes items that were rated important to least important from a faculty perspective in helping students succeed. The most important items tended to be task oriented (providing feedback and resources), while the moderately important items were more relationship focused (e.g., talking to mentees, respecting their experience). The least important items tended to be those related to teaching (e.g., monitoring of the classroom).

Table 2. *Faculty Perspective: Helping Students Succeed (n = 26)*

Most Important
Timely, specific, and applicable feedback (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)
Having a good knowledge of resources (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)
Working together as a team (<i>n</i> = 25; 96.2%)
Having a consistent objective attitude (<i>n</i> = 25; 96.2%)
Offering specific strategies to succeed (<i>n</i> = 25; 96.2%)
Using track changes and comments (<i>n</i> = 24; 92.3%)
Keeping them accountable (<i>n</i> = 24; 92.3%)
Asking probing questions (<i>n</i> = 24; 92.3%)
Suggesting the multiple supports offered by university (<i>n</i> = 24; 92.3%)
Moderately Important
Utilizing methodology resources (<i>n</i> = 23; 88.5%)
Being available to talk to mentees (<i>n</i> = 23; 88.5%)
Being easily accessible (<i>n</i> = 21; 80.8%)
Respecting their experience, expertise, and life circumstances (<i>n</i> = 21; 80.8%)
Least Important
Frequent monitoring of the classroom (<i>n</i> = 6; 23.1%)
Facilitating a group video conference meeting (<i>n</i> = 10; 38.5%)

Influence by Faculty. A related topic, how faculty reported they influenced mentees, is shown in Table 3. Faculty used practical, immediate tasks to influence their mentees, while motivation techniques were ranked as least important.

Table 3. *Ways Faculty Influence Mentees*

Important
Showing respect for the individual ($n = 26$; 100%)
Providing resources ($n = 25$, 96.2%)
Reminding mentees that patience is needed with the review of numerous drafts ($n = 25$; 96.2%)
Listening ($n = 25$; 96.2%)
Not giving up on mentees ($n = 24$; 92.3%)
Moderately important
Validating mentees own sources of motivation ($n = 22$; 84.6%)
Being specific in ways that their research will contribute to the field ($n = 21$; 80.8%)
Discussing different perspectives ($n = 19$; 73.1%)
Reminding mentees of their goals for their career ($n = 17$; 65.4%)
Least important
Reminding mentees that I have been where they are to ease their stress ($n = 6$; 23.1%)
Reminding mentees of their goals for their career ($n = 5$; 19.2%)
Motivating mentees through phone calls ($n = 4$; 15.4%)

Communication. Faculty indicated forms of communication with students depended on mentee preference (phone, text, email, chat, digital meetings; $n = 23$; 88.5%), or using email ($n = 22$; 84.6%)

Proposal Completion. The capstone proposal consists of the first three chapters of the final report: Chapter 1 is Introduction, Chapter 2 is Literature Review, and Chapter 3 is Methods. Faculty members detailed what specific support helped students successfully complete their proposal such as timely actionable feedback ($n = 26$; 100%), realistic encouragement ($n = 24$; 96%), offering suggestions and helping mentees when they are stuck ($n = 24$; 96%), ensuring that mentees meet all the requirements ($n = 24$; 96%). Continued use of principles established during prospectus stage ($n = 23$; 92%), use of additional supports as needed (doctoral specialist/advisor, writing center, methodologists, remedial courses; ($n = 23$; 92%), relating progress to their goals ($n = 23$; 92%), and developing logic and support for the project ($n = 23$; 92%).

Final Stage of Capstone. The final stage of the capstone consists of Chapter 4 Results and Chapter 5 Interpretation. When asked what help was needed for the final stage of the capstone, faculty expressed that mentees needed constructive feedback ($n = 26$; 100%) and help finding the best way to present their data and findings ($n = 24$; 96%). In the areas of expanding interpretation of findings ($n = 23$; 92%), faculty expressed the importance of reviewing mentees’ data analysis with them ($n = 23$; 92%) and making sure mentees used university resources like the Form & Style Guide ($n = 23$; 92%). Of note in both the proposal and final stage, faculty did not mention community building or motivation of students.

Students

Student data were analyzed in a similar manner to the faculty data. We created groups using the same criteria, **“most important” >90% agreement, “least important” <10% disagreement, and “moderately important”** (where < 90% of the students agreed/strongly agreed and >10% of the students did not disagree/strongly disagree).

Capstone Resources. As shown in Table 4, students considered their chair and second committee member the most important resources in completing their capstone. The many resources available from the university

were considered the least important.

Table 4. *Student Perspective: Capstone Resources*

Most Important
Their dissertation chair (<i>n</i> = 195; 97%)
Their second committee member (<i>n</i> = 155; 77%)
Least Important
University Webinars (<i>n</i> = 64; 32.2%)
Academic Advisor (<i>n</i> = 54; 27.2%)
Doctoral Specialist (<i>n</i> = 47; 23.3%)
Writing Center (<i>n</i> = 36; 18.3%)

Communication. Students (*n* = 191; 94%) indicated that email was the most important communication tool. Students also indicated that some communication tools were not important including Blackboard (i.e., classroom; *n* = 48; 23.80%), texting (*n* = 57; 28.70%), video conferencing (GoToMeeting, Skype, or Zoom; *n* = 45; 22.30%) and phone (*n* = 21; 10.40%).

Feeling Valued. As shown in Table 5, students appeared to feel most valued when they communicated with their committee.

Table 5. *Student Views on Feeling Valued*

Most Important
When my committee listens to me (<i>n</i> = 188; 93.1%)
My committee gives me feedback (<i>n</i> = 195; 96.5%)
Moderately Important
When my chair is encouraging (<i>n</i> = 179; 88.6%)
When my committee shows me that my thoughts matter (<i>n</i> = 175; 86.6%)
When my committee respects my professional experience in my study area (<i>n</i> = 171, 84.7%)
When the committee thanks me for my thoughts, comments and input (<i>n</i> = 152, 75.2%)
Least Important
If my committee invited me to write in professional journals and seek publications (<i>n</i> = 32; 15.8%)

Committee Support. Students were asked about what support they received from their committee that led to their capstone success. They indicated that having their committee available to assist with formulating their ideas (*n* = 167; 82.7%), being their biggest cheerleader (*n* = 151; 74.8%), and pushing them to complete their dissertation (*n* = 161; 79.9%) were seen as moderately important support from the committee.

Comparison of Faculty and Students Responses

In this final section, we compare the topics that were similar for both faculty and students.

Methods of Motivation. As shown in Table 6, for both faculty and students, the most important motivational technique reported was timely feedback. Students felt that the committee being accessible was important. Faculty found posting weekly announcements and recognizing reasons for individual students obtaining their doctorate was the least important for motivating the mentees. Having the faculty provide

timely, actionable feedback was important for both groups. Seeing the student as a developing scholar was moderately important for both groups. Several self-motivation statements were seen for students in the most and moderately important areas (e.g., Wanting to prove to myself I could do it).

Table 6. *Comparison: Methods of Motivation*

Faculty (<i>n</i> = 26)	Student (<i>n</i> = 202)
Most Important	Most Important
Providing timely, actionable feedback that helps them improve (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	My committee providing timely feedback (<i>n</i> = 196; 97%)
Building a positive working relationship with them (<i>n</i> = 25; 96.2%)	My committee being accessible when I needed them (<i>n</i> = 193; 95.5%)
Allowing autonomy in their work with accountability (<i>n</i> = 24; 92.3%)	Remembering all the work that had been accomplished to that point (<i>n</i> = 191; 94.6%)
	Being aware of the time I was investing in my education (<i>n</i> = 184; 91.1%)
	Being aware of the money I was investing in my education (<i>n</i> = 184; 91.1%)
	Wanting to prove to myself I could do it (<i>n</i> = 84; 91.1%)
Moderately Important	Moderately Important
Finding ways to collaborate with them (<i>n</i> = 23; 88.5%)	Reminding myself that quitting was never an option (<i>n</i> = 179; 88.6%)
Providing flexibility in how we work together and communicate (<i>n</i> = 23; 88.5%)	Setting short term goals (<i>n</i> = 178; 88.1%)
Acknowledging challenges and success as a path toward mastery (<i>n</i> = 23; 88.5%)	Strong desire to engage in research in my chosen field (<i>n</i> = 178; 88.1%)
Treating mentees as colleagues who are developing skills for scholarly success (<i>n</i> = 22; 84.6%)	Support from my family (<i>n</i> = 165; 81.7%)
Acting as a cheerleader for them (<i>n</i> = 19; 73.1%)	Taking the capstone one day at a time (<i>n</i> = 157; 77.7%)
Recognizing the individual's reason for acquiring a doctorate (<i>n</i> = 17; 65.4%)	Thinking of myself as an expert and a scholar practitioner (<i>n</i> = 153; 75.7%)
Contacting mentees regularly via calls, texts, emails or skype (<i>n</i> = 22; 84.6%)	Prayers and faith (<i>n</i> = 152; 75.2%)
Using learner-centered strategies (<i>n</i> = 21; 80.8%)	
Least Important	Least Important
Posting weekly announcement (<i>n</i> = 7; 26.9%)	Support from my friends (<i>n</i> = 85; 42.1%)
	Support from peers/cohort (<i>n</i> = 60; 29.7%)

Communication. Both groups agreed that the prospectus and proposal were times when communication was important (see Table 7). Faculty rated all phases of the capstone as equally important, while students felt **that the final two chapters' preparation, data analysis, and** a listing of all times during the process were moderately important. This may have been because many students (44%) had not reached the later stages.

Table 7. *Comparison: Importance of Communication During Capstone Stages*

Faculty Most Important	Students Most Important
The beginning of the dissertation process (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	Proposal (<i>n</i> = 192; 95%)
The prospectus (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	Prospectus (<i>n</i> = 184; 91.1%)
The proposal (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	
Development of Chapters 4 & 5 (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	
All stages of the dissertation (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	
Data analysis (<i>n</i> = 25; 96%)	
The IRB (<i>n</i> = 23; 92%)	
The literature review (<i>n</i> = 23; 92%)	
	Moderately Important
	Final capstone (<i>n</i> = 180; 89.1%)
	All stages of the capstone (<i>n</i> = 180; 89.1%)
	Data analysis (<i>n</i> = 172; 85.1%)

Creating a Safe Space. Both groups were asked what would make a safe space for the capstone classroom (see Table 8). Faculty and students agreed that communication was important, with students ranking four communication related items as most important or moderately so. Faculty appeared to be mindful of differences in students, being aware of the entire group, and the need to be student centered. Students were more self-focused and dealing with the current experience.

Table 8. *Comparison: Creating a Safe Space*

Faculty Most Important	Student Most Important
Treating every mentee with dignity and respect (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	Feeling comfortable speaking with my chair and committee (<i>n</i> = 193; 95.5%)
Working to develop a positive working relationship with them (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	
Being learner-centered (<i>n</i> = 25; 96.2%)	
Communicating both written and oral (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%)	
Moderately Important	Moderately Important
Considering how their culture might affect how they views things (<i>n</i> = 23; 88.5%)	Feeling 100% supported to ask any question (<i>n</i> = 177; 87.6%)
	Having positive interactions with university (<i>n</i> = 175; 86.6%)
	Having active dialogue and engagement (<i>n</i> = 172; 85.1%)
	Having no unanswered questions (<i>n</i> = 168; 83.2%)
Least Important	
Using the Mentee Café (<i>n</i> = 12; 46.2%)	

Definition of Mentoring. As shown in Table 9, both faculty and students were asked about their definitions of mentoring. Both groups rated providing feedback highly important. Both groups also indicated the importance of helping a student complete the capstone and helping them become a scholar-practitioner. Rated moderately important by students (and most important by faculty) were helping complete goals and the faculty being a motivator. The consensus definition of mentoring identified by faculty was, “*providing the mentee with constructive feedback, guidance in gaining research skills, and maintaining a respectful relationship while providing support to complete the doctorate.*” The consensus definition of mentoring identified by students was, “*having the faculty provide constructive feedback, be honest, solve problems, and support communication while helping their mentee to complete the doctorate.*”

Table 9. Comparison: Definition of Mentoring

Faculty Most Important	Student Most Important
A mentor should be providing accurate, honest, and timely feedback (<i>n</i> = 26; 100%),	Providing constructive feedback (<i>n</i> = 196; 97%)
Supporting a developing scholar acquire research capabilities (<i>n</i> = 24; 96%),	Being honest (<i>n</i> = 195; 96.5%)
Helping mentees become more effective researchers (<i>n</i> = 24; 96%),	Offering feedback and alternative solutions to problems (<i>n</i> = 198; 98%)
Mentees achieve their goals of graduating with a doctorate (<i>n</i> = 24; 96%),	Helping a doctoral student successfully complete their journey (<i>n</i> = 198; 98%)
Helping the development and maintenance of a personal and respectful relationship (<i>n</i> = 24; 96%),	Supporting open lines of communication (<i>n</i> = 198; 98%)
Supporting the mentee throughout the process (<i>n</i> = 24; 96%),	Being fully engaged in all aspects of the process (<i>n</i> = 190; 94.1%)
Motivating and educating a new member that will enter our field (<i>n</i> = 23; 92%)	Offering advice (<i>n</i> = 190; 94.1%)
Supporting a developing scholar acquire a professional identify (<i>n</i> = 21; 81%),	Developing scholar-practitioners (<i>n</i> = 189; 93.6%)
	Providing leadership and expertise (<i>n</i> = 189; 93.6%)
	Listening (<i>n</i> = 189; 93.6%)
	Engaging with the student (<i>n</i> = 189; 93.6%)
	Guiding (<i>n</i> = 189; 93.6%)
	Being there (<i>n</i> = 185; 91.6%)
	Sharing knowledge with doctoral candidates (<i>n</i> = 185; 91.6%)
	Being encouraging (<i>n</i> = 185; 91.6%)
	Being positive (<i>n</i> = 184; 91.1%)
	Assisting with identifying resources (<i>n</i> = 183; 90.6%)
	Moderately Important
	Supporting individual students (<i>n</i> = 181; 89.6%)
	Motivating (<i>n</i> = 177; 90.6%)

Being kind but with a firm hand ($n = 177$; 90.6%)	
To be challenged ($n = 175$; 86.6%)	
Sharing a common goal ($n = 174$; 86.6%)	
Growing together in an authentic and beneficial way ($n = 171$; 74.7%)	
Building relationships ($n = 165$; 81.7%)	
<hr/>	
Least Important	
Having concern for my personal issues ($n = 29$; 14.4%)	

Discussion

In the present study, a modified Delphi technique was used to examine the faculty and doctoral mentee experience in a large online university. Following three rounds of data collection, results indicated both similarities and differences in the views of faculty and mentees. Consistent with previous literature (Akojie et al., 2019; Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006; Li et al., 2018), the relationship between faculty and mentee was found to be important. However, the expectations were different for the two groups, which has not been previously reported. For mentees, understanding of personal characteristics were the most important factors (**e.g., time & money involved**); **for faculty, recognizing mentees' personal characteristics was considered the least important factor**. Faculty indicated that they wanted to develop a positive relationship with their mentees and for mentees to be accountable.

Mentees' psychosocial development and support for academic development was generally consistent with the literature such as Kumar and Johnson (2017) and Stadtlander (2021), who identified providing structure, group mentoring, using multiple means of communication, providing examples of dissertations, and providing feedback as key elements. In the present study, one of the most common items for both groups was the need for timely, actionable feedback. Faculty indicated that they thought university resources were important, but mentees reported they were the least important elements. Both groups indicated they relied primarily on email for communication, despite the availability of a capstone classroom. Both faculty and mentees felt that the most critical times during the dissertation in terms of communication were during the prospectus and proposal.

We had anticipated that faculty's methodological expertise and knowledge about the content area would be areas that were considered important; however, they were not mentioned by either group. Apparently, it was assumed by both groups that faculty are experts in their fields. Anekstein and Vereen (2018) suggested that the relationship and communication between the chair and student often influences how competent the student perceives the chair to be, which may be a factor in the current findings. Additional research is needed in this area to understand what each group perceives as expertise in methods and content areas.

We also examined the role of motivation in the capstone process. Previous research has indicated that online doctoral mentees experience isolation, especially at the dissertation/capstone phase, when they start working only with their mentors (Stadtlander, 2021) and as a result required motivation from the mentor. In the current study, faculty appeared to use practical, immediate tasks to influence their mentees, while specific motivation techniques were ranked as least important. Again, both groups felt that timely, actionable feedback was motivating. Mentees mentioned items that were self-motivating such as their being aware of time and money spent as well as wanting to prove to themselves that they could do it. Having a community of mentees for support was ranked very low by both mentee and faculty. Mentees' academic self-esteem appeared to be

tied to faculty being responsive. Faculty emphasized mentee autonomy while mentees wanted frequent contact with faculty. This dichotomy has not been previously reported and appears to be a source of contention between faculty and mentee, where the mentee expects that the faculty will be in frequent contact and the faculty expect mentees to work independently. This issue was also indicated in that mentees relied on the chair and second member to be accessible for questions and help. The definitions of mentoring confirmed this issue as indicated that mentees expected faculty to listen, solve problems, and be the communicators while faculty expected mentees to be autonomous researchers.

The definitions of mentoring provided other insights into the faculty and mentee thought process. Mentees had a large number of expectations ($n = 24$) as compared to the faculty ($n = 8$). **Faculty's comments tended to be focused on the specific immediate task of mentoring while mentees wanted a personal relationship, where the mentor was guide/therapist.**

Finally, mentees reported they do not take advantage of other available university resources (e.g., writing center, advising, webinars). Similarly, the faculty indicated they did not use many of the tools provided for them, such as the Blackboard classroom and the teaching tools present there. Additional research is warranted in this area as to what may motivate faculty to use the provided resources.

Limitations

Presumably, only faculty and students most interested in the issue self-selected to participate in the study. It was difficult to recruit alumni for the study, as we had no way to access current emails and had to rely on former chairs providing the email addresses.

Recommendations

One of the key elements from the study was that mentees wanted faculty to be more accessible and to take a personal interest in them. Faculty reported that they wanted mentees to be autonomous; however, the **students' description of mentorship focused more on mentors being fully engaged in the process, supporting open lines of communication, guiding, being there, encouraging, and identifying resources for the students.** Weekly or biweekly check-in calls by faculty to mentees may provide the interaction that mentees need (Stadtlander, 2021). Findings indicated that university resources were often not used by students; therefore students should be encouraged (and perhaps required) by faculty to use the available resources

Conclusion

The current modified Delphi study has provided new information as to mentoring faculty and doctoral mentee thoughts and beliefs about the online mentoring process. It has demonstrated a dichotomy present in that mentoring faculty believed mentees should be independent researchers with faculty just providing support and resources. On the other hand, mentees believed that faculty should have a personal relationship with the mentee, be available as needed, and be the resource themselves for the mentee. This finding may be the basis for contention between faculty and mentee.

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Appendix A

Delphi Study: Round 1 Questions

Faculty

1. How old are you today?
2. What is your gender?
3. Race: Caucasian (not Hispanic), African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, other, choose not to answer
4. How many years have you worked at Walden?
5. At this university are you part-time or full-time faculty?
6. How many capstone committees do you currently chair?
7. How long have you been a capstone committee member/chair (anywhere)?
8. What program are you in at this university?

This Delphi study will consist of 2-rounds of data collection with the same participants. This is Round 1. You will be answering open-ended questions about your capstone mentoring experience. There are no right or wrong answers: you are the expert and we are interested in your unique experience.

Your expert opinion matters, please be direct and open about your capstone experience. We would appreciate if you can provide details information, even better if you can add examples/instances where appropriate to better explain your capstone experience. The richer data will allow us to accurately represent your experiences.

1. How do you keep mentees motivated while they are working on their capstone?
2. What are the most important factors that are needed from the committee for a student to succeed? (provide some examples)
3. What support practices that you provide are the most helpful for your mentees?
4. For what stage(s) do you believe your mentees need the most support and how is that support provided?
5. What factors/strategies/best practices work best in helping you to improve student completion during the capstone phases (prospectus, proposal, final)?
 - a) prospectus
 - b) proposal
 - c) final
6. Do you feel you create a safe space where culture is valued and acknowledged for your mentees? Please elaborate.
7. How do you communicate with your mentees?
8. At what stage(s) do you communicate the most with your mentees and why? Please elaborate.
9. **How does your research method expertise contribute to your mentees' capstones?**
10. **How does your content knowledge contribute to your mentees' capstones?**
11. The committee consists of the chair, second member, URR, and student. Do you feel that your mentees are a valued member of the capstone committee? Please describe your response.

12. What does doctoral mentoring mean to you?
13. What other things **do you perceive have contributed to your mentees' success?**
14. **Are there other ways you have influenced your mentees' capstone completion?**
15. How do you use your capstone classroom?

Alumni

1. How old are you today?
2. What is your gender?
3. Race: Caucasian (not Hispanic), African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, other, choose not to answer
4. What year did you complete your doctoral capstone at Walden?
5. What doctoral degree did you receive from Walden?
6. What doctoral program were you in at Walden?
7. What is your current occupation?

This Delphi study will consist of 2-rounds of data collection with the same participants. This is Round 1. You will be answering open-ended questions about your capstone experience. There are no right or wrong answers. You are the expert, and we are interested in your unique experience.

Your response matters. Please be direct and open about your capstone experience. We would appreciate if you can provide details information, even better if you can add examples/instances where appropriate to better explain your capstone experience. The richer data will allow us to accurately represent your experiences.

1. What were at least 2 ways that you stayed motivated while you were working on your capstone? Some things that other students have reported are rewarding yourself for meeting long term/short term goals, having motivational sayings/memes nearby. What specific ways did you use to stay motivated?
2. What are the 3 main outside factors (e.g., chair, family, student advisor, time, finances) which motivated you to complete the capstone? How did they do so, please describe.
3. What resources from within the university were the most helpful while you were working on your capstone? Some possible examples include: academic advisor, library, writing center, methodology office hours webinars.
4. a) For what stage(s) (prospectus, proposal, data analysis, final dissertation) did you need the most support from your committee,
b) How did you receive that support? Please be specific on the support you received.
5. What support did you receive from each committee member that led to your capstone success? Please explain with specific examples for each committee member.
6. a) Did you feel a safe space (e.g., where you felt comfortable asking questions) was present where your culture was valued and acknowledged?
b) How was that done?
7. a) What ways did you communicate with your committee?
b) What would have been your preferred way to communicate with your committee
8. At what stage(s) did you communicate the most with your committee and why? Please elaborate.

9. **How did your committee's research method expertise influence your study's method section?**
10. **How did your committee's knowledge of your topic influence your study's literature review and overall study content?**
11. a) Did you feel that you were a valued member of the capstone committee?
b) Please describe an instance(s) in which you felt valued.
12. a) What does doctoral mentoring mean to you?
b) Describe an instance that illustrates doctoral mentoring to you
13. What other ways did your committee influence you to complete your capstone?

Appendix B

Surveys for Round 3

Faculty Survey

How old are you today?

What is your gender?

Race: Caucasian (not Hispanic), African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, other, choose not to answer

How many years have you worked at this university?

At Walden University are you part time or full time faculty?

How many capstone committees do you currently chair?

How long have you been a capstone committee member/chair (anywhere)?

What program are you in?

All survey questions were in a Likert scale from Not Important to Very Important

Rate the importance of each item for you motivating your students.

finding ways to collaborate with them

treating mentees as colleagues who are developing skills for scholarly success

contacting mentees regularly via calls, texts, emails or skype

providing flexibility in how we work together and communicate

acting as a cheerleader for them

using learner-centered strategies

posting weekly announcement

acknowledging challenges and success as a path toward mastery

allowing autonomy in their work with accountability

providing timely, actionable feedback that helps them improve

recognizing the individual's reason for acquiring a doctorate

building a positive working relationship with them

Rate the importance of each item for helping your students to succeed.

being easily accessible

using track changes and comments

working together as a team

keeping them accountable

having a consistent objective attitude

asking probing questions

offering specific strategies to succeed

respecting their experience, expertise, and life circumstances

timely, specific, and applicable feedback

having a good knowledge of resources
providing positive encouragement
facilitating a group video conference meeting
suggesting the multiple supports offered by Walden
utilizing methodology resources
using track changes
frequent monitoring of the classroom
timely and specific feedback on their draft submissions
being available to talk to mentees

Rate the importance of each item for your creating a safe space for your students.

using the Mentee Cafe
treating every mentee with dignity and respect
being learner-centered
working to develop a positive working relationship with them
considering how their culture might affect how they views things
communicating both written and oral

How important are the following for communicating with your students

text
talking with the entire cohort
e-mail
depending on mentee preference (phone, text, email, chat, digital meetings)
phone
video conference (e.g., zoom, Collaborate)
Blackboard classroom via announcements and reminders

Rate the importance of each item for your use of the capstone classroom.

meeting through Collaborate software
documenting all communication with mentees
interacting with mentees
posting discussions
celebrating accomplishments
for grading
posting announcements
providing feedback

Rate the importance of each item that you use to help your mentee achieve their goals.

having weekly detailed calls
faculty engagement throughout the process

letting the mentees know you care
ensuring that comprehensive feedback on drafts is provided
accessibility to committee

Rate the importance of each item for your mentee to complete the prospectus.

peer review
helping mentees find resources
repeated stages/cycles of iterative development
setting timeline goals
quick, and actionable feedback
realistic encouragement
constructive reviews

Rate the importance of each item for your mentee to complete the proposal.

peer conversations and reviews
continued use of principles established during prospectus stage
use of additional supports as needed (doctoral specialist/advisor, remedial courses)
relating progress to their goals
developing logic and support for the project
use of resources (writing center, methodologists, librarian)
preparation for data collection
timely actionable feedback
realistic encouragement
offering suggestions and helping mentees when they are stuck
ensuring mentees are meeting all the requirements

Rate the importance of each item for your mentee to complete the final capstone.

having mentees share progress and challenges with peers
expanded interpretation of findings
discussing possibilities of dissemination of the research
breaking down writing into achievable parts
checking on mentees' data collection progress
checking the raw data for accuracy
reviewing mentees' data analysis with them
helping mentees find the best way to present their data and findings
encouraging and modeling critical analysis of data
expressing confidence in the work done
constructive feedback
making sure mentees use the resources like the Form & Style Guide

Rate the importance of communicating with your mentees at each of these phases.

the beginning of the dissertation process

the prospectus

the proposal

the literature review

the IRB

the data collection

the data analysis

development of Chapters 4 & 5

all stages of the dissertation

How important are the following items in influencing your mentees.

reminding them that I have been where they are to ease their stress

motivating them through phone calls

validating their own sources of motivation

reminding them of their goals for their career

being specific of ways in which I believe that their research will contribute to the field

discussing different perspectives

providing resources

not giving up on them

showing respect for the individual

reminding them that patience is needed with the review of numerous drafts

listening

Rate the importance of supporting your mentees at each of these phases.

the prospectus

the literature review

the proposal

data collection

data analysis

development of Chapters 4 and 5

all phases of the dissertation

Rate the importance of each item for how your research method expertise contributes to your mentees' capstone.

methodological issues

connecting the logic of the RQ to the process of method choices

staying up to date on research methodology

overall research design

having an extensive library on both quantitative and qualitative research

focusing on questions of logic and reasoning
sharing the excitement of discovery
having the background and understanding of a number of different research methods

Rate the importance of each item for how your research content expertise contributes to your mentees' capstone.

Referring mentees to the most current articles and new trends
supporting their literature searches, writing, and knowledge
providing reassurance and connection to their topic/content
assisting with the understanding of their subject area of research

Rate the importance of each item as to how your mentees are a valued member of the committee

they provide expertise
they provide experience
they provide perspective
they are core to the committee

How important is each item to your definition of mentoring

supporting a developing scholar acquire research capabilities
helping mentees become more effective researchers
motivating and educating a new member that will enter our field
helping mentees achieve their goals of graduating with a doctorate
supporting a developing scholar acquire a professional identify
supporting a developing scholar acquire expertise in their subject area
providing accurate, honest, and timely feedback
helping the development and maintenance of a personal and respectful relationship
supporting the mentee throughout the process

Rate the importance of each item for your mentees success

mentees have support from the doctoral specialist/advisor
mentees take their coursework and apply it to their capstone stage
being knowledgeable about the mentee's subject area and topic of research
mentees have support from family members
keeping abreast of walden's ever-changing policies and procedures
using a sense of humor
setting high standards for my mentees
having a positive "we can do this" attitude
reaching out to my mentees and assure them they can succeed
applying compassion, empathy, tough love when needed
student survey
how old are you today?

what is your gender?

Race: Caucasian (not Hispanic), African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, other, choose not to answer

What stage are you in your capstone project? Prospectus, proposal, IRB, data collection, data analysis, chapter 4, chapter 5, final stages

What doctoral degree will you receive from Walden?

What doctoral program are you in at Walden?

Do you work part-**time, fulltime, I don't work**

All survey questions were in a Likert scale from Not Important to Very Important

Rate the importance of each item for motivating yourself.

support from my friends

taking the capstone one day at a time

support from peers/cohort

support from my family

prayers and faith

setting short term goals

thinking of myself as an expert and a scholar practitioner

my committee being accessible when I needed them

strong desire to engage in research in my chosen field

being aware of the time I was investing in my education

reminding myself that quitting was never an option

remembering all the work that had been accomplished to that point

my committee providing timely feedback

being aware of the money I was investing in my education

wanting to prove to myself I could do it

Rate the importance of each item as a capstone resource for you.

Doctoral Specialist

Academic Advisor

University Webinars

Writing Center

Second Committee Member

Dissertation Chair

Library Resources

Rate the importance of committee support at each phase.

prospectus

proposal

data analysis

final capstone
all stages of the capstone

Rate the importance of support you receive from your committee for each item.

being my biggest cheerleader
being helpful with the content of my dissertation
being sure that I understood my methodology
being helpful with my writing
pushing me to complete my dissertation
being available to assist me with formulating my ideas
ensuring that my study was sound

How important are the following items for you to feel safe in the capstone classroom?

feeling 100% supported to ask any question
having positive interactions with Walden
having no unanswered questions
having active dialogue and engagement
feeling comfortable speaking with my chair and committee

How important is each method for you to communicate with your committee?

via video conferencing (GoToMeeting, skype, or zoom)
via text
via phone
via blackboard
via email

Rate the importance of support from your chair at each of these phases.

at the prospectus stage
at the proposal stage
during data collection
during data analysis
at every stage of the capstone
during the final capstone stages

*Rate the importance of each item as ways your **committee has influenced your study's method section.***

by providing invaluable instrument training
by helping to form the research question
by being available to ask questions
by providing direction
by providing validation

*Rate the importance of each item as ways your **committee's content knowledge assists you.***

expanding the literature review
focusing the content of my study
giving useful feedback on my topic
being helpful overall

How important is each item for you to feel valued?

if my committee invited me to write in professional journals and seek publications
when my chair is encouraging
when my committee shows me that my thoughts matter
when my committee listens to me
when the committee thanks me for my thoughts, comments and input
when my committee respects my professional experience in my study area
when I have autonomy in the construction and execution of my research
when my committee gives me feedback

How important is each item to your definition of mentoring

Having concern for my personal issues
building relationships
being fully engaged in all aspect of the process
being kind but with a firm hand
sharing a common goal
being there
motivating
being positive
developing scholar-practitioners
sharing knowledge with doctoral candidates
growing together in an authentic and beneficial way
providing leadership and expertise
offering feedback and alternative solutions to problems
listening
offering advice
to be challenged
assisting with identifying resources
engaging with the student
being encouraging
supporting individual students
guiding
helping a doctoral student successfully complete their journey

supporting open lines of communication
being honest
providing constructive feedback



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