Creating Community Through Mentoring

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This research studies a doctoral program that includes a cohort component. Candidates engage in active learning and in the skill of mentoring. Research on peer mentoring has shown to support graduate students as they progress in their study (Luna & Cullen, 1998). Analysis of the data found themes relating to mentoring and community: candidates identify the act of mentoring with leadership development; candidates see mentoring as a form of social as well as emotional/psychological support; candidates build community within own cohort but not necessarily across cohort lines.

The doctoral program being studied is graduating its first cohort in the spring of 2006. Designed with a focus on educational leadership, students move through a coherent curricular sequence of leadership and research classes while completing their dissertation. Students progress through coursework in a cohort model. The program also embraces learning activities designed to strengthen the candidates' skills with the anticipation that those competencies will become an essential component of their ability to create a sense of community in their places of work. By building community within the doctoral program, students spend time together, have a safe space in which to exchange ideas, and have the opportunity to practice mentoring skills.

Related Literature

Descriptions of mentoring can be traced back to Greek history. Mentor was a Greek figure in Homer's Odyssey who was Ullysses' wise, old friend. Mentor was entrusted to teach Ulysses' son Telemachus and assist him in his growth toward adulthood (as cited in Edlind & Heansly, 1985). Mentoring continues to be explained as a process where a person of greater expertise guides a person of lesser expertise. Kram's work (1985) revealed two primary functions that mentors provide: career development, including coaching, sponsoring, and providing challenging assignment; and that of psychological and emotional support, including friendship, acceptance, counseling, and role modeling. Research on mentoring revealed that the act increased scholarship, improved leadership skills, enhanced collegiality and developed networking systems (Bass, 1985, 1996; Bass & Avolio, 1990; Blasé, 1990; Brenden, 1986; Burns, 1978; Caruso, Rice, and Schwartzkopf, 1988; Fullan, 2001;

Good, Halpin et al. 1998; Greenleaf, 1996; Johnson 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 2000; Leithwood, 1992; Packard 2003; Sergiovanni, 2000; Starratt, 1995). Although mentoring programs guided by faculty provide useful insights on mentoring protocol, it is often limited. A richer and deeper understanding of the mentoring process can be experienced when graduate candidates volunteer to mentor and to be mentored. This experience allows the candidates to focus on aspects of community, collegiality, and leadership that are most important to them.

Research Variables

As mentioned previously, students move through the doctoral program in a cohort model. Coursework is coherent and sequential and provides support to the dissertation process. All coursework is related to two themes: educational leadership or research. Professors teaching the educational leadership strand exhibit a strong philosophy of active engagement in the learning process.

Cohorts are heterogeneous: there is a mix of genders, ethnic backgrounds, and ages. Members are not necessarily from the K-12 setting; indeed, there are community college educators, non-profit agency staff, military, and university administrators in the program. There are also varied levels of leadership experience among cohort members.

The Question

In practitioner programs, it is easy to lose students to the rigors of their profession coupled with family responsibility. Dorn and Papalewis (1997) found that doctoral students are more likely to persevere in programs that rely on the cohort model, which provides for community support. The work of Luna and Cullen (1998) found that graduate students were more likely to be successful when engaged with mentoring. Based on this work, the emerging question became: How do doctoral candidates experience being a mentor? The researchers also questioned whether given a certain set of assignments and introductions, will the doctoral candidates build their own community as a result of the learning?

Description of the Innovation

In the cohort model used by the university, during the third year of coursework candidates are required to take a class in organizational change and development. Doctoral candidates are given the opportunity to decide how they might approach mentoring first-year candidates. The works of Kram (1985), Cullen and Luna (1998), Dorn and Papalewis (1997), and Mullen (2005) are studied. Kram's work discusses the impact of life and career stages on mentoring relationships. Peer mentoring relationships provide a range of functions, including those of career, psychosocial, and special attributes.

Within the contexts of these relationships, peers provide confirmation to each other through sharing of perceptions, values, and beliefs related to their lives at work, and through discovering views they have in common. Secondly, peers provide emotional support by listening and counseling each other during periods of transition and stress. Third, by providing feedback in areas that extend beyond the job-related concerns in career functions, peers offer each other a personal level of feedback that can be invaluable in learning about one's leadership style, the impact one has on others in the organization, and how one is managing work and family commitments. Finally, peer relationships provide friendship, encompassing concerns about each other that extend beyond the work. This function reduces the sense of alienation or stress individuals experience at every career stage. (p.136)

A survey of graduate students completed by Cullen and Luna (1998) found that 83% of the respondents indicated that it was important for graduate students to have mentors. Fifty-three percent stated that mentors provided important "role modeling, guidance and support, listening, and building [of] self-confidence" (p. 326). Dorn and Papalewis (1997) cited their findings that the cohort group structure was a factor in retention: doctoral students who "feel committed to each other, and to the group, who share common goals, are more likely to meet group goals, such as earning a doctorate" (p. 4). They also found that evidence to indicate that peer mentoring provided critical support to members of the cohort.

The work of Mullen (2005) discusses the idea of the mentoring mosaic, which enables the individual to access multiple figures for learning, feedback, and support (p. 82). Mentoring mosaics include informal networks that provide community, a sense of family, and resources. Within this structure, members interchange roles in a mentoring community, wherein support becomes a form of mentoring-in-action (p.91).

In addition to studying the works of the aforementioned authors, candidates learn how to use the conferencing techniques of cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2002). Cognitive coaching includes establishing and maintaining trust, facilitating mutual learning, and reflective practice. Candidates also discuss how they might use strategies found in modules designed by the Association for the Supervision of Curriculum and Development (2004) in the mentoring process. Candidates practice the Tuning Protocol used as part of the California School Restructuring project (Allen & McDonald, 1993). The Tuning Protocol uses a structured process to discuss a critical incident in which one of the participants was involved with and agrees to share. Participants practice listening skills, coaching, and facilitating reflective practices techniques.

After participating in these learning activities and discussions, candidates were assigned to provide some form of mentoring to a first-year doctoral student. A doctoral colloquium was held during the fall semester to introduce the members of Cohort One and Cohort Three. Time was given during the colloquium for members of Cohort One and Cohort Three to discuss research interest and program expectations. At the end of the colloquium each member of Cohort One gave the researchers the names of three people they would want to mentor and the members of Cohort Three gave the researchers the names of three people they wanted to be mentored by. The researchers, according to research interest, assigned mentor/mentee pairs. The expectation of the assignment was for the mentor to make contact with the mentee on a regular basis during the semester. There were no further mentoring assignments; however, the researchers hypothesized that the mentor/mentee relationships would continue into the next semester and beyond.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was qualitatively collected from the doctoral candidates in three forms: a class assignment, a focus group, and an electronic questionnaire. All data was collected at the end of the fall semester and prior to the beginning of the spring semester. The first data was collected through an in class writing assignment that was collected as an electronic journal. The assignment was given the week before final exams. The assignment asked the participating doctoral candidates to encapsulate their mentoring experiences.

The second method of data collection was a focus group with a maximum of 14 doctoral candidates during finals week. A research assistant conducted the focus group. She asked two multi-part questions regarding mentoring. The questions were (1) "What have been the strengths of the mentoring project so far and in what ways might the project be improved?" and (2) "Has the mentoring project helped create community in your cohort?" The candidates' responses were tape-recorded. The taped responses were transcribed by a different research assistant to ensure all the doctoral participants complete anonymity.

The final method of data collection was an electronic questionnaire sent to the 14 members of the doctoral cohort. Thirty-five percent of the doctoral candidates returned the electronic questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent during the semester break and asked the following questions: 1.) The number of times the mentor met with their mentee. Of the 35% who responded, 60% met with their mentee one to two times and 40% had never met with their mentee. 2.) Method of communicating with mentee. The preferred method of communicating between mentor and mentee was by e-mail. All of the respondents had

used e-mail as their primary form of communication. 3.) 60% of the respondents felt being a mentor was a valuable experience and 40% remained neutral to the mentoring experience. 4.) All of the respondents learned more about themselves through the mentoring experience. Questions 5-8 on the electronic survey were reflective and elicited qualitative responses; "Do you see this mentoring process helping you in a future leadership role?", "Were you provided with enough information to be comfortable in your role as mentor? What additional information and/or training would be valuable to you?", "Would you like additional formal setting to meet with your mentee and/or other cohort members?" and the final question asked for suggestions to improve the mentoring process.

The data responses were color coded and organized into emerging themes. The theme approach to analyzing data is common to qualitative research. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982) there are three major types of research focus. They are thesis, theme, and topic. This data analysis was based on the themes focus. Merriam describes themes as "an overarching concept or theoretical formulation that has emerged from the data analysis" (1988, p. 191). Analysis of the data found mentoring and community themes that related to leadership, professional growth, communications, convenience, emotional support, and social support.

Our data suggest that there were four primary sub-themes related to mentoring. The first sub-theme found was that candidates identify the act of mentoring with leadership and professional development. Responses to opened-ended questions regarding mentoring included the following quotations about leadership development: "…this responsibility will assist me in a future leadership role." "Being a mentor is a responsibility that I embrace and an opportunity I appreciate."

A second sub-theme that emerged under the category of mentoring was communication. Twenty-one percent of the coded segments were concerned with mentor-mentee contact.   "…I crafted an introduction email and sent it off. After two weeks of not hearing from him, I crafted another and sent it off. As of today no response has been received." Another mentor responded:

> I contacted my mentee as soon as I got her email address, offering whatever I thought she may need, as much or as little, in whatever contact form would be best for the mentee. I was surprised when I didn't hear anything back.

The final sub-theme that emerged under the category of mentoring related to communication, that of convenience.   While the mentors recognized the importance of mentoring to their professional growth as leaders, their comments were sometimes in conflict. "I suggested that I might meet with her at her work, which is on the way to the university

and therefore convenient for me."   "I was not in favor of having one more thing to do."   "…thinking back to my first semester and the toll it took on me, I expect I will hear from him when his time frees up."

Within the theme of community, sub-themes of social and emotional support were found. Candidates saw building of community as a form of social support and of value. "Having the other cohort members together on occasion provides a broad range of support for everyone." One candidate responded:

> …it would be a good idea to plan either a social occasion or some time where everybody gets together in the same room…It seems to me, I agree, that it is powerful and that it is our duty to do this.

Another candidate commented on how being in a social situation with other members of other cohorts was important:

I just want to say that I had a great time at the CERA when we ran into cohort members in one, two, and three and in that environment and atmosphere we were…eating meals together and we were in a very much collective situation. I made a recommendation in my mentor paper that I thought if we were to do something like that on our Saturdays and all of our cohort groups got together…we could mix and mingle. I found that really, really powerful.

The community was also seen as an emotional and psychological support.   "It's more of a social/psychological support versus actual physical…"   "To tell you that we all have these same feelings, we've all been frustrated and anxious and nervous and scared and ready to throw-up before we do a presentation. It is just part of the process."   Following is a response regarding the emotional support a mentor could provide:

> I think the mentoring program might be important to the continuation of this program. What happens so many times when you're under a tremendous amount of stress and things are new to you an you hear and see things you take see us and you don't have anybody to talk to about these issues except maybe a person in your cohort who's just going to feed into whatever anxiety you have – but if you have somebody who's already been through it, who sees the bigger picture, who knows what's down the road, to call and have that person let you talk and let you say what you need to say and then comfort you with a few words...

From another student:

> I see my role as a mentor more as to be there, to be their friend, to be supporting them in happy times when they finish (name of professor) class, and help them in times when it is more difficult.

Discussion

It is interesting to note that although the mentors talked about the importance of leadership and professionalism that were embodied by the act of mentoring, it was difficult for them to translate that knowledge into action when working with their mentees.   While they were not

necessarily resistant to the act of mentoring, they were passive in waiting for their mentees to contact them. The mentors also showed a certain level of expectation of convenience: almost all contacts were made exclusively by email. When the mentees did not respond, the mentors were passive in response, either sending a second email several weeks later or not connecting to the mentee at all.

In reviewing whether doctoral candidates built their own learning community as a result of their learning, once again there was a passive expectation that the mentee would come to them. There was also an expectation that the faculty would provide structure and process for the mentoring to occur, mostly within a community building event such as the colloquium. Several candidates suggested ways in which faculty could improve the process, putting responsibility on the faculty to provide assignments and opportunities for the cohorts to meet together. There were no candidates who took responsibility for making mentorship or the act of building community a function of their own work in the doctoral program.

Conclusions and Further Considerations

Based on the data, the researchers found that candidates in the doctoral program identified mentoring with leadership development and saw it as a form of social, emotional and psychological support. It was also found that while community building occurred within a cohort, it did not necessarily extend across the doctoral community. One possible flaw in the research design was that the questions asked did not stress building community across cohorts; rather, it was theorized that this information would come out in the data collection.

As candidates continue to use and become more familiar with the mentoring process, the community of learners will be strengthened and continued after graduation from the program. We feel that mentoring is a responsible form of leadership and encourages leaders to work collaboratively in community. While this study has ended, it raises many questions for further study. Those questions include:

1) Did establishing an environment for leadership mentoring retain students in the doctoral program?

2) Was an environment established that allowed candidates in the process of mentoring to actively and successfully participate?

3) Did the mentoring experience make a difference in their educational and leadership experiences?

4) How do we provide a formal structure for mentoring and building community within the doctoral program?

5) What is the impact of the mentoring process on field-dependent and field-independent doctoral students?

Finally, the responsibility to create community in the doctoral program is up to the candidates, and the responsibility for providing an atmosphere for community to develop and mentoring to take to place rests with the faculty.

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