

Online Doctoral Cohort Mentors: Model Implementation and Evaluation

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Doctoral students benefit extensively from direct mentorship throughout their degree programs and this mentorship can be particularly beneficial for doctoral students completing their degrees in the online format. This study provides an analysis of the implementation of a Doctoral Cohort Mentor Model at the Online Campus of a mid-sized University. Internal and external needs of online doctoral students were explored. Further, online faculty needs and the experience of the initial group of mentors were evaluated utilizing the focus group method. Data were examined utilizing qualitative coding procedures and the results are discussed in the context of relevant theories pertaining to internal and external aspects of motivation.

Keywords: online doctoral students, cohort engagement, doctoral student mentorship, online mentorship, online student engagement, self-determination theory, faculty engagement, faculty mentorship

INTRODUCTION

This study provides an analysis of the implementation and initial evaluation of a Doctoral Cohort Mentor Model (DCMM) from a faculty perspective. The model outlined below was piloted within the first four cohorts of one doctoral program delivered through the Online Campus of a mid-sized University. Three Mentors were assigned to one or more of the four cohorts. A focus group was conducted to evaluate the impact of the model on the Mentors.

The program in which the DCMM was piloted currently enrolls 88 students. Thus far, 8 cohorts of students are in various stages of program completion. The model was implemented in the first Spring term of 2020 and has been in operation for the past three 8-week terms. The DCMM has the following aims (see Appendix A):

- 1) Build community within individual cohorts by creating opportunities for regular interaction between students and mentors.
- 2) Build relationships with students by engaging in regular individual meetings.
- 3) Facilitate engagement within individual cohorts by hosting regular synchronous meetings.
- 4) Develop students by sharing resources and networking opportunities on a regular basis.
- 5) Reduce the potential for student isolation by providing regular communication through diverse means.
- 6) Improve the student experience by providing meaning opportunities for connection.

- 7) Improve the mentor experience by providing opportunities to share experience and provide direction to assigned mentees.

This research focuses on the final aim, with the intention of assessing the degree to which the model impacts the experience of the faculty members currently serving as mentors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

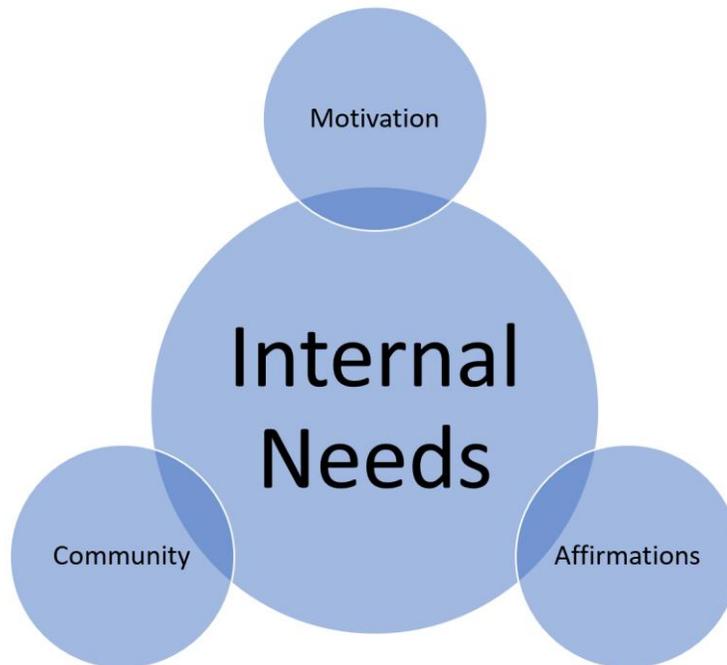
A great body of research elucidates a multitude of complex needs which may be experienced by online doctoral students (e.g., Akojie, Entrekin, Bacon, & Kanai, 2019; Gibson Fields, Wladkowski, Kusmaul, Greenfield, & Mauldin, 2019; Kumar, & Coe, 2017). Online doctoral student needs can be categorized as internal or external. Internal needs relate to the need for motivation (Muirhead, & Metros, 2016), community (Lake, Koper, Balayan, & Lynch, 2016), and affirmation from peers (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011) and faculty (Deshpande, 2017). External needs pertain to modeling (Geesa, Lowery, & McConnell, 2018) and direction (Roberts, & Ferro-Almeida, 2019), including clear expectations and feedback (Crowell et al., 2019). Many of the challenges experienced by online doctoral students are directly related to the failure of the institution or department to meet these needs. Understanding the challenges faced by online doctoral students can help to inform policy and practice which prioritizes the student experience and supports the educational journey of students.

Research by Kumar, Jumar, & Taylor (2020) outlines eight key challenges for online doctoral students and their faculty and goes on to propose mentoring-based solutions to address each area. Seven of these challenges relate most directly to student needs. Three key challenges, pertain to connecting, building a relationship, and isolation are consistent with the internal needs of online doctoral students outlined above. The remaining challenges: communicating, understanding expectations, undertaking research projects, and producing writing pertain to external needs of online doctoral students. The final challenge outlined in this research, giving feedback, pertains to faculty supervising online doctoral students and, like the other challenges, can be addressed through effective mentoring.

Internal Needs

When embarking on the quest to earn one's doctoral degree, internal needs, and associated challenges play an important role in the process. One key factor pertaining to internal needs (see Figure 1) and impacting the retention and completion rates in online doctoral programs is motivation. Doctoral students may experience intermittent motivation due to competing demands for their resources, for instance. Further, doctoral students may experience diminished motivation in cases where they perceive inadequate support within their programs. This perceived lack of support may create feelings of isolation and diminished effort on the part of the doctoral student. When working with students in the online environment it is of the utmost importance to support and nurture motivation. One strategy for building and nurturing motivation among students is the community of practice.

FIGURE 1
INTERNAL NEEDS OF ONLINE DOCTORAL STUDENTS



A community of practice is a group of individuals who interact with one another on a regular basis and are focused on similar goals. The regular interactions of the group allow for relationship-building, collaborations, feedback, and encouragement. Communities of practice are prevalent in the departments and programs of brick and mortar institutions and represent an impactful strategy for engaging students and faculty alike. Communities of practice can work well in the virtual realm (Yalof, & Chametzky, 2016), and are well supported by technologies such as Microsoft Teams and Yammer. These communities allow students and faculty to connect easily, provide one another with updates and feedback, share resources, and cheer one another on throughout the course of a doctoral program. These communities also provide opportunities for affirmation from peers and faculty, the final internal doctoral student need in this proposed categorization system.

Individuals, for the most part, appreciate affirmation, as affirmation provides meaningful feedback regarding growth. Faculty-student relationship building is a key strategy for providing affirmations to students (Korey, Desmond, & Jared, 2016). Relational mentoring refers to the development of a relationship between mentor and mentee which is generative in nature and exhibits qualities of interdependence such that both the mentor and the mentee gain from the relationship. Relational mentoring serves to support learning and growth (Ross-Sheriff, Berry Edwards, & Orme, (2017). Peer mentoring initiatives, which involve the establishment of mentoring relationships between individuals who are at similar stages of development. In the case of doctoral students, peer mentoring may facilitate encouragement in the form of affirmations (Lee, Anderson, & Burnett, 2017), as well as modeling, the first external need (see Figure 2) proposed in this classification.

External Needs

FIGURE 2
EXTERNAL NEEDS OF ONLINE DOCTORAL STUDENTS



Online doctoral students engaged in the peer mentoring process may benefit from viewing peers, who are at a similar stage of program completion (McConnell, Geesa, & Lowrey, 2019). Online programs expose students to a diverse group of peers who may vary in terms of age, gender, racial and ethnic background, prior career experience, and prior education experience. Due to the significant differences between online doctoral students, students are often able to learn from one another, through feedback, as well as modeling. For instance, if an individual with career experience and significant motivation manages time effectively, then they may model this behavior for the benefit of early career individuals who may not have identified time management strategies yet. As an additional example, a doctoral student with significant research experience may model effective data analysis for peers. Through these peer-based mentoring experiences, individual students may experience increased confidence. Formal peer-mentoring programs are often established within departments to capitalize on the power of modeling (e.g., Lowery, Geesa, & McConnell, 2018; Lowery, K., Geesa, & McConnell, 2019). In addition to modeling, direction is a requirement component of the doctoral student preparation process.

Direction may be provided in the form of expectation setting and the provision of regular, helpful feedback. First, in terms of expectation-setting, a key prerequisite is effective communication. Without communication, expectation-setting cannot be accomplished. Research demonstrates that effective communication is a key predictor of student satisfaction with online mentoring (Dorner, & Kumar, 2017; Geesa, Brown, & McConnell, 2020). Communication may be facilitated through the use of a wide variety of technology tools, which allow mentors to connect with students on a regular basis (Perera-Diltz, D. &

Duba Sauerheber, 2017). Effective communication is particularly important as students near the dissertation phase of their programs, at which time they require increased direction.

Frameworks for effectively e-mentoring doctoral students throughout the dissertation process may employ strategies such as using varied technologies for outreach, remaining available, communicating in a timely manner, setting deadlines, providing structure and timely feedback, scheduling regular meetings, structuring small group meetings and peer interactions, and providing examples of dissertations and psychosocial support (Kumar, Johnson, Dogan, & Coe, 2019). Structure and support are key factors impacting the online student experience of the doctoral dissertation (Kumar & Johnson, 2019). Faculty tasked with the mentoring of online doctoral students must navigate a complex system and, at times, must wear multiple hats. Mentoring online doctoral students also has the potential to meet the needs and address the challenges of online faculty.

Online Faculty Needs

Online faculty may experience unique needs, which is due in part to their geographic distribution. This group of faculty may experience feelings of isolation or diminished engagement, which may serve to impact their performance (Byrne, Peters, & Weston, 2016; Dolan, 2011; Deligero, & Laguador, 2014). Online faculty satisfaction is impacted by community building within the institution and units which they serve (Bolliger, & Wasilik, 2009) and can therefore be impacted by efforts to involve this group in the day to day operations of the institution. Community can be nurtured by providing opportunities for online faculty to serve on committees, collaborate on departmental initiatives, and share their research with the University community. Initiatives which demonstrate value for the faculty member serve to increase their perceptions of community and their levels of engagement (Hakeem, & Gulzar, 2015).

An additional strategy for building community among online faculty relates to opportunities to connect with students in a synchronous format (Huang, & Ling Hsiao, 2012; Lowenthal, Snelson, & Dunlap, 2017). Mentoring serves to play an important role in building community among online faculty and doctoral students. Research demonstrates that key factors, including structure, small group mentoring, and peer support may help to address challenges associated with communication during the mentoring experience (Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

This study explored the implementation of a cohort-based mentoring model within one doctoral program offered through the Online Campus of a mid-sized University from a faculty perspective. The following research questions were assessed:

1. *Does the DCMM impact faculty?*
2. *Do faculty perceive that the DCMM impacts their students?*
3. *Do faculty perceive that the DCMM impacts the institution with which they are affiliated?*
4. *Do faculty have positive reflections related to their experience delivering the model?*
5. *Do faculty have suggestions for improvements to the model?*

METHOD

Participants

Three faculty members assigned as DIOP Mentors for one or more cohorts of an online doctoral program participated in the focus group. All mentors served as adjunct faculty for more than 3 years. Each possesses extensive practical and research experience.

Materials

Five questions were posed during the focus group.

1. What impacts, if any, does the Cohort Mentor Model have on faculty?
2. What impacts, if any, does the Cohort Mentor Model have on students, in your view?
3. What impacts, if any, does the Cohort Mentor Model have on the institution?
4. Please share any positive reflections regarding your experience with the Cohort Mentor Model.
5. Please share any suggestions for improvements to the Cohort Mentor Model.

Procedure

A virtual focus group session was scheduled, and all mentors provided a response to each question. The session was 1 hour in duration and was recorded for future transcription.

RESULTS

Data were examined utilizing qualitative coding procedures (Vaughn & Turner, 2015) and a number of themes emerged. First, regarding question one, “What impacts, if any, does the Cohort Mentor Model have on faculty?”, two key themes were identified. The first theme pertained to purpose. Faculty offered reflections regarding the sense of purpose they obtained from their participation in the mentoring relationship. The benefits of sharing their experience with students seemed to bring a sense of meaning. The second theme emerging was satisfaction. All mentors reported feeling an increased sense of satisfaction with their position within the institution following the implementation of the cohort mentor model. Mentor responses to question two, “What impacts, if any, does the Cohort Mentor Model have on students, in your view?” can also be categorized into two themes.

The first theme emerging for question two was student satisfaction. Mentors reported that students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the increased support they received as a result of the mentoring model. The second theme pertaining to mentor perceptions of the student experience was relevance. Mentors shared their perception that the relevance of the interactions which were facilitated by the implementation of the model were variable. For students in some cohorts, mentors felt that students perceived relevance. For other cohorts, mentors reported that they felt students perceived less relevance. The concept of relevance will be explored in greater depth through the analysis of additional themes. For question 3, “What impacts, if any, does the Cohort Mentor Model have on the institution?”, one theme emerged: dedication.

All mentors reported that, in their view, the implementation of the model impacted perceptions of institutional dedication. Mentors reported that the model’s implementation showed institutional interest in improving performance. For instance, involvement in the program served to increase faculty performance, particularly in situations where the mentor was teaching a program course that included their mentees. One quote with relevance to this theme, “... sends the right message of support”, accurately depicts mentor reflections in this area. Responses to the next prompt, “Please share any positive reflections regarding your experience with the Cohort Mentor Model”, can be categorized into two themes: connections and engagement.

First, with respect to the theme of connection, mentors reported multiple instances of positive connection experiences with the students in their cohorts. Many of these experiences involved information sharing and some involved students expressing fears regarding programmatic requirements, such as the dissertation. In each case, mentors shared examples to illustrate the ways in which the model helped to establish connections between students and mentors. Next, with respect to the theme of engagement, mentors shared positive reflections from the group and individual synchronous sessions they facilitated as a part of the model. Students were able to engage with one another and with the mentors. Further, the content which was presented as a part of the engagement opportunities provided students with the opportunity to further explore practical applications of program content from a personal and career-related perspective.

Mentor responses to the final prompt, “Please share any suggestions for improvements to the Cohort Mentor Model”, can be categorized into two key themes: structure and expectations. First, with respect to structure, mentors shared that introducing the mentors to cohorts at the start of their programs could lead to more engaging outcomes. Further, mentors felt that the use of multiple communication methods could encourage more students to participate in the optional program. Next with respect to the theme of expectations, mentors reported that student expectations could be communicated more clearly. Further, mentors shared that clearly articulating the expectations of the mentors to the students could facilitate better outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Results of this qualitative analysis indicate several key themes pertaining to the mentor experience as it relates to the model implemented here.

Purpose

Faculty strive for a sense of purpose, which is consistent with theories of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Findings of this study indicate that faculty who are engaged in mentoring small groups of doctoral students perceive a sense of purpose. Further, this sense of purpose may have impacted mentor perceptions regarding institutional dedication.

Satisfaction

Perceived institutional dedication likely impacted the emergence of the themes of satisfaction, from a faculty perspective. This finding is consistent with research on faculty satisfaction (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011) as it relates to perceptions of value. Mentor reflections regarding connections and engagement are consistent with literature on the ability of faculty-led programmatic initiatives to increase feelings of engagement among faculty and students alike (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009).

Relevance

Themes of relevance emerging from discussions regarding mentor predicted student perceptions of the program align well with themes pertaining to model improvements. For instance, students appeared to engage more strongly when relevance was high. Revising model structure to provide greater direction to students regarding their expectations with respect to the model could help to address any barriers to participation created by uncertainty regarding expectations.

There are two key limitations of the current study. First, the sample size of 3 may not have accurately depicted the views of faculty within the institution. A second limitation is that no student data were collected. As such, our assessments of potential student perceptions may not accurately reflect their genuine experience. Future directions for this research will aim to explore model relevance and impact from a student perspective and faculty perceptions of the model from the perspective of all faculty, rather than the group of faculty currently serving as cohort mentors.

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APPENDIX A: DOCTORAL COHORT MENTOR MODEL

Aims

1. Build community within individual cohorts by creating opportunities for regular interaction between students and mentors.
2. Build relationships with students by engaging in regular individual meetings.
3. Facilitate engagement within individual cohorts by hosting regular synchronous meetings.
4. Develop students by sharing resources and networking opportunities on a regular basis.
5. Reduce the potential for student isolation by providing regular communication through diverse means.
6. Improve the student experience by providing meaning opportunities for connection.
7. Improve the mentor experience by providing opportunities to share experience and provide direction to assigned mentees.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What impacts, if any, does the Cohort Mentor Model have on faculty?
2. What impacts, if any, does the Cohort Mentor Model have on students, in your view?
3. What impacts, if any does the Cohort Mentor Model have on the institution?
4. Please share any positive reflections regarding your experience with the Cohort Mentor Model.
5. Please share any suggestions for improvements to the Cohort Mentor Model.