Chapter 7
Mentoring Dissertation Students in Online Doctoral Programs

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring doctoral students in online programs can be even more challenging than mentoring in the face-to-face educational environment. Factors such as geographic and transactional distance can result in student isolation and attrition during the dissertation process. Students often are not prepared for the intensity of doctoral work and the discipline required to complete a dissertation. Effective mentoring techniques can decrease transactional distance boundaries to enhance the online dissertation process. Dissertation chairs must understand how mentoring can improve student learning. Rather than mentoring students based on personal beliefs or past experience, online dissertation chairs must familiarize themselves with best practices in mentoring throughout the dissertation process to provide a quality educational experience for their students, as well as to decrease attrition.

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral-level learning is challenging in any environment, but these challenges are exacerbated in the online format. Although students may be able to successfully complete their doctoral coursework, many struggle extensively throughout the dissertation process. It is more difficult for faculty who are geographically separate from their students to establish a collaborative, effective relationship that motivates students to complete the dissertation process. The purpose of this chapter is to provide information and guidance on how mentoring in online doctoral education can be improved to decrease attrition in the dissertation phase of online programs.

BACKGROUND

The percentage of graduate students enrolled in fully online programs (not including blended or hybrid programs) was 22% as reported by Strausheim in 2014; this is twice the percentage of undergraduates enrolled fully online (11%) out of a total of 5.5 million online students. The Council of Graduate Schools (2015) reported a 3.5% increase in graduate enrollment from August 2013 to August 2014; this was the first increase since 2009. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2016), almost 3 million students were enrolled in online graduate education. There is no doubt the number of students obtaining their graduate degrees online is continuing to increase at a faster rate than undergraduate education. According to the Online PhD programs website (2016), there are more than 50 schools in the U.S. offering various online doctorate programs.

Burnsed (2010) reported in U.S. News and World Report that online programs, in general, have a 10% higher attrition rate than face-to-face programs. Andrews (2016) reported 30-40% attrition rates for graduate students while, Cassuto (2013) and Nieto (2016) reported approximately 50%. According to the Council of Graduate Schools in the Ph.D Completion Project report (n.d.), the vast majority of students have the intelligence and academic tools necessary to complete a doctorate, yet many never complete the degree. The factors listed that prevent completion include: "selection, mentoring, financial support, program environment, research mode of the field, and processes and procedures" (p. 1). Cassuto (2013) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted students who enter masters' programs, in general, complete the program if they are willing to do the work. However, he noted, not all doctoral candidates should complete the degree. However, what is problematic is students in the math and science fields usually drop out by the third year of the dissertation; in the humanities many students do not drop out until the seventh year. Students in this situation leave doctoral programs with immense debt and no degree. In other words, they become "All but Dissertation (ABD)." Nieto stated completion is "dismal" (2016, p. 35) in all doctoral programs. Andrews (2016), in her study of online doctoral dissertation students and their mentors, looked at the competencies that dissertation chairs who serve as e-mentors should possess. She noted there was a significant difference in what faculty perceived as important, and what students viewed as important. She noted this is an additional factor that can impact doctoral retention and attrition.

Ewing, Mathieson, Alexander and Leafman (2012) reported effective mentoring can reduce the attrition rate down to about 27% for students who enter graduate school. Online doctoral programs continue to proliferate. One important key to success and decreased attrition is effective mentoring relationships.

DEFINING MENTORSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

What is mentorship? Crisp and Cruz (2009) pointed out there are more than 50 definitions of mentoring in the higher education setting in the literature. According to McWilliams and Beam (2013), "mentoring in higher education historically is rooted in those informal advisory relationships that develop between faculty and graduate students, serving a socializing role for students to the academic profession" (p. 1). Johnson (2016) defined mentoring in higher education as "a personal and reciprocal relationship where a more experienced faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced student or faculty member. A mentor provides the mentee with knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge and support" (p. 23). Johnson noted these relationships take time; trust must be established between the mentor and mentee. As it pertains to dissertation chairs and doctoral students, this trust can begin

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