Chapter 8

Mentoring Doctoral Students in a Distance Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to describe research on mentoring and advising of doctoral students in a distance education context through the lens of for-profit education. Changes in the doctoral education landscape, including broad access mandates, mean that more students, many of whom are older, have family obligations, are first generation, and have established careers, have access to doctoral education. The role of the mentor has and will continue to change to meet the unique demands these students present. Findings from the examination of mentoring doctoral students online suggest that the characteristic of mentorship are well-examined and that more research is needed that disentangles the roles of mentors to provide targeted services needed by doctoral students. The for-profit, distance education sector has the potential to be a leader in knowledge on mentoring doctoral students in a virtual environment.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 20th century, increased demand for distance education resulted in the expansion of opportunities for more people to earn doctoral degrees; the for-profit sector has assumed a large share of this growth (National Education Center for Statistics, 2020). There is a growing literature about mentoring doctoral students who

are likely to be nontraditional in terms of age (older), work experience (extensive), first generation, and raising a family (Burkholder et al., 2013). The interest in andragogy, or student-centered learning (Knowles, 1980) has resulted in a shift in the focus in doctoral research from what the faculty wants to what students need to be successful in their careers and meet their own goals. Doctoral students in traditional programs tend to work more independently post-coursework, and once students are actively working on their dissertations, many work remotely with less in-person contact with faculty mentors/advisors that was characteristic during the coursework phase. The popularity of distance education doctorates creates challenges for educators in how to appropriately mentor and advise a larger volume of nontraditional and culturally diverse students.

There is ample literature that describes mentoring in general, less that describes mentoring of doctoral students, and even less that focuses this understanding within the for-profit context. An examination of the literature on doctoral student mentoring suggests that a common definition of *mentor* remains elusive, and that the lack of an operational definition results in a variety of ways programs interpret mentoring and how mentors serve students (Brown et al., 2020). Eby et al. (2007) captured the essence of the issue when they wrote, "…everyone thinks they know what mentoring is..." (p 7). Mentoring comprises several characteristics and activities supported by empirical research but lacks a commonly accepted framework. While Yob and Crawford (2012) created an evidenced-based framework, it is not commonly accepted, and authors continue to craft systematic reviews to identify the key characteristics of mentoring (e.g., see Pollard and Kumar, 2021). In addition, *mentor* and *advisor* are used interchangeably, yet both represent distinct roles and functions in the overall faculty-student relationship.

For-profit doctoral education has provided an incentive to understand the various roles that mentors play. Such understanding can be used to improve efficiency in the faculty-student relationship with the goal of enhancing completion. Faculty-student ratios tend to be low, due to many interested doctoral students and a relatively small pool of trained faculty to supervise them. Both potentially reduce the time faculty can spend with individual students. There is an additional sense of urgency, then, in understanding the various roles performed by mentors so that the key faculty-student relationship can be preserved while delegating non-faculty critical responsibilities to other individuals.

The primary goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research on doctoral student mentoring through the lens of for-profit, distance education. The objectives are to:

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