

# Mentoring and Student Perspectives in Online Graduate Education

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## ABSTRACT

Effective social change relies upon successfully educating professionals. This qualitative study will integrate rapid expansion of **online learning** with best practices in graduate education. An innovative pilot **mentoring program for graduate students** will be assessed. The study addresses a gap in the literature on student perceptions of the mentoring process.

## PROBLEM

Technological innovation has catapulted online education enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2011). **Online education** is growing at a rate much faster than traditional higher education and represents 31 % of the total student population (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

**Barriers** to successful graduate educational attainment are numerous (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008; Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009). Additionally, the online educational environment presents unique challenges to graduate education and professional development (Cox, 2008).

**Mentoring** is one strategy for increasing graduate student success (Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009). However, little is known about student perspectives in educational mentoring relationships. **There is a need for research to understand student views in online graduate mentoring relationships.**

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative case study will be to explore the **perceived needs of online graduate students in a pilot mentoring forum.**

The lack of research on student perspectives in mentoring relationships lends itself to an exploratory qualitative approach. Student views are a missing piece in understanding how mentoring relationships can increase graduate educational success.

## RELEVANT LITERATURE

Vygotsky's (1978) **social development theory** proposed that learning occurs through social interaction, a "more knowledgeable other" (MKO), and self-direction.

Graduate student success may be supported through **multi-dimensional strategies** including peer & faculty mentoring (Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009).

Mentoring has been used to successfully support a **scholar-practitioner model** (Beddoe & Harington, 2012).

**Professional development** is a distinct component of graduate education responsive to mentoring application (Koblinsky, Kuvalanka, & McClintock-Comeaux, 2006).

Mentoring in academia may take several forms with varying **power differentials** between mentor-mentee (Buell, 2004).

Mentoring in academia has been linked to goals of **social justice** (Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth, 2010; McAllister, Harold, Ahmedani, & Cramer, 2009; McGeorge & Carlson, 2010).

Mentoring research has focused on mentoring **program evaluation and faculty perspectives** (Haggerty, 2010; Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth, 2010; Koblinsky, Kuvalanka, & McClintock-Comeaux, 2006; McAllister, Harold, Ahmedani, & Cramer, 2009). **Student perspectives represent a gap in the mentoring literature.**

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**RQ1:** What are the **perceived needs** of online doctoral students in a pilot mentoring forum?

### Subquestions

- What are student-identified **barriers** to online graduate education?
- What **facilitates** educational success, according to students?

## PROCEDURES

### A Qualitative Case Study

The study will examine the content of **discussions in an online pilot mentoring forum** for graduate students. Two 12-week quarters of mentoring forum discussions will be analyzed. Discussions include student interaction with their peers and a faculty mentor.

## DATA ANALYSIS

**Systematic content analysis** will be used to analyze the discussion board comments in the pilot mentoring forum (Patton, 2002). The text of discussion board postings will be reviewed for recurring themes, patterns, and meanings.

Convergent and divergent themes along with evaluation for substantive contribution will be used to guide analysis (Patton, 2002). NVivo software will be used to organize analysis. Triangulation of data through multiple researcher review and member-checking will be used.

## FINDINGS

Expected themes emerging from the data include:

- Discussed **barriers** to online education
- **Facilitators** of educational success
- **Academic** factors
- **Professional** development
- **Peer** support
- **Faculty** roles in the mentoring process

## LIMITATIONS

The study will be limited to a small sample of students involved in a **pilot mentoring project.**

Students will be from a single school at a large online university.

The first two 12-week quarters of the forum will be analyzed.

As a voluntary project, participation rates in the discussion may vary widely.

Students represent a continuum of progress in their academic program affecting discussion topics.

## CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions will provide an understanding of **student perceptions** of the online mentoring process. Recurring themes will indicate the topics that are common and central to the online graduate experience. Analysis of these results will suggest topics for future online mentoring relationships. Incorporating these themes into mentoring relationships will attempt to respond to student perceived needs.

## SOCIAL CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

Social change is facilitated by successful education at the highest levels of a profession. The **scholar-practitioner model** integrates academic and professional practices that are often best learned through mentoring relationships.

Understanding perceived needs of students in mentoring relationships is a research gap that will improve the **effectiveness of graduate mentoring.** Given the growing online educational environment these results may improve the success rates of online graduate education.