

Pedagogy: The Online Dissertation

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Abstract

This preliminary study examines dissertation mentoring practices reported by 80 Walden faculty. Comments related to orienting students to instructor expectations and the dissertation process, motivating students, and expectations of frequency of student drafts are reported. Findings indicate that there are currently few consistencies in the pedagogical practices of mentors.

Problem

While considerable information is available on how to mentor dissertation students in traditional land-based programs, there is little information on how to mentor in an online environment. As a first step, this study examines Walden dissertation faculty's current mentoring practices.

Purpose

The purpose of the present study is to examine the pedagogy used by Walden faculty to mentor dissertation students.

Relevant Literature

There is considerable empirical evidence that faculty-graduate student research mentoring relationships are a significant aspect of the graduate education experience and foster student success (Patton 2009). Such relationships benefit students in numerous ways including increased employment opportunities (Bova, 2000), development of professional skills (Bova & Phillips, 1984), and professional growth (Harris & Brewer, 1986). Research on faculty-graduate student relationships has provided valuable insights about effective practices that foster the success of graduate students in general (Komarraju et al., 2010), and underrepresented students specifically (Patton, 2009). Research has examined general mentoring practices for traditional land-based programs (e.g., Crutcher, 2007; Fernando & Hulse-Killacky, 2006); however, there is little research on how online faculty mentor dissertation students. The present study is a first step in addressing this gap.

Research Question

How do online faculty approach dissertation mentoring?

Procedures

An expert panel of three experienced dissertation faculty reviewed all questions. OIRA and IRB approved the study, which recruited through an ad in the CFE newsletter over a 3 month period, requesting dissertation chairs and committee members complete a survey on survey monkey. The present data are part of this larger study; presented here are data from 80 faculty who responded to open ended questions on pedagogy. Faculty represented: psychology = 31; education = 28; business = 7; public policy/admin = 6; human services = 6; nursing/ health services = 2; public health = 1; not given = 2.

Data Analysis

Data from the open ended questions were coded and similar concepts are summarized.

Findings

Demographics

51 women and 27 men participated (2 did not state their gender); 78.8% of the sample was Caucasian (other races included: 5% Black, 2.5% Native American, 5% Hispanic, 1.3% Asian, 7.5% did not answer the question); 90% were contributing faculty and 10% were core faculty; faculty worked for Walden for $M=6.2$ yrs. (range: 6 mon. - 22 yrs.). 77 were chairs and committee members, while 3 were only committee members.

When you take on a new dissertation student, how do you approach their orientation to you and to the classroom?

No orientation. 16 faculty stated that they do no orientation of new students, they rely just on the classroom. Interestingly, two stated that they did not understand what orienting students would mean. "I don't understand the 'orientation' part of this question."

Email. 15 faculty indicate they email students with their expectations.

Phone call. 35 faculty stated that have a phone call/teleconference with new students and lay out their expectations.

Passive Orientation. 3 faculty stated that they encourage students to contact them.

5 left the question blank, 3 were only committee members, 2 did not address the question.

What do you do to encourage students to stay motivated to finish the dissertation process?

There were 3 primary themes for this question. However, one faculty member stated that it wasn't his/her role to be motivating. "I try to meet them where they are at and help them take the next best step. I can't really motivate them. That's not my role."

Communicate. 22 faculty mentioned the importance of communicating regularly with students, whether through conference calls, individual calls, or by email.

Acknowledge/ celebrate accomplishments. 7 faculty mentioned celebrating student accomplishments

Encouraging comments. 5 faculty mentioned giving encouraging comments.

Give support. 12 talked about being supportive.

Talk about future plans. 4 mentioned having the student talk about their future plans with their degree.

Email. 7 mentioned contacting the student regularly by email.

Fast draft returns. 4 faculty mentioned the importance of fast draft returns on writing feedback.

Be realistic. 6 faculty highlighted the importance of having the student be realistic in their goals and timeline.

7 left the question blank, 5 did not address the question (e.g., "Quarter plan may help, along with submitting regular revisions").

What are your expectations for student writing progress and how often do you expect to give feedback?

Few faculty answered this question with any specificity, which suggests they have few requirements. Those that did specified a range of expectations; one stated that he/she expected "perfection" with each draft.

5 left the question blank, 27 provided very general comments (e.g., "I always give feedback"), and 8 made general comments about student writing (e.g., "writing should be a lot better than it is now - many cannot even form sentences").

At least once per quarter. 2 faculty indicated they expected at least one draft per quarter.

2-3 drafts a quarter. 21 faculty stated that expected at least 2 drafts per quarter.

4 times per term. One faculty indicated 4 times per term.

5 times per term. 4 stated 5 times per term.

Once a week. 2 indicated that they wanted to see a draft weekly.

By chapter. 5 state they only wanted to see completed chapters.

Writing center. 5 explicitly mentioned sending students to the writing center, often before they would read a draft.

Limitations

Faculty volunteered for the study based upon an ad in the CFE newsletter, thus only those who read the newsletter and with a particular interest in dissertation mentoring may have responded. Also, it is probable that only those comfortable in their online mentoring would have responded. The present data represent 77% of the full sample, thus, 23% did not respond to any of the open ended questions.

Conclusions

The results indicate that faculty in the sample are using a wide variety of pedagogical techniques to mentor, there do not seem to be consistent approaches to student orientation, motivation, nor to expectations for writing.

An orientation and discussion of expectations appears to be occurring with about a third of participating faculty. Consistent communication appears to be the most commonly identified method of motivating students.

More research is needed to determine the best pedagogy for mentoring dissertation students.

Social Change Implications

The findings from this study can be used as a starting point for discussions on appropriate mentoring and for developing consistent expectations in dissertation practices at Walden.