




Positive Leadership Theory for Online Dissertation Mentoring

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Abstract

A number of theoretical models have been suggested for how to mentor doctoral students. However, they tend to rely on hierarchical and authoritarian relationships between the faculty and students. Such models tend to create dependency and fear of the faculty, resulting in a reluctance in coming to the mentor for guidance. Such models do not tend to work well with online adult doctoral students with jobs and families. This paper proposes a model of positive leadership for online doctoral mentors, where mentors are accessible and create an environment where success is assumed and social support is provided by both the mentor and peers. In this model of mentorship, students are encouraged to problem solve their deficiencies and work out a plan to address them. Gratitude is expressed by the mentor and encouraged in students to recognize those who have helped them to progress. The paper includes suggestions, examples, and methods to aid the mentor in positive leadership of doctoral students.

Keywords: *positive leadership, doctoral mentoring, doctoral mentoring theory, research mentoring*

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Introduction

Doctoral online (also known as distance or remote) learning has become a ubiquitous entity: In 2016, 31.6% of all students took at least one course at a distance (Seaman et al., 2018). The essential characteristic of distance learning programs is that students and instructors are geographically dispersed (Seaman et al., 2018). Students and instructors may be anywhere in the United States or throughout the world; instruction may take place through the computer, telephone, email, or other means.

Dissertation Mentoring

Approximately 40–50% of U.S. doctoral students who begin a doctoral program will never complete it (Litalien & Guay, 2015), with an even lower completion rate for minority students (36%–56%; Okahana et al., 2020). Lack of doctoral student retention results in a loss of revenue for the institution, students with high

student loans and no degree, and loss of institutional credibility. Regardless of the program or institution, the common element for all doctoral students is their research supervisor/faculty mentor, who assists and supervises the students' research for their doctoral dissertation. The doctoral dissertation (which may be called a "doctoral thesis," doctoral project," or "capstone" in some institutions) demonstrates students' abilities to conduct an original piece of empirical research as part of the requirements of doctoral programs (e.g., Ed.D., Ph.D.; Gardner & Barnes, 2014; Paré, 2017).

There is considerable empirical evidence that faculty-doctoral student research mentoring relationships are a significant aspect of the graduate education experience and foster student success (Al-Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019; Burrus et al., 2019; 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 (Ferrell et al., 2019; Komarraju et al., 2010) and underrepresented students specifically (Patton, 2009; Posselt, 2018). Research has demonstrated that faculty-graduate student relationships play an integral role in shaping graduate students' research training, their professional identity, and career dedication, in addition to providing socialization into academe (Gardner & Doore, 2020). Mentors derive a host of possible benefits as well, from personal satisfaction to career enhancement (Anafarta & Apaydin, 2016; Rose, 2003).

Doctoral programs, especially those online, tend to be lengthy and stressful; as a result, the online doctoral mentor needs to be more proactive than in a brick-and-mortar environment (Jameson & Torres, 2019). The lack of effective doctoral supervision can result in student emotional issues and social isolation and may result in the student leaving the program (Ali et al., 2007; Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). A further issue online is that traditional doctoral supervision sets up an inherently hierarchical power relationship between supervisor and student. This power dynamic is perceived to be unequal, resulting in the relationship being a determining factor in whether the student will be successful in his or her program (Morris, 2011). The power dynamic can add more challenges to the relationship because it may affect students' willingness to express their feelings or perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the supervision they receive (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019).

An example of the power differential in doctoral mentoring is illustrated in a recent theory to aid faculty in effective mentoring: Roberts and Ferro-Almeida's (2019) theory of tough love for doctoral mentors, which combined parenting and trust theory. According to tough love theory, mentors who are benevolent, competent, honest, reliable, and demanding will bring about optimal growth of students. The basis of the theory is authoritative parenting and is one of hierarchical authority, in which the mentor (in the parent role) expresses high expectations and demands that young people reach those expectations. However, today many doctoral students are not of traditional college age (particularly in online education) and a parental authority may not be appropriate for them. Hierarchical relationships tend to infantilize the person, placing them in a position of dependency and fear of the authority (Diefenbach, 2013). Mentors need to recognize that doctoral students are adults and lead them to make their own decisions so they will be independent scholars and researchers.

Research has shown some online doctoral mentor behaviors are linked to better student performance. In a systematic review of the literature on online supervision, Gray and Costa (2019) identified nine aspects of an effective doctoral student/supervisor relationship.

1. Supervisor ensures that assumptions, and expectations are openly discussed, and agreement are embedded in ground rules which are regularly reviewed and re-affirmed in the context of online supervision.
2. Supervisor is intrinsically enthusiastic about their topic.
3. Supervisor adopts an educative role suitable for the medium of online learning.
4. Supervisor cares about them as an individual as well as their research.

5. Supervisor is culturally aware and sensitive in the way that the online relationship is developed and progressed.
6. Supervisor is readily available and always there when needed.
7. Supervisor provides readily understood guidance and is approachable when further clarification is required, using a variety of online resources as appropriate.
8. Supervisor provides advice on their work, sending it back as soon as possible with comments and constructive criticism, using a variety of online resources as appropriate.
9. Supervisors should provide a coherent structure as well as support within the online supervisor relationship. (p. 185)

However, as Gray and Costa (2019) indicated, a theoretical framework incorporating these known aspects of online doctoral mentoring is lacking. An option in mentoring that addresses many of the identified positive mentoring attributes and has not been previously employed for doctoral faculty mentors is that of positive leadership.

Positive Leadership

Cameron (2012) introduced the concept of positive leadership, which was based upon the principles of positive psychology (Seligman, 1999); it has recently been applied to business organizations (Adams et al., 2020), to K–12 education leadership (Cherkowski et al., 2020), and to higher education leadership (Benito et al., 2018; Buller, 2013). A critical review of the literature on positive leadership (Malinga et al., 2019) determined that positive leadership consists of a number of leadership traits (e.g., optimism and a “can-do” mindset, altruism, an ethical orientation, and motivational characteristics). A positive leader should possess specific leadership behaviors, such as creating a positive working environment, developing positive relationships, focusing on results, and engaging in positive communication with employees (Malinga et al., 2019). Further, these behaviors should in turn enhance certain leadership outcomes (such as enhanced overall productivity and performance levels, improved organizational citizenship behavior, and enhanced employee well-being) that are beneficial to the leader, their employees, and the organization.

Positive leadership is based upon three aspects of performance. (1) It focuses on performance outcomes that exceed expected performance. (2) It focuses on strengths and capabilities (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). It stresses positive communication, optimism, and strengths, as well as the opportunities presented in problems and weaknesses (Benito et al., 2018). (3) Finally, positive leadership focuses on virtuousness or the best of the human condition. Positive leaders work as a coach and partner with individuals under their supervision as opposed to that of an authority in a chain of command structure.

Cameron (2012) emphasized four key strategies to motivate employees that have resulted from research in work settings. The first strategy is a positive work environment, in which employees have optimistic attitudes and well-being predominates. Research (e.g., Bagozzi, 2003; Benito et al., 2018; Fredrickson, 2002) has demonstrated that conditions fostering positive emotions result in optimal individual and organizational functioning, both in the short and long terms. Examples of strategies to promote a positive work environment include promoting work-life balance (Owens et al., 2018), valuing employees as partners, and maintaining professionalism and competency (Maassen et al., 2021).

The second strategy is building positive relationships through the creation of “energy networks” that lead individuals to feel motivated and optimistic. Energy networks are created by people who create and support vitality in others; these individuals uplift and boost people. This idea can be conceptualized as reframing situations into a problem-solving mode. Thus, instead of merely pointing out problems, the individuals try to point out ways to improve the situation. Positive energizing is a learned behavior; positive energizers benefit their organizations not only by performing better themselves but also by enabling others to perform better. This is particularly the case for leaders, as the positive energy of a leader can affect the organization and the

employees' performance. Heaphy and Dutton (2008) demonstrated that positive social relationships affect the cardiovascular, immune, and hormonal systems, which enhance health and feelings of well-being.

The third strategy is positive communication, seen through collaboration and emphasizing individuals' strengths and contributions. Losada and Heaphy (2004; also see Box et al., 2021) demonstrated this strategy in a study in which they reported that the most important factor in predicting organizational performance was the ratio of positive statements to negative statements by leaders and employees. Positive statements were defined as those that expressed appreciation, support, helpfulness, approval, or compliments. Negative statements were those expressing criticism, disapproval, dissatisfaction, cynicism, or disagreement.

The final strategy is positive meaning in which a sense of community is developed, and actions are grounded in a set of core values. People who are engaged in work they feel is personally important lead to effects such as reductions in stress, depression, turnover, absenteeism, dissatisfaction, and cynicism as well as increases in commitment, effort, engagement, empowerment, happiness, satisfaction, and a sense of fulfillment (Cameron 2012; Chen, 2007; Gray & Costa, 2019).

Positive Leadership and Online Mentoring

I propose that the principles of positive leadership can be applied to the online dissertation mentoring experience. Some applications of positive leadership theory for faculty, strategies, and guidelines for mentors include the following.

Positive Leaders Create a Positive Environment

In a dissertation context, a positive environment may be created through compassion, forgiveness, and expressions of gratitude. Fostering compassion could be achieved by noticing when a student is having problems and offering care and concern as well as resources to support the student. An example would be early recognition of writing issues and referral to a writing course or editor.

Aiding forgiveness involves helping the student acknowledge the hurt of feeling unprepared or not "feeling good enough" and identifying remediation that the student can use to reach the high standards necessary to complete the degree (Nori et al., 2020). Using language that helps the student to clarify his or her reasons for getting a doctorate and his or her plans for the future may lead to a focus on long-term solutions. Reinforcing the need for skill development as a step to future employment and acquiring a toolbox of proficiencies can reduce the sting of remedial work (Lesko et al., 2020).

Encouragement by the positive leader for the student to acknowledge their gratitude to others can build a positive climate (Howells et al., 2017). Suggesting the student keep a research journal in which they acknowledge others' contributions and comments can be helpful (Stadtlander, 2018). Encouraging students to occasionally reach out by phone or email to peers, friends, family members, and former teachers to offer thanks and acknowledge their assistance in reaching the student's goals can lead to developing respectful and supportive relationships (a great time to encourage this behavior is at Thanksgiving; Stadtlander, 2018). Leaders can also make sure their own language is respectful by using "please" and "thank you" to students.

Gratitude on the part of both students and supervisors has been reported to result in positive effects for both parties (Howells et al., 2017). Following an intervention to promote expression and feelings of gratitude in Howells et al.'s study (2017), both supervisors and students reported increased feelings of well-being. Supervisors were found to improve the quality and delivery of supervisor feedback to students, and students reported increased enthusiasm for their research. Student-supervisor relationships were reported to be enhanced "by building trust, developing communication and relational well-being, increasing motivation and productivity, and diminishing the inequality of the student-supervisor relationship construct" (p. 11).

Positive Leaders Foster Positive Relationships

Part of a positive relationship is believing in the student's creativity and resourcefulness. If, as a mentor, you think the student is incapable, you will not demonstrate the creativity and excitement in your mentoring that help the student reach somewhere fresh, new, and deep (Guzzardo et al., 2021).

An important reminder when working with students is that "people do well when they can" (Kraft, 2020, p. 45), meaning that their current life allows them to have the mental space to work and think, as well as the skills needed to solve problems to complete the task. For online students, as adults often working and with families, this can be particularly relevant when acting out behaviors are seen (e.g., anger that seems unjustified, not following through on assignments). Starting conversations with asking how they are doing and coping with the stresses of research can provide insights into the underlying issues. Sometimes adult students need help to problem solve how to handle their many responsibilities with working on their dissertations. Brainstorming alternatives, such as getting up earlier, creating a small office in a room with a door (even a closet will work), or working in a library or coffee shop may help them find the mental and physical space to work.

A relationship issue for many faculty members is when students become emotional and frustrated with feedback. Reynolds (2020) suggests not to mentor the emotion: the topic is what is important, and the emotion is not the topic. So do not give up on the student's agenda in order to get rid of their unpleasant emotion. Give space for the student to experience and express the emotion. Use silence as well as subtle cues to the student that it is ok to feel as they do, such as inviting the student to share what they are feeling ("it looks like you're feeling something right now, what is it?"). Invite the student to connect the emotion to the topic at hand and problem solve. However, avoid asking "why" questions, which can come across as judgmental. Why questions can cause the student to think they have to defend or explain themselves instead of inviting new awareness. It is better to ask something like, "what about this brings up frustration for you?" Or "what does your frustration tell you about this? What has to change inside you in order for you to deal with this?" "What are some options that you can use to address this?"

Positive Leaders Foster Positive Communication

Empirical evidence (e.g., Box et al., 2021; Losada & Heaphy, 2004) suggests that higher levels of positive communication compared to negative communications lead to higher performance. This area is one in which many faculty members have the most difficulty; traditionally, academic responses are negative where problems are pointed out. However, previous research indicates that students are more likely to reject or ignore comments if they evoke negative emotional responses (Ryan & Henderson, 2017).

Positive communication does not mean that you can never say that a student's work is not up to acceptable standards. Good leadership is not about stroking egos. Positive academic leadership does not require the mentor to become satisfied with mediocrity (Buller, 2013). If a student cannot (or will not) meet goals and show sufficient progress, it may require a meeting to discuss whether the current program and time in the student's life are compatible with the doctoral program. Positive leadership is about finding effective strategies to achieve the goals developed for your students, recognizing if such goals are not being attained, and problem-solving solutions.

Causing someone to live in a state of fear or dissatisfaction does not lead to the student reaching his or her goals (Buller, 2013). Criticizing students over relatively minor matters builds a wall between the mentor and student (e.g., "The way you are writing citations is unacceptable and not at a graduate level. I am not going to look at it again until you fix them."). For reasons of pride or fear, they may not feel comfortable coming to the mentor for guidance any longer. Negative language may convey an impression, however unjustified, that the mentor will dismiss any inquiries in the future as dumb questions or matters that they already ought to know.

A preferable strategy is to use positive language in such a way that the student understands exactly what the mentor does want (Buller, 2013). Talk with the student and offer advice, keeping the tone constructive and forward looking. For instance, a mentor might say:

Thanks for talking with me today. I really appreciate your meeting with me weekly. I'd like you to take a look at this particular section of your paper. It's not clear to me exactly what you're trying to say in this paragraph, can you try saying it to me in your own words? That is much clearer, you might want to try reading your work aloud and see if you can clarify the language.

It is often most effective to praise what you can; in the above example the mentor praised the student's timeliness and also their effort to reword the sentence. Providing guidance gently and helpfully, while demonstrating absolute confidence in the person's ability to meet the standards that have been set, keeps the communication open and encourages the student to keep trying.

Motivational Interviewing. Using skills from motivational interviewing can also be beneficial to a positive leader, particularly when suggesting a change of approach or recommending the student get additional help.

[Motivational interviewing] is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion. (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 29)

Key qualities of motivational interviewing include using a guiding style of communication that incorporates good listening, directing, and giving information and advice. It is designed to empower people to make a change by drawing out their own meaning, importance, and capacity for change. It is based on being respectful and curious with people in a way that facilitates the natural process of change and honors the individual's autonomy.

In the current context of fostering communication between a doctoral student and mentor, two aspects of motivational interviewing are relevant: evoking and planning. During the evoking step, the mentor gently explores and helps the student build his or her own "why" of change through eliciting the student's ideas and motivations. Ambivalence is normalized, explored without judgment and, as a result, may be resolved. This process requires skillful attention to the person's talk about change. During the planning step, the mentor helps the student explore the "how" of change; whereby the mentor supports the student to consolidate his or her commitment to change and develops a plan based on the person's own insights and expertise. Here is an example of how such an exchange might look:

Mentor: Could you remind me please; what did you say you would complete for this week?

Student: I was going to write 5 pages, but I just ran out of time. It is so hard to find literature!

Mentor: I see. What did you decide your goal would be for this term for your dissertation?

Student: I want to get Chapter 2, the literature review done.

Mentor: And how is that coming along? We are now halfway through the term.

Student: I have a few pages done. I have been really busy with work; it is just so hard for me to have time to sit and write.

Mentor: Remind me again, why did you want to get your doctorate?

Student: I want to be able to teach college, I am really tired of my job.

Mentor: So, the next step in being able to reach your goal of being a college teacher is finishing Chapter 2, correct?

Student: Yes, I have to get that done!

Mentor: Let's brainstorm a little. What are some possible ways you could make time to write?

Student: Well, I guess I could write during my lunch hour.... maybe I could get up an hour or two earlier?

Mentor: What changes would you have to make in your life to make that happen?

Student: Well, I guess I would have to take my lunch to work. And I would need to get enough rest by going to bed earlier. I could get up at 5 and write for 2 hours before work.

Mentor: Is that something you are willing to do?

Student: I don't know if I can do it all of the time.

Mentor: How long do you think you could commit to doing it?

Student: Maybe a month? And see how it goes?

Mentor: That seems reasonable to me. How about if we check in next week and see how your writing is coming along?

Some aspects of the above exchange to note are that the mentor had the student express his goals and used them to help the student to brainstorm some possible solutions. The mentor verified that the student was willing to commit to a specific time period for his solution and provided opportunities to check in on the progress. At subsequent meetings the pair could refine the solution to be sure it remains workable.

Positive Leaders Foster Positive Meaning

People who feel they are pursuing a profound purpose or engaging in work that is personally important find that positive outcomes are produced (Savvides & Stavrou, 2020). These outcomes include reductions in stress, depression, turnover, absenteeism, dissatisfaction, and cynicism, as well as increases in commitment, effort, engagement, empowerment, happiness, satisfaction, and a sense of fulfillment (Cameron, 2013; Chen, 2007; Savvides & Stavrou, 2020).

Cameron (2013) suggested that work is associated with meaningfulness when it possesses one or more of four key attributes. It appears that these attributes can also be applied to the student who is pursuing a doctoral degree. The first attribute is that the work has an important positive impact on the well-being of others (Brown et al., 2003; Grant et al., 2007). Students may be able to find meaning in their doctoral work by being reminded of the long-term implications of their research study. Having students articulate realistic implications and applications of the results of their study may provide the impetus to continue their work when things get difficult. An example question in this area might be, "How could other (teachers/nurses/professionals, etc.) apply your work in the future?"

The second attribute of meaningfulness is that work is associated with an important virtue or a personal value (Bright et al., 2006; Hager, 2018; Kaufman, 2018). During their doctoral work, students need to be reminded of the reasons that they originally undertook the doctoral program. Often the student gets distracted by the day-to-day concerns and loses focus of their original goal and how it would benefit their and their family's future. Occasionally having students restate their ultimate goal, why they started the program, and why they selected the topic of their research may help them recommit to the program and their research study. It is

helpful for faculty to keep track of the student's goal and use it as incentive when difficult feedback is given (e.g., "There are a lot of changes needed in this (methods/literature, etc.) section, Mary. But remember, when you are a college instructor, it is an area you will need to understand and be able to discuss with your students, so it is well worth the time to get it right now").

It is also important that the mentor indicates through his or her behavior and language that they believe it is important that the student finish their doctorate. Setting up a schedule of weekly or biweekly phone meetings, with assignments due at each meeting, illustrates their commitment to the process and to the student. Reminding the student occasionally of how far they have come in the dissertation process and how much they have improved reinforces their belief in the student.

The third attribute of meaningfulness is that the work has an impact that extends beyond the immediate timeframe or creates a ripple effect (Cameron & Lavine, 2006). A basic human need is to create a legacy or to extend influence beyond the immediate time frame (Lawrence & Nohria, 2004). It may help students to consider the personal legacy to their family of completing a doctoral degree and how they may motivate current and future family members to also attain higher education. A discussion of a long-term research agenda may also be beneficial for a student to consider how their research may benefit their profession and society. An example of how to discuss these issues:

You have developed an interesting study, Meredith. What do you see as the next study that would be interesting to do? Great ideas! You should write those down; you are starting to develop a research agenda. It is a good idea to keep track of all of your research ideas for the future. How could your study be applied to other areas in (psychology/political science/our field of study)?

The final attribute of meaningfulness is that the work leads to supportive relationships or a sense of community (Polodny et al., 2004). In an online environment the doctoral committee has a responsibility to create supportive relationships and a sense of community between students (Stadtlander et al., 2020). Respecting that the student has a key role within the committee and is a scholar in training may help the committee to create a feeling in the student that they do not want to let the committee down by not completing the doctoral degree.

The dissertation mentor can not only create a positive relationship with the student but also facilitate a supportive community between their students. For example, faculty may wish to consider maintaining a texting group with their online dissertation students (e.g., using the app GroupMe; Stadtlander et al., 2020). In such a group both current and former students may be in the same texting group. The students can offer support on the dissertation process as well as personal emotional support for the members, requiring only occasional input from faculty. Having peers that understand what the individual is experiencing can be invaluable. Such a support group might also be developed in person or in a classroom environment.

In an online dissertation environment isolation can be a major problem for students (Kaufmann, 2018). Many faculty members offer a regular online group meeting, for example, having a monthly meeting using conferencing software (e.g., Zoom) in which students have the opportunity to interact and share questions and progress. They can celebrate successes and offer advice to others. Meetings may be an optional support group or faculty may require attendance and have more formal sessions. Positive leadership approaches can be used to set the tone and stimulate interaction between students; some examples include the following.

Welcome everyone, I am so glad you could join us! Let's begin with a check-in, tell us where you are in the process and how things have been going.... John indicated he is having problems writing his literature review, anyone have any suggestions that worked for you? Any resources that might help him?

Focusing on what students do well and facilitating their sharing that skill in a group setting can have a strong impact. For example, asking a student who has successfully completed a section of his or her paper or defended their proposal or final paper to discuss their strategies and experience can benefit the group and promote excellence for all. Some faculty also have students practice their oral presentations before their classmates, providing students the opportunity to provide peer feedback and understand the preparation required for the defense.

Organization

An important aspect of being a positive leader is being organized with all the information for and about the mentees. To be effective the mentor needs to keep track of student progress, the students' short- and long-term goals, and information about their personal life. Being knowledgeable about students' jobs, marital status, and if they have children at home provides insights into their motivations and concerns. As a mentor, it is necessary to keep track of where students are in the process, notes on them, and their drafts. It may be required to find specific information months later, as well as being able to recall the rationale for making decisions and a timeline of when things were done. There are a number of methods to achieve this organization, from making a strict file system on the computer to maintaining a log in a spreadsheet or in word processing software. The important aspect is to set up a system that will work for the user and to keep it maintained. Some example entries of a log of student interactions, for those not familiar with the idea:

- 3-7 call, agreed to be chair, discussed expectations, she wants to be college professor. Has 2 middle school daughters, and works as a technician in a hospital
- 3-21 call, discussed definitions, doing expert panel, pilot.
- 4-10 decent draft of prospectus and survey—made some comments
- 4-22 reviewed draft of prospectus—suggested we do a video chat and talk through it. She tends to phrase things vaguely—assuming the reader understands
- 4-29 almost done with prospectus—just a few things to clarify
- 5-19 prospectus approval by committee
- 7-6 call, reviewed partial draft of c 2—looking good so far
- 8-13 call, discussed c 2
- 10-13 call, full draft of c 2, discussed expectations with methods

Conclusions

Positive leadership for online mentors means being accessible and creating an environment where success is assumed, and social support is provided by both the mentor and peers. Students are encouraged to problem solve their deficiencies and work out a plan to address them. Gratitude is expressed by the mentor and encouraged in students to recognize those who have helped them to progress. Using positive language, being open, and being supportive leads students to succeed.

One of the biggest differences between positive mentorship and more traditional forms of mentoring is that the leader does not necessarily appear to be leading. In other words, rather than telling students to do tasks, positive leaders spend much of their time creating environments that increase the likelihood of student success. They lead without making students continually feel that they are being led and dependent, even

though everyone senses their positive energy and progress that results from their collective efforts (Buller, 2013). Thus, positive leadership provides a viable alternative to mentoring based on hierarchy, fear of penalties for honest mistakes, and other factors that inhibit creativity and destroy initiative in their students. The goal for the mentor is to develop independent and proficient researcher-scholars.

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