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Abstract

Although students and faculty at a university level differ on what constitutes mentoring, communication is key. Students and their faculty instructors/advisors in university online programs were surveyed to discover if and how the perceived mentoring occurred. Students wanted evidence of a personal interest in them by their instructors/advisors. However, students equated mentorship with communication. Students were particularly interested in the amount of time delay between any question they asked and the response they received from their instructor/advisor. Faculty considered mentoring to be above and beyond mere advising or instructing in an online course or program. Faculty also perceived communication as vital; but mentorship communication was vital to the professional development of their students/advisees and not simply answers to course or graduation questions.

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Introduction

One of the questions facing college faculty transforming their programs to online delivery is how to maintain the personal mentoring of graduate students implicit in a master's degree program (Roblyer & Ekhami, 2000). Based on the characteristics of graduate students who choose online programs (Howland & Moore, 2002), students and faculty view mentoring differently. Graduate students choose online programs for various reasons ranging from convenience to self-directed individualized learning (Howland and Moore, 2002). To be successful in an online program, a student must contain the ability to be self-motivated and organized (Petrides, 2002). In addition, online students must take responsibility for their own learning and be able to adjust to a new climate of instruction (Garrison et.al,2004; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2004). Basically, what do these self-directed, organized students expect from their instructor and their advisor in an online program?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to interview graduate students enrolled in a

variety of different online courses and programs and to interview the university faculty teaching these courses (who also advise) in order to discover what expectations each group had concerning mentoring in graduate programs. To begin, how did each group define mentorship? What examples of mentoring did each group describe? What conclusions can be drawn from the responses to improve the quality of online instruction?

Methodology

Students enrolled in over twenty online courses were asked, in an additional discussion board thread in the Blackboard platform, several open-ended questions. Based on the answers to these questions, a follow-up open-ended question was asked. Faculty teaching these courses was then asked the same open-ended questions. Responses were tabulated and placed in a hierarchal order with most often given responses listed first to least often given responses listed last. Of 208 graduate students surveyed, 132 responded, producing a return rate of 64%. Twenty-seven instructors responded to individual interview survey questions.

Questions to graduate students

Questions:

1. Provide your definition of mentoring.
2. Do you feel you are mentored by your faculty advisor/instructor? Yes No
3. If yes: Do you consider mentoring to be about coursework, teaching in general, or both? Provide examples.
4. How was mentoring provided to you? Circle as many as apply.
Phone, Through Blackboard Face-to-face, Skype, Adobe Connect, Facebook, Texting, Other (please specify)

Follow-up Question:

1. How soon should you expect a reply from your mentor/advisor/instructor?

Questions to Faculty

1. Provide your definition of mentoring.
2. Do you feel you mentor your advisees/students? Yes No
3. If yes, provide examples of mentoring provided by you.
4. How was mentoring provided by you? Circle as many as apply.
Phone, Through Blackboard, Face-to-face, Skype, Adobe Connect, Facebook, Texting, Other (please specify)

Responses by students

Students defined mentoring in terms of communication with their advisor/instructor. Students equated mentorship with evidence of personal interest from their advisor/instructor. All student respondents felt they had been mentored. In addition, all student respondents felt mentoring was both course-based and general teaching responsiveness by the advisor/instructor. Examples of mentoring, as defined by students, included the following categories in descending order of number of responses in that category.

1. Assignment clarification
2. Program/graduation/requirements questions
3. Comprehensive exam information and advice
4. Responsiveness to personal issues in their own classrooms/schools/district assignments or teaching assignments
5. References for job or continuation in educational pursuits

Responses by faculty

Faculty definitions of mentoring emphasized differences between simple communication with students regarding coursework, programs, or graduation requirements to the perceived more important student-faculty interactions regarding research interests, current educational practices, and in-depth advice about professional development. Examples, again in hierarchical descending order of responses provided.

1. Providing new knowledge
2. Providing current research-based information
3. Providing new strategies based on current research
4. Providing specific feedback on assignments to improve student knowledge, presentation, professionalism, etc.
5. Tying current research to common practice
6. Developing professional behavior (dispositions) in students
7. Advising students on future career paths
8. Including student in research opportunities (presentations and papers)
9. Mentoring is NOT program advising!

Conclusions

Communication is the key to successful online instruction (Yang & Cornelius, 2004). Students indicated on the follow-up question with the survey in this study, they would like a response within 24 hours of asking. Lack of a timely response

from instructors or advisors is a major weakness listed for online programs (Howland & Moore, 2002; Petride, 2002; Hara & Kling, 1999, Vonderwell, 2003). Without a timely response, students feel abandoned or lose confidence to be successful in college (Howland & Moore, 2002). As online instruction becomes more prevalent and technology advances, more innovated ways of communication are available (Clark, 2002, Dwyer, 2003). With these technological advances, instructors and advisors can interact with students more personally. Developing a more personal relationship with an instructor or advisor is one of the strengths of online instruction (Petrides, 2002, Yang & Cornelius, 2005). University faculty teaching and advising online are encouraged to capitalize on the ability to develop a personal relationship with college students and develop a different paradigm of mentorship.

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