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Norina L. Columbaro

Catherine A. Hansman

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Mentoring Relationships and Experiences in Online Doctoral Education: Perceptions, Reality, and Action

Norina L. Columbaro, Cleveland State University
Catherine A. Hansman, Ed.D., Cleveland State University

Keywords: Mentoring, online doctoral degrees, e-mentoring

Abstract: This paper explores research and literature surrounding the existence and nature of mentoring relationships within online doctoral degree programs and how these relationships prepare online doctoral degree graduates for full-time, tenure track employment in higher education institutions.

There are reportedly 336 online doctoral degree programs worldwide (eLearners.com, 2012). According to the 2011 Almanac of Higher Education, among the top 10 institutions conferring online doctoral degrees in all disciplines are the for-profits such as Capella, Walden, and University of Phoenix Online. Land-based institutions have increasingly adopted online degree programs into their offerings as well. Allen and Seaman (2006) state that, “Doctoral/Research institutions have the greatest penetration of offering online programs as well as the highest overall rate (more than 80%) of having some form of online offering; either courses or full programs” (p. 2).

Adult learners often choose to earn their degrees online because of conflicts with their employment situations, socioeconomic status, family obligations, physical challenges, and living in remote geographic locations: reasons which potentially prohibit them from traveling to college campuses regularly (Enger, 2006; Rooney, 2011). Other research suggests that minority and female students may also turn to online learning after experiencing discriminatory treatment in the traditional classroom (Castro, 2007; Tosto, 2006).

Research focusing on online doctoral programs in preparation for academic careers consistently reveals a perception that online doctoral degree programs lack opportunities for social learning, mentoring and submersion in the academic culture (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). The value of mentoring within doctoral programs and as preparation for academic careers has been addressed in several empirical studies (Creighton, Parks, & Creighton, 2007; Hansman, 2012; Mullen, 2009). According to these studies, there are various forms of mentoring in doctoral programs, such as traditional mentor-protégé pairing, peer mentoring, mentoring mosaics, mentoring cohorts, and e-mentoring (Hansman, 2012; Mullen, 2009).

Findings from these studies suggest that mentoring relationships throughout a student’s doctoral program are widely considered integral to preparation for a career in higher education (Hansman, 2012; Mullen, 2009). On the other hand, there is consistent skepticism that emerged from several research studies about whether quality mentoring is occurring in online doctoral programs; thus, adequately preparing potential job candidates for tenure-track employment in colleges and universities (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). While there have been studies conducted regarding outside perceptions, little research has specifically attended to online doctoral students’ first-hand accounts of being mentored and their perceptions of how those experiences and relationships prepared them for tenure-track employment within four-year, land-based higher education institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the research and literature surrounding the

existence and nature of mentoring relationships within online doctoral degree programs. Discussion will focus on how these relationships prepare online doctoral degree graduates for full-time, tenure track employment in four-year, land-based higher education institutions. In addition, this discussion could encourage discourse surrounding the perceived necessity of “on campus” social learning and face-to-face mentoring for successful doctoral education and preparation for academic employment.

Initially, this topic holds significance for multiple adult education audiences in that it explores the intersection of doctoral education, mentoring, social learning, and technology. Discussion could illuminate challenges institutions may face relative to perceptions of mentoring opportunities in their online doctoral programs. In addition, current and prospective doctoral students may find value in this discussion as part of their personal exploration as well as the opportunity to share their perceptions and experiences. Finally, adult educators guiding online doctoral students may benefit from this discussion as they help students build and maintain healthy, mutually beneficial mentoring relationships whether they may be face to face or at a distance.

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