Chapter 9
A Framework for E-Mentoring in Doctoral Education

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ABSTRACT

The upward trend in online graduate degrees, the mobility of graduate students, and the increase in the number of dissertations completed at a distance from universities poses several challenges for faculty who supervise research virtually, students being mentored virtually, and institutions invested in the quality of doctoral education. At the same time, emerging communication technologies present new opportunities for mentoring approaches that build upon those used in traditional on-campus environments. Based on qualitative research with 29 graduates who completed their dissertations at a distance, this chapter presents a framework for the e-mentoring of research and dissertations that encompasses strategies and support at the institutional, mentor, small group, and mentee levels.

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INTRODUCTION

The upward trend in online education at institutions of higher education in the United States (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018) has also been reflected in the increasing number of blended and online doctoral degrees being offered (Kung & Logan, 2014). Such doctoral programs can vary widely by discipline and institution, where some consist of online coursework, seminars, and individual research, and others focus only on individual research and on-campus or virtual meetings. Dissertation formats across new programs also vary and include traditional five-chapter dissertations, a collection of articles, or collaborative dissertations. Regardless of program structure and dissertation formats, faculty mentoring of research continues to play an important role in students’ completion of dissertations in blended and online doctoral programs (Erichsen, Bolliger, & Halupa 2014; Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013). When doctoral programs are offered partly or completely online, and mentors and mentees are geographically dispersed, the development of research designs, implementation of dissertation research, and generally, the mentoring of dissertations becomes more complex and challenging. At the same time, the online environment, emerging and current communication technologies, and social media offer new possibilities for mentoring in additional ways to those in traditional on-campus environments.

In this chapter, we present a framework for the e-mentoring or virtual supervision of dissertations based on data collected during three iterations of an online doctoral program. Given the scarcity of research on virtual mentoring of dissertations for online students, or students conducting their research at a distance from universities in which they are enrolled, it is important to identify the ways in which institutions and supervisors can mentor research and support students at a distance, be it in on-campus programs or online programs. Literature on traditional apprenticeship models of doctoral supervision abounds, but little is known about the kinds of interactions and strategies that lead to successful doctoral degree completion when dissertations are completed at a distance.

BACKGROUND

Doctoral education scholars have used terms such as “supervision”, “advising”, and “mentoring” (Lyons, Scroggins & Bonham-Rule, 1990) to refer to interactions between a supervisor and doctoral student. Advising has alluded to more of a managerial and support role, and supervising has been the preferred term in the literature about educating, supporting, and managing the process of dissertation research (Kadushin, 1976; Winston & Polkosnik, 1984). In our research, we adopted the term mentoring that includes advising, supervising, mentor as well as mentee growth, and is learner-
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