

Holding Your Hand From a Distance: Online Mentoring and the Graduate Library and Information Science Student

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Abstract

The emergence of online education in colleges and universities brings with it a variety of issues and concerns for the remote student. One such issue is online mentoring.

This paper presents a study that examines perceptions of the impact and role of online mentoring by online graduate students in a Master of Library and Information Science program. The guiding research question asked “what impact does online mentoring have on the online student experience?” A survey using open and closed-ended response questions was administered. Findings indicate that the participants see the need for online mentors in at least two forms—peer mentors to assist with the “institutional maze” surrounding distance education programs, and secondly, professional mentors to assist with career planning and development. Institutions should thus consider a two-tiered mentor network to meet the needs of students at various points in their academic lives.

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Introduction: Mentoring Goes Digital

In recent years, an emergence of online, e-mentoring, or telementoring relationships is taking place across the Web, taking the traditional long-standing face-to-face practice into the electronic environment. The National Mentoring Center defines this emerging practice as "...mentoring projects that use technology to facilitate and support mentor relationships" (2002, p. 6). As distance education continues to emerge as a core educational strategy for all levels, the role and potential efficacy of online mentoring deserves careful consideration.

Mentoring in general has a long and diverse history, and this diversity certainly extends to the realm of online mentoring. Mentoring relationships exist among formal and informal learners of all ages, in many various settings and disciplines. Professionals in the field mentoring high school students (O'Neill, Wagner, and Gomez, 1996; Field, 2003); graduate students mentoring undergraduate learners in university settings (Easton, 2003); professional female engineers mentoring undergraduate and graduate female students in the science and engineering fields (Muller and Barsion, 2003); adults with varied interests mentoring youth with disabilities (Connecting to Success, 2003), and many more (see National Mentoring Partnership, 2003). Zeeb (2000) has explored the various categories of mentoring and their delivery mechanisms, recognizing traditional mentoring, peer, group or team, and online/virtual mentoring. In academic mentoring in particular, the stakeholder and their relationships vary: student to student, student to instructor or instructor's assistant, and student to professional. Academic mentoring as Stein and Glazer (2003, p. 10) suggest, is "a process of interpersonal exchange between a faculty member and a learner, typically both in the same profession." Referring to Zachary (2002), Stein and Glazer further assert that "views of academic mentoring are moving toward a process in which the role of the mentor is to help the mentee develop critical reflective skills and achieve mutually agreed upon academic and scholarly goals" (p. 10).

Notably, e-mentoring in its various forms is attractive to such important funding bodies as the National Science Foundation (Duff, 2000; Muller and Barsion, 2003), as well as to such corporate entities as IBM and Alcoa who have recognized the potential import and efficacy of online mentoring programs. Such sponsors have contributed to the planning, implementation,

and development of e-mentoring in schools and workplaces. Research is now emerging on the efficacy and viability of such programs.

It seems self-evident why children and young adults would benefit greatly from mentoring; and, given the current popularity of electronic communications among youth, e-mentoring has great potential – a caring, learning relationship that facilitates “trust, warmth and support” (Connecting to Success, 2003). Yet, in the realm of higher education in particular, where research continues to suggest that online learners are “voluntarily seeking further education; highly motivated and self-disciplined, older, willing to initiate calls to instructors for assistance, possess a more serious attitude toward coursework, and already a holder of a college degree” (Easton, 2003, p. 88-89), it may seem a mentor, academic or otherwise, is unnecessary. Yet, the complexities of online education, from the frustrations of the technology itself (Hara & Kling, 1999; Hawkrigde, 2003), to the potential isolation of online environments to learning the nuances of participating in online discussions all contribute to a situation where a mentor provides a much needed virtual hand to hold, for learners of all ages. Stein and Glazer (2003), who studied e-mentoring with online doctoral students, suggest that “mentoring in an online environment relates to enhancing the learner’s spirit of independent learning and building intellectual capacity...it is more about providing guidance on becoming a scholar, expressing support for the learner, advocating for learner success and persistence, and mutually establishing roles and relationships” (p. 21).

Background Information and Study Population

This study surveyed distance education graduate students on their perspectives of online mentoring. In particular, it questioned the perceived impact of online mentoring on the learning experience in a web-based Master’s program in Library and Information Science (LIS).

To contextualize the research within the professional framework of LIS schools, distance education offerings, and the existence of mentoring programs within them, the researchers considered how many distance learning programs were recognized and accredited by the American Library Association (ALA). The ALA reports 45 accredited programs offering the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS)/Master of Library Science (MLS) through some form of distance education. We inquired of the dean, admissions coordinators, or directors

if their school or program offered a mentoring process or program. Representatives from 33 of these schools or programs (73%) responded, with 42% indicating they do not have a formal mentoring process. Many of these reporting, however, qualified their responses with statements such as “we have a good deal of student to student interaction,” “our students move through the program as a cohort and build very strong ties with their cohort,” “we offer several advising/peer counseling options,” and “students in their second year of the MLIS program informally help their first year colleagues.”

Such statements indicate there are various degrees of understanding surrounding mentoring relationships, and many in LIS education recognize that some form of mentoring, whether in the form of a cohort or professional guidance, can be of value. The MLIS/MLS degree is a professional degree, and many pursuing the degree are already working in the profession in some capacity, which may change the type of mentoring that is actually needed. Mentoring, based on the comments reported, can assume different types: student to student, educator to student, and professional to student. This research sought to understand specifically how mentoring can impact the *online student* learning experience. Does the online MLIS student experience indicate that all three types of mentoring (student to student, educator to student, and professional to student) contribute to a meaningful overall learning experience? A larger question for research consideration will become “Are LIS schools/programs meeting the needs of their online learners?”

To begin to investigate these issues, the researchers looked at the School of Information Studies (SOIS) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), which began offering an online Master of Library and Information Science in 1998. Students pursuing the MLIS can complete all degree requirements (36 credits and a comprehensive exam) online. When the research was conducted (Fall 2003), the School had 150 distance education graduate students. Due to the limited population size, and small response rate (34%), this research may be considered a pilot study, from which future research can build. While the researchers did not design the survey with the intentions of statistical generalizability, the results do shed light on significant issues in e-mentoring that may hold applicability for students in similar professional degree programs in particular, and in the larger realm of serving distance students in general.

Figure 1: Participant demographic information.

Gender:	Female	Male
	94%	6%
Age Range		
	Participating	
20-25	6%	
26-30	20%	
31-35	14%	
36-40	10%	
41-45	16%	
46-50	24%	
51-55	10%	
over 56	2%	

Location:	Within 50 Miles of the University	Over 50 Miles
	8%	92%

Profession	
Professional Librarian/¹ Library Technician/ ParaProfessional	39%
Non-Library Workers	25%
Full-Time Graduate Students	25%
Full-Time Undergraduate Students	4%
None of the Above	7%

Current and Desired Mentoring Relationships

When the survey was conducted in Fall 2003, 6% of the respondents currently had a mentor within the SOIS program, with 67% reporting they would consider working with a mentor if the

School provided a formal program. Eighteen percent reported having a mentor outside of the School, typically in the form of a colleague or co-worker. The existing mentor program is an informal program, where a new student requests to be paired with a more experienced student. The School's Distance Education Coordinator provides the email addresses and it falls upon the individuals to communicate. The School is now exploring a more formal mentoring program, recognizing that effective e-mentoring requires extensive planning and commitment (National Mentoring Center, 2002).

Finally, the breakdown of survey respondents, according to age group, who would like to have a mentor, follows:

Figure 2: Mentor Seeker by Age Range.

Age Range	Percent Seeking a Mentor
20-25	4%
26-30	25%
31-35	8%
36-40	8%
41-45	17%
46-50	21%
51-55	12%
over 56	4%

Methods and Instrument

Three individuals comprised the research team: one professor in the SOIS and two distance education graduate students from the MLIS program. As noted, this research sought to explore the relationship between online mentoring and the online learning experience. A major consideration is whether online students feel a mentoring program would benefit their learning

and educational experiences. Due to sample size, statistical generalizability was not sought, and the results presented herein set the stage for a larger, more exhaustive research study.

The research instrument utilized a mixed-method approach, combining closed-ended survey questions, and qualitatively-based open-ended questions, comprising a 29-item questionnaire (see Appendix A, pages 15-18). Demographic data were collected for analysis of significant age, gender, and experiential trends. The survey was created and loaded on a secure web site for ease of access by the online students, following approval from the University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Students were informed about the survey in the School's Virtual Lounge, as well as by announcement in individual online courses.

Open-ended comments were analyzed using qualitative research techniques; each member of the research team analyzed and coded student comments, after which the research team consulted on themes and major issues.

Discussion: Perspectives on E-Mentoring and Online Learning

Typically, online mentoring is done through asynchronous communications, email or a discussion forum, thereby freeing the mentor and mentee from the constraints of time, geography, high costs, or other limiting factors. Unfortunately, in a traditional face-to-face mentoring relationship, mentors and mentees may be matched based on geographic proximity despite other significant incompatibilities. In academic mentoring, the typical subject specialization or profession guides the mentoring pair. Research has shown that mentors should bring certain characteristics to the mentoring relationship: Duff (2000) suggests mentors should be "honest, realistic, positive, and encouraging..." (p. 50), while *Connecting to Success* (2002) hopes that a mentor will engage in a "caring relationship" with "ongoing, regular communication, trust, warmth and support" (n.p.). While disparate types of mentoring relationships exist, certain commonalities emerge;

- A mentor provides support, encouragement, friendship, and is a person with whom to share joys, frustrations, and feelings.

- A mentor offers professional development advice and information, and serves as an intellectual resource.

These two areas often intertwine and overlap, and rightly so. The researchers identified the following themes as significant in responding to the research questions through the open-ended data.

Peer Mentors, Professional Mentors, and Instructor Mentors

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents agreed that mentoring would be helpful and would ultimately improve the learning experience. Of these respondents, a desire for peer mentors and professional mentors over an instructor mentor prevailed. When asked about positive or negative experiences in the SOIS online program, several participants commented on the professors themselves, noting that the experience itself depends on the professor—“some are just better than others.” Perhaps if professors/instructors assumed a greater mentor role, more participants would feel that a mentor can improve the overall learning experience. Given the MLIS is a graduate professional degree, students’ needs may be dramatically different than a traditional undergraduate or graduate student in a humanities or social science program. The professions may be unique in the types of mentoring relationships that are beneficial to students.

Technology and Online Learning: What Can a Mentor Do?

The most common theme throughout the respondents’ comments revolved around the technical and institutional aspects of distance education. Finding one’s way through the maze of technology, and then through the institutional maze of registration, university resources, and student services, among other challenges, appears daunting to new online students. A mentor, it was felt, could alleviate feelings of confusion and helplessness in “the system.” For instance, one student specifically wanted a mentor who has “been there, done that,” in order to ask questions about the program, classes, professors, and the format of online classes. In particular, a mentor could “advise the student of where to focus attention to learn the steps to get started. The mentor could answer questions and walk the student through the necessary steps...,” and “An online mentor could discuss common pitfalls to help you avoid them.” In short, as one participant stated, “support from a mentor would probably help the newbies in learning the

system.” The idea of “immersing” new students in the learning environment is something to which a mentor would contribute, “there's a lot of simple things that aren't covered in some courses, like the availability of resources through UWM's library site.”

Some participants seemed reluctant to ask their instructor about the process and technical issues in online learning, looking instead to their peers on the School's Virtual Lounge. In particular, the mentor should “help [with] technical problems, downloading, uploading, navigating DE software.” This sentiment supports the realities described by Easton (2003); the mentors, instructors' assistants, in her study reported that their mentees' primary problems dealt with the “newness of the technology and errors on the website and in the materials” (p. 96). Hara and Kling's (1999) study of student frustrations online also point primarily to technological problems and difficulties. However, the participants here reported a high level of satisfaction with the course management system (Web CT or Desire to Learn), with 94% currently satisfied with the system, and 92% reporting that they believe instructors are mindful of online students' needs when posting online course materials.

A second major area where a mentor would impact the online learning experience revolves around the potential isolation students feel in online coursework. One participant jokingly stated that she tells people she is attending “Lone-Wolf University,” and that online mentors could ease these feelings of isolation. A non-faculty mentor seems most appropriate here, as one respondent specifically worries that “professors forget DE students, there is difficulty in communication.” Faculty or instructors were, in fact, not named as the type of mentor that would be most useful to a distance education student. Instead, librarians in the field, friends, others pursuing the MLIS, co-workers, and local librarians, were identified as the most useful type of mentor. Moreover, participants also felt that an “assigned” mentor, as opposed to the student seeking one out, would be most useful.

Specifically, a student-to-student mentor network would help with feelings of isolation, thus, the SOIS created the “Virtual Lounge” as another means of student interaction and camaraderie, and student response to the Lounge has been overwhelmingly positive. The Lounge has become an informal mentoring site. One respondent articulated her feelings about this isolation, and how

important it is for distance learning students to connect with each other: “DE Students are so scattered. We meet in a few classes but don’t—didn’t—have a place to get together and just exchange ideas and talk outside of class. Now, we can all get together over a cup of coffee and talk with each other. I haven’t found a lot that makes me feel like I’m part of the University...so this virtual student lounge really makes me feel like UWM is starting to recognize the existence of DE Students....” A second participant sought socialization in the Lounge: “Since the babyboomers have commented, are there any single mothers out there taking classes? I’m 27 and have a 6 year old. I also work at a public library branch. My travel time to work is a half an hour. I have a disgruntled ex-husband and ex-inlaws to deal with weekly. Anyone else in this situation?” Comments of this nature suggest that online students want to engage in meaningful social relationships with their peers. These relationships can take place through a mentoring relationship. Further, when students engage on an informal social level in addition to a formal level of classmate, the learning experience is enhanced.

Recommendations and Conclusions

While not attempting to formally generalize the results from this study, there are many significant points that other distance education programs, especially professional degrees, can heed from the perspectives we have described. Only now is research beyond anecdotal discussions emerging on the efficacy of this new practice. Difficulties in empirical research on e-mentoring include small sample size and cross-sectional data (Mentoring.org, 2003) and “self-reported data, observer effects, self-selection bias, challenges in establishing reliable control groups, variability in processes, too many variables which may affect measurements of mentoring outcomes, [and] the usual challenges in research on social phenomena and interactions of isolating cause and effect even where correlations can be made” (Muller and Barsion, 2003, p. 4). This research, admittedly, falls into these realms, and thus, suffers from the same difficulties. It does, nonetheless, contribute to the emerging literature base by providing more evidence from a specific program in regards to student perceptions on mentoring in virtual environments and the sorts of benefits that can materialize and transpire. Thus, as e-mentoring programs become more established in various organizational capacities, research will

illustrate and confirm its potentials and its limitations. We hope that this research will contribute to the emerging discussion of this practice.

Our recommendations to those involved in online learning programs and those considering the potential impact and efficacy of e-mentoring include the following.

- E-mentoring demands careful planning. Harris (cited in National Mentoring Center, 2003, p. 9) suggests that e-mentoring “should only be done when a genuine need is perceived and a realistic plan can be implemented long-term.” Furthermore, Harris, cited in Mentoring.org (2003) cautions against “underestimating the cost of online mentoring.”
- Planning and promoting an online program, obtaining consultation, conducting evaluations, troubleshooting, etc., all cost money.” Establishing “hit-or-miss” mentoring programs, especially for professional degree seeking students wastes valuable time and efforts. The needs and desires of the students must drive the mentoring network, and these can only be identified by surveying and polling the students on a regular basis.
- Keeping online students involved in all aspects of the educational experience is imperative, and this can be done through online surveys, online focus groups, or through the establishment of a distance education student advisory board, who works on behalf of their peers to make recommendations to the school or institution (Buchanan, 2001).

We know many reasons why students pursue a degree through distance education, despite its challenges and obstacles. It is a rewarding educational experience on a number of levels, and it is oftentimes the most practical way to complete a degree. Participants in this study cited “marriage and family obligations,” “job obligations,” “unable to move across the country,” “convenience,” and the ability to “earn the degree while working full time” as primary reasons for pursuing a degree through distance education. These reasons do suggest that while yes, many of the participants have support networks in the form of family or work, an online mentor will contribute in a significant manner to a learning experience that is more seamless and productive, and ultimately, more rewarding. The idea of immersing a student in the realities of online education should be carefully considered, to avoid student frustration and subsequent attrition. An online mentor, especially a peer mentor, contributes to this immersion. Unfortunately, many

institutions offering online programs still fail to provide adequate student support services, while still others fail to embrace the remote student perspective (Buchanan, 2001). Even when these realities are met, holding a mentor's virtual hand may make the online learning experience even more worthwhile.

Once online students' realities and perspectives are understood, the efficacy of a faculty mentor should certainly be explored. Stein and Glazer's research suggests that doctoral students would benefit from a faculty mentor. However, as we have demonstrated, professional degree-seeking students would prefer a peer or professional mentor over an instructor mentor. When developing online mentor programs, the degree and profession must be considered carefully and the objectives of the mentor program must be clearly articulated. This research suggests that online MLIS students would benefit from both peer and professional mentors. Thus, an efficacious mentoring program would develop along two parallel lines;

- New students would be assigned a peer mentor to assist with the institutional and technological mazes they face early in their online education.
- Once students are further into their studies, they should be assigned a professional from the field. In this way, the student is guided throughout the learning experience by an "expert," each of whom in different ways contributes meaningfully to the learning process.

The learning process is complex; it entails the informal learning of course management systems, institutional procedures and policies, and unique course policies and politics, and it entails socialization, meeting and becoming friends and classmates through a technologically-mediated space. The learning process also involves the formal acquisition of knowledge and skills related to the course or program of study. The informal and formal learning processes must be aligned and coherent, in order to provide a meaningful and successful experience. An effective online mentoring program contributes to this experience.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

UWM - School of Information Studies Online Student Learning and Virtual Mentors Survey

1. Gender

Male
Female

2. Age Range

20-25
26-30
31-35
36-40
41-45
46-50
51-55
Over 56

3. Profession

Full time Graduate Student
Full time Undergraduate Student
Paraprofessional
Library Technician
Librarian
Non-Library
None of the above

4. Location

Within 50 miles of UWM
Over 50 miles from UWM

5. Have you taken any on-site classes at UWM?

Yes
No

6. Have you taken Distance Education courses at UWM?

Yes

No

7. Have you taken Distance Education courses outside of UWM?

Yes

No

8. Do you currently have a mentor now?

Yes

No

9. Have you had a mentor in any past classes at UWM?

Yes

No

10. Have you had a mentor in any classes outside of UWM?

Yes

No

11. Would you like to have a mentor now?

Yes

No

12. Are you currently a mentor for other students?

Yes

No

13. Have you ever been a mentor for other students?

Yes

No

14. If you do not have a mentor now, would you consider working with a mentor in your current studies?

Yes

No

15. Would having a mentor now assist you in your learning process?

Yes

No

16. Please list any areas you feel a mentor would be helpful to you.

(examples: career resources, internship resources, class assistance, financial aid assistance, scholarship assistance, computer assistance, software assistance, etc)

Comments:

17. If you do not currently have a mentor, do you have other types of assistance for your learning process?

Yes

No

Please explain, if Yes:

18. What types of mentoring would be useful to you as a Distance Education student now?

Coworkers

Friends

Assigned mentor

Other

Comments:

19. Are you currently satisfied with the online system used to deliver course materials?

Yes

No

20. How would you rate the navigability of WebCT/D2L:

Excellent

Above Average

Average

Below Average

Unsatisfactory

21. Do you think instructors are mindful of Distance Education students' needs when posting course materials online?

Yes

No

Comments:

22. What comments do you have regarding either positive or negative experiences of UWM's Distance Education program?

Comments:

23. State any comments about your decision to enroll in the School of Information Studies Distance Education program.

Comments:

24. Is there anything you would change regarding the Distance Education program?

Comments:

25. Do you utilize the Website links found on WebCT?

Yes

No

26. How would you describe the experiences of an online student?

Comments:

27. How would an online mentor change or help or otherwise impact those experiences?

Comments:

28. Do you have any other comments regarding Distance Education and/or WebCT or D2L?

Comments:

¹ It is not uncommon for small, rural, or under-funded libraries with few staff, in particular, to hire a professional librarian without the Master of Library and Information Science degree, though it is oftentimes expected that the individual will complete the degree program. The online MLIS provides the access to an accredited MLIS program so individuals do not have to leave current employment.