

# Building an Effective Peer to Peer Distance Mentoring Program in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Higher education institutions today are offering more and more online courses to meet the growing demands of students who want courses and programs of study that are easily accessible, convenient, up-to-date, and contain quality course content and learning experiences. To effectively deliver online courses and programs, instructors must have the knowledge, skills, and disposition to design, implement, evaluate, and refine online courses to meet students' diverse needs. This paper offers suggestions for administrators whose responsibility is to build and develop a distance mentoring program in higher education based upon the authors' experience serving as a distance coordinator and mentor, discussions with distance experts on how to design effective mentoring programs, and a review of the literature.

## Introduction

Students seeking higher education degrees today are looking for quality education programs in their field that are affordable. They also are searching for programs that are easily accessible, convenient, and offered in their specific timelines. Many online degree programs meet these requirements and allow individuals with busy work and/or home schedules to continue with their daily life and obtain an education without disrupting their normal routine. Due to the convenience and flexibility provided by online courses, degree programs and courses offered throughout the United States have significantly increased (Allen & Seaman, 2005; Magjuka, Shi, & Bonk, 2005; McKenzie, Ozkan, & Layton, 2006; Schrum, 2002; Yang & Cornelius, 2005).

To meet the educational needs of students in the region who are at a distance from the university, which is a significant part of the University mission, and to increase our student enrollments, especially at the graduate level, the University of West Georgia designed and implemented a program called the distance mentor/mentee program in the fall of 2005. It had three distinct objectives. These were:

1. to increase faculty interest in teaching online class sessions by gradually putting class meetings online with the assistance of experienced distance mentors,
2. to increase faculty knowledge and skills in designing, teaching, and evaluating online classes, and
3. to infuse more technology and interaction activities into existing online classes to meet the changing needs of students and improve student online learning experiences.

## Implementation of Mentoring Program

In an attempt to increase the amount of online instruction that was taking place in College of Education classes, improve the quality of our existing online classes, and increase our student enrollments fall semester, a distance mentoring program was designed and implemented the beginning of fall semester 2005. The Dean of the College of Education and the Chair of the Department of Media and Instructional Technology initiated the new innovative program. The immediate goal of this program was to gradually increase the number of online class meetings using the WebCT platform to deliver instruction across the graduate curriculum by enticing new distance instructors to begin to use this new teaching and learning format through a distance mentoring program that utilized experienced distance instructors to guide them successfully through this process. As a result of this program students had greater

flexibility in their learning through the use of both synchronous and asynchronous communication techniques, a significant reduction in the amount of time spent on the road driving to and from campus to attend face-to-face classes, and more opportunity to access class materials online at any time from any place. Students also demonstrated improved technology skills and knowledge with the addition of online classes to the curriculum and improved their online communication skills with e-mail, Internet use, and bulletin board postings.

**First Semester (Fall 2005).** The coordinator of the distance mentoring program, the Department Chair of the Media and Instructional Technology Department, carefully assigned the distance mentors to the new mentees after sending out a College of Education survey to determine who was interested in serving in these capacities. Matches were made based upon three factors: (1) requests from the distance mentees, (2) if the mentor had previously taught the mentee’s class or had the skills and knowledge to help design the course, and (3) the online experience of the mentor. It was imperative the mentor had higher level knowledge and skills to take the mentee to the next level in his/her online teaching and course design development.

At the beginning of the mentoring program the assigned mentor was asked to review their mentee’s syllabi and suggest at least one to two classes where online instruction could easily take place in lieu of the traditional face-to-face instruction. This was especially helpful for those faculty members who had little or no previous online experience, for it gave them a place to gradually place their face-to-face class meetings online. In addition, the mentor was asked to suggest activities that could take place during these online sessions and help the new distance mentee design and put these sessions online for his/ her class meetings. Generally new distance faculty members selected online activities that did not require a substantial amount of time to design the support materials for the first few sessions. They utilized such activities as online exams; online chats with virtual learning groups; online searches, readings, and bulletin board postings; or PowerPoint presentations with or without audio that was impaticized and could be easily viewed online. If mentees wanted to put more than two class meetings online they could do so. In the fall of 2005 program participants received the payment for their services that is shown in Table 1. The funding could be used for professional development purposes such as travel to conferences or the purchase of supplies or technology for courses such as digital cameras, laptops, textbooks, or whatever the faculty member needed to enhance his/her particular course.

**Table 1. Payment for Distance Services – Fall 2005**

Distance Position	Payment for Placing 1 Class Online	Payment for Placing 2 Classes Online
• Distance Mentee	\$200	\$400
• Distance Mentor	\$250	\$500

**Second Semester (Spring 2006).** The same process was used in the spring semester to invite faculty to participate in the mentoring program. All College of Education faculty were sent a survey asking for their participation in the distance mentoring program as a distance mentor and/or mentee. Thirty faculty signed up for distance mentee training and sixteen as distance mentors to try to design and infuse online meetings in 40 classes. It was interesting to note that the number of faculty who wanted to be involved in the mentoring program almost doubled yet the number of distance mentors dropped by twenty percent. Distance mentors were assigned by the distance coordinator using the same criteria as in the fall assignments. In addition, feedback from the formative and summative evaluations was utilized. A few mentees indicated that some of the previous mentors had the same knowledge and skills as the mentees and did not advance the mentee’s skill level or knowledge. As a result one of the staff members in the Distance Office was utilized as a distance mentor for the spring semester.

At the beginning of spring semester the assigned mentors were asked to review the new distance mentee’s course syllabi and come to consensus on which classes would be best to convert from face-to-face to online meetings. Next, the mentor along with the mentee brainstormed online activities that could be used to accomplish the class objectives for the selected online days. Mentors, due to their experience with online design and development usually were instrumental in taking the lead in assisting new distance mentees in developing instructional materials to be included in the online class days. In many instances mentors allowed new distance mentees into their online classes so they could see what effectively designed online classes looked like.

Table 2 below displays the payment for faculty serving as mentors and mentees during the spring semester 2006. Since a number of new distance mentees exceeded the maximum requirement of putting two classes online in the fall semester, the payment plan was slightly adjusted for the spring semester to provide payment for those mentees and mentors who wanted to put three classes online.

**Table 2. Payment for Distance Services – Spring 2006**

Distance Position	Payment for Placing 1 Class Online	Payment for Placing 2 Classes Online	Payment for Placing 3 Classes Online
• Mentor	\$200	\$300	\$350
• Mentee	\$225	\$350	\$400

To ensure the program was effective in meeting the intended goals, formative and summative surveys were administered both semesters. Data revealed the program was highly successful in adding online classes to the curriculum. Table 3 below summarizes some of the findings between the two semesters with regard to the number of face-to-face meetings placed online, the number of mentees and mentors participating, and the number of classes impacted by the program. In the fall semester 112 face-to-face class meetings were put online while 216 class meetings were put online spring semester. The number of faculty participating in the distance program as mentees sharply increased from 16 in the fall of 2005 to 30 in the spring of 2006. This was a 46.6% increase. Unfortunately the number of faculty serving a distance mentors from fall semester 2005 to the spring dropped by 20% as shown below.

**Table 3. Fall and Spring Mentoring Programs**

Mentor / Mentee Program Comparisons ~ Fall & Spring	Fall 2005	Spring 2006
• # of Face-to-Face Meetings	112	216
• # of Distance Mentees	16	30
• # of Distance Mentors	20	16
• # of Classes Impacted by Program	31	39
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 Undergraduates</li> <li>• 22 Graduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 Undergraduates</li> <li>• 30 Graduate</li> </ul>

### Suggestions for Distance Leaders

Based upon a review of the literature in mentoring and distance mentoring, the formative and summative results of the mentor/mentee program, formal and informal discussions with program participants and the department chairs in the College of Education, discussions with distance experts, and the author's experience as coordinator of the program and as a distance administrator, the following suggestions are offered for distance leaders who are beginning to build a distance mentoring program in higher education. The experiences and strategies below should serve as a strong base from which to build a solid distance mentoring program.

1. The distance mentor/mentee program must be well planned and begin at the onset of the semester so there is sufficient time for the program to take place. Mentors and mentees should know in advance who his/her mentor or mentee is so meetings can be established. Once the semester begins it is so busy with teaching, research, and service it is often difficult to fit in training time.
2. Funding should be secured to support the mentoring program through a grant and/ or locate funds within the college or university. Faculty work long hours teaching, conducting research and writing, making presentations, and providing service to the region. Providing funds for them to serve as a distance mentor or mentee is usually an effective incentive in getting them involved in a distance mentoring training program. The funding obtained

can then be used for professional development purposes such as travel to professional conferences or purchasing work related items (e.g., books, technology).

3. Distance mentees should be carefully selected for the training program to make sure they have the time and commitment to follow through in completing the necessary work. Designing online course activities to replace traditional face-to-face class meetings takes a substantial amount of time and should be carefully thought through. It is highly recommended that administrators develop and use an online questionnaire which potential mentees complete in order to be selected for the program. Some of the key questions to be addressed are:
  - What face-to-face meetings in your selected class do you intend to put online this semester?
  - Why have you selected this class?
  - What type of activities are you planning to use to accomplish learning goals?
  - Why have you selected these activities?
  - How will you evaluate the impact of these activities on student learning?
  - Who would you like to serve as your mentor?In addition, mentees should be asked
  - For what class or classes would you like to have a mentor assigned?
  - Who would you like to serve as your mentor? (choice #1?, choice #2?, choice#3?)
  - What are important qualities you look for in a distance mentor?
4. Faculty serving as distance mentors and leaders must also be carefully selected for the mentoring program. They should possess a positive attitude towards teaching online and serve as a positive role model to their mentee. (Brooks, 2003). To carefully select distance mentors it is highly recommended they complete some form of assessment as well. Below is a list of questions the authors have used this semester to guide them in matching mentors and mentees. The questions are:
  - Does the faculty member have the time to work with a mentor during the semester?
  - How many mentees can the mentor effectively work with during the semester?
  - If the mentor worked with a mentee in the past, does he or she wish to continue working with the same individual?
  - How does the mentor wish to be contacted by the mentee for assistance (e.g., via e-mail, phone call, a walk in during office hours)?
  - Does the mentor have any special requests and/or information he or she wants the distance coordinator to know about before assigning mentees?
5. New distance instructors should be assigned distance mentors who come from the same discipline if possible and who teach the same course. This allows new distance instructors to ask content related questions and get answers based on distance instructor's experiences.
6. A plan should be developed to assess whether or not the distance mentor/mentee assignments are successful matches. If assignments are not working out within the first two weeks of the semester then new assignments should be made so valuable training time is not lost. For example, the distance mentee can be required to contact the distance coordinator by e-mail or complete an online survey that is sent to the coordinator within the first two weeks of the program to indicate how well the assigned distance mentor is working out with the distance mentee.
7. A program orientation should be provided to the distance mentor/mentee program at the beginning of every semester to review a number of significant points and to provide greater clarity for all participants such as:
  - Expectations of the distance mentor/mentee program,
  - Payment plan and documentation,
  - How to resolve differences that take place,
  - How to get answers to questions that emerge and who to contact,
  - Suggestions for improvements,
  - Program feedback,
  - Due dates for work completion and feedback,
  - Training opportunities on campus and online, and
  - Samples of mentor and mentee work from the previous semester to set up the standards.

8. Distance mentees should be advised in learning how to design and build effective online classes from experts and start small. It is imperative that new, inexperienced distance instructors build their online classes over time, not all at once. Faculty must gradually learn how to teach using the online environment and how to effectively design, implement, and evaluate online classes. This takes time. With the guidance of an experienced distance mentor and time to observe what works and what does not online, a new distance instructor can gradually enhance his or her knowledge and skills in teaching online classes. Instructors as well as online students want to have a positive and meaningful online class experience. Negative online classes can quickly kill student interest and decrease program growth.
9. Program assessments should be built into the mentoring program to determine how the class and the program is going and what program improvements are needed to better meet students' educational needs. The formative assessments should be conducted at least one to two times each semester. They can be kept anonymous or may include the student's name. They can easily be completed online and sent to either the instructor or the department chair for review. Once the data is collected and analyzed program improvements should be made based on the feedback.
10. Distance leaders, who oversee distance mentoring programs, must be aware of the characteristics of effective mentors to be able to select appropriate individuals to serve in this capacity in the program. For example, mentors must provide positive feedback to their mentees, be willing to share his/her online experiences and provide mentees with direction as needed so they expand their knowledge and skills. They must also assist distance mentees in a timely manner and serve as a positive role model (Hunter & Kiernan, 2005). If this is not the case, take steps to educate distance leaders through a variety of professional development activities such as purchasing books on distance mentoring and mentoring in general for them to read, providing individualized distance mentoring to quickly enhance the leader's knowledge and skill level, suggesting selected distance conferences to attend, and recommending the leader talk with other distance leaders on their distance plan and program to learn from their experiences.
11. Distance leaders who assign mentors to new distance mentees must be knowledgeable about effective teaching/ learning practices. It is imperative that distance mentors have higher level skills and knowledge than their mentees in order to enhance their mentee's professional development in distance learning. If the assignments are not an appropriate within the first two weeks of the training session the distance coordinator should be contacted so new assignments can be made.
12. Distance instructors who love teaching online classes should be selected to serve as distance mentors. Their enthusiasm is contagious and will rub off on new distance instructors. Instructors who are opposed to teaching online should not be forced to teach online. Their lack of enthusiasm may be displayed in class and provide students with a less than positive learning experience.
13. A wide variety of training experience for mentees should be developed since professionals learn in different ways. This should include not only working with the assigned mentor but a number of other options such as: face-to-face training sessions conducted by the College of Education or the Distance Education Office, web page training materials, books, conferences focusing on online training, formal and informal luncheons that are sharing sessions about what worked and what did not work in training sessions, online training courses conducted by the University on how to be an effective online instructor, live online training sessions, and online readings and web sites.
14. Social events and collaboration should be built into the distance mentoring program where distance mentees and distance mentors meet to share information on what has been more and less effective in the online classroom. Informal lunches have been a useful way of providing this type of learning experience.
15. Online mentoring program should be reviewed and updated continually to make sure it meets the diverse and ever-changing needs of new online teachers. Techniques that are useful include the following:
  - Design summative surveys and administer them to program participants,
  - Conduct focus group interviews with interested mentors and mentees,

- Observe the growth in the number of online class meetings with program participants,
  - Conduct focus group interviews with interested students who are enrolled in online classes taught by distance mentees in the program,
  - Formal and informal discussions with program participants, and
  - Review other summative evaluations generated by the University and the Distance Office.
16. Distance mentoring should be recognized as highly important by the institution and higher level administrators if it is going to be given the support and recognition it needs to thrive. Distance education is different than face-to-face instruction and takes a significant amount of time to develop the knowledge and skills to be successful in this teaching and learning format.
17. Provide recognition to program participants for their time and collaborative efforts in expanding the institution's distance offerings. In addition to the payment for services, participants should receive letters of recognition or certificates that can be used as verification of their contributions. This can be used in tenure and promotion materials and faculty can advance within their institutions.

## Future Directions

In light of the program's high degree of success its first year, the peer-to-peer distance mentoring program will be continued another year. The Dean of the College of Education has provided the funding for one more year to continue to enhance faculty knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards online learning. Observations of what worked and what did not, formal and informal discussions with faculty in the program, and data generated by program assessments will be used to make program improvements to facilitate an even better year.

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