Developing Online Peer-to-peer Mentoring Programs for Distance Degree Programs

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Abstract: Students' successes in online learning programs relate directly to their sensibility of a community of learning and support services that help mediate this learning environment. This article addresses four focused areas: the academic and social challenges to online learning; defining online peer mentoring and provides a rationale for further online student support development. In addition, ethical and legal considerations in establishing online peer mentoring programs are discussed with the integration of two case scenarios for further analysis. Recommendations for future program development and an online peer-to-peer mentoring program development checklist for administrators to consider in program development are shared.

Introduction

"Help your brother's boat across and your own will reach the shore."

Proverb-Hindu

For many students initially embarking on the journey of online learning, this intimidating adventure requires the sojourner to be not only open and flexible, but willing to secure guided help if necessary to be successful. Students must not fear forging ahead alone in their educational travels. With the growth of many programs' student populations, student success and efficacy has moved to be a central consideration amongst online program administrators and developers. Online degree programs continue to grow due to the flexibility and accessibility of the learning environment (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Maguire, 2005). As the number of colleges and universities providing distance learning continue to expand, students now have an extensive marketplace from which to select those programs that match to their educational interests, lifestyles, and learning styles. As well, students may consider distance programs based on their establishment of services to help their adjustment to online learning.

While this online learning format can be highly appealing to many types of learners, not every learner immediately thrives in this environment. Issues that arise for the new online learner include having difficulty with the technology; gaining familiarity with the course platform; understanding the policy and procedures of the school; communicating effectively; and developing time management skills (Henry, 2007). Initially, many students describe feeling overwhelmed in the early stages of their beginning an initial online course. As such, many college and universities have expanded or adapted academic and social support services to assist learners with their progress and support their assimilation to online learning.

Some of these student support services align with schools that are adapting quality frameworks for online education.   Quality frameworks consist of five pillars of the quality framework (Quality Framework for Online Education, n. d.). The five pillars of quality that support this quality framework are recognized as learning effectiveness, access, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, and cost effectiveness. A peer-to-peer mentoring program would improve both access and student satisfaction with the online education experience. It could also improve cost effectiveness and faculty satisfaction by taking some of the workload off of university staff. However, the primary focus for mentoring programs would be improving access. The Quality Framework for Online Education (n.d.) defines access in quality online programs " as improving support services for greater access to education and enhancing collaboration and communication between faculty and learners" (p. 2).

Many distance degree programs approach the issue of this third pillar of quality online education by offering academic advisors as learning support for students who are having personal or academic problems. This may also include academic advising and other collaboration between the learner and the faculty to resolve and to troubleshoot problems while the student is enrolled in a course. As part of this access quality pillar, most programs offer technical support help lines that can help students navigate the course room and assist them with technological problems that arise (Quality Framework for Online Education, n. d.). As academic advising and technical support are primarily support mechanisms staffed by school employees, the authors of this paper posit that peers are an untapped source of potential to mediate problems, to role model, and to mentor peers online. According to Thomas, Hu, Gewin, Bingham, & Yanchus (2005), mentoring has been associated with positive outcomes in a variety of settings including higher education. Both authors, having instructed online for almost a decade, have observed a number of helping behaviors in online classroom group activities that supported those less experienced with the technology or newcomers to the program. To that accord, interest in this untapped human resource potential through exploring the possibility of implementing online peer-to-peer mentoring is being investigated.

The Need for Mentoring

Mentoring has drawn a lot of attention in both education and management contexts. Kram & Isabella (1985) affirmed in a qualitative study that mentors are an asset to an individual's personal and professional development. Online mentors integrated into distance programs have shown efficacy and have had positive impacts to some university programs (Sener, 2004; Gewin, 2005; Perren, 2003). The literature on traditional mentoring relationships and peer-to-peer relationships in institutions of higher learning and work environments is substantial (Angelique et al., 2002; Good et. al., 2000; Allen, et al.,2006; & Woodd , 1997; Ensher et. al.2001;Wells, Gosland & Craig, 2005; Woodd, 1997).   However, the research regarding online peer-to-peer mentoring relationships is scant. This paper seeks to address the issues related to online peer-to-peer mentoring in an effort to further knowledge on this subject. Online administrators seeking to help assimilate students online may be assisted by this overview and, in turn, find resources to support their planning and approach to integrating an online peer mentoring program into their distance program.

Paper Organization

This paper explores four distinct research based areas. First, the academic and social challenges to students are approached in relation to the online learning environment are explored. Second, online peer-to-peer mentoring is defined. Third, a rationale for further online program support and development will be addressed. The reader will be afforded further critical glimpses at the ethical and legal implications involved in implementing these programs are provided with scenarios for increasing the understanding of these sensitive issues. Recommendations for future program development will be provided. Lastly, an Online Peer-to-peer Mentoring Program Development Checklist is provided in Appendix A for those wishing to adapt or start a similar online peer-to-peer mentoring program.

The Academic and Social Challenges to Students in the
Online Learning Environment

The online learning environment in higher education presents unique, yet interesting challenges as educators continue to refine, to enhance, and to develop effective programs and systems to support student learning and development from a distance. Murphy et al. (2005) affirmed that challenges existed for online learners who are not familiar with online technology or in collaborating with online group. These researchers confirmed that challenges exist for instructors as well because their roles shift to a more learner-centered focus. These challenges can be categorized into varying levels of instructor support, programmatic interventions to mediate student concerns, communication in the online environment, and technological issues.

Instructor Support

One specific challenge to both traditional and online students is varying levels of instructor support. Maguire (2005) stated the majority of support to instructors is assuring faculty workloads and other competing activities that are perceived as having more value towards tenure and promotion. While online programs conduct evaluations and train instructors to set standards of interaction, for various reasons this may not meet learners' expectations or needs. Therefore, in the online environment, gaps in communication can be significantly heightened without a face-to-face precedent from which to judge further exchanges and interactions. Berge (1998) cited this impediment to the online environment as "faceless teaching" (p. 2). As such, timely instructor support is essential in responding to student's questions and concerns. Smith (2004) focused on academic support, availability, and accessibility as part of quality off-campus programs in distance learning. His research sought to focus on defining students' perceptions of quality in distance learning programs. The support components for off-campus support delivery included: assistance with understanding course concepts and materials, guidance in interpreting assignment requirements, feedback on assignments, supervision of research planning and activity, and feedback on draft research work. Smith also noted that the components that best supported students were the lecturer's availability and accessibility, the ability to provide timely feedback, and the ability to provide appropriate feedback and constructive criticism. Smith emphasized that the online instructor role is much more dimensional and complex in an online environment than in traditional settings.

Programmatic Interventions

As noted previously, online learning programs vary in the range of support and programmatic interventions that assist students in transitioning to the technological, social, and structural nuances of this environment. Programmatic interventions range from academic or learner support advisors who link with instructors as problems arise all related to issues of access as defined in quality online learning pillars (Quality Framework for Online Education, n. d.).

In Browne's (2003) research on adaptability in online environments, participant responses affirmed how important a personal tutor can be to students studying at a distance. In addition, clear role definition in relation to labels attached to tasks in the learning and teaching environment are important. Often online learners experience what Goldsmith (2004) described as "too much information, too fast" (p. 11). In this anecdotal article, which approached leadership using a business model, he used the word *e-coach*, noting that the role of an e-coach would be to help individuals begin to sort out what is most important and quickly find the relevant information they needed to know.

Online Communication

Communicating effectively online is considered a critical skill for students. Conrad (2002) discussed a constructivist approach to understanding student interactions online. The researcher found a combination of factors that related to students' online interaction. The qualitative analyses of this study revealed

> …the combination of these factors—online learners' lack of anonymity, learners' strong senses of purpose, our societal inclination to be 'nice' people, and learners' prolonged commitment to a program of learning—created an increased sense of inhibition which led to their concerted effort to maintain equilibrium and harmony through their heightened application of etiquette. (Cornrad, p. 206)

These findings also attested that reflecting carefully and with empathy in the communication interaction serves to support student learning.

Sims (2003) research also confirmed in a survey of online students that there was a need to establish very clear expectations. A two-way flow of information in the online learning environment is essential to avoid miscommunication and frustration. This study of Australian undergraduates investigated interactivity and its value to the online learning process. Results also showed students had specific expectations of interactions in their learning. This study provides insights for the design of online learning environments and specifically to the issue addressed in this paper support services such as online peer mentoring.

In a case observed by one of the authors of this paper, the following instance was noted in facilitating online group activities in a counseling course. A group activity almost was unsuccessful due to a new online learner's frustrations with the set expectations of the group members. The student admitted to a difficulty in managing personal and educational pursuits and assumed that the other members of the group more able to manage these areas of their lives. The student communicated in all lowercase letters typical to chatting or instant messaging and so presented a weak academic posture. Subsequently the student verbally attacked the other group members by emphatically stating that it was a challenge to participate and that they did not have all the luxuries of daycare and time to manage (as they perceived others to have) and "that they (the group) would have to deal with it."

While the instructor mediated the issue by personal communication and phone, if another faculty member was lax or unengaged in the process, this situation could have substantially affected the entire class's progress. Communication can be a challenge to those learners re-entering the educational realm (and doing so online), who are not familiar with the etiquette of online communication. In this case, a peer mentor may have lessened some of the apprehension and frustration that the individual may have felt in not knowing some of the processes and may have complemented the support the instructor provided in the end.

Technological Issues

Effectively using the technology platform of the online courseware is an ongoing challenge for students. Often, new online learners are overwhelmed with addressing the content of the course, while also managing the online course or classroom and its features. Whereas 24-hour technical support is provided throughout programs to assist students to troubleshoot problems, it still remains a central challenge to the new student in an online program. Browne (2003) noted that the class site also can prove problematic for students. The layout could be too complicated, problematic, or frustrating for some students. This research also found that technology-delivered courses require reliability and appropriate use of the media if students are to be confident in their process of online learning. An online peer-mentoring program that provides some basic guidance and assistance for learners could be a nice complement to the existing technology help lines.

Defining Online Peer Mentoring

Clarifying terminology in relation to mentoring and differentiating from traditional mentoring is essential as variation abounds in the literature. The term most widely used for online mentoring is e-mentoring (Hunt, 2005; Mahayosnand, 2000; & Stokes ,2001). Headlam-Wells, Craig, & Gosland (2006) described e-mentoring as mentoring aided by CMC, and can include the use of web-based media such as chat rooms, online meetings, and discussion areas. According to Level & Mach (2005), peer mentoring is considered to be a newer approach to the mentoring paradigm that pairs an inexperienced person with a knowledgeable individual or group of the same status. The approach can be informal or formally structured. Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz & Yang (2005) gave their definition of *mentoring* as "A one-on-one relationship between an expert and a novice in which the expert guides the novice by behavioral and cognitive modeling, academic, and career counseling, emotional and scholarly support, advice, professional networking, and assessment" (p. 344). For the purposes of the discussion here, this definition closely fits the peer-to-peer online mentoring. In that the model presented and discussed here, peer mentors would be required to have more expertise in the online environment to help other, less experienced peers navigate their online course and succeed in program completion.

A Rationale for Further Online Support Services

Online education and distance programs continue to evolve, some due to changing requirements to meet accreditation bodies, others due to adherence to quality standards. Whatever the case, programs that work to foster student access and support in innovative ways can ultimately accommodate learners' transitioning into this educational arena. Online peer mentoring may be effective in providing this support without the high costs of staffing that other paid programs may need. Headlam, Gosland & Craig (2005) affirm the cost effectiveness of these programs, noting "there are high start-up costs, but once established operational costs are low" (p. 445). An advocacy model also supports a diversity of learners who may be accessing education online for the first time and need

guidance. Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard (2003) emphasize there have been many online mentoring efforts, but the effectiveness has been under-researched.

Why peer mentoring versus other approaches to student support?

According to Good, Halpin, & Halpin (2000), peer mentoring appears to be a viable approach to providing role models and leadership for underrepresented groups within higher education, and has been widely used in traditional settings for freshman students and minority retention. The research involving minority students in a technical program who had peer mentors indicated that the students developed personal skills such as communication, confidence, and identity. However, Rhodes, Spencer, Saito, and Sipe (2006), indicated that despite the expanding array of mentoring programs, and the interest on the topic of online mentoring, little is known about its relative advantages and disadvantages or the nature of the relationships formed in online situations. These researchers suggested that to fully utilize this process, a deeper understanding of e-mentoring relationships and a deeper insight into the characteristics of a high quality program is needed.

In addition, Headlam-Wells, Craig, & Gosland (2006) attested that web-based mentoring transcended organizational boundaries and had a positive implication in offering a way of minimizing status barriers and challenging power relations evident in other traditional programs. In addition, Gewin (2005) stated that many models for mentoring have been successful in Europe where students arrive with different levels of education, experience, and cultural expectations. This approach did not endorse one mentoring style, but allowed for more personalized attention and structuring of the process. It confirmed programs that were non-hierarchical were still highly functional.

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Ethical and Legal Issues

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When creating a peer-to-peer online student-mentoring program, many ethical and legal considerations will emerge. A program needs to be proactive to anticipate and eliminate any potential problems or conflicts and also to be reactive, promptly addressing problems not initially projected. Once begun, the program should conduct a periodic review so that the school can continue to be proactive, preventing ethical and costly legal problems.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations include expectations of confidentiality in mentoring, questions about the definition of mentor, and the potential dual role the mentor might have as a representative or employee of the institution and as mentor. In some mentoring programs, mentors are actually tutors or evaluate mentees and are thus somewhat misnamed. For example, at the University of Portsmouth in the UK, student mentors (*Student Mentor*, n. d.) perform duties more typical of tutors such as: to "provide academic and general support" (¶ 2). Their *Student Mentor Job Description* (n. d) states that the student mentors' duties are:" To deepen the mentee's subject knowledge, … [and] To help the

mentee develop study skills and learning strategies" (p. 1.).   This dual relationship of tutor and mentor could be awkward for the mentor if he is expected to report the mentee's progress to the school (breaching the mentee's expectations of privacy) or if the faculty member teaching the course asks for information that the mentor considers confidential. As shown in Scenario 1 below, conflicts can occur when mentees hear the word *mentor*, but receive different services, especially if the mentor is expected to evaluate the mentee or report back to the school about the mentee's progress.

Scenario 1: When mentors evaluate

Eager to share her knowledge and experience, Elizabeth signed up for her employer's mentoring program to mentor new employees. She signed a contract to mentor three people for $2,000. Her role of mentor was not clearly defined in the contract. When she went to the training course, she was surprised to find out that she would be evaluating the new employees three times over the course of four months. Each evaluation would be shared with the mentees' immediate supervisors. Although the relationships started out as cordial, two of the three mentees received bad evaluations and stopped confiding in her. She realized that she was more of an evaluator than a mentor and felt that the program required her to breach her mentees' trust. She quit the mentoring program soon after.

As indicated in the scenario, dual roles as mentor and an evaluator can cause problems for both the mentor and the mentee. Clear roles need to be defined early in the orientation program, preferably before contracts are signed. The school, the mentor, and the mentee can all have different expectations of what a mentor will do based on their prior experiences. Although a model based on a mentor evaluating mentees can work, the evaluating aspect of the relationship needs to be known to all parties from the beginning so that mentees do not expect confidentiality from the mentors. For example, at Park University (Schulte, Marthann, personal communication, December 13, 2007), online adjunct faculty mentors complete periodic reviews of mentee job performance. The final review is shared with administration. This model works because mentees know from the beginning that they will be reviewed.

Defining Roles

Clearly defined roles are also essential for a successful mentoring program. For example, the student *mentoring* program at Lake Superior College (Dahl, n. d.) is an excellent example of an online student mentoring program filling a gap in student services because the college cannot afford teaching assistants for each online class. According to Dahl, mentors are "paid as student workers" (slide #5) to help answer student "questions not related to course content" (slide # 6). Mentors are chosen by faculty based on performance in class. The job description defines boundaries between faculty, mentors, and mentees and specifically states that mentors are neither tutors nor friends of faculty or mentees (Dahl, slide #7).

In defining the role of mentor, the primary question is: what services is an online mentor expected to *provide*? San Francisco State University (*The FSMP at SFSU: What is a Student Mentor?*, 2001) answered this question by describing a student mentor as:

> [someone] who ideally has excellent social and communication [and] serves as a guide for success in a university setting, offering benefits such as
> - A supportive relationship with the protégés
> - Options and alternatives to protégés' questions and concerns
> - A resource for appropriate campus referrals
> - Peer support and sincere recognition for the protégés' academic goals and achievements. (¶ 1)

Other schools define this in the negative by answering: what services are mentors not expected to provide? For example, at Lake Superior College (Dahl, n. d.), online student mentors "are NOT: subject tutors, counselors, proofreaders, graders, friends to students or instructors, [or] disciplinarians." (Dahl, n. d, slide #7). Defining the roles of mentor and mentee can *reduce* the ethical issues that mentors might face by clarifying the expectations of both parties. Generally, mentors are not technical support for their mentees, but mentors can direct mentees to the appropriate technical support agent. Mentors are not a resource for locating a job, but a mentor can recommend the school's writing lab for resume writing questions. Mentors are not subject matter experts, but can direct students to a school's tutoring services or to online tutoring services such as www.Smartthinking.com. In summary, mentors should act as conduits, helping their mentees to identify problems and to navigate through the labyrinth of student services available to online students.

Confidentiality

In addition to defined roles, every mentoring program should have a clearly stated confidentiality *policy* with outlined exceptions. Confidentiality should apply to both verbal and written communication. Thus, forwarding mentee e-mail should be prohibited unless allowed under an exception. Examples of exceptions would be when a mentor or faculty member the mentor reports to is required by law to report reasonable suspicions of neglect or abuse of a child, a dependant adult, or an elderly person or when a mentor or faculty advisor reasonably suspects that someone is going to physically harm himself or someone else.

Scenario 2: Suspected Child Abuse

Cai is mentoring Sierra online and calls her to help her with a technical problem she's experiencing with the school website. While on the phone, Cai overhears interaction between Sierra and her daughter Megan who indicates she is abusing Megan. Shocked, Cai mentions this to his faculty advisor. What are Cai's legal responsibilities as a volunteer student mentor? What is the faculty member required to do, if anything? What are Cai's ethical responsibilities to Megan? Can he report this without violating confidentiality?

In the scenario, Cai has no legal responsibilities to report suspected abuse, although he may feel ethically compelled to do so. The faculty member likely has no legal responsibility as he neither talked to Megan nor witnessed the conversation. Scenarios like this where a faculty advisor or a mentor has direct knowledge of child or an elderly abuse are unlikely to occur because contact with children or elders is limited. Spousal abuse may be encountered, but no requirements exist to report it. Because abuse may be communicated to a mentor, mentoring programs may want to consider this question: should exceptions to mentor confidentiality allow mentors to report suspected spousal, child, or elderly abuse even if not required by law?

What is faculty responsibility in these situations? When is a college faculty member required to report child abuse? State law will vary on this. For example, in Oregon, "'[a]ny public or private official having reasonable cause to believe that any child with whom the official comes in contact has suffered abuse, or that any person with whom the official comes in contact has abused a child shall immediately report or cause a report to be made . . ." (Or. Rev. Stat. § 419B.010 (2005)). According to Oregon law, a school employee is considered a "public or private official" under the statute. (Or. Rev. Stat. § 419B.005(3)(c)(2005). University personnel need to take this statute seriously, as, according to the Oregon Department of Human Services, "failure to report is a violation [of this statute] and carries a maximum penalty of $1,000.00. Mandatory reporters have also been successfully sued for damages in civil court for failing to report" (n. d, Question #1).

When is a college faculty member required to report dependent adult or elderly abuse? State law will vary on this, too. For example, according to the Los Angeles County Department of Community and Senior Services (*APS Mandated Reporters*, n. d.), California requires colleges and universities that "serve dependant adults or elders" to report abuse if:

> 1. The reporter observes or has knowledge of an incident that reasonably appears to be abuse, or 2. The reporter is told of an incident by the victim (see 'Exceptions to the Reporting Requirement') or 3. The reporter reasonably suspects abuse (p. 1)

Would an online faculty member or mentor be likely to encounter child abuse or dependent adult or elderly abuse? Hopefully not, but the authors have found that students who need a flexible class schedule are attracted to online classes. Many of our students are mothers of small children who have trouble finding someone to care for their children while they attend classes in a traditional environment. Someone taking care of an elderly relative or a dependent adult would likely be in the same situation and prefer to take some classes online. Thus, the authors posit that online faculty and mentors would be more likely to encounter possible abuse than their counterparts in traditional classrooms.

Beyond what the law requires for instances of abuse, an online mentoring program should contain academic exceptions to mentor confidentiality. An example of an academic exception to confidentiality in a student mentoring program would be solicitation to cheat by either a mentor or a mentee. In fact, exceptions should include any violations of the student code of conduct belonging to either the institution or the mentoring program.

Sometimes mentors breach confidentiality because they need advice. Greenhalgh of the University of Salford (n. d) cautioned that a mentoring relationship is "confidential and built on trust and honesty" (p. 13) and recommended that mentors ask permission before discussing any issues that arise during mentoring with a third person. Because absolute confidentiality is impossible, she also recommended that mentees should be warned at the beginning of the relationship that mentors may have to disclose private information with a third party and cautions that mentors should try not to mention the names of mentees when discussing the mentoring program with others or seeking mentoring advice even if in "[mentoring] support sessions" (p. 13). In the academic world, that group of others should include faculty members, especially if a mentee is currently taking a class from a faculty member. Mentors assigned to one class or faculty member should be especially mindful of this.

If the mentor needs to discuss something with a third party, Sweeny (2003) recommended that the mentor involve the mentee in the discussion. He also recommended that mentors avoid making any comments about mentees whether positive or negative. When mentors are asked about mentees, he suggested that mentors thank the third party for supporting the program, state that mentoring is confidential, and suggest a "workable solution" (Sweeny, p.3). Sweeny also suggested that mentors, mentees, and the third party involved meet as a group to work out problems. If these recommendations are adopted, perhaps the confidentiality statement should include an exception so that mentors can freely discuss mentees with lead mentors or faculty advisors to the program, opening a window for the mentors to be mentored if needed.

Academic Issues

In addition, academic issues related to ethics may appear at any time. Maintaining the institution's academic integrity should be a central concern of the mentoring program. The mentors should be required to know the rules regarding plagiarism and cheating. In particular, mentors should not proofread mentees' assignments (Dahl, n. d. Slide 7) or give mentees copies of old tests or midterms from previous classes, and should be required to sign a mentoring code of ethics agreeing to these terms.

Legal Considerations

Besides exploring possible ethical conflicts, an online mentoring program should make every effort to avoid potential liability on the part of the students and the institution. Generally, legal liability can be divided into two areas of concern: criminal and civil.

Criminal Liability

 Issues of criminal liability for mentors and mentees should be very rare. However, military students sometimes require special considerations. Specifically, American military personnel can be court-martialed for having unprofessional relationships with other military Personnel (Turney, 2000). Turney also stated that relationships between

officers and enlisted personnel can be especially problematic. The definition of unprofessional relationship varies, and each service has its own rules (Turney, 2000). Thus, the lead mentor needs to be sensitive to these issues. Military personnel are mindful of these rules and may be hesitant to mentor other military personnel or need to terminate a mentoring relationship to avoid violating these rules. Despite these restrictions on relationships, according to Major M. W. Taylor, USAF, Assistant Staff Judge Advocate, an academic mentoring relationship, standing alone, is not likely to be an unprofessional relationship (personal communication, November 8, 2007).

Once potential criminal liability is addressed, civil liability of the school should be of great concern to any mentoring program. Civil liability can best be proactively avoided at three integral times in the mentoring process: selection of the mentors, training and orientation, and termination of the mentoring relationship.

Prior to hiring, a background check including the sexual offenders' registry and requiring references would be two excellent ways to avoid future problems. Sherk (n. d.) recommended evaluating potential mentors and mentees prior to inclusion in the program. In particular, he recommended the following screening process for adult mentors:

- An application process and review.
- [A] Face-to-face interview.
- Reference checks for mentors, which must include criminal history record checks (finger printing), and may include character references, child abuse registry check, and driving record checks.
- Suitability criteria that relate to the program statement of purpose and needs of the target population. Could include some or all of the following: personality profile, skills identification; gender; age; language and racial requirements; level of education, career interests; motivation for volunteering; and academic standing.
- Successful completion of pre-match training and orientation. (p. 8)

Criteria for an online student mentor could vary depending on the institution's needs. For example, at Lake Superior College (Dahl, n. d.), the criteria for a student mentor are as follows:

- Experienced online student—preferably of the same class
- Successful (A or B) student
- Technologically savvy and confident
- Responsible and timely
- Currently enrolled student
- Able to commit 3-5 hours per week for a three-credit class (Slide #12)

After selecting the mentors, educating them on the applicable laws and policies should be part of the training process. The mentor training program should include advice on the following areas: when to refer mentees to professionals such as psychologists, if appropriate, what to do if a mentee reports a campus sexual assault, how to respect

mentees' rights to privacy of their student information, and how to avoid discriminating against any individual belonging to a group protected by law.

Mentors should refer mentees to professionals such as psychologists, counselors, doctors, lawyers, or pastors instead of engaging in counseling for psychiatric or legal problems. This policy should be clearly stated. Some adult students go through difficult scenarios such as a death in the family, divorce, personal illness, surviving a sexual attack, or fighting a war in a foreign country while taking an online class and are sometimes depressed or anxious to the point that they need professional help. In fact, some universities and colleges are required by The Campus Sexual Assault Victims' Bill of Rights at 20 U.S.C. § 1092 (f)(8) (2007) and 34 C.F.R. § 668.46(b)(11) (2002) to inform victims of sexual assault that they have certain rights, including the option to report the crime to the police, to receive school assistance in reporting the crime if needed, and to inform victims of their choices and any assistance available in "changing academic and living situations after an alleged sexual assault incident." (20 U.S.C. 1092 (f)(8)(B)(vii) (2007)). Failing to abide by this law could be costly. According to *Security on Campus*, "schools found to have violated this law can be fined up to $27,500 or lose their eligibility to participate in Federal student aid programs" (*Campus Sexual Assault Victims' Bill of Rights*, n. d, p. 1).

Mentoring programs should also be aware of The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) which requires schools in the United States to protect student information. In particular, students have "the right to file complaints against the school for disclosing educational records in violation of FERPA" (Van Dusen, 2004. p. 1) so school personnel need to keep this federal law in mind when constructing a mentoring program. One exception to the law is directory information such as a "[student's] name, address, phone number and e-mail address, dates of attendance, degree awarded, enrollment status, [and] major field of study" (Van Dusen, p. 2). This can also be extended to any "photograph, video and electronic image taken or maintained by the university, date of birth, grade (class) level, … honors and awards received, [and] previous institution(s) attended" (*FERPA: Students Rights to Privacy*, n. d, p.1). A school can release this information without written consent. However, students can opt out of being part of the directory to protect their information. Once the student requests that the directory information be restricted, the school can no longer release it without permission (Van Dusen). In light of this, Van Dusen recommended that "institutions … err on the side of caution and request, in writing, that the student allow the school to disclose directory information to third parties" (p. 4). Such a policy would be an excellent addition to a mentoring agreement between the mentor, the mentee, and the school. Also, mentoring programs should restrict non-directory information of both mentors and mentees to protect their privacy and avoid violating FERPA as all participants in the mentoring program would be students.

In addition to potential liability from violating FERPA, a school could be found liable for discrimination. Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sexual discrimination by institutions of higher learning. In particular, it provides that "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits

of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program receiving Federal financial assistance..." (20 U.S.C. 1681(a)(2007)). Some educational institutions and programs are exempted from this statute (20 U.S.C. 1681 et seq. (2007)).

Because some models of online student mentoring treat mentors as student workers (Dahl, n. d.), employment laws could also apply. In particular, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 with its 1978 Amendments would need to be addressed in the United States. Many employment laws apply only to employees and not to volunteers and vary by state. The mentoring program director would need to check with an attorney practicing law in the state where the school is located to see what laws apply to the particular student mentoring model adopted by the school.

Regardless of whether mentors are employees or volunteers, harassment or discrimination on the basis of gender, race, color, religion, national origin, disability, or age should not be tolerated, a no tolerance policy should be stated, and a mechanism for reporting harassment should exist for both mentors and mentees. In particular, distributing pornography or other sexually inappropriate material via email should be stated as grounds for removal.

 For example, at the University of Portsmouth in the UK (*Student Mentor Job Description*, n. d.), the following statement is included in the job description and code of conduct for mentors:

> Mentors must be aware at all times of the use of unacceptable language,
> i.e. [sic] racist, sexist or other discriminatory jokes and refrain from using
> it in front of the pupils. Mentors must be aware of how their behavior
> could be interpreted by the pupils and the effect it could have on them. (p.
> 2)

Unfortunately, screening mentors prior to hiring and training mentors on ethical and legal concerns will not eliminate the possibility of firing an employee or firing an unpaid volunteer. A mentoring program needs to have clear standards for termination of either a mentor or a mentee. Institutions should make sure that the mentoring program incorporates the school's code of ethics for students and state that anyone violating the code of ethics, a national, a state, provincial, or local law will be removed from the program. Recommendations for guidelines from Herberger and Thomas (2000) are:

1. The mentor may refuse all or part of a project at any time.
2. The onsite coordinator has the authority to terminate the arrangement.
3. The mentor should report problems or concerns ASAP to the onsite coordinator.
4. The onsite coordinator should approach the mentor directly about any complaints or concerns regarding their ability. If the relationship must

> be terminated, a clear understanding of that fact should be made
> available to everyone involved. (p. 2)

In conclusion, institutions of higher learning should anticipate potential ethical and legal concerns before beginning a mentoring program and create mechanisms for mentors both to be trained about these issues and to discuss any problems that arise during the course of a mentoring relationship with a lead mentor or faculty advisor. Avoiding a significant gap in time between training and mentoring should reduce the number of problems. Institutions can also reduce situations where potential ethical conflicts or legal liability to the school may arise by screening potential mentors and mentees, educating mentors and faculty advisors on ethical and legal issues, creating a process for mentees to issue complaints against mentors, and drafting clear guidelines for both mentee expectations of confidentiality and termination of the mentoring relationship by the mentee, the mentor, or the institution.

Recommendations for Future Program Development

As with any program development creating a working group that is responsible for co-creating an online peer-to-peer mentoring program is advisable. This working group should be interdisciplinary and consist of individuals who provide traditional support services for students so there is a seamless level of understanding of the context of the program under development. Individuals who have worked in the helping profession or counseling center can prove critical to assist the mentors.

McCauley (2007) suggested defining the objectives of the program to get a clearer sense of whether it will be developed into a formal or informal one. The authors here suggest a formal program for online peer-to-peer mentoring programs due to the nature of the exchanges and to foresee and avoid any issues due to ethical or legal complications. A formal program with a working group identified to address the issues can be helpful to work through the procedures, expectations, and facilitate the program's development. Level and Mach (2005) suggested the use of listservs to help mentors communication and to use internal web pages to call attention to resources in professional development of mentors. Most of all they emphasized flexibility in the design to allow for the program to adapt to the needs as they present themselves from the participants.

Woodd (1997) emphasized that there needs to be flexibility in the guidelines which allows for individual needs while not inhibiting other mentor relationships. This research continued to emphasize that a scheme for the mentoring to take place must be in place and mentors need to be selected and trained carefully. Allen, Eby & Lentz (2006) found that a focus on the role of high-quality preparatory activities proved to establish a tone for the mentoring and expectations for mutual creating of the mentoring experience as an intrinsic learning opportunity (about oneself and the mentor). For example, their research affirmed that input and effort into the prospective matching of the mentors may produce a sense of commitment to the mentorship. This consideration of matching and assistance with program planning and coordination may be of interest for those beginning to plan a

peer mentoring program. Wai-Ling Packard (2003) studied composite mentoring which was a strategic set of diverse mentors to help guide students in an active role in their own mentoring experience. The results of this study noted that the following components are essential but often overlooked in creating a mentoring program:

- Training for students seeking a mentor should be considered an important part of the mentoring program
- Identify and clarify their role in the mentoring process and exploring the possibility of multiple mentors
- Increased training for both mentors and students seeking mentoring is essential (p. 344)

Two resources with easily adapted sources, programs, and models for developing online peer mentoring programs are recommended. *A Mentors' Companion* (Ambrose, 1998) is a highly functional resource that affirms mentoring as a vital part of learning. This text comes from more of an organizational perspective rather than higher education, but would provide some ready resources to begin to discuss the development of an online peer-to-peer mentoring program. The extensive inclusion of checklists and scenarios to debrief amongst mentors could be a good starting point for engagement and discussion for the program developers. In addition, it provides an organized sequencing of activities that an institution may or may not want to include in their program.

Making Mentoring Happen (Lacey, 1999) covers formal mentoring programs, developing strong mentor relationships, an orientation to a program for participants, and the full cycle of a mentoring relationship. While both of these resources are not specific to online peer mentoring, much of the structure and topical application can readily translate to the online environment.

For many, the challenge is formulating a methodological approach to initiating an online mentoring program. In Appendix A an Online Peer-to-peer Mentoring Program Development Checklist has been developed to assist individuals interested in this process to gain an initial sense of the range of activities and processes that will assure smooth integration of a program to their online program. This is intended as a brainstorming document for distance programs seeking to begin discussions with a working group on implementing a prospective online peer-to peer mentoring program.

Conclusion

Online peer counseling relationships continue to emerge to support students across the lifespan in mediating online learning. While program development, efficacy, and outcomes continue to emerge, so does empirical examination of these unique approaches to support students online. This article approached the challenges unique to online learners, which included issues that range from instructor support to hurdles in the technology of the program. The rationale for the development of online peer-to-peer mentoring suggests that in much of the research it potentially could be a tool of social justice and advocacy in helping many underrepresented groups to succeed in online programs.

Defining online peer mentoring programs as differentiated from existing programs was an important milestone from which to proceed with an overview of some of the effective practices in the literature. To this end, an examination of career, organizational and educational literature was reviewed. These practices provided readers with references that support a further review of programs and their results for further analysis. Ethical and legal implications with scenario applications were provided to assist potential program developers with initial guidance on avoiding problems and being aware of possible situations. Finally, recommendations for future program development was provided with reference to a checklist and two text resources as starting points for an organization's development of an online peer mentoring program.

The online environment makes peer mentoring an ambitious prospect. However, if approached comprehensively with training, support, and appropriate ongoing professional development and evaluation, its potential to help support individual learners could significantly contribute to students' thriving in online learning by improving the quality pillars of access and student satisfaction. It could also decrease costs and staff and faculty workloads—adding to the quality pillars of faculty satisfaction and cost effectiveness. Also, the authors have found that many Internet faculty feel disconnected with their students and miss out on working personally with students in advising roles. Creating opportunities for Internet faculty to advise student mentors could help connect faculty and students and bridge the gaps created by distance. Alternatively, a negative experience could contribute to frustration and questioning about the program and its ability to assist new learners and possibly open an organization up to ethical dilemmas and legal liability. With such a continuum of positive and negative implications, one thing is sure: developers must not enter into online peer-to-peer mentoring haphazardly.

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Appendix A
Online Peer-to-peer Mentoring Program Development Checklist

▢ First consider how an online peer-to-peer mentoring program will fit into the existing structure of your distance online learning program. How will this program interface with other aspects of academic and social support already provided?

▢ Answer the questions: What are the goals of the prospective program? What need will they meet that hasn't been addressed by the existing support for student success?

▢ Seek out administrative support for an online peer-to-peer mentoring program. Rhodes, Spencer, Saito & Sipe (2006) affirmed that when programs are well conceived, supported, and structured, mentor relationships stand a better chance of thriving. What are the resources available to begin a program? Develop a formal proposal to present to administration with an overview prospectus of the role and function of an online peer-to-peer mentoring program.

▢ Identify individuals who can contribute to a working group that will guide the development of an online peer-to-peer mentoring program. Include individuals with expertise in online learning, academic support services, counseling, and student retention.

▢ Identify the objective of your online peer-to-peer mentoring program. What is the primary goal of the program? Will the program be formal or informal? Perren (2003) noted that e-mentoring should be combined with other support mechanisms.

▢ Establish a timeline for coordination. Identify how long the program will last and if the initial implementation will be a pilot from which to further understand its role and utility and your university.

▢ Begin to outline a prospective training outline for the prospective participants in the program. Identify the learning objectives and supportive learning activities for the training. Identify any types of assessments and evaluation for the training. Begin to identify the process for the training delivery and facilitators. Good, Halpin, & Halpin (2000) suggested a weekly mentor journal to document improved mentor skills and to incorporate suggestions from professional development. Developing a resource manual that incorporates the policies and procedures of the program can offer suggestions, guidance, and resources.

▢ Begin to identify how participants in the online peer-to-peer program will be selected. What will be the criteria? Participant selection and matching has been affirmed throughout the literature to be a vital component of a program. Consider accessing established online clubs or associations that are already established that may have

individuals interested in the process. Psychology or counseling organization may be a natural fit with individuals who have already demonstrated helping behaviors.

▢ Select participants carefully for an online peer-to-peer mentoring program. It's essential to identify individuals with effective communication and participants that can provide support and guidance. Allen & Poteet (1999) provided the results of their content analysis on ideal mentor characteristics and effective dimensions of mentoring relationships that are highly recommended for review. These researchers also suggested creating and setting polices and procedures on proper and improper mentoring activities and enforcement of these procedures.

▢ Try to identify common interests or shared experiences on the part of the peer mentors. These aspects improve the prospect of ease in establishing a peer relationship and chances of it being a successful experience. While Headlam- Wells, Craig, & Gosland (2006) offered a pre,-mid, and post mentoring process for e-mentoring professional women, components of the model could be replicated for other program implementation.

▢ Identify the expectations and reasons why a student is interested in peer mentoring. Being able to identify these aspects will also act as an effective means of an appropriate "match." Headlam-Wells, Craig, & Gosland (2006) affirmed the fluency in online communication is a vital skill to be mastered for maximum benefit from an e-mentoring type program.

▢ Consider peer mentoring as a component of service learning in a course. Provide incentives for faculty or student organizations to work on a service learning project. Peer-to-peer mentoring of individuals or groups can be part of this.

▢ Establish periodic checks to monitor how the peer-to-peer relationships are progressing. Have periodic meetings to check on progress and provide professional development support.

▢ Consider the purpose and role in evaluation. How will the information be used? Will it be shared outside the mentor relationship? Will the evaluations be used for further analysis to refine the initial online peer-to-peer mentoring program?

▢ Make sure that every mentor and mentee signs a user agreement approved by your legal department.

▢ Compile a list of FAQ (What do I do first, etc) for mentors and mentees.

▢ Create a central email address for questions about the mentoring program. (For example: Onlinementoring@school.edu).

- o Create an online mentor training and resource area for mentors.

- o Select lead student mentors to decrease faculty advisor workloads.

- o Before implementing a mentoring program school wide, limit the initial program to a small group for the first year or two to work out problems with the first Beta model.