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Documenting and Sharing the Work of Successful On-site Mentors

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Emerging research suggests that on-site mentors can play an important role in supporting K-12 online learners, yet in practice there is wide variability in what mentoring looks like from program to program. Recently, states like Michigan have expanded online course access programs, accelerating the need for better on-ground support models for online learners. Unfortunately, many K-12 personnel have received little training on what different mentoring models could look like or should look like. In the absence of such professional development, many have simply learned by doing. This descriptive study provides insight into established and successful mentoring programs by way of mentor interviews that highlight a range of mentoring program practices, providing points of comparison for mentors, instructors, administrators, parents, and students in regard to alternative support structures and/or strategies for online learners.

K-12 online enrollments have grown rapidly in the last 15 years (Queen & Lewis, 2011; Watson et al., 2013). When promoting online learning, legislators and school administrators cite the need to prepare students for 21st century occupations while cutting the costs of educating students at the same time (Lewis, 2011). Online learning has also proved popular with students because it allows them to take advanced courses not offered by their school, re-take previously failed courses that are required for graduation, learn at their own pace, and have the flexibility to pursue interests outside of school. In a recent survey, close to 60% of Michigan adults strongly agreed that knowing how to learn online is part of what it means to be college- and career-ready after high school (Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute, 2015).

Despite these benefits, online learning attrition rates are believed to be higher than those found in brick-and-mortar schools (Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2005). Researchers have found that students fail to persist for several reasons including academic rigor, lack of motivation, technological problems, and a lack of teacher immediacy (de la Varre, Irvin, Jordan, Hannum, & Farmer, 2014). These causes are compounded by students' low self-regulation and metacognitive abilities, making it especially difficult for them to learn and persist in a highly autonomous learning environment with no face-to-face student-instructor interactions (Cavanaugh, 2007; Moore, 1993, 2007; Rice, 2006). In response, online programs have worked to develop learning models that support and foster student success.

Although students are increasingly taking all or most of their courses online, the majority of online students enroll in only one or two online courses to supplement their more traditional face-to-face courses (Watson et al., 2013). To better support their students and increase pass rates, some programs have begun to supplement the support that the online instructor provides students with support from a mentor who regularly interacts with students at their brick-and-mortar school (Borup & Drysdale, 2014). Providing students with an onsite mentor is not a new practice and has its roots in earlier correspondence courses that mailed learning materials to a mentor at the students' brick-and-mortar school (Russell, 2004). However, in previous models, students had little or no interaction with their online instructor or peers. As a result, it is important to understand how the roles and responsibilities of the instructor and the on-site mentor differ and how their efforts can be coordinated to provide students with the needed support. Although growing, research examining on-site mentors is limited and additional descriptive research of successful mentors can prove insightful to online programs that are using on-site facilitators as an intervention to lower student attrition and increase student performance. In this research, we examine mentoring roles in three schools in Michigan—a state that requires online students to be assigned an on-site mentor.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Harms et al. (2006) explained that online learning models contain separate but complementary roles; Staker (2011) added that if "[o]ne part of this interdependent system is not functioning, the whole system fails" (p. 28). Harms et al. (2006) emphasized three roles that are present in most learning models: designers, instructors, and facilitators. In a face-to-face course, the same individual typically performs all three roles, but in online courses they are commonly distinct positions. Designers create and organize course learning activities and assessments within a learning management system (LMS). The course instructor then modifies course materials and calendars to meet student needs, tutors students, provides students with assessment feedback, and monitors and directs students' content-related discussions. Unlike the course designer and instructor, the facilitator (mentor) does not require course content expertise (Harms et al., 2006). Instead, the mentor engages with the student and instructor to ensure that "everything is working smoothly" (Hannum, Irvin, Lei, & Farmer, 2008, p. 213). More specifically, the mentor builds relationships with students in an attempt to understand their needs, assists students in developing learning skills, fosters academic honesty, motivates students to fully engage in learning activities, encourages student-instructor and instructor-parent communication, closely monitors student progress, and orients students to the LMS used in the course (Harms et al., 2006). Staker (2011) added that mentors are responsible for maintaining classroom discipline while simultaneously mentoring multiple students in the same room.

Qualitative researchers have reported that mentors can positively impact student success (Frid, 2001; Drysdale, Graham, & Borup, 2014, in press)—especially at-risk students (Pettyjohn, 2012; Ferdig, 2010; Wicks, 2010). However, mentors' impact can vary greatly. Roblyer (2006) emphasized the need to provide facilitators with professional development because effective "facilitators are made, not born" (p. 34). Researchers recommend that mentors who are new to the position be formally trained by more experienced mentors (Borup & Drysdale, 2014). O'Dwyer, Cary, and Kleiman (2007) described one model where new mentors were trained by course instructors. Researchers also described a successful professional development program that provided facilitators with realistic scenarios and an expert-facilitated forum to discuss their thoughts and experiences (Irvin, Hannum, Farmer, de la Varre, & Keane, 2009; Keane, de la Varre, Irvin, & Hannum, 2008). Unfortunately it is unknown how many mentors actually receive professional development; Lewis (2011) found that none of the mentors who participated in his research received training before mentoring students. The lack of quantitative research examining the impact of professional development is to blame, in part. However, the emerging research is promising.

For instance, using a cluster-randomized control trial, researchers found online students who were assigned a trained facilitator had higher pass rates than those students who were assigned facilitators with no training (Hannum et al., 2008). Staker (2011) similarly reported that mentors who were trained regarding the course LMS, motivation strategies, and technology troubleshooting were more successful than mentors who received no training.

One obstacle for providing effective training is a lack of research identifying effective mentoring strategies. Although Harms et al. (2006) provided a structural framework for understanding instructor and mentor responsibilities and possible ways that they might collaborate to improve course outcomes, little research exists that describes mentoring in practice. The emerging research supports Harms et al.'s (2006) framework but also highlights areas of disagreement. For instance in some case studies, mentors were expected to troubleshoot students' technological issues, and in other cases technology support staff performed troubleshooting. Researchers have also observed that students will commonly ask mentors for tutoring help even though their mentors do not have the level of content expertise necessary to teach the course (Barbour & Hill, 2011; Barbour & Mulcahy, 2004; O'Dwyer et al., 2007). de la Varre et al. (2011) also found that mentors would increase their tutoring activities or even modify learning activities and due dates if they perceived weaknesses in the course or the instructor. In some cases the mentors were openly critical towards the course, undermining teachers' abilities to fulfill their responsibilities. In order to avoid these conflicts, mentors and instructors should communicate regularly (Wicks, 2010); de la Varre et al. (2011) recommended that mentors and instructors have an in-depth conversation at the start of the course.

While more rigorous research is needed in the budding area of mentor practice, an on-ground reality is that too many schools and mentors lack ideas about what mentoring can and should look like. Individuals who are asked to become mentors frequently are given little notice, provided with little to no training, and may serve as mentors for limited periods. Schools and their mentors are in desperate need of easily understood examples of how schools with successful online programs go about the art of mentoring. To this end, *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute* (*MVLRI*) interviewed mentors from successful online learning programs in the state and developed a series of school mentoring vignettes based on these interviews that illustrate a range of mentoring programs, providing points of comparison for mentors, instructors, administrators, parents, and students about alternative support structures and/or strategies for online learners.

METHODOLOGY

Context

In 2012, Michigan's governor and Legislature funded the *Michigan Virtual University*® (*MVU*®), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, to establish the *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*™ (Michigan Public Act § No. 201, 2012). One of the first tasks was to create a report that highlighted enrollment totals, completion rates, and overall impact of virtual courses on Michigan K-12 students. Using data collected by the state since the 2010-11 school year, *MVLRI* published *Michigan's K-12 Virtual Learning Effectiveness Report* (Freidhoff, DeBruler, & Kennedy, 2014). A few of its key findings included:

- On average, virtual learners performed worse in their virtual courses (60% "Completed/Passed" rate) than they did in their non-virtual courses (72% "Completed/Passed" rate).
- Students who took virtual courses as supplements to their non-virtual curriculum tended to do worse the more supplemental virtual courses they took in a year.
- Schools varied considerably in how well their virtual learners performed. About 30% of schools with virtual enrollments had 90%-100% "Completed/Passed" rates. On the other hand, 9% had rates of less than 10%. About half of the schools had "Completed/Passed" rates of less than 70%.

This last bullet point, in particular, resonated with MVU's experience running the *Michigan Virtual School*® (*MVS*®) where school-level variability is high though course content, delivery, and instructors are fairly consistent. The research team speculated that a likely differentiating factor was the quality of the wrap-around supports schools use to nurture their online learners.

At the same time the Effectiveness Report was being written, Michigan began to implement new legislation that made it the seventh state in the U.S. to have choice at the course level (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin & Rapp, 2013). Section 21f of Michigan Public Act § No. 60 (2013) gave students in grades 5-12, with parental or guardian consent, the right to enroll in up to two online courses offered by the student's local school, other Michigan public schools, or *MVS.*[1] School districts were limited in the reasons they could deny student requests for online enrollment, and schools were obligated to pay for the cost of the online course (not to exceed a certain amount) with the money they received from the state for students.

1 For more information about Section 21f, including a variety of district-oriented resources, visit https://micourses.org/resources/21f_Tool_Kit.html

Prior to Section 21f, Michigan public schools were able to offer online learning options to their students, but schools were the gatekeepers of access to courses. These online learning options were and still are counted by schools under Section 5-O-A of the Michigan Department of Education's Pupil Accounting Manual (2014a). In order to count the student in membership for an online course under 5-O-A, "[a]n *on-site mentor must be assigned* [emphasis added] and available for assistance to the pupil. The on-site mentor will monitor the pupil's progress in the course. The *on-site mentor must be a certified teacher* [emphasis added] employed by the school district. The on-site mentor may also be the teacher of record for the course" (p. 5-O-A-1).

With the advent of Section 21f and its requirement that the instructor of record for all Section 21f compliant courses have a Michigan teaching certificate (a requirement that was not and is not present for 5-O-A online enrollments), the necessity of having an on-site mentor who also held a Michigan teaching certificate was questioned. A prominent concern of Michigan public school districts was that requiring an on-site mentor to have a Michigan teaching certificate meant that districts had to incur the costs for two teachers when students enrolled in Section 21f courses. To date, the equivalent section in Pupil Accounting Manual (2014b) for counting students under Section 21f states:

> "[A] teacher who holds a valid Michigan teaching certificate must be identified and assigned to the course. The teacher is responsible for determining appropriate instructional methods for each pupil, diagnosing learning needs, assessing pupil learning, prescribing intervention strategies, reporting outcomes, and evaluating the effects of instruction and support strategies. An on-site mentor employed by the district must also be assigned to the pupil. (pp. 5-O-D-1 – 5-O-D-2).

Given the presence of an online instructor within the Section 21f online courses, the requirement that the on-site mentor also have Michigan certification was removed, allowing any adult employed by the district to act as the official mentor of record. The effect of such policy has meant there is wide variability in who serves as mentors.

Participants

Potential mentoring programs with a history of high performance in *MVS* courses were identified through interviews with *MVS* staff. Purposeful sampling with a focus on maximizing variation was used to determine schools

and to select the interview participants (Patton, 2002). Although all interview participants mentored high school students, the locales in which the mentors worked ranged from small rural schools to large suburban ones. Some mentors were employed part-time as para-professionals while others were full-time Michigan-certified teachers. The study included individuals who were relatively new to mentoring as well as veteran mentors with multiple years of experience.

Ten out of 14 mentors asked to participate agreed to interview, and three interviews included multiple mentors. Thus, the experiences of 14 mentors were represented in the overall project. All interview participants were mentors for students taking fully online courses with *MVS*.

Data Collection

A set of over 30 questions was used (See Interview Protocol in Appendix). The interviews were semi-structured, allowing mentors to talk freely and the interviewer to provide prompts for additional information when needed (Hatch, 2002; Patton, 2002). Interview questions were developed to:

- understand the roles and responsibilities of local supports, defined as 'mentors' in the State of Michigan;
- understand how mentors can best help students prepare for online courses;
- identify mentoring strategies as described and practiced by those interviewed; and
- gather ideas and best practices to share in a guide for mentors and those creating mentoring positions and/or programs.

The interviews took place over the phone (Seidman, 2006), and each lasted at least an hour. On three occasions, when time ran out, remaining questions were sent to the mentor via email in a Word document, and individuals returned answers electronically. Using a case study approach (Stake 1995), a rich description of each program was created that focused on:

- who the mentors were,
- what they did,
- the logistics of what they did,
- how they built rapport with the students, and
- what their experience has taught them that would be helpful for others to know.

In addition, within the broad areas mentioned above, the interviews yielded information on the background and experience of the mentors; the context and history of online learning in the schools; their relationships with students, instructors, administrators, and parents; and their challenges and

rewards. Pseudonyms for the mentors and the schools are used to protect identity. Member checking was done on each case to ensure the accuracy of the mentor descriptions (Maxwell, 1998). After member checking, the case studies were summarized into smaller vignettes for space considerations and cross-case analysis (Ragin, 1997; 1993) applied to highlight areas of differences among programs.

Because of the way the mentors were selected, the results are limited in their generalizability. While students from these schools had high completion rates in their *MVS* courses, those results may or may not be attributed to the quality of the mentor interviewed. In addition, by attempting to highlight higher performing mentors, the mentoring activities captured in the interviews may not be typical of what many mentors do. Finally, the variation exhibited in the interviews may be more limited due to the schools use of the same online provider (MVS) and colored by the interactions these mentors have had with *MVS* staff and resources.

RESULTS

Examples of Information Gleaned across Interviews

Mentor Preparation. Most of the 10 mentors had at least one teaching certification (n=6) or substitute teaching experience (n=3), two had Master's degrees in Instructional Technology, and four had counseling degrees. Seven had personal experience with online learning; most mentioned the likely benefit of having more exposure to online learning before becoming a mentor. None of those interviewed had any mentor training or preparation prior to taking their mentoring position in Michigan schools; however, once they became mentors, many sought support from MVS Customer Service or Help Desk or attended MVU-sponsored sessions at conferences. All of the mentors responded that it was difficult to pursue professional development while working because there was no one to fulfill their mentoring responsibilities while they were receiving training. Some mentors reported developing program materials as needed or seeking additional resources on the Internet.

Time. By and large, mentors responses indicated that the time they had to provide support was managed differently, depending on their non-mentoring responsibilities. Programs with both full-time and part-time mentors most often had a physical space dedicated to online learning (e.g., part of the media center, an assigned lab, and/or classroom). Frequently, students had the option to work at home, before or after school, and in school locations other than the dedicated online learning space. Often access to these options was dictated by whether the student demonstrated success in the

online course by keeping up with assignments and having achieved a grade or passing rate determined by the school. Mentors' contact with students ranged from daily to weekly, and/or on an as needed basis, from multiple times in a class period to once or twice a semester. Some mentors reported making a point of checking in with students every day, even if it was just to ask how the students were doing; others reported scheduling time to meet with students to log into students' courses and discuss progress and concerns. Only a few – those with mentoring responsibilities added to their full-time roles – reported seeing their students less frequently than once a week. With few exceptions, even those who did not have direct contact with a majority of students every day, talked with online learners daily whether it was to address an academic issue or to maintain contact and build relationships.

Vignettes

ABC High School. The mentor at ABC High School, Ms. Smith, worked full-time with approximately 150 online learners per semester. She did not have a teaching certificate, but was a substitute teacher and worked with youth in other community programs prior to taking on mentoring responsibilities. She had mentored for 18 months at the time of her interview.

Ms. Smith was quick to say that she loved her job because she liked working with the students and talking with them. Because she had five children who attended schools in the district, she knew many of the students personally from school events. Her history with the school and relationships outside her mentor role provided the foundation for her relationships with students, parents, and administrators.

Ms. Smith was responsible for enrolling students in their online courses, helping them adjust to the new context for learning, supporting them in completing assignments, assisting them with tech support, and managing the lab. Early in the semester, Ms. Smith showed students how to navigate the learning management system and become familiar with their courses. She communicated regularly with parents, teachers, and administrators about the students and their online learning experiences. In fact, she maintained weekly contact with the principal, two assistant principals, the technical high school director and assistant director, the athletic director, and counselors about student progress so they always knew who was doing well, who required intervention, and who was eligible for various school activities. Because students were used to asking questions of a teacher in the classroom setting and did not have much experience emailing or texting an instructor they did not know, Ms. Smith coached them in how to communicate their questions and concerns to their online instructor. She advocated for students when they made a mistake and facilitated contact with instructors or the help desk when students needed additional assistance. She also conducted conferences with teachers and called parents as necessary.

The students that Ms. Smith mentored met in a lab space originally designed specifically for online learning. While the school had a policy permitting students who were achieving 75% or more in their courses to be exempt from coming to the lab every day, Ms. Smith had a difficult time tracking them down if they fell behind, so she decided to require attendance until they completed the class. Because of the problems students had with procrastination and the lack of day-to-day, face-to-face contact with the teacher, Ms. Smith talked about coursework with students regularly, even daily if the student required that level of support. She routinely worked with students on assignments, helped them use the Internet to do research, and helped them build their writing and other employability skills.

Ms. Smith believed more could be done to foster student achievement and success by providing a more organized orientation session to students and finding easier ways to track student progress. While the personalized pace of learning suits some students, others struggle. She would like online instructors to either impose more consequences for students who fail to make their best effort because they procrastinate or who have attendance issues or reward those who achieve positive results.

LMN High School. LMN High School's mentor, Mr. Jones, had a full-time teaching load and mentored the school's 100 online learners in addition to his class time. He had a Michigan teaching certificate, online teaching experience, and a Masters in Educational Technology. He had been the mentor for a year when he was interviewed.

Counselors at LMN High School were responsible for enrolling students and discussing their expectations and the nature of their commitment to taking online courses. Mr. Jones described his role as primarily tracking student progress, determining who is where they need to be and who is not, and communicating with the students to give them feedback about where they are in their coursework. While he did not have a designated time for mentoring, the students' online courses were scheduled for a particular hour, and they were required to sign in on a piece of paper taped to Mr. Jones' door and then go to the library to work. Because he had classroom responsibilities throughout the day, he used email, the lunch hour, between classes, and before and after school to connect with students. When students fell behind or struggled, he made time to sit down and talk with them to determine what the issues were and how to resolve them. Sometimes resolution involved Mr. Jones contacting the instructor, administrators, and/or parents. Once a month, he held a 10-minute meeting in the cafeteria for all students taking online courses to remind students of upcoming deadlines, talk about how many of them were behind, and remind them of the consequences of failure.

Mr. Jones identified procrastination as the primary challenge for the students he mentored; thus, he would like to see more hard deadlines for student assignments. He hoped for LMN High School to be able to create

an area in the school designated to online learners, where students would meet and he could provide support as a learning specialist and be present to monitor what they were doing.

XYZ High School. At XYZ High School, three full-time mentors worked with 400 online learners per semester. They scheduled students throughout the day to work from their own designated classroom/lab space. The mentors worked as a team with online learners and instructors, as well as with the students' face-to-face instructors, counseling staff, and other school personnel. At the time of the interview, Ms. Brown, the online learning coordinator and mentor, had a teaching certification, a Masters in Educational Technology, and had held her position for six years; Mr. Green was working on a teaching degree, had been an online learner in high school and college, and was in his first year as a mentor; Ms. Black had been a substitute teacher for over 12 years and had been a mentor for two.

When XYZ High School began their mentoring program, Ms. Brown learned about enrollment record keeping, grading, and course structure and navigation in the weeks before classes started. Since that time, she has developed mentor orientation and training materials. The mentors met once a week as a professional learning community to establish norms, problem solve, and share best practices and successes. The mentors described their program as flexible, dynamic, and ever changing and attributed their success to their collaborative and transparent relationship with each other and their shared goal: to do what is best for the students.

Students taking online courses were assigned to a specific mentor, classroom, and computer for their class time throughout the semester. The mentors then managed their classrooms, maintained academic integrity, monitored student progress, followed students' Individualized Educational Programs if required, worked with other instructors or staff in the building as related to student issues, communicated with parents and instructors as needed, and advocated for the students. At the beginning of the semester, mentors conducted an orientation program introducing students to netiquette, course navigation, the pacing guide, classroom expectations, the roles of each member of the learning team, and how to get technical support. Throughout the semester, mentors provided more direct course support, for example assisting with technology issues, explaining assignments, and going over instructions. The mentors noted that, because of the mentoring relationship, students learn other skills and behaviors from being in the online courses, including how to take responsibility for their learning, initiate and maintain communication with their instructors and other students, advocate for themselves, and be self-directed, independent learners.

Ms. Brown noted that online learners were more successful when they received quick responses and feedback from instructors, had well-defined expectations, such as pacing guides and progress checks, and had access to quality content effectively delivered. At XYZ High School, over 70% of the

students were eligible for free and reduced lunch; many of whom successfully completed online courses. The mentors attributed the increase in many students' academic success to their online learning experience, including the relationship with their mentors, because they took courses that engaged them in a peaceful, welcoming, safe place where everyone was equal.

DISCUSSION

While there is of course a great deal still to be learned about the factors that contribute to successful on-site facilitation or "mentoring," there is an emerging mentoring framework. However, these often theoretical foundations have less clear or well-established practical applications. For instance, while there tends to be agreement that factors such as personal interactions between the student and teacher, teacher and mentor, and mentor and student are integral to successful online learning, how those interactions actually play out in real educational settings varies widely. In practice, some mentors may require frequent communication with students and reach out frequently to online teachers while others may instead opt for initial "welcome" communication and then support students on an as-needed basis. The next section will discuss some of the primary factors associated with mentoring and student success in online environments and present examples from the vignettes (discussed above) that highlight the variability in interpretation and practice.

Mentor Training and Professional Development

A prime example of the divide between what is known empirically and how it is occurring in practice is the presence, or in many cases, absence, of training or professional development for mentors. Staker (2011) reported better course outcomes for Florida Virtual School (FLVS) courses in which mentors were trained in basic technological assistance, course navigation, and strategies to improve student motivation. This finding is neither unique in literature on mentoring nor surprising; Davis et al. (2007) and Hannum et al. (2008) found (respectively) that mentors positively impact learning outcomes and that mentors who received training were more effective than those who did not.

Borup and Drysdale (2014) suggest that face-to-face teachers lack the skills and knowledge to be effective mentors for online students, and these, much like the skills and knowledge necessary for online teaching, are rarely taught in teacher preparation programs. As a result, staff assigned mentoring responsibilities, even certificated teachers, typically require additional training and professional development focused on how to effectively support online students. However, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) found that administrators are resistant to professional development for on-site mentors

due to cost which results in professional development that varies in quantity and quality across school contexts. While we cannot make claims to the generalizability or representativeness of the programs we interviewed, training and professional development were largely lacking across many of them.

Professional training and experience varied widely across the cases from Smith at ABC High School who did not have a teaching certificate, to Mr. Jones at LMN High School and Ms. Brown at XYZ High School who both had a Masters in Educational Technology. Additionally, while some mentors received mentor-specific training, like those working under Ms. Brown at XYZ High School, many more did not and learned their role throughout the school year. Highlighting this lack of training and professional development was Ms. Brown at XYZ High School who developed her own mentor training and orientation materials to support new mentors and establish clear mentor expectations at that school.

Mentor-Student Interactions

Much like the discussion of mentor training and professional development above, mentor-student interactions and the importance of that relationship have some basis in online learning literature, but lack consistency and clarity across applications. Providing additional complexity to the situation is the lack of empirical clarity around what constitutes an ideal level of interaction and for what type of student. It is reasonable to suggest that more experienced online learners and those that have demonstrated prior success with online learning will have a different level of ideal interaction than new online students or those with a history of low academic achievement (Borup, Graham, & Davies, 2013). Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2009) found that the physical presence of mentors had some positive motivational effects on students, which not only supported and encouraged student learning, but also helped to strengthen the mentor-student relationship. Recent research also suggests mentoring benefits can exist even when the mentoring is done online rather than on-site (Drysdale 2013; 2014).

A positive mentor-student relationship can be particularly beneficial for students struggling with the course content and/or the online learning environment and students with little at-home support (Archambault et al., 2010; Ferdig, 2010; Pettyjohn, 2012). This same relationship can also be beneficial for online teachers, who can use the mentor as a point of physical contact for students with consistently low engagement and course participation (de la Varre et al., 2011). Again, however, we are not necessarily arguing that there should be a state-mandated interaction requirement. Instead, schools and mentors must decide on their own requirements and expectations for mentor-student interaction. This played out with great variability across the programs interviewed, and, as was clear from the interviews, there was no one best approach.

Mentor-student interactions were also affected by the space that was allotted for the students to work on their online courses. Two of the mentors noted a requirement for students to work on their courses from a physical space located inside of the school; however, even this consistency in policy played out differently across programs. While the official policy at ABC High School was to permit students who were achieving 75% or higher in their courses to be exempt from coming to the online learning lab every day, Ms. Smith was going to require all students to be physically present with her in the lab until they had completed the course. Students at LMN High School also had to be physically present during their online course hour; however, this meant signing in on Mr. Jones' door and going elsewhere to work on their course, not in the physical presence of the mentor. As the mentor at LMN High School, Mr. Jones had a full-time teaching load in addition to his mentoring responsibilities. Because of this, he was unable to physically monitor the students he mentored.

Access to Student Progress

There is less of a direct empirical basis for access to student progress than for the other two examples presented above. Access to student progress, however, was a desire that cut across each of the vignettes, and one that was in no way unique to only mentors and schools included in this research. In interviews with 12 K-12 online teachers, Borup, Graham, & Drysdale (2014) found that these teachers considered student activity reports helpful in monitoring engagement. Mentors, while not responsible for delivering course content, have a commitment to support and engage students in their online courses; thus, access to student progress reports would be beneficial in completing this task more efficiently and effectively. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, access to and use of student progress reports has great variability in practice. There are several barriers to mentors' ability to accurately gauge and track student progress, some within but many outside of mentors' control. There is no pre-determined amount of access granted to mentors of online students, and even with complete access to each and every student's online course, it is unreasonable to suggest that a mentor with large caseloads could seek out progress statistics on each and every student regularly.

As was clear from the case studies, there was great variability in the caseloads of each of the mentors and mentor teams. Ms. Smith at ABC High School oversaw approximately 150 online students, with no other teaching responsibilities. Mr. Jones at LMN oversaw 100 online students in addition to teaching several courses on-site, and the three-person mentor team at XYZ, managed by Ms. Brown, oversaw 400 online students. Given the large numbers of students to oversee, in various courses and subject areas, mentors, like Ms. Smith at ABC, noted a desire for easier access to student

progress. Unfortunately, the learner analytics (e.g. grades, resources accessed, time on task) that LMS programs currently provide vary in usefulness and accuracy because students have learned how to exaggerate their login data to give the illusion that they are more engaged in learning activities than they really are (Borup et al., 2014; Zhang & Almeroth, 2010). Zhang and Almeroth (2010) argued that analytic data would be more useful if it was presented in a visual and easily understood manner. We also recommend the LMS be developed with the mentor in mind by automatically aggregating student data across multiple courses. These types of systems would alleviate some of the mentors' administrative responsibilities, allowing them to spend a larger portion of their time working with students.

These oversight and monitoring tasks may become increasingly important in course choice states where students have the ability to select online courses from a catalog of providers. Monitoring the progress of 400 students who are all with the same online provider is quite different than monitoring 400 students across 10 different providers. Issues of data portability and accessibility will be even more critical for mentors to be successful in tracking student progress.

Mentor Commonalities

As discussed earlier, programs were selected to represent variety in what mentoring programs look like across the state of Michigan, and the intended audience was school leaders and personnel who were implementing mentoring programs at the local level. The vignettes illustrate clear differences in how mentors are selected, the design of the school environments, how they go about their work, where mentoring takes place, and how students interact with their mentors. At the same time, the interviews and vignettes suggest that mentors have much more in common in how they work with their students than the logistics of their programs might suggest.

Mentors agree that online learning is not for everyone, and they reported that they would like to see students make format choices that are more aligned with their learning strengths. They believe that to be successful in online courses, some students just need better preparation and a more substantial orientation to online learning than they have been able to provide.

All of the mentors mentioned working with students on two particular behaviors: time management and effective written communication. Warding off procrastination and helping students learn how to allocate sufficient time for their academics in the face of many commitments was reported as a constant challenge. Many of the mentors talked about helping students learn to convey their questions or concerns to their teachers. Students are expected to prepare a draft communication before the mentor gets involved; however, most mentors reported finding themselves coaching students throughout the semester about effective email habits.

While the daily routine may differ given the other responsibilities some mentors have, those interviewed have much in common. They all have practical ideas for how to improve the mentoring program as time and resources allow, and they know a lot about the students they mentor. Of paramount interest to them is the success of students in online courses and the reward of seeing students who have had transformative experiences learning online.

CONCLUSION

In Michigan, and across the country, the number of K-12 online enrollments is growing rapidly. From 2012-13 to 2013-14, the number of virtual enrollments in the state of Michigan jumped from over 185,000 to over 319,000 with only about 57% of the 2013-14 virtual enrollments yielding a passing completion status (Freidhoff, 2015). While some students clearly benefit from online learning, the data seem quite clear that many students are not being well served through existing models. Better outcomes requires revisiting practices in all facets of the online learning experience, including offline components like mentoring programs.

While there is emerging research that mentoring matters and the case studies/vignettes shared here provided examples of the possible, building-level administrators face a difficult set of challenges when determining how to shape their mentoring programs. While they want to provide the highest quality learning environments for their students, they find it challenging to make investments in mentoring programs when money to support these enrollments may not exist. As a research community, we need to help practitioners make sound decisions by building evidence for (or, perhaps, against) investing in mentoring programs. Furthermore, we need to be able to encapsulate such critical research in consumable ways for policy makers to be able to craft policies that support best practices and that financially incentivize programs that follow those practices.

An example of the kind of consumable research that practitioners are thirsty for can be seen in MVLRI's recently released *Mentor Fundamentals: A Guide to Mentoring Online Learners* (2014). Drawing from extant research and the interviews our research team conducted, the mentor guide fills a hole identified by working mentors in the field. Too many mentors were asked to be mentors with little or no information and/or training on how to be one. *Mentor Fundamentals* is what the mentors interviewed "wished they had when [they] first began mentoring online students."

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Mentor

- Make initial contact: Mention who recommended him/her, explain purpose of collecting best practices, ask re: availability; make follow-up phone call.
- Conduct interview.
- Send thank you.
- Make follow-up call or send email for additional info if necessary.
- Send draft of vignette to interviewee for member check.
- Send link to publication when it's released.

Principal

- Make initial contact via email to introduce project.
- Send thank you with draft of vignette.
- Send link to publication when it's released.

Interview Questions

Who

1. What made you decide to become a mentor?
2. What preparation did you have to be a mentor?
3. Do you have any opportunities for ongoing professional development?
4. What other roles do you fill at your school or in the district currently?
5. What other jobs have you held at your current school? At others?
6. What is your educational background?
7. What did you know about online learning before you became a mentor?
8. What kind of support network do you have?
9. How long do you expect to continue as a mentor?

What

1. How many students do you mentor?
2. What are your primary responsibilities as a mentor?
3. Describe your typical routine with the online learners you mentor.
4. How do you establish a relationship with the students you mentor?
5. What restrictions are there, if any, on how you can support an online learner? (e.g., time limit, assignment parameters)
6. What do you do when online learners have trouble communicating?

Logistics

1. How do you orient students who are new to online learning?
2. Do you have a designated area for mentoring? If so, where is it?
3. What kind of support materials and/or technology do you use?
4. How often do you meet with each student?
5. How much time do you typically spend with each student?
6. How often do you contact students?
7. What is your preferred method of communicating with students?
8. What is their preferred method of communicating with you?
9. Who else do you communicate with regularly about the students individually? As a group?
10. How often do you communicate with those you mentioned?
11. Why do you usually initiate contact with those you mentioned?

Suggestions

1. What do you know now that you wish you had known when you started mentoring students?
2. What tools or materials have you created/assembled?
3. What have been your greatest challenges/rewards?
4. What would you like parents to understand about online learning?
5. What would you like online teachers/administrators to understand about online learning?
6. What makes a good mentor?
7. What would make your job as a mentor easier?
8. What would contribute to greater success for online learners?