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Innovative PsyD Training: The Development of an Alumni Mentorship Program

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Abstract

This article describes the development and implementation of a unique mentorship approach in a professional psychology program. Graduate students enrolled in the first two years were offered the opportunity to have an alumni mentor for at least 6 months. Mentors were recruited from our pool of approximately 300 graduates of the PsyD clinical program. The description includes demographics about the 75 mentorship dyads successfully created over the first 5 years of the program and details about the mentorship orientation and matching processes. Data from the MRI (Mentor Role Instrument) for all participants are discussed as pertaining to the match in desired mentorship roles of the dyad participants. Successful outcomes are described, as are issues of feasibility, sustainability and generalizability of a program that requires few resources and is mutually satisfying for all participants.

Keywords: MRI: Mentor Role Instrument; CPDP: Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program; APA: American Psychological Association

Abbreviations: PWIs: Primary White institutions

Introduction

Mentoring relationships in graduate settings are often dynamic, mutually rewarding personal relationships in which a more experienced faculty mentor acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor to a less experienced student [1]. Mentors provide a range of career and relational functions to students, and mentoring signifies intentional and generative career development [2]. The literature on mentorship for graduate students has identified the most common characteristics including: (a) mentorships are enduring personal relationships that are increasingly reciprocal over time, (b) relative to the mentee, mentors demonstrate greater achievement and experience and provide mentees with guidance on entering the profession, (c) mentors provide social and emotional support, and (d) mentorships offer a safe harbor for self-exploration in the service of growth and development, [2].

According to Johnson [3] the two most important aspects are: (a) reciprocity and mutuality between mentor and mentee, and (b) accomplishment of an identity transformation, as the mentee moves from neophyte to colleague over a period of years [4]. The nature of the mentorship relationship is complex in so much as the

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mentor provides the mentee with a professional culture, professional values and models working with the personal and professional life as a psychologist. Lundgren and Orsillo et al. indicate that the usual trajectory of a doctoral student offers opportunities for informal mentorship from academic advisors, professors and advanced peers. However, often the most salient mentorship relationship in doctoral education is with one's research mentor, especially in a clinical PhD program [5].

Although there is a growing body of literature on the important components and outcomes of successful mentor relationships, there are few well controlled studies grounded in particular theories to help guide mentorship program development [6]. Surveys indicate that nearly all graduate students report having an advisor, only half to two thirds of students report being mentored [7]. Mentorship is a unique relationship often encountered in academic and work settings that fosters satisfaction and commitment to the profession, increases confidence, professional recognition, and networking opportunities [2], and is beneficial in recruiting and retaining people of diverse backgrounds [8]. Since much of the literature to date has focused on similarities between mentors and mentees as predictive of mentorship success, it may be far more difficult for minority students or students from other diverse backgrounds to find and develop good mentorship relationships during their training. Alvarez and colleagues [8] emphasize that there has been no sustained growth in the percentage of students of color who have earned doctoral degrees since the peak in 2000.

These authors argue that diversity education for those mentoring students of color merits an additional expertise in areas such as: culture and academia, shared/assumed existential posture, racial discrimination, race and ethnic self-awareness, and relationship and process. The dilemma is that students in professional psychology are less likely to be mentored, and further, ethnic minority students have less of a chance of finding mentors who are ethnically similar. Since there is already limited representation of diversity in doctoral education, the cultivation of mentoring relationships is an essential factor in helping students of color attains their degrees [9]. We wondered if the opportunity to find a mentor extended to alumni of a particular clinical program, could some of these unique issues relative to diversity be addressed [10].

From another perspective, much of the mentoring literature is focused on protégé relationships in business organizations and the mentoring of research scientists. The consideration of mentoring in psychology has traditionally examined mentoring in PhD programs, of which there are 299 in clinical, counseling and school psychology. The mentorship situation may be quite different for the 76 accredited PsyD training programs, as there is usually less of a focus on research and more emphasis on clinical training. As such, there are clinical supervisors who might serve as mentors in professional psychology training programs. Block-Lerner, McClure, Gardner & Wolanin [11] wonder, however, with PsyD programs accepting larger cohorts of students, offering limited financial support and relying on adjunct faculty more heavily, are there enough opportunities for mentorship? Larger cohorts of students mean more responsibilities for faculty members and therefore less time and focus on mentorship activities with individual students. Thus, PsyD students may lose this important part of their training as clinicians. Further, the majority of faculty at PsyD training programs has a PhD in psychology and might not be best suited to mentor students in professional psychology who will likely not pursue an academic career [12].

In summary, mentoring relationships in graduate programs can be defined by: (a) positive emotional valence, (b) increasing mutuality, (c) a range of career and psychosocial functions, and (d) an intentional focus on the development of the mentee's career and professional identity. The mentor relationship can be critical for completion of the degree and successful entrance into the profession [13]. Although studies have looked at the impact of mentorship on graduate and clinical training programs, no studies have looked specifically at PsyD programs or at alumni as mentors for graduate students. Alumni mentoring program is unique as it can provide mentorship, support, and guidance for students that are facing similar processes and challenges to those who have successfully graduated from the same program. Alumni mentoring can also provide the additional support needed in PsyD programs with larger cohorts and less emphasis on research [14].

Rationale and Justification

Problem

How can doctoral training programs increase support and mentorship to diverse and sometimes large cohorts of students when:

a. There are limited resources given the faculty/student ratio in professional PsyD programs.
b. There are limited faculties who come from diverse backgrounds and would be able to function as mentors or role models.

c. Effective mentorship depends on the nature of the relationship (alliance) and the mutuality that evolves. Thus assigning mentors, as many programs do initially with advisors, might not be the best way for mentorship to take place.
d. Mentorship in PsyD clinical programs might be quite different than the research mentorship that exists in PhD programs. Perhaps what is needed is more emphasis on professional practice development.
e. Most frequently endorsed goal of students in PsyD programs is to practice as a professional psychologist, yet many faculty members are purely academic and better prepared to offer research mentorship.

Justification

A possible solution might be to develop an alumni mentorship program wherein alumni from a particular PsyD program volunteer to mentor a first or second year graduate student in their former program. The availability of these mentors would not tax the already limited resources and might offer a more diverse and current cadre of professional role models than faculty could ever provide.

Indicated Competencies

Relational competencies are highly valued in professional psychology training programs. However, there are many relationships within individual programs that have complex dynamics in an environment of pressure and anxieties. Johnson, Skinner and Kaslow [15] suggested that the supervisory relationship in clinical programs can parallel the mentoring relationship, but only if the supervisor has a strong sense of collegiality and sees themselves as a "transformational supervisor". This supervisor might offer increasing levels of support, empowerment and reciprocity over time and the relationship would become more egalitarian. Although this is possible, it is likely not frequent, as supervisors are usually temporary (across a semester or two) and have a number of supervisees to train in a busy clinical environment. Further, the varied roles for the student, the faculty member, the advisor, the supervisor and the dissertation advisor naturally produce some relationship conflict and ethical problems can arise when boundaries are not clear or faculty members serve in these multiple roles for graduate students.

In 2012, Lundgren & Orsillo discussed the numerous mentorship opportunities within the context of the competency benchmarks currently guiding professional psychology doctoral training. In particular, there are several foundational and functional competencies likely to be enhanced through an alumni mentorship program. These include:

Foundational competencies

Professionalism: Mentors can model all domains of professional behaviors as clinicians as well as ethical decision making in tough situations. Further, mentors might assist students to think beyond their graduate program and engage in networking in professional associations and continuing education.
Reflective practice: Mentors might help students reflect on their career and personal goals as well as encourage their mentees to engage in self-care.
Relationships: The quality of the mentorship relationship, indicated by a working alliance and good interpersonal skills will impact both mentor and mentee. This also provides the student with a role-model for interaction within professional relationships
Individual and Cultural Diversity: Effective mentoring requires sensitivity to matters of culture and stigma [15] and an understanding of how similarities and difference impact relationships

Functional competencies

Consultation: the mentor is in a unique position to consult on coursework, faculty relationships, clinical experiences and dissertation ideas.
Supervision: All of our graduates working in the field become licensed professional psychologists and are thus in an excellent position to offer extra supervision on clinical ideas and/or cases.
Advocacy: which might include networking in the professional worlds of the mentor and assisting the student to advocate for themselves within their programs?

Program Description

The LIU Alumni Mentorship Program was created in order to support graduate students in clinical psychology on their journey to define their identity as professional psychologists. Our PsyD Program began in 1990 and to date there are approximately 300 graduates, spread across all of the United States and internationally. The 2013-2014 academic year marked the launch of this pilot mentorship program. We recruited volunteers from the pool of graduates of the Clinical Psychology (PsyD) Doctoral Program (CPDP) and 1st and 2nd year doctoral students to form mentoring partnerships. A typical incoming cohort of 1st year students is 20. We are now in our fourth year of this successful program and have launched 60 mentorship dyads [16].

Initial Survey

The development of this pilot program began in October 2013, when a brief online survey was distributed to all LIU-Post Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program (PsyD.) graduates to assess alumni interest in mentoring current first- and second-year LIU doctoral candidates. Similarly, a mentee version of the survey was distributed to current first- and second-year doctoral students to gauge their interest in being mentored by alumni. These surveys were designed by the program director and a graduate student and were administered anonymously through Survey Monkey. Results indicated strong interest among both alumni and mentees – and thus the Alumni Mentorship Program was formed. With the advances in technology, there were multiple ways that mentors and mentees could communicate and set up meetings, either in-person or electronically [17].

Participants

Alumni participants

Recruitment for the Alumni Mentorship Program occurred initially via e-mail announcement to alumni as well as the first- and second-year doctoral students. Then, during each of the following summers, testimonials were solicited from alums that have enjoyed the process. These statements are then incorporated into a recruitment letter sent out again to all program alums. Before signing on, an information session is provided for interested alumni to educate them about the mentoring guidelines and orient them to our process. Then to help orient another cohort of participating alumni to the role of mentor, a mentoring workshop is held in the fall before they are introduced (via email) to their mentees. Another workshop is provided in the spring to capture participants' thoughts and ideas about the experience. The training for the mentors was gleaned from the APA 2006 Guide: Introduction to Mentoring: A guide for mentors and mentees published by the Center on Mentoring along with our own literature review and data from our own program evaluations. All mentors participated in a one-hour orientation meeting and a 90 minute training workshop via SKYPE in addition to receiving all printed materials [18].

Over the course of the 4 years of the program, we have had more than 60 alumni mentors volunteer for the program. This article presents information on the 60 mentors who were successfully matched and participated for at least a year with their mentees. They ranged in age from 27-48 years with a mean age of 34.53. Sixty-seven percent were female and the mean number of years since receiving their doctoral degree was 5.23. What is interesting about this last component was that in the fourth cohort, the most recent one, the mean number of years since graduation was quite different than in previous cohorts (X=1.88 years). Likely this was because when the program was introduced and it was only for first and second year students, the advanced students at the time heard all about the experience, yet could not participate until they had received their degrees. Then, most recently a number of them did volunteer.

Cohort	Mean Age		% Female		Years since
	Mentees	Mentors	Mentees	Mentors	Graduation
#1	28.75	35.43	80%	87%	5.86
#2	29.09	36.13	73%	55%	6.38
#3	27.06	35.58	83%	61%	6.82
#4	25.13	31	87%	67%	1.88*
Total	27.5	34.53	81%	67%	5.23

Table 1: Demographic information from all mentorship participants (n=60 dyads).
*Indicates the first alumni cohort graduating having heard of the start of the mentorship program while a graduate student.

Graduate student participants

Information about the program is delivered to students via e-mail as well as through live group meetings. Each year, after recruitment calls are made to mentors and any first or second year student who would like an alumni mentor, an informational session is held to orient the graduate students to this unique mentorship relationship. Materials similar to those created for the mentor workshop are shared with students. This 90 minute orientation session is held by an upper level student familiar with the program [19].

Over the course of the 4 years of the program, we have had more than 60 first and second year student mentees volunteer for the program. Information about the 60 graduate students who engaged with their assigned

mentor for at least a year is included in this discussion. They ranged in age from 22 to 40 years with a Mean of 27.5 years. Eighty-one percent of the mentees were female.

Matching Process

Each year, after identifying alumni and students who are interested in engaging in mentorship relationships, mentors and mentees are matched based upon commonalities in experience, interests, and demographics. These similarities were ascertained through information collected from participants' curricula vitae (indicated any practice areas such as child versus adult or theoretical orientation in clinical work), a Matching Variables Survey (brief online survey to determine preferred logistical and demographic variables such as geographic location, gender, and ethnicity), and responses on the Mentor Role Instrument.

The Mentor Role Instrument (MRI) is a 33 item self-report inventory designed to assess qualities one would expect to find in an ideal mentor or mentee. Created by Ragins and McFarlin [20] there are 2 components, Career Roles (15 items) and Psychosocial Roles (18 items), and each has a number of subscales: Career Roles: Sponsor, Coach, Protector, Challenging Assignments, and Exposure. Psychosocial Roles: Friendship, Social, Parent, Role-Model, Counsel, Acceptance. Each subscale contains three items ranked on a Likert Scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total scores can range from 33 to 233, but the individual item means were used in our data analyses. A recent study of scientists at an academic medical center affirmed the strong internal consistency and factorial and concurrent validity of the measure (Dilmore et al 2010). Table 2 includes data for all mentor and mentee responses on the two subscales of the MRI: Career mentoring and psychosocial mentoring across the four cohorts before the start of their mentoring relationships [21].

	Mentor	Mentee	Mentor	Mentee
Cohort #	Career Roles	Career Roles	Psychosocial	Psychosocial
1	4.13	4.87	5.8	6.2
2	4.38	4.77	4.74	5.2
3	4.45	4.57	5.04	5.11
4	5.03	5.08	5.46	4.74
Mean	4.5	4.82	5.26	5.31

Table 2: Means for Mentor and Mentee Responses on the MRI-Mentor Role Inventory (n=60) at onset.

Overall there was consistency in that both mentor and mentee cohorts were slightly more interested in the psychosocial mentor functions rather than Career functions for their mentorship relationship. The differences between mean responses for the mentor and mentee cohorts on both subscales were small as well.

Although each year, there were mentors and mentees who did not get matched, there were 60 mentorship matches made. When there was not a match, it mostly was due to lack of common interests, geographical challenges or a change of heart. In the first year of the program, there were 15 mentorship dyads constituted. In year 2, there were 11 dyads, in year 3 there were 18 dyads and in year 4 there were 16 dyads. Of the successful dyads, 67.5% were female-female matches while there were 6 male-male and 18 male-female. In terms of minority representation, in the first year of the program, 40% of the alumni mentor where non-white and in Year 2 this was a similar 36%. However, in year 3 and 4 the minority representation changed to 17% and 13% respectively. In contrast and representative of our program in general, across all cohorts, 18% of mentees were non-white with no real differences across cohorts. It seems that for the first calls for alumni as participants, more minority alums volunteered for this role and maybe this reflects what they wished they would have had while a graduate student. The majority of mentorship dyads had two white participants (73%). Other dyads were non-white with non-white participants (5 dyads) and a non-white participant with a white participant (11). Lastly, only 20% of dyads involved an out of state mentor which made it necessary to rely on cyber meetings.

Structure of the Mentoring Process

Once mentorship matches have been made, participants are asked to sign an Alumni Mentoring Partnership Agreement, which outlines mentoring roles and responsibilities, participants' commitment to engage in the mentoring relationship monthly for at least six months, and an agreement to provide feedback about the mentoring experience. The Partnership Agreement also includes the following statement about confidentiality:

"The mentor indicates to the mentee that all information discussed will be kept strictly confidential. The mentor is

not required to disclose any identifying information to the PsyD Program or Long Island University."

Mentors and mentees are encouraged to meet in person or via telecommunications like Skype at least once per month. Periodically, throughout the mentorship, feedback on the program is collected to determine the most effective mentoring practices and the participants' satisfaction with the process. Further, as indicated in the Partnership agreement, if either the mentor or the mentee believes that the mentoring is not working as desired, the mentor or mentee will communicate that belief and take action to improve things [22].

Outcomes Evaluation

Since the mentoring relationships are not supervised in any way, and since we do offer it as a confidential process up to the choice of the partners, it is difficult to get outcomes data on impact. We have gotten much anecdotal feedback from participants and we hope to do some qualitative research on the process to help articulate what is most beneficial. From the data initially collected on the MRI, we analyzed the highest and lowest ranked subscales across our mentor and mentee samples and found very consistent results. Across all cohorts, the top 2 desired mentorship roles were Friendship (Mean item ranking for mentees = 6.3 and mean ranking for mentors = 6.62) and Acceptance (Mean item ranking for mentees = 6.04 and mean item ranking for mentors = 6.36). The 2 mentorship roles ranked the lowest were Parent (Mean item rankings for mentees = 2.9 and mean item ranking for mentors = 2.11) and Protector (Mean item rankings for mentees = 3.49 and mean item rankings for mentors = 3.65). So, even item subscales proved to be consistent for mentor and mentee cohorts. Interestingly, three of these pivotal items are on the Psychosocial Subscale which may indicate that those mentoring roles are more salient or important.

In terms of dyad match, we also computed mean difference scores for the mentor-mentee matches on each of the subscales of the MRI as we did use these scores to make the matches. These mean difference scores can be found in Table 3.

Cohort	Career	Range	Psychosocial	Range
	MRI		MRI	
#1	1.38	(.4-2.27)	0.99	(.11-2.28)
#2	0.85	(.07-1.79)	0.97	(.033-2.33)
#3	1.22	(.07-2.6)	0.74	(0-1.67)
#4	0.86	(.06-1.53)	0.75	(0-2.34)
Mean	1.08		0.86	

Table 3: Mean Difference scores between mentors and matched mentee on MRI subscales.

Overall, the mean differences between mentors and mentees was low with an overall mean difference score for all dyads of 1.08 for the Career subscale of the MRI and .86 for the Psychosocial subscale of the MRI. In a study of non-clinical mentors and mentees (Wanberg, et al, 2006)) results from MRI data across time indicated positive relationships between mentee reported similarity to the mentor and impact of psychosocial mentoring. It makes intuitive sense that friendship, role modeling, counseling, and acceptance would occur more often among pairs for whom there was a perception of similarity. Our next phase of data analyses will examine the use of the MRI match data as a predictor for the success of the mentorship relationship. We will be able to examine outcomes for the dyads with the larger differences on MRI scales as well. Also, in the future with a larger sample size we will be able to examine matching on demographic variables and similarities on MRI responses. Success is hard to define, however we have collected feedback about the participants' experiences at the end of the six-month trial period and will examine those responses and factor in the difference scores for each dyad to help determine the usefulness of this measure in the match process.

Another determinant of success might be the lasting nature of the mentorship relationship. Since participants are only asked to make an initial 6-month agreement, we do ask at the end of each academic year whether or not the dyad chooses to continue for another year. The continuation of the mentoring partnership could be considered a successful outcome of the match and the relationship. After the first year, 10 of the 16 mentor relationships for the first year cohort were ongoing; six of the relationships have continued for the second cohort (across two years) and from the original cohort, five of 15 relationships have continued (across three years). In sum, at the end of the third year of the Alumni Mentorship program, a total of 21 mentorships dyads continued to meet.

Additionally, for that very first cohort, three of the doctoral students have asked their alumni mentor to be a dissertation committee member as they began to form

their initial ideas within those dialogues and the mentor maintained their interests in the dissertation process. As seen in Table 1, for this pool of alumni, there was a much different group of alumni volunteering to mentor. Many more recent graduates signed up as this was the first graduating cohort still in graduate school when the program was initiated. They perhaps already anticipated becoming an alumni mentor, as they had heard about all of the excitement for it. These are wonderful outcomes that we did not necessarily anticipate.

Implications, Sustainability and Generalizability

The focus of our program has always been to provide greater support to the students beginning their doctoral education. Given the usually limited resources for additional faculty, supervisors, and/or advisors to offer mentoring relationships, those who have graduated from our program over the years proved to be a valuable resource to match the need for increased mentoring. Although our outcomes data are limited, we are currently conducting qualitative interviews with both mentees and mentors who have volunteered to share their experiences. It is hoped that the dominant themes from this research will help to shape the program as it moves forward. Our particular structure (e.g. meet for a minimum of 6 months as frequently as desired), the training workshops provided and the matching process were all developed from reviews of the literature, our own training in mentorship and our own experiences as mentees. Feedback from successful and unsuccessful mentoring relationships will determine changes for the next cohorts of mentors and mentees. Understanding the impact on mentors as well as mentees will help to better inform the matching process, as we assume that mismatches have resulted in less successful mentoring [23].

There seems to be great enthusiasm for the program. Recently graduating alums, who have known about the program, are quick to volunteer and hopefully this is sustainable. The cadre of alums will naturally continue to expand although the incoming PsyD student cohort is likely to stay the same each year, so the supply and demand for alumni mentorship should be satisfactory. Also of interest is evidence that more alums from minority backgrounds have volunteered to be mentors than represent to make up of the new cohort classes. The desire to give back in this fashion likely speaks to the need for mentoring to help guide minority graduate students into the profession.

Additionally, there have been 5 mentors, each in their own private practices, who have requested another mentee. This leads us to believe that it has been a rewarding experience for these alumni mentors. It might be a nice contrast to the isolation sometimes experienced when engaged in clinical work, with much less responsibility and a greater psychosocial aspect. Sustainability also depends on administrative commitment and resources. Clearly the PsyD program director devotes time to the recruitment of additional mentors each year and to the training meetings. The hope is that every three years, a graduate student receiving an assistantship will be responsible for the maintenance of the process and content of the mentoring program.

In the future, we hope to better understand the possible outcomes for both mentors and mentees and how best to measure these. Clearly the voluntary extension of the mentorship relationship indicates that it is satisfying for both parties. But, since it is voluntary, we have not formally collected data on this. The fact that several mentors have been asked to participate on their mentee's dissertation committee was not anticipated, but seems another positive outcome. We plan at our 5-year mark to survey all of the mentors and mentees to ask more specifically about positive and negative outcomes that we are likely not aware of: perhaps the members of the dyad are now part of one another's professional network, perhaps they have referred cases to one another, perhaps they kayak together and a friendship has grown. Not only does the alumni mentorship program enhance the relational competencies of the participants while in the program, it likely engenders "real" relationships that continue.

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