Threads Of Support: Mentoring Of Online Doctoral Students

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THREADES OF SUPPORT: MENTORING OF ONLINE DOCTORAL STUDENTS

By

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BA (Aurora University) 1989
MA (Baylor University) 1993

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Education

Portland & Biddeford, Maine

October, 2018
THREADS OF SUPPORT: MENTORING OF ONLINE DOCTORAL STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

Doctoral students in programs throughout the United States express a need for mentoring as an important element in the completion of their degree (Associate Students of the Graduate Division, 2017; Noonan et al., 2007; University of Michigan, 2006). Although there are several studies that explored types of mentor programs and student perceptions of mentoring (Johnson, 2015; Terry & Ghosh, 2015), a review of the literature indicates an examination of doctoral student mentoring from a faculty mentor’s lens had not been examined. This transcendental phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. The findings in the study provided threads for five emergent themes: Theme 1, Development of Trust; Theme 2, Experience as a Doctoral Student; Theme 3, Mentoring Is Challenging; Theme 4, Relationship Building; and Theme 5, Varying Types of Communication. Recommendations surfaced from the implications generated in this study, which ranged from programs clarifying that mentoring is an expected dimension of the dissertation dynamic to providing training on communication tools for faculty, and programs may want to consider the ratio of mentees to mentor based on best practices for cultivating such relationships and ways to support mentors who support a large number of students. Finally, developing a best practices mentoring guide for online Ed.D. programs reflective of the lived experiences, as well as recommendations, shared by research participants in this study was another recommendation in this study. In addition to unearthing the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor
online Ed.D. students, this study provides a foundation for continued research exploring mentoring relationships in online doctoral programs.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This statement from novelist Paulo Coelho, “And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it” captures many of my feelings at this point and time. There are many people who supported my efforts to complete this dissertation. There are not enough words to express how fortunate I am to have the support from so many as I pursued my doctorate degree.

First, I want to express deep gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Brianna Parsons and Dr. Joel Lowsky for their support and constructive feedback during this process. Their understanding, as well as encouragement to be concise yet “unpack” my statements, fueled my abilities. To Dr. Santos Torres, Jr., who believed in my success before I did, and through supportive guidance helped me to consider ideas in a new light, I cannot adequately express my gratefulness. I also want to thank Dr. Marylin Newell and Dr. Michelle Collay for their encouragement early in the dissertation process.

Many thanks to my colleagues who have been on this similar journey during the past three years. We have dialogued in our courses, peer reviewed aspects of each other’s research, and given encouragement when we could. To my research team, Kevin, Chris, and Sherron, I give many thanks. To the women of SPLP—Cathy, Christy, Dani, Kellie, and Maryann—thank you for welcoming me into the group part way through our program. Your support and encouragement provided a life preserver at times! I hope that we all “just keep swimming” even though this accomplishment is now behind us.

To my family and friends, as well as colleagues and students at California State University, Sacramento, thank you for the threads you also contributed to this adventure. Finally, yet in many ways most importantly, thank you to the twelve faculty who volunteered to be
research participants. They shared their perspectives and lived experiences while offering support to yet another online Ed.D. student, me. My gratitude for their contribution to my growth and continued journey as a scholar is immeasurable! You each touched my heart in various ways. THANK YOU!!!!
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The retention rate for doctoral programs in the United States is 50% to 57% (Cassuto, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015). Smith (2010) reported that online courses experience a 40% to 80% dropout rate (as cited in Bawa, 2016). When canvassing the literature and national data sources regarding online doctoral programs, specific reports regarding attrition or retention rates could not be located. This researcher contacted the Council of Graduate Schools to inquire about such data to no avail. Reports generated by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) were also reviewed and the organization emailed to acquire this information, if it is maintained, but again such information was not obtained. There are statistics generated by NCES regarding programs that offer online courses but not whether the entire program is delivered online. Although specific data was not available regarding student attrition in online doctoral programs across the United States, the research that was available regarding online course completion rates led some researchers to assume that the attrition rate for online doctoral programs was the same as the overall national average for doctoral programs, or slightly higher (Asatryan, 2015; Haynie, 2015; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015).

Johnson (2015) discovered that student relationships with faculty were a persistent factor for degree completion among doctoral students across several programs. The Council of Graduate Schools’ Ph.D. Completion Project (2010) identified mentoring relationships as a “cornerstone of the most effective and promising practices” (as cited in Holley & Caldwell, 2012, p. 244). Further, researchers noted that mentoring is a path to enhance retention efforts in graduate education (Chesler & Chesler, 2002; Johnson, 2015; Noonan, Ballinger, & Black, 2007; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008). According to Columbaro (2015), several researchers (Adams &
DeFleur, 2005; Flowers & Baltzer, 2006; Columbaro, 2007; Good & Peca, 2007; DePriest, 2009, as cited in Columbaro, 2015) indicated that a lack of mentoring in online doctoral programs appears to create obstacles when students seek academic-related employment upon receipt of their doctorate. Other research indicated that mentoring improves student retention in graduate education (Chesler & Chesler, 2002; Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2010; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007; Patterson & McFadden 2009; Villanueva, 2015; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008).

Literature reviewed for this study (Bashi, 1991; Casey, 2013; Rullan, Vasquez, & Wong, 2014; Smith, 2015; Tyson, 2014) reported a focus on the effectiveness of mentoring for first-year college students and disenfranchised student groups, such as first-generation students, former foster youth, Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans. However, the literature was sparse when exploring faculty-student mentoring relationships in higher education, especially regarding mentoring in online graduate programs (Columbaro, 2015; Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013; Simmons, 2006; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). Simmons (2006) as well as Terry and Ghosh (2015) indicated a key component for successful completion of the doctorate degree was faculty-student mentoring. These studies focused on mentee perceptions and degree completion; leaving a gap in the literature relative to the experience of faculty mentors. Research that garnered mentee perceptions ranged from online doctoral student perceptions of mentoring experiences and to what degree these relationships prepared them for tenure-track employment in academia (Columbaro, 2015), to the importance of multiple mentoring relationships as perceived by Ed.D. students (Terry & Ghosh, 2015), and to characteristics doctoral students valued in their ideal mentor (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008). Yet, uncovering the characteristics that are important from a mentor’s lens or in what way
faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students experience the mentoring relationship has not been explored. Mentoring is a relationship of trust, guidance, and empowerment through an interactive exchange between both the mentor and mentee (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Exploration of faculty mentor perceptions of mentoring could be important for those interested in understanding the mentoring of doctoral students and its impact on doctoral student success. According to Yob and Crawford (2012), few studies examined the perception that mentors have of faculty-student mentoring.

The researcher of this study was drawn to understanding the dynamic of mentoring due to past experiences of being mentored and serving as a mentor for others within academia and the non-profit sector. These experiences coupled with the pursuit of a doctorate in an online program spurred a curiosity regarding the utility and experiences of mentoring in this educational context, faculty-student mentoring in online doctoral programs. Another impetus of this study was the realization that the attrition rate across doctoral programs was quite high (Cassuto, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015) and that the literature pointed to a need for mentoring in doctoral programs (Chesler & Chesler, 2002; Johnson, 2015; Noonan, Ballinger, & Black, 2007; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008), yet very little was reported regarding mentoring in online doctoral programs (Simmons, 2006; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012).

**Statement of the Problem**

Doctoral students in programs throughout the United States express a need for mentoring as an important element in the completion of their degree (Associate Students of the Graduate Division, 2017; Noonan et al., 2007; University of Michigan, 2006). In fact, many doctoral students who do not complete their degree reference the lack of such relationships as a primary
contributing factor (Kumar et al., 2013; Mansson & Myers, 2012). Several researchers reported that attrition rates for doctoral students are approximately one out of two over the course of a seven-year time period (Cassuto, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015), with the rate for online doctoral students projected to be the same or higher (Haynie, 2015). Several studies explored types of mentor programs and student perceptions of mentoring (Johnson, 2015; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Yet, a review of the literature indicated several gaps in the research. These included minimal research regarding (a) mentoring in Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) programs (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006); (b) the mentoring of students in online doctoral programs (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner, 2014; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Terry & Ghosh, 2015); and (c) exploring faculty perceptions of the faculty-student mentoring experience (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012). Therefore, this study sought to investigate the lived experience of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. This researcher aspired to learn from faculty about their experiences and insights regarding faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students, which would add to the body of knowledge in this area. Information gathered lends awareness to the essence of mentoring online doctoral students as well as online doctoral student mentoring best practices.

This study’s exploration of faculty-student mentoring relationships can increase awareness relative to doctoral student persistence and the completion of the doctorate. Additionally, this investigation could provide insight for student self-confidence and professional development (Columbaro, 2015; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Noonan et al., 2007). The building of relationships in which online doctoral students can express their feelings, gain clarity and support regarding tasks (e.g., dissertation completion), and seek advice from someone who is in the
position to guide, lead, and empower may provide rich opportunities for academic and professional success as well as a broad emotional support system (Holley & Caldwell, 2012).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students (specifically in online Ed.D. programs) and examine mentoring components that may influence online doctoral student success. Such information might aid programs as they continue to strengthen their retention efforts and provide a compilation of ideal practices for mentoring in online doctoral programs. An indirect benefit may be faculty members who participated in the study reflecting on their view of mentoring through the opportunity to share their mentoring narrative. At times, reflection can produce insight regarding one’s own experiences. In many of the studies conducted regarding mentoring programs, a consistent recommendation was that more research is needed relative to the mentoring of students in online graduate (or doctoral) programs (Kumar et al., 2013; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). This study responded to that need.

This phenomenological study explored how faculty teaching in online Ed.D. programs perceive mentoring and uncovered the lived experience of faculty when participating in these relationships with online doctoral students. Semistructured interviews were conducted with faculty who currently are involved in mentoring relationships with online Ed.D. students, or have been within the past five years. Such information not only adds to the body of literature regarding online mentoring but also provides relevant information for the construction of a best practices model for mentoring online doctoral students. Kumar, Johnson, and Hardemon (2013) encouraged online doctoral programs to “adopt best practices and evidence-based strategies from the literature on doctoral education and doctoral mentoring in order to be successful in providing
support for doctoral students” (p. 9). Therefore, insight gleaned from this study adds to this body of knowledge in several ways.

**Research Questions**

The primary focus of this research exploration was to uncover the shared lived experience of faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students in Ed.D. programs and identify important themes relative to mentoring. Therefore, the primary research questions were:

- **RQ1:** What are the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students?
- **RQ2:** How do Ed.D. faculty describe the faculty-student mentoring relationship in online Ed.D. programs?

These questions provided a baseline for capturing the essence of how faculty perceive their mentoring relationships with online Ed.D. students. And they lend insight to the conceptualization of themes relative to this mentoring experience.

**Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual frameworks provide a mechanism for linking the theoretical framework to the research problem by connecting three elements: the personal interest of the researcher, topical research, and the theoretical framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). This researcher’s academic and professional background has encompassed that of mentor as well as mentee, which was a compelling stimulus for this study. Engaging in relationships in which one individual offers guidance and support to a less experienced individual has served this researcher in building capacity for navigating professional and personal pursuits for self and others.

Researchers have examined factors that support doctoral degree completion and identified mentoring as a success factor (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Simmons, 2006; Wright-Harp &
Cole, 2008). Several studies reported that doctoral students expressed that mentoring from faculty positively contributed to their satisfaction and the completion of their degree (Johnson, 2015; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). The interactions that occur in a mentoring experience can solidify a student’s self-confidence and self-efficacy while pursuing and completing their doctoral degree (Columbaro, 2015; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Noonan et al., 2007).

This study employed a conceptual framework that borrows from social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and social field theory (Bourdieu, 1990), as well as transformative servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) to provide a useful lens relative to the exploration of mentoring in online doctoral programs. Each of these theoretical perspectives relate to the mentoring process. Bandura’s social learning theory’s emphasis on modeling and self-efficacy connects to the mentor-mentee relationship as mentees seek to emulate the behaviors, skills, and often values of their mentor. The meaning that develops from the dynamic experienced in the mentoring relationship relates to constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). In the vein of constructivism, Bourdieu’s social field theory lends insight relative to mentoring due to the resources that are cultivated from a mentoring relationship (e.g., knowledge, networking, understanding). The focus of this study concentrates on the experience and viewpoint of faculty mentors, which links to Greenleaf’s transformative servant-leadership theory in light of the description of mentoring as a relationship of empowerment.

Feedback, guidance, and modeling are elements of Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory. Mentoring relationships are described as mimicking these characteristics. According to Bandura, individuals learn how to behave, respond, and think by observation and interaction with another who is seen as a role model. Through interaction with one’s mentor a mentee gains the
skills, requisite knowledge, and support expected in academia relative to the pursuit of their
doctorate and their professional goals.

The meaning of experiences is created through the interaction between individuals and
the society in which they reside (Vygotsky, 1978). This interchange is influenced by the
situation, and sculpts the event for those involved (Andrews, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Such a
dynamic reflects the subjectivity of what is considered reality (Andrews, 2012). Yet, these
subjective experiences often materialize into a shared identification among several individuals
and become objective components of society (Andrews, 2012). Therefore, constructivism
(Vygotsky, 1978) provides a lens for uncovering the meaning, importance, and impact of faculty-
student mentoring with online Ed.D. students.

Social field theory (Bourdieu, 1990) is a constructivist theory that further concretizes the
understanding of the faculty-student mentoring relationship. Social field theory suggests that in
order to understand an aspect of society it is important to frame it in relation to other points of
reference that give it meaning and importance. Bourdieu (1990) suggested that within parts of
society where an exchange occurs (e.g., knowledge, services, status) individuals seek and may
struggle to gain important resources, which he called social and cultural capital. Social capital
refers to the networks individuals develop that can be used to gain more knowledge and status
(e.g. mentors), whereas cultural capital entails experiences and previous knowledge (e.g.,
understanding of academia, research, publication process) of one’s own context. This increases
the ability to garner more capital (social, cultural, and even financial). Bourdieu’s social field
theory provides a useful frame for understanding the importance and dynamic of mentoring with
online doctoral students.
Bourdieu’s (1990) development of the concepts of social and cultural capital provides a sound rationale for understanding the importance of faculty mentoring in this context. Mentees are afforded access to social capital that may be necessary for their academic and professional advancement (e.g., connections at other universities, navigating their job search upon attaining their doctorate). Social capital is supported through the connections and advice given by their mentors. In academia, cultural capital consists of understanding the nuances of the academy, which consists of the bureaucratic makeup, faculty expectations, publication requirements, and expectations related to research presentations. Faculty-student mentoring relationships can build upon the cultural and social capital that online doctoral students use as they embark on future professional opportunities.

Mentoring relationships can be described as one of empowerment where mentors invest in the growth and support of their protégés. Greenleaf’s (1977) servant-leadership model is a transformative leadership theory that lends insight to the mentoring relationship. Greenleaf purported that transformative servant-leaders focus on the empowerment of others. Aiding others’ growth and strengthening their skills is central to mentoring as well as the servant-leader’s goal. A core characteristic is “going beyond one’s self-interest” (van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1230). These theories are further elaborated on in Chapter 2 in an effort to ground this research study in the extant literature. In Chapter 3, the conceptual framework is revisited when addressing the selection of the research methodology of phenomenology.

Significance

A recurring theme in the literature was the need for more research pertaining to the mentoring of students in online doctoral programs (Columbaro, 2015; Kumar et al., 2013; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Simmons, 2006). An exploration into the perceptions of faculty who mentor
online doctoral students contributes to filling in this scarcity in the literature. Jairam and Kahl (2012) indicated that previous studies explored mentoring in doctoral programs and looked broadly at mentoring in on-the-ground doctoral programs. Other studies (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Butcher & Sieminski, 2006; Columbaro, 2015) explored online doctoral programs specifically, but looked at student perceptions and the impact of their participation in mentoring programs on grade achievement. Because this study sought information from faculty mentors, it examined a different viewpoint and adds new insight relative to findings from previous research.

Research studies have demonstrated that mentoring is positively correlated with retention and program completion for doctoral students (Creighton et al., 2010; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Villanueva, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012). An examination of how mentoring is experienced and perceived by faculty who have engaged in mentoring online doctoral students may inform best practices for doctoral student success. An increased understanding of the faculty-student mentoring relationship for online doctoral students might also improve retention and completion rates for students pursuing their doctoral degrees, which not only bolsters the reputation of a university, but could serve to empower present and future graduates of online doctoral programs.

Kouzes and Posner (2003) wrote that “leadership is a relationship” (p. 1); therefore, relationship is an important principle in effective leadership. Furthermore, relationship building and empowerment of others is a core element within transformative leadership (Burns, 1978; Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Riggio, 2013). Since mentoring embodies the engagement between a leader and protégé with the intention of supporting protégés to their greatest potential, such components in online doctoral programs advance transformative leadership in an evidence-based manner (Burns, 1978; Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Riggio, 2013). Therefore, gaining a deeper
understanding of the views of faculty regarding the mentoring of online doctoral students may contribute to an awareness of effective transformative leadership.

**Definitions of Terms**

For the purpose of this research study, key terms are defined as follows. The order of the definitions of terms is alphabetical and is not intended to indicate hierarchical importance.

*Doctoral degree completion:* The attainment of the Ed.D. or Ph.D. A doctoral student completes all required coursework, comprehensive exams (if required), and the writing and defense of the dissertation.

*Doctoral student retention:* A doctoral student remains enrolled in doctoral program through to degree completion (Gardner, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

*Ed.D. Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.):* Doctoral degree earned from a program that prepares graduates for professional leadership and education positions (Everson, 2009).

*Faculty advisor/adviser:* A faculty member who provides academic guidance to student(s) regarding program requirements and academic concerns (e.g., course enrollment, dissertation completion) (Creighton et al., 2010; Welton, Mansfield, Lee, & Young, 2015; Wyman, 2012).

*Formal mentoring:* A mentoring relationship that is set up by the student’s program or institution. While there may be variation in the types of activities involved in the formal mentoring from one program to another, there is a degree of accountability, initial matching, and/or follow-up (Bagaka’s, Badillo, Bransteter, & Rispinto, 2015; Inzer & Crawford, 2005).
Informal mentoring: A mentoring relationship that is not set up by the program or institution where mentors and mentees relate with one another. Rather, the mentoring relationship transpires organically and naturally, with no official setup or monitoring (Bagaka’s et al., 2015; Inzer & Crawford, 2005).

Lived experience: first-person descriptions, accounts, and feelings of life encounters; indicates how and why people lived through an experience. An individual’s personal account of their involvement in and perceptions of a situation or phenomena (Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 2014).

Mentee (or protégé): An individual who receives guidance and support from another person who has been through similar academic experiences and understands the academic, as well as professional experiences and challenges they face. The individual is involved as an active participant in the relationship and solicits feedback and advice from the mentor (Inzer & Crawford, 2005).

Mentor (for this study, a faculty mentor): A college professor who is trusted as a counselor, guide, or advisor. (Dictionary.com, n.d.; English Oxford Dictionary, n.d.; and Webster Dictionary, n.d.) and engages with a mentee to support their academic success, career goals, and professional advancement (Inzer & Crawford, 2005), often referred to as a coach (Brill et al., 2014). “A mentor provides the mentee with knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge, and support in the mentee’s pursuit of becoming a full member of a particular profession” (Johnson, 2016, p. 23).
Mentoring: A relationship between two individuals, a mentor and mentee or protégé, in which the mentor, who is more experienced, supports, guides, and counsels the mentee/protégé in a process of self-exploration, encouragement, and becoming self-reliant as the mentee/protégé pursues his/her goals (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Inzer & Crawford, 2005; Johnson, 2016; Terry & Ghosh, 2015).

Online doctoral program: An advanced graduate level educational program for attainment of a Ph.D. or Ed.D. that is delivered completely online. Students and faculty interact with one another and course content as well as submit work through the internet (Ally, 2004).

Online doctoral student: A person enrolled in a graduate-level academic program that is delivered completely online with the intent of receiving a Ph.D. or Ed.D. upon completion of degree requirements. For the purposes of this research, this term includes online doctoral candidates—students who have completed everything but the dissertation.

Delimitations and Limitations

There are inherent limitations and delimitations to a qualitative study. Limitations consist of aspects of the study (e.g., confines from the methodology itself such as sample size in qualitative research) that confine the breadth of the research that may weaken the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Delimitations comprise boundaries (e.g., time, place, participant selection characteristics) the researcher implements in order to narrow its scope (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Due to using a phenomenological methodology, the number of research participants was limited to six to twelve faculty who have had this experience. Therefore, this sample size precludes the generalizability of the study’s findings. However, the purpose of this study was not to seek data that can be attributed to the larger population, but to delve into the lived experience
of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. Additionally, due to time constraints and a desire to focus on the experience of those in online research doctoral degree programs, specifically that of an Ed.D., participants were limited to Ed.D. faculty.

Since the researcher was currently a doctoral student in an online Ed.D. program, engaging in the process of bracketing was important. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained bracketing, or epoché, as the process in which a researcher engages to set aside his/her personal experiences and beliefs about a phenomenon in order to focus on the information shared by participants. While the removal of personal views can be very difficult to fully achieve in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994), the use of bracketing allowed this researcher to minimize the impact of her personal viewpoint and focus on listening to respondents in order to understand their lived experience when mentoring online doctoral students. Another boundary or delimitation in this study was that faculty from the University of New England (where the researcher was a doctoral candidate) were screened out as participants for this study. This was done in an attempt to minimize conflict of interest for participants and the researcher.

**Scope**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to systematically research the phenomenon of the lived experience of faculty who mentored online doctoral students. The scope of the study was intentionally narrowed from all online doctoral programs to Ed.D. programs due to information in some of the literature reviewed (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006), which indicated little research explored mentoring in Ed.D. programs. Additionally, exploration of the experience of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students was personally relevant as this researcher was participating in an online Ed.D. program.
Conclusion

This chapter introduced the topic under exploration and the phenomenon to be examined: the lived experience of faculty who mentor online doctoral students. This phenomenological study investigated the primary research questions of this study:

RQ1: What are the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students?

RQ2: How do Ed.D. faculty describe the faculty-student mentoring relationship in online Ed.D. programs?

Attaining a deeper understanding of the perceptions of faculty regarding the mentoring of online doctoral students may promote an awareness of supportive strategies for online doctoral students in their academic and professional endeavors. Chapter 2 reviews literature that highlights research pertaining to mentoring in higher education and its benefits, background of online doctoral programs, important elements of mentoring programs and the mentoring relationship, and the development of the theoretical framework for this research. Information gathered from these sources also concentrates on research methods that are most appropriate for the exploratory nature of this author’s research, thereby laying the groundwork for Chapter 3, in which the method selected for this study is explained along with the cultivation of questions for the semi-structured interviews. In Chapter 4, the findings generated from the study are presented and discussed. Finally, Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of what was discovered from the research conducted and recommendations are offered for future research endeavors in this area of inquiry.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A recent study conducted by Johnson (2015) discovered that relationships with faculty were a persistent factor for degree completion among doctoral students across several programs. In fact, doctoral students in the United States indicated mentoring as an essential factor that contributes to the completion of their degree (Associate Students of the Graduate Division, 2017; Noonan et al., 2007; University of Michigan, 2006). Further, a lack of mentoring relationships is reported as a contributing factor to degree noncompliance by doctoral students who do not complete their doctorate (Kumar et al., 2013; Mansson & Myers, 2012). An examination of how faculty in online doctoral programs perceive the mentoring relationship relative to formally mentoring online doctoral students may provide insight regarding mentoring as it pertains to online doctoral students and programs.

To furnish a point of reference and background information for the development of this study, this literature review provides a look at research and various perspectives on the topic of mentoring, faculty-student mentoring, the benefits of mentoring, and elements of mentoring programs. To establish direction for this research inquiry, the author began by researching articles and books that discussed mentoring in doctoral programs. Various keyword search terms were used such as “mentoring and doctoral programs,” “mentoring and online doctoral programs,” “online doctoral students and mentoring,” “faculty-student mentoring and doctoral programs,” “faculty-student mentoring and online doctoral programs,” “educational doctorate and mentoring,” “mentoring and higher education,” and “mentoring and retention.” An important aspect of this exploration of the literature was to review the plethora of definitions utilized throughout the published research and how other authors distilled the various definitions and
their focus. This chapter reviews literature that specifically focused on mentoring and that which is relevant to online doctoral programs. Information regarding mentoring in higher education is highlighted in order to lay a foundation for the research problem this writer explored.

This review offers a synthesis of the literature to guide the direction of this research exploration of the lived experience of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. To begin, this literature review explores the history and definition of mentoring, various elements of mentoring programs, the benefits of mentoring, relevant theoretical perspectives, and recommendations provided in the literature. An integrative summary is then provided as the conclusion for this preliminary literature review to draw together the identified themes and direction of this writer’s research.

**Definitions of Mentoring**

Identifying a definition of mentoring as used by various researchers was an important element in reviewing the literature. Laying the foundation for this area of inquiry includes a basic review of mentoring in doctoral programs as well as information about online doctoral mentoring programs. Further, exploration of the literature regarding the definition of mentoring provides context for the lived experience of faculty mentors.

Definitions of mentoring abound in the literature. Pamuk (2008) referenced Homer’s *Odyssey* and the story of Mentor, a trusted friend of Odysseus, who was entrusted with guiding Odysseus’s son, Telemachus, as the historical beginning of these types of relationships. Reference to this mythological story appears in many different sources when researching the origins of mentoring (Johnson, 2016; Pamuk, 2008; Simmons, 2006). A recurring theme in several dictionaries for the definition of the word *mentor* is someone who is trusted as a counselor, guide, or advisor (Dictionary.com; the English Oxford Living Dictionary; and the
Webster Dictionary). Generally, mentoring relationships are formed between two individuals in which one individual (the mentor) supports the other (the mentee or protégé) in becoming self-reliant and successful as the mentee pursues his/her goals (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Mentoring can occur on a personal, professional, or academic level (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). The concept of mentoring has been described as one of caretaking with male and female traits (Johnson, 2016). A multifaceted definition of mentoring encompasses a mentor having an interest in supporting others; having interpersonal as well as professional relationships with their mentee; enhancing the mentee’s goals academically and professionally; personalizing one’s approach relative to the mentee’s cultural background, ethnicity, or gender; and making adaptations in their mentoring style in light of these differences (University of Michigan, 2015).

Johnson (2016) believed mentoring is a term often used unsystematically and applied to describe many different types of relationships to the extent that it is overused. Johnson’s definition of mentoring as set forth and developed from many of the classic definitions as well as his research on mentoring within academe embodies many of the varied characteristics relevant to higher education:

Mentoring is a personal and reciprocal relationship in which a more experienced (usually older) faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced (usually younger) student or faculty member. A mentor provides the mentee with knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge, and support in the mentee’s pursuit of becoming a full member of a particular profession. (p. 23)

This is the definition that was used in this research project. The reference of mentoring as being personal and reciprocal indicates that the relationship is more than a professional task and
benefits the lives of both individuals in the mentoring relationship: the faculty member (mentor) and the online Ed.D. student (mentee), which gives breadth and depth to the definition of mentoring.

**Mentoring and Advising**

A common experience among doctoral students is to work with an advisor during the dissertation process and to ensure one is on track with course registration. Such relationships are limited to the student’s time in the program and bound to very specific tasks (Mansson & Myers, 2012). For some individuals this naturally evolves into a mentoring relationship in which personal and professional support is provided by the advisor (mentor), which moves beyond the feedback and guidance provided while writing and conducting research (Creighton et al., 2010; Johnson, 2016). Yet for others, if there is not a specific mentoring program or set of efforts on the part of faculty mentors, such relationships are never developed.

Some scholars (Barnes & Austin, 2009 as cited in Creighton et al., 2010; Crookston, 1972; Monsour & Corman, 1991; Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006; Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004 as cited in Mansson & Myers, 2012) argued that the advisor-advisee relationship is one of mentoring. However, other researchers contended that advisors have the primary role of providing degree-specific advice, and mentors have the task of engaging with mentees in a dynamic process to support the mentee’s professional and academic knowledge and skills (Creighton et al., 2010; Johnson, 2016; Mansson & Myers, 2012). The mentor-mentee relationship may have personal nuances similar to a friendship of sorts. Creighton et al. (2010) recommended that it is important to provide a distinction between mentoring and advising. They defined an advisor as someone generally assigned to meet with a student to assist with the degree plan and address academic issues or concerns. In contrast, a mentor was described as someone
(in this instance a faculty member) a student seeks to emulate professionally and to learn from while completing research and pursuing one’s professional goals. Johnson (2016) asserted that academic advisors provide technical guidance to assist a student’s progress in an academic program. Schlosser and Gelso (2001) defined “advisor as the faculty member who has the greatest responsibility for helping guide the advisee through the graduate program” (p. 158). They contended that although advising relationships can be very positive, they are not the same as that of mentoring.

In contrast to the role of advisor, a mentor is a faculty member who has a working relationship with their mentee regarding personal and professional goals and guides them through to degree completion (Creighton et al., 2010; Johnson, 2016). While formal mentoring may occur, the specifics of the relationship are not as structured as that of advisor. Aspects associated with a mentor include support, personally and professionally, to students so that they feel valued, understood, and gain self-confidence as they move through the degree program and explore professional growth. On the other hand, the examination of course progression, dissertation construction, and advancement to degree completion are a part of an advisor’s role (Johnson, 2016; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). It is clear that while an individual could perform a dual role (that of advisor and mentor), this distinction indicates a stark difference in these role expectations and their potential impact on students (Creighton et al., 2010; Johnson, 2016; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). This researcher was interested in exploring mentoring relationships that are more than that of advisement and dissertation progress; rather, the focus was on the reciprocal relationship that evolves between a faculty member and online Ed.D. student as formally assigned by the online doctoral program.
**Faculty-student mentoring.** The faculty-student mentoring relationship may exist primarily as an advising type of relationship relative to program progression and dissertation guidance. However, characteristics of what constitutes a good mentor point to a relationship that moves beyond that of basic advisement. Espinoza-Herold and Gonzalez (2007) recommended four characteristics that contribute to good mentoring:

(a) acting as role models for learning how to use coping strategies and to develop resiliency to overcome challenges; (b) facilitating opportunities for scholarly productivity and academic success; (c) networking with colleagues to form a collective power; and (d) establishing an empathic connection between the mentor’s multicultural experiences and the protégé’s diverse background. (p. 313)

According to Johnson (2016), faculty mentors of graduate students are charged with the role of guiding graduate students “through a supportive and engaged mentorship” (p. 147). The faculty-student mentoring relationship for graduate students was linked to a persistent emotional and intellectual rapport beyond the degree attainment.

**Mentoring versus coaching.** Within organizational settings the term *coaching* is many times considered the same as that of mentoring. Yet, in academe coaching is used when referencing someone who needs help dealing with repeated or serious conflictual situations. Johnson (2016) identified characteristics that are unique to the role of coach. These include (a) a coach informs another individual of attitudes and behaviors that are necessary for success in the institution; (b) a coach is generally someone who does not work in the same department or is completely external to the organization, in order to maximize confidentiality and professionalism; and, (c) interventions implemented or suggested by a coach are a result of the careful assessment of a problem that an employee needs to resolve. Although some of these
characteristics overlap with those indicative of a mentor, a coaching role is more restricted and fixed (Johnson, 2016).

**Mentoring and Doctoral Programs**

Mentoring relationships are identified as an important element to incorporate into doctoral programs to reduce the high attrition rate in doctoral programs in the United States (Creighton et al., 2010; Khan, 2010; Ulku-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes, & Kinlaw, 2000). The Council of Graduate Schools’ *Ph.D. Completion Project* (2010) identified mentoring relationships as a “cornerstone of the most effective and promising practices” (as cited in Holley & Caldwell, 2012, p. 244). Johnson (2016) claimed that “mentoring is among the most important elements in graduate training” (p. 147). Additionally, many researchers have noted that mentoring is a tool to augment retention efforts in graduate education (Creighton et. al., 2010; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008).

The literature indicated that support systems are important to doctoral degree completion (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006; Jairam & Kahl, 2012: Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Having a number of supportive networks enhances the doctoral student’s experience as well as persistence to degree completion (Terry & Ghosh, 2015). When surveyed, doctoral students who did not complete their program referenced the lack of mentoring as a primary reason for not persisting to degree completion (Kumar et al., 2013; Mansson & Myers, 2012). Many of those who finished all degree requirements indicated they would have benefited from more mentoring while in their program (University of Michigan, 2006). Additionally, the Council of Graduate Schools identified mentoring as one of six key factors important for Ph.D. completion (as cited in Johnson, 2016).
Peripheral relationships important to mentoring in doctoral programs are the relationship of the institution to the faculty member, the student, and the doctoral program. This can be demonstrated in various ways, such as whether the university directly supports faculty as mentors and whether it institutionalizes mentoring programs as part of its doctoral program(s). A review of the literature identified specific mentoring efforts at several universities throughout the United States: Tide Together Mentoring Program at the University of Alabama’s Graduate School (Holley & Caldwell, 2012); California State University’s Chancellor’s Doctoral Incentive Program (CDIP) (The Chancellor’s Doctoral Incentive Program, 2018); e-mentoring program at the University of Georgia (Hyder & Gilliam, 2015); Five-Tier Mentoring Program at the Graduate School at Howard University (Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008); and the Mentoring Others Results in Excellence (MORE) program at the University of Michigan (2015). These programs demonstrate different approaches to the provision of a formal mentoring program, whether the distinction is relative to the student population group served, the delivery of the program or where it is housed on a campus, or the degree to which the institution is involved in the mentor-mentee match.

One example, the Tide Together Mentoring Program (University of Alabama, 2018) is a university supported program that provides support to graduate students at the University of Alabama by matching all participants with a mentor. Yet, the primary student populations served by this program include first-generation students, women STEM students, racial/ethnic minorities, and students must be enrolled in a doctoral or MFA program at the university (University of Alabama, 2018). The California State University Chancellor’s office sponsors the CDIP, which is available across 23 campuses (The Chancellor’s Doctoral Incentive Program, 2018). This program provides an accessible loan up to $10,000 during a three-year time period of
which 20% is forgiven if the CDIP recipient teaches for the CSU upon obtaining their doctorate. All recipients identify a mentor who is a faculty member at a CSU campus that will work on an academic and professional plan while in pursuit of their doctorate. Therefore, the program is not involved in the mentoring arrangement but does expect reports of accountability and program outcomes.

Institutional investment in doctoral student mentoring is affected by many factors, including cultural and demographic characteristics, such as mid-career students’ needs and expectations, the desire of international students to have mentoring support, and differences experienced by males and females as well as categories labeled minority versus majority race/ethnicity students in the mentoring relationship (Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Johnson (2016) indicated that often, mid-career students are not perceived to need mentoring as due to their age it is assumed they are more mature, and established in their professional career. Pursuit of an advanced degree is considered adding to the mid-career student’s career, not entrée (Johnson, 2016). The design and emphasis within different academic disciplines impacts the amount of institutional investment provided to mentoring. If the program is considered more scientific in nature and one that can secure funding for the institution, there is more likely to be support at the institutional level (Nerad & Cerny, 1993).

**Mentoring and online doctoral programs.** An increase in online doctoral programs occurred during the first two decades of the 21st century (Sheehy, 2013). Several researchers indicated that the literature regarding mentoring in online doctoral programs is sparse (Chipere, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Kumar et al., 2013; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). With the increase of online graduate programs in the United States, understanding more about the nature of online mentoring may provide insight for program directors and university administrators relative to online
doctoral student retention and completion. This is in part informed by knowing that attrition rates of doctoral programs overall are high and that in many cases those of online programs in higher education are even higher than those of traditional on-campus programs (Haynie, 2015; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Johnson (2015) highlighted a pattern regarding high attrition rates revealing a “lack of faculty connectedness that keeps students involved towards the end of doctoral programs” (p. 11) contributes to student persistence to degree completion. The literature points to mentoring relationships as a central component to doctoral student success.

When reviewing information collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), a distinction between doctoral programs that take place entirely or partially online is not made; rather, such programs are grouped together. Some programs identify as an online doctoral program yet require student residency each year during the program to connect with their cohort and professors face-to-face. Generally, mentoring in these programs occurs with the aid of technology (e.g., the Internet via web-conferencing, email, or other similar means; the telephone, etc.). Kumar et al. (2013) highlighted findings from other researchers that mentoring conducted online is unlike traditional mentoring. For one, mentoring online is not constricted by location, or distance, which can lead to higher levels of mentor accessibility (Mueller, 2004). Additionally, online mentoring to a degree eliminates status differences, creating a sense of objectivity (Single & Single, 2007). Some unique aspects of online mentoring include possessing a level of online technical competence, varying the type of online communication to include written, audio, and possible video technology, ensuring timely feedback or response to a mentee’s questions, and for protégés to remember that immediate responses are not always realistic (Khan, 2010; Kumar, et al., 2013). While some characteristics of this type of mentoring relationship may be different,
there are many elements that are relevant regardless of its occurrence online or traditional face-to-face mentoring, such as developing mutual trust, pairing mentors and protégés who have shared interests, providing an orientation, setting goals, maintaining commitment, and consistent contact (Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Kumar et al., 2013). Benefits from online mentoring include less time spent scheduling and holding meetings, the relationships between participants are more egalitarian, and there is greater access (Johnson, 2016). Kumar et al. (2013) discovered that flexibility and the use of multiple technologies to facilitate doctoral student learning, growth, and autonomy contributed to successful online mentoring.

**Mentoring Benefits**

Mentoring as an effective strategy for improving doctoral student retention was highlighted throughout the literature (Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007; Villanueva, 2015). Noonan et al. (2007) also highlighted the advantage created from this relationship relative to research opportunities, job attainment, and benefits experienced by mentors. There are also many benefits experienced by faculty who mentor students (Bagaka’s et al., 2015; Johnson, 2016).

**Retention and Degree Completion**

While a singular reason cannot be easily identified regarding what doctoral programs should do to increase retention and degree completion, there is a continued assertion that mentoring programs are key to such efforts (Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Villanueva, 2015). Creighton et al. (2010) indicated that the most significant predictor of degree completion is faculty-student mentoring relationships, and Villanueva (2015) pointed to mentorship as an “essential element of retention programs” (p. 22). Johnson’s (2015) research explored doctoral student persistence factors for online doctoral
degree programs and identified a lack of faculty mentoring as a component related to low completion rates for online doctoral students.

Although specific online doctoral student attrition data could not be located, according to several researchers (Asatryan, 2015; Allen & Seaman, 2010; Haynie, 2015; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Patterson & McFadden, 2009), students in online doctoral programs are less likely to complete their degree than those enrolled in traditional campus-based programs. Additionally, Patterson and McFadden (2009) found that students of minority groups present as having higher attrition rates than those who are white male, yet male and female students have a similar dropout rate (19% and 22% respectively). Noonan et al. (2007) indicated that a review of literature over the past decade points to mentoring as a long recognized and effective strategy to retain and support doctoral students. Mentoring reduces attrition rates and creates a climate of trust that supports degree completion (Hyder & Gilliam, 2015). As doctoral students work on their culminating research in the form of a dissertation, support and collaboration from an invested mentor also improves student retention, achievement, and degree completion (Noonan et al., 2007). Therefore, mentoring in online doctoral programs could aid student persistence to degree completion.

Self-Confidence

Among the many benefits doctoral students reported about mentoring is an increase in their self-confidence (Johnson, 2015). Similar to Bandura’s (1977) concept of self-efficacy, self-confidence refers to an individual’s belief in their ability to achieve their goals, which decreases feelings of vulnerability. Noonan et al. (2007) referenced several studies that reported increased self-confidence and that students indicated feeling they received benefits from caring experiences while in their program. A study conducted at the University of Georgia noted that
the students’ quality of work was positively correlated with their confidence level after participating in an e-mentoring program (Hyder & Gilliam, 2015). Encouragement and support from a mentor added to the mentoring relationship and the academic and personal growth of the mentee (Creighton et al., 2010; Johnson, 2016). Additionally, the University of Michigan’s (2015) Rackham Graduate School’s mentoring handbook identified confidence as a mentoring benefit for students and that this in turn minimizes stress. The results of gaining greater self-confidence was reported in several studies (Johnson, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007; Simmons, 2006) as supporting the completion of comprehensive exams, dissertation completion, and reports of greater comfortability with navigating student-faculty relationships.

**Professional Networking**

Mentoring in doctoral programs supports higher retention rates as well as an increase in doctoral student self-efficacy (Columbaro, 2015). However, mentoring provides benefits that reach beyond doctoral program completion. Advantages relative to job placement (Noonan et al., 2007) aided by professional networking, academic development, and involvement in campus opportunities are also related to faculty-student mentoring (Holley & Caldwell, 2008). Johnson and Huwe (2003) cited networking as one of nine extrinsic benefits for graduate students who received mentoring. Extending one’s professional network was reported as assisting in career development (Nieto, 2016). Such development maximizes success while completing the Ed.D. program (e.g., presenting at professional conferences, preparing manuscripts for publication) as well as career pursuits after degree completion (Nieto, 2016; Noonan et al., 2007).

**Benefits to Faculty Mentors**

The benefits of self-confidence and networking are afforded not only to mentees, who appear to be the object of such programs, but faculty mentors also profit. Noonan et al. (2007)
referenced studies in which faculty stated, “their own performance is enhanced through the mentoring experience (Ragins & Scandura, 1993), and that mentoring is generative and revitalizing (Blackburn, Chapman, & Cameron, 1993)” (p. 251). To further demonstrate that mentoring generates professional development, a mentoring program, Tide Together, at the University of Alabama’s Graduate School emphasized personal and professional development related to academic and personal growth as part of its mission statement (Holley & Caldwell, 2012).

**Elements of Mentoring Programs**

While there is limited literature that examines mentor relationships in online doctoral programs, there have been many efforts to examine what elements are included in successful mentoring programs. Some mentoring occurs in a very informal and possibly taken-for-granted manner. According to Johnson (2016), such faculty-student mentor relationships are spontaneous and do not include institutional involvement in the process. However, some mentor programs are specific and purposeful with management from the department or university in order to increase doctoral student retention (Johnson, 2016). Often the latter are referred to as structured mentoring programs.

**Faculty-Student Mentoring Programs**

Faculty-student mentoring provides opportunities (Columbaro, 2015; Simmons, 2006) for doctoral students to learn the norms of doctoral student expectations and the effective cultivation of professional trajectories after achievement of the doctoral degree. Simmons (2006) pointed to a great deal of literature that acknowledges the importance of faculty-student interaction and mentoring. Research indicates faculty-student relationships are important to doctoral student program persistence (Johnson, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007). The literature also highlights the
efficacy of faculty-student mentoring (Noonan et al., 2007; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). The ability to engage with and seek advice from someone who is in the position to guide, lead, and empower provides rich opportunities for dialogue as well as a broad emotional support system (Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Specific programs that advance faculty-student mentoring at the doctoral level may be difficult to sustain if there is not a designated program or institutional support for faculty who are continually required to perform in many different areas without adequate compensation (Grasso, Barry, & Valentine, 2007; Johnson, 2016). Regular meetings between a faculty member and student in a mentor relationship support overall success in sought-after mentoring outcomes.

**Cross-Cultural Mentoring Considerations**

Although all doctoral students can benefit from mentoring, students who do not mirror the traditional demographic of faculty and doctoral students (women and underrepresented minority groups) particularly profit from such experiences (Crutcher, 2014 & 2007; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Rose, 2005). Therefore, there is a need for mentors to be equipped with cross-cultural knowledge, values, and skills in order to be effective in mentoring across societal boundaries relative to gender, age, and socially constructed race/ethnicity categories (Crutcher, 2007; Johnson, 2016). Crutcher (2014) defined cross-cultural mentoring as “mentoring [that] involves an ongoing, intentional, and mutually enriching relationship with someone of a different race, gender, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, or nationality” (p. 26). Embracing cross-cultural mentoring advances an inclusive environment.

Rose (2005) indicated that female doctoral students desire both professional and personal insights from mentors. According to Rose, women tend to seek out acceptance and validation to a greater extent than their male counterparts. A study conducted by Bell-Ellison and Dedrick
(2008) confirmed this conclusion. Understanding such differences among doctoral student population groups can aid the development of successful mentoring programs while also targeting doctoral program retention.

In addition to characteristics and considerations identified for successful mentoring, other attributes are needed when reaching across cultural boundaries. Crutcher (2007) maintained that these include “selflessness, active listening, honesty, a nonjudgmental attitude, persistence, patience, and an appreciation for diversity” (p. 22). Additionally, Espinoza-Herold and Gonzalez (2007) referenced mentors having an empathic connection that recognizes the differences between the mentors’ cross-cultural background and the diversity presented by the individual they mentor. Transferring an understanding of one’s own experiences and struggles to those of another aids the development of empathy. Including a focus on diversity is an important aspect to incorporate into mentoring efforts and increases success (Johnson, 2016, Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008).

**Structured Programs**

The literature reflects many standards for successful mentoring programs (Creighton et al., 2010; Noonan et al., 2007; Villanueva, 2015; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008). Incorporating a specific structure into the mentoring relationship is seen as a best practice for ensuring success in the advancement of higher retention outcomes (Villanueva, 2015; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008). Some of the characteristics of structured, or formal, programs include specific meeting times, constructing a goal plan, specifying role expectations of both the mentor and mentee, and addressing disempowerment, stress, and opportunity barriers (Creighton et al., 2010; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Villanueva, 2015; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008). The incorporation of these strategies represents a structured or formal mentoring program where someone coordinates the
mentor pairing, touches base with those in the program, and may have group meetings or
interactive gatherings for all mentoring pairs to come together (Johnson, 2016). Such programs
generally maintain quantitative data to assess benchmarks for outcome achievement related to
grades and program completion, and qualitative data that describe how mentees (sometimes
mentors) experience the mentoring relationship. Yet, while students and faculty are reported as
preferring organic and unmonitored mentoring relationships, when institutions rely on that
approach to mentoring, the research indicated that there are dramatically lower rates of
mentoring than in colleges/universities that intentionally support and promote mentoring
relationships (Johnson, 2016).

**Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework consists of theories that provide insight to understanding the
phenomenon under exploration (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Several theoretical perspectives
surfaced when reviewing the literature on mentoring in doctoral programs. Some researchers
incorporated social learning theories, a few integrated constructivism into their theoretical
construct, and others fit with transformative leadership. This section of the literature review
highlights how each of these theories are applicable to faculty-student mentoring.

**Social Learning Theory**

Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory is grounded in a process-oriented perspective to
explain how individuals learn and interact. Bandura believed that the development of attitudes
and behaviors occurs through modeling and imitation. Pamuk (2008) indicated that through
observation, talking, and listening to others, people gain an understanding of their environment
and what to do as well as what to expect in return. Social learning strategies, especially relative
to adult learning in doctoral programs, support learning through the use of guidance, feedback,
and direction as one learns to navigate their doctoral program and professional goals (Pamuk, 2008; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Individuals gain many benefits from participating in mentoring programs as a mentee as well as a mentor.

According to mentor enactment theory (MET) the human connection between mentor and mentee is at the heart of the mentoring relationship (Mansson & Myers, 2012). MET reflects social learning theory tenets in that it speaks to how modeling is influential in the growth of mentees and serves a purpose in the mentoring relationship. As part of this dynamic, mentors have the motivation to coach, teach, nurture, and care, and mentees seek to learn from their mentors any skills and techniques relevant to their professional goals (Grill, 2011; Kalbfleisch, 2007; Mansson & Myers, 2012). Communication and behaviors that advance and maintain the mentoring relationship are central in this theoretical perspective. Mentors who are more closely connected to their mentee’s professional success are more likely to have mentoring relationships that last (Mansson & Myers, 2012).

**Constructivism**

Constructivism is a theoretical perspective that focuses on how individuals create meaning and understanding of their environment through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). It proposes that people not only generate an understanding of their surroundings through interaction but also construct their view of self. Noonan et al. (2007) grounded their study in constructivism with their focus on how a mentee cultivates a social network to learn the language and norms of the group to which they aspire to become a part. By being an active participant in a community of practice “learning occurs within the context of social relationships” (p. 252). Learning is viewed as a process, through which professional knowledge and understanding increases. Additionally, interacting with others in the environment and incorporating the beliefs,
values, and norms of the profession, create a mentoring mindset (Millwater & Yarrow, 2006). Southern (2011) stated that through relationships with others, individuals co-create their lives as well as communities of care for one another. By participating together and learning from one another, mentors and mentees transform their experiences gained from participation in doctoral programs, thereby enhancing their social and cultural capital within their field. Whether a mentoring relationship is informal or formal, mentees enter into a dynamic of socialization in which their mentor prepares them for the next stage in their higher educational trajectory. Laverick (2016) stated, “expertise should be shared by mentors and developed by their protégés” (p.4) thereby co-constructing a relationship while exchanging human capital.

Social field theory. Bourdieu’s (1990) social field theory provides another useful frame, within that of constructivism, for understanding the importance and dynamic of mentoring with online doctoral students and serves as a foundation for broadening this theoretical application. Bourdieu’s development of the concepts of social and cultural capital offers a rationale for the development and use of ideal characteristics for online doctoral student mentoring. Mentoring relationships can build upon the cultural and social capital that online doctoral students already have and need as they embark on future professional opportunities. Social and cultural capital were concepts developed by Bourdieu through his social field theory, to characterize the elements within society’s social structure that contribute to the ways individuals succeed in their various social environments. The combination of these perspectives embodies what Anfara and Mertz (2015) referred to as components of a good and useful theory. They are simple, testable, novel, and supportive of other theories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, as cited in Anfara & Mertz, 2015). The application of a constructivist lens supports the telling of an enlightening story while providing insight to the mentoring of online doctoral students.
The lens of constructivism readily aligns with an attempt to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty and online Ed.D. students. Not only does it provide a lens when seeking a greater awareness of mentoring, it serves well as support for embracing a phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994). Vygotsky’s (1978) constructivist view that people construct their meaning of the world around them coincides with that of phenomenology and its interest in bringing to light the essence of a social phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Transformative Servant-Leadership**

The literature indicates that mentoring relationships personify relationship-oriented components, which embody a transformative leadership element addressed by Burns (1978). The relationship between faculty and students is thought to be a transformational process in and out of the classroom experience. Developing environments that are conducive to learning is an important aspect of a faculty member’s role. In turn, when students encounter learning environments where they feel cared about and invested in they “are more willing to take risks and be vulnerable” (Southern, 2007, p. 330). Further, mentoring provides an avenue to advance the goals of the university and of students.

One type of transformative leadership is servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), which focuses on a leader’s motivation to lead as well as their need to serve others. As described by van Dierendonck (2011), servant-leadership is “demonstrated by empowering and developing people” (p. 1228). The relationship that develops between the leader and followers in this relationship is one characterized by trust, fairness, self-actualization, higher performance (academic or employment), positive attitudes, and stronger organizational sustainability (or one could say program sustainability).
All of these characteristics resemble what are highlighted as important components of successful mentoring relationships that support doctoral student success. Helping others to grow and strengthen their skills is central to mentoring as well as to the servant-leader’s goal. A core characteristic is “going beyond one’s self-interest” (van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1230), which is also indicative of mentoring. Application of this leadership theory within the context of mentoring can provide insight to the mentee’s and mentor’s perspective as well as an institution’s commitment and investment to ensuring mentoring is integrated into doctoral programs.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Theoretical Framework

Due to the relationship dynamics that are existent in mentoring and the desire to understand the perceptions of mentees, mentors, and program administrators, the use of constructivism as an overarching theoretical framework has credence relative to both the topic under inquiry as well as the research design outlined in Chapter 3. However, there are strengths and weaknesses to its application. One weakness is that this theoretical approach is seen as a philosophical viewpoint (Creswell, 2015), which can be seen as not cultivating the gathering of specific facts to aid the researcher. At the same time, a strength is that it provides flexibility in allowing the study’s participants to guide the relevance of information and contribute to the cultivation of an ideal practices guide for mentoring online doctoral students.

Additionally, since this researcher leans toward a constructivist worldview it was important to be aware of that partiality and be open to where the literature and information gathered through the study guided the study. Continually employing researcher reflexivity (Creswell, 2015) was important in order to “honor and respect the site[s] and participants” used in the study (p. 478). Engaging in a phenomenological case study provided an opportunity to
uncover themes relative to mentoring that may impact student persistence and program completion. This was another strength for applying the constructivist lens as part of this study’s theoretical framework. Additionally, application of the phenomenological strategy of bracketing or epoché, contributed to the researcher’s attempt to suspend judgment while collecting data (Vagle, 2014).

**Future Research Needed**

Researchers offered many recommendations for future research relative to mentoring in higher education. This included a need for more research relative to the mentoring of students in online programs, including doctoral programs (Brill, et al., 2014; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Butcher & Sieminski (2006) indicated that research regarding mentoring in Ed.D. programs was lacking, so further development of research in this specific degree area is needed. Numerous mentoring studies concentrated on understanding the perceptions and involvement of mentees, but few explored the experience and perceptions of the mentor in the mentoring relationship (Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Bell-Ellison and Dedrick (2008) indicated a need to explore in what ways student perceptions of mentoring coincide with that of faculty mentors. Another important recommendation was the importance of institutional efforts in support of mentoring programs (Cassuto, 2013; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Terry & Ghosh, 2015) so that faculty and students are supported as they participate in these important institutional programs that benefit the institution, the graduate program, the faculty member, and the student (Creighton et al., 2010; Johnson, 2016). Bawa (2016) indicated that the involvement of faculty and institutions in such efforts along with interactive well-designed online courses all need to be further examined as research is cultivated to improve the retention of online graduate programs.
Gaps identified by researchers included studies that explore (a) mentoring in Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) programs (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006); (b) the mentoring of students in online doctoral programs (Brill, et al., 2014; Terry & Ghosh, 2015); and (c) exploring faculty perceptions of the faculty-student mentoring experience (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012). Terry and Ghosh (2015) suggested an exploration of mentor perceptions of the mentoring relationship with online Ed.D. students. This research endeavor responded to the recommendations and gaps drawn from the review of literature.

Gaining knowledge about the lived experience of faculty mentors of online Ed.D. students through this research study adds to the literature on this overall topic and informs ideal mentoring practices for the development and implementation of mentoring programs in online doctoral programs. This last point aligns with a recommendation made by Kumar et al. (2013) that online doctoral programs should “adopt best practices and evidence-based strategies from the literature on doctoral education and doctoral mentoring in order to be successful in providing support for doctoral students” (p. 9). Understanding the lived experience of faculty mentors can contribute to the development of best practices for mentoring online Ed.D. students.

**Conclusion**

Current literature demonstrated that mentoring in graduate programs has been in a state of change and development since the dawn of graduate degrees. This is due not only to fluctuations relative to student needs but also variations in program delivery. Exploration of the history and definition of mentoring provide a context for how mentoring is evidenced in higher education. Research studies have demonstrated that mentoring is highly related with retention and program completion for doctoral students (Creighton et al., 2010; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Villanueva, 2015). In
addition to this benefit, mentoring is connected to a doctoral student’s sense of self-efficacy or confidence (Creighton et al., 2010; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007) and expanding one’s professional network (Noonan et al., 2007; Holley & Caldwell, 2008).

While there has been a growth in online doctoral programs, little is known or reported regarding the existence of mentoring within these programs. What is known is that the attrition rate of doctoral students across programs is 50% or higher (Cassuto, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Hyder & Gillam, 2015; Johnson, 2015), and it is anticipated that this figure is higher for online programs (Haynie, 2015; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015). Therefore, concerted efforts to incorporate mentoring into online programs could benefit doctoral student retention rates. This writer drew upon the literature that due to minimal research regarding (a) mentoring in Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) programs (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006); (b) the mentoring of students in online doctoral programs (Brill, et al., 2014; Terry & Ghosh, 2015); and (c) exploring faculty perceptions of the faculty-student mentoring experience (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012) exploring the lived experience of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students could provide valuable information regarding faculty-student mentoring in online Ed.D. programs.

As information was garnered and examined regarding practices and needs relative to the mentoring of online doctoral students, consideration of Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory provided insight to the efficacy of mentoring as students pursue doctoral education and degree completion. Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) added to this theoretical lens for understanding the mentoring relationship (Millwater & Yarrow, 2006; Noonon et al., 2007) due to the interaction that occurs in the mentoring relationship, which impacts and is impacted by the relationship itself. Furthermore, Bourdieu’s (1990) social field theory provided a useful frame for
understanding the importance and dynamic of mentoring for online doctoral students as they build social and cultural capital. Finally, due to the relationship-oriented nature of mentoring and its role in supporting students as well as faculty mentors, application of the transformative leadership style (Burns, 1978) of servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) assisted in framing this research. Helping others to grow and strengthen their skills is central to mentoring as well as the servant-leader’s goal.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to add to the body of knowledge regarding the mentoring of online doctoral students, specifically those in Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) programs. During the past eleven years, numerous research studies indicated that mentoring is positively linked with doctoral student retention and program completion (Creighton et al., 2010; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Noonan et al., 2007; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Villanueva, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012). In many of the studies conducted regarding mentoring programs, a consistent recommendation was that there was a lack of research relative to the mentoring of students in online graduate programs (Brill, et al., 2014; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kumar et al., 2013; Terry & Ghosh, 2015); as well as relative to Ed.D. programs (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006). Additionally, there was very little in the literature that explored the perceptions of faculty mentors (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012).

The overarching conceptual lens used in this study encompassed that of a constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) framework, which highlights how individuals create meaning and understanding of the world around them through interaction. Noonan et al. (2007) surmised, “learning occurs within the context of social relationships” (p. 252), as they examined both peer and faculty mentoring in doctoral programs. Uncovering the perceptions of faculty relative to formal mentoring relationships with online doctoral students adds to understanding this type of relationship and its meaning within this sector of academia, online doctoral programs.

Application of a phenomenological methodology to learn from faculty about their experiences and insights regarding faculty-student mentoring in their online doctoral program adds to this body of knowledge. The specific phenomenon that was investigated in this study was...
the lived experience of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students. Gaining information from faculty about their experiences and views of student mentoring that exists in their online Ed.D. programs lends insight to the essence of mentoring online doctoral students.

The purpose of this study was to understand the common lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students and identify themes that surface as important mentoring components. Semistructured interviews with faculty who are or have been involved in mentoring relationships with online doctoral students pursuing their Ed.D. were conducted to achieve the identified objective. This research study contributes to some of the literature gaps regarding faculty-student mentoring for online doctoral students.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research questions are:

RQ1: What are the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students?

RQ2: How do Ed.D. faculty describe the faculty-student mentoring relationship in online Ed.D. programs?

These research questions gave credence to the use of the qualitative research method of phenomenology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) wrote that “qualitative research is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of research participants” (p. 27). They offered several reasons for the selection of a qualitative research methodology. One reason central to this study was that the study sought to discover information about a phenomenon of which very little is known: the viewpoints of faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students. Further, a qualitative research methodology was more suited to uncovering the nuances of the lived experience of
faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students than a quantitative research method. A theoretical perspective deeply entrenched in qualitative research is constructivism (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), which provides a useful lens for understanding mentoring.

**Research Design**

This study was based on the view that faculty who participate in faculty-student mentoring have unique experiences that are impacted by their situations, beliefs, and values; therefore, it is fitting that this study used the qualitative research genre of transcendental phenomenology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014). Phenomenology is “interested in the lived experience which requires us to go to the things themselves” (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). Going directly to mentors, the things themselves, was emulated in this study, by asking faculty themselves about their experience. Moustakas (1994) moved beyond pure phenomenology to transcendental phenomenology, which entails a “readiness to see [phenomena] in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices” (p. 41) of other research methods or knowledge.

A constructivist lens, which was central to this study’s conceptual framework, contends that people construct and cultivate an understanding of the world around them through their interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). This lens contributed to the rationale for selecting phenomenology as the methodology in this research. Phenomenology entails reflecting on the “living meanings of everyday experiences, phenomena, and events” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 23). Constructivists seek to understand the meaning that people attach to their interactions as well as how interactions contribute to the meaning itself. This notion coincides with phenomenology’s focus to uncover the lived experience in conjunction with the meanings attached to that experience (Van Manen, 2014). This study aspired to learn from faculty who formally mentor
online doctoral students descriptions of their lived experience in these faculty-student relationships, while putting aside the researcher’s beliefs and ideas about this phenomenon. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on the depiction of phenomena as expressed by others without an interpretation of those experiences from the researcher (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014). Therefore, transcendental phenomenology was well suited to this study due to its focus on bringing to light elements that contribute to the essence of mentoring online doctoral students from the perspective of the mentors’ experience.

Transcendental phenomenology utilizes three processes in data analysis: Epoché, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, and Imaginative Variation (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché, also referred to as bracketing or bridling, involves the researcher steering away from the common sense or preconceived ways of understanding phenomena, and setting aside their own experiences of the situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This allows the researcher “to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78). This researcher maintained a reflection journal to aid in this process and move toward reduction. The second process, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, involves delineating the description of the phenomenon as provided by research participants (Moustakas, 1994). This practice entailed listing out what was stated in the interviews accompanied by sentences or phrases that captured meaning of the explanations provided by participants. The explanations identified pertained to the specific experiences shared (Moustakas, 1994) of the mentoring process or relationship. This list was considered the development of textural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994), which helped to uncover the essence of the phenomenon, due to the focus on individual expressions. Finally, the third process involved in transcendental phenomenology, Imaginative Variation, “aims to grasp the structural essence of
experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 35). During this stage the researcher attempted to unearth the 
how of the phenomenon and arrive at a structural differentiation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This aspect of the method generated a composite of the participants’ narratives relative to formally mentoring online doctoral Ed.D. students. The textural descriptions and structural essences were synthesized in an effort to unearth the heart of the phenomenon explored (Moustakas, 1994), the lived experience of faculty formally mentoring online Ed.D. students.

The nature of a phenomenological methodology included selecting six to twelve participants who have a shared, lived experience (Creswell, 2015). Therefore, all participants shared the characteristic of either being a mentor currently, or having mentored in the past five years, with an online Ed.D. student(s) as part of a formal mentoring relationship. These participant selection criteria contributed to framing the context of participants in the study and how the researcher gained access to participants.

Setting

Description of the research setting entails important characteristics of where the study takes place, including anything unique, unusual, or particularly noteworthy (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In a broad sense, Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) programs were the overarching virtual setting for this research inquiry. There are approximately 190 accredited online doctoral programs in the US; 50 of which offer an Ed.D. (Online PhD Programs, 2018; Online Schools Center, 2018). Participants were drawn from these programs.

The focus of this study was to learn about the perceptions and thoughts of faculty who have participated in the mentoring of online doctoral students, thereby garnering insight and wisdom through their lived experience. Narrowing the study from all online doctoral programs to
those conferring Ed.D.s provided greater specificity regarding the lived experience of faculty who participated in this study. Interviewing faculty from different programs enriched the information generated; therefore, recruitment of participants did not focus on any one specific institution. Additionally, conducting interviews with faculty from several universities afforded some transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), as the data generated information that indicated similar perceptions are experienced at multiple university settings. Semistructured interviews with participants were conducted remotely through audio conference calls. All participants had the common experience of working as a faculty member in an online Ed.D. program and formally mentoring online Ed.D. students.

**Participants**

Study participants were selected using a purposive, criterion-based sampling method, and all participants were faculty who had the shared experience of formally mentoring online doctoral students in Ed.D. programs (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Purposive sampling, also referred to as criterion-based sampling, is a sampling strategy commonly used in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018); and consists of the researcher relying on his/her own judgment for selecting the characteristics important to the study (Creswell, 2015). The use of a snowball sampling method, also referred to as network sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009), was also employed to locate individuals from different Ed.D. programs. Snowball sampling is a type of purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009) in which identified participants or possible participants were asked to refer others who meet the selection criteria (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The social media website LinkedIn was used to identify individuals who might volunteer to participate in the study. Regardless of participation in the study, those who received the notice about the study were asked to refer other
faculty they know who currently mentor or have mentored online Ed.D. students during the past five years. Finally, the researcher relied on the self-report of qualifying participants that they have been, or are, part of a mentor relationship that was paired by their department or institution, thereby constituting a formal mentoring relationship. Verification that the individual who expressed their willingness to participate in the study was a faculty member with a university was done by the researcher considering the participant’s email extension of .edu, as well as reviewing the university’s website for the individual’s name being listed either within their department or on the course schedule.

Twelve individuals who met the selection criteria: (a) is or was a faculty member in an online Ed.D. program, (b) has mentored Ed.D. students, and (c) is willing to be interviewed by the researcher during the designated time frame (May 15, 2018 through August 31, 2018), were selected for this study. This number of participants coincides with Creswell’s (2015) recommendation for data collection when conducting phenomenological research. Vagle (2014) suggested that because phenomena studied are all different there is no “magic number” (p. 75). Additionally, Moustakas (1994) proposed the following regarding the selection of research of participants:

Essential criteria include: the research participant has experienced the phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, is willing to participate in a lengthy interview . . . , grants the investigator the right to tape-record, possibly videotape the interview, and publish the data in a dissertation and other publications. (p. 107)

Therefore, Moustakas’ recommendation was demonstrated in the selection criteria for this study and was commensurate with what is expected in a phenomenological study.
Participants were recruited by posting an announcement within the following groups in LinkedIn: Higher Education Adjunct Faculty, Higher Education Teaching and Learning, and Inside Higher Ed, as well as by sharing the information with colleagues and peers in other institutions of higher education. The announcement included information about the researcher’s dissertation proposal, IRB approval, and the selection criteria to participate in the study (see Appendix A). If any faculty from the University of New England’s (UNE) online Ed.D. program responded to recruitment efforts, they were purposefully excluded. Because the researcher was currently a student in the online Ed.D. program at UNE, such participants would present a conflict of interest in this study. The research advertisement also requested that the information be shared with anyone who might qualify and be willing to volunteer to participate in the study. Therefore, social media along with a snowball sampling strategy (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2015; Merriam, 2009) was used to recruit participants for this study. Once a faculty member expressed interest in participating in the study, he or she was sent the Informational Letter (see Appendix B) and informed consent form (see Appendix C). This researcher then set up a time to interview each participant.

Historically, saturation was not accepted in qualitative research as appropriate relative to the number of participants in the study except when conducting a grounded theory study (Saunders, et al., 2017). While there are many definitions for saturation, a generally accepted definition is that which originated with Glaser and Straus (1967) when they developed grounded theory. Glaser and Straus referred to saturation as the point at which new information is no longer discovered upon review of participant interviews. Therefore, recruitment, data collection and analysis, to a degree, occurred simultaneously (Saunders et al., 2017). There is not a prescribed rule, yet Fusch and Ness (2015) posed that data saturation in phenomenology is aided
with the process of epoché and is reached when one has reached the point of no new data as well as no additional themes.

Initially, this researcher accepted the first two individuals who expressed their willingness to be interviewed and met the selection criteria for this study. This practice continued (the scheduling of two interviews) while simultaneously processing the transcription of interviews and subsequent coding of the transcripts in order to determine when information saturation was reached. If saturation had been reached after six interviews the researcher would have ended the study at that point. However, the information generated from the interviews was not reached until after eight interviews, the anticipated saturation point for this research endeavor, the study continued until twelve interviews were conducted. During the recruitment process, the researcher attempted to cultivate as much of a cross-section of participants as possible so that there was a degree of diversity among participations. Such factors considered were gender, geography, and the university with which one identifies. This may provide breadth to the lived experience that was shared by faculty regarding the formal mentoring of online Ed.D. students.

**Participant Rights**

In accordance with the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979), ethical principles were observed to ensure the protection of participants in this research study. As part of the requirements at the University of New England (UNE), this researcher completed the CITI Online Training on Human Subjects Protection (see Appendix D). Prior to conducting the study, the research protocol was submitted for UNE IRB Review. Participant rights were protected throughout the study. All participation was voluntary and those willing to participate were provided an informed consent form (see Appendix C). Participants were asked
to sign the consent form to confirm that they read, understood, and agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. The informed consent form provided a review of the purpose of the study, the duration of the interview, the participant’s right to withdraw from the study at any time, an overview of the data collection process (which will include interview audio recording), how participant privacy would be protected (not only through pseudonym assignment but also a cleansing of the data if any personal name references, LinkedIn group, geographical location, or affiliated university names are mentioned in the interview itself), the destruction of the recordings once transcribed, and that confidentiality would be maintained with the transcription and reporting of all data obtained in the study.

When confirming the interview date and time through email communication, the participant was asked to complete and return the informed consent form and was given the name and contact information of this researcher’s advisor. Recorded interviews were given to a professional transcription service, Rev.com. The transcription service was asked to use the code names given for each interviewee. Only the researcher knows which interview responses belong to each code name. This supported the project’s effort to ensure confidentiality. Once the recordings were transcribed they were destroyed. After conducting each interview, participants were sent a thank you email (see Appendix E) and reminded in that correspondence of confidentiality, the inclusion of unidentifiable names, data cleansing, recordings destruction, and member checking of the transcribed interviews.

**Data**

The focus of transcendental phenomenological research is on the described lived experiences of participants, not particularly the interpretation of the information collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The data collected in this study consisted of
responses from semistructured interviews with twelve participants about their perceptions and experiences of formally mentoring online Ed.D. students. Each interview was 30–45 minutes in duration. Phenomenological interviews do not require that all participants answer the exact same questions (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014). This is informed by the goal in phenomenological research of finding “out as much as you can about the phenomenon from each particular participant” (Vagle, 2014, p. 79). According to Vagle, a specific type of interview approach is not required, yet conversational interviews can be unproductive and not garner the depth of information sought; therefore, a structured or semistructured interview protocol is recommended.

The semistructured interviews were audio recorded using an audio recording software application, Zoom, a video and audio conferencing tool, that had the capacity to record audio communication (the video component was not used). Recorded audio files generated were stored and password protected on the researcher’s hard drive. The recorded audio was transcribed by a professional transcription service; therefore, the transcribed documentation of the interviews comprised the data that was used for analysis. All participant identifying information was removed from the transcribed documents and a pseudonym was assigned to each respondent. After their transcription, the original recordings were deleted and destroyed. Data generated from the documents were only accessible to the researcher. After completion of the dissertation, the research data will be deposited in the University of New England’s institutional repository. All consent forms were stored in a secure location on the researcher’s hard drive that is password protected and to which only the researcher has access. Consent forms were not affiliated with any data obtained during the study.

Study participants were initially asked basic questions, to advance the inquiry of the research question and provide a bounded starting point for each interview (see Appendix F).
Subsequently, probing questions were posed based on participant responses. The goal in each interview was to gain as much descriptive information as possible about the respondent’s experience mentoring online Ed.D. students. Information garnered from the interviews provided ample material to analyze and reflect upon relative to the shared experience of faculty mentoring online doctoral students, as well as how they described the faculty-student mentor relationship with online Ed.D. students.

**Analysis**

The use of a phenomenological approach lent itself to understanding faculty experiences and their viewpoints when mentoring online doctoral students. The phenomenological research approach is descriptive and holistic in nature; therefore, this study did not seek to prove, measure, or discover specific types of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Rather, this approach served as a mechanism for understanding the phenomenon of mentoring online doctoral students in Ed.D. programs.

A benefit of this research design is its holistic nature and the opportunity to delve into this lived faculty experience. In-depth, open-ended interviews support this dynamic process. To add to this in-depth exploration, the researcher engaged in epoché (the first process in transcendental phenomenology) and attempted to put aside her personal views and assumptions through a process referred to as bracketing or bridling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This activity was important to do while listening to participants during the interviews, coding the transcribed interviews, and analyzing data generated from this process. The researcher endeavored to accomplish bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014), or phenomenological reduction according to Giorgi (2009), by maintaining a journal of her thoughts about mentoring and then before each interview, and each analytical endeavor,
reminded herself of the research question and purpose of the study (Vagle, 2014). Journaling assisted with parceling out and compartmentalizing the researcher’s views and experiences regarding mentoring and fostered a bridled attitude, a commitment to openness as she listened to others, which was the purpose of the bracketing process (Vagle, 2014). As the data was collected and processed, a review of the research question and purpose before each interview aided in being mindful and open to a fresh perspective regarding the mentoring of Ed.D. students.

The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service (Rev.com). In order to member check, participants were sent a copy of the transcript via email to review and verify accuracy (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). Participants were asked to notate any modifications that they feel were appropriate to their interview and returned those modifications the to the researcher. Subsequently, transcripts of the recorded interviews were coded by the researcher using an advanced coding software, ATLAS.ti. The process of coding entailed identifying a word or short phrase that designated descriptive meaning in the narrative of an interview (Saldana, 2009). One way of describing a code is that it captures the essence of what is being studied. Coding qualitative data is a mechanism that supports capturing the essence of the data (Saldana, 2013). While analyzing the data, simultaneous coding was employed through descriptive, in vivo, and process coding. Descriptive coding was done by assigning a term to categorize the “primary topic of an excerpt” of data (Saldana, 2013, p. 3), whereas in vivo coding was created from terminology stated by an interviewee (Saldana, 2013). Finally, process coding demonstrated action related statements (Saldana, 2013). Therefore, each interview was initially reviewed and coded by applying these coding methods to represent ideas and descriptions the participant shared in the interview. Once all interviews were coded, the researcher determined themes that presented within and across the interviews through the
phenomenological process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) of the identified codes within and between interviews.

A modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis (Moustakas, 1994) was employed in this study. Several procedures were utilized while coding the interviews: horizontalizing of the data and textural, as well as structural, descriptions of participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalizing provided a mechanism to cluster meanings from the information generated and to identify themes. When engaged in horizontalizing, “every statement is treated as having equal value” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Once all themes were identified, those statements that were not relevant to the research question or overlapped with one another were eliminated. Another member check was done by providing interview participants a copy of the themes derived from their interview in an effort to maintain credibility.

Textural descriptions were derived from specific statements from the interviews and the themes identified in the horizontalization process. A textural description provided information on what the participants experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Such descriptions entailed the thoughts and feelings that were expressed by those interviewed regarding formal mentoring of online Ed.D. students. The conditions, situations, and contexts of those experiences are considered the structural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018); how it was experienced. This process lends to clustering the data based on the themes that come forth (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Once the identification and clustering of themes reached saturation the researcher drew inferences and conclusions to describe the lived experiences of mentors’ perceptions of the mentoring of online Ed.D. students, the final phase of analysis. Saturation was determined when the researcher reached a point where new themes or information were no longer identifiable (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to add to understanding the lived experience of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students.
This last phase of analysis is referred to as a synthesis and composite description of the textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994), which resulted in the researcher sharing the collective narrative of those interviewed representing their shared lived experience of formally mentoring online Ed.D. students.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Trustworthiness is described as efforts by the researcher to address issues of what quantitative research addresses with validity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Therefore, in qualitative research, validation is not what is sought. Rather a qualitative research study seeks trustworthiness, dependability, credibility, and confirmability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through bracketing and bridling, the researcher practiced trustworthiness in the study (Vagle, 2014). To confirm the trustworthiness of the study, excerpts that were collected through the horizontalizing process were checked against the full transcript to ensure they were compatible (Moustakas, 1994). Further, Bloomberg and Volpe indicated trustworthiness is a “criterion [that] refers to whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them” (p. 112). In an attempt to increase the level of credibility and confirmability in this study, member checking was executed by giving research participants a copy of the textural and structural descriptions from their interview as a measure of credibility (Moustakas, 1994). Participants indicated whether or not they perceived these as compatible with what they shared.

**Potential Limitations**

A benefit of phenomenology is its holistic and dynamic approach while delving deeply into the phenomena of the mentoring of online Ed.D. students. The in-depth semistructured interviews explored facets of faculty experiences when mentoring online Ed.D. students. The
semistructured interview protocol supported a dynamic interchange as the researcher probed the participants’ responses to retrieve the full story (Moustakas, 1994). However, this type of interaction can also be a limitation. The dynamic and personal quality of the interviews between the researcher and participants makes it difficult to strip this exchange of researcher bias. As Moustakas (1994) shared, removing personal views is very difficult to achieve completely; therefore, the use of bracketing, or epoché, is an integral aspect of this methodology. Through the use of epoché, “suspending our understanding in a reflective move that cultivates curiosity” (LaVasseur, 2003, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 81), the researcher attempted to provide a balance by focusing on creating an interview that started with a question and inserted into the dialogue to ask a probing question or affirm hearing what the participant has shared. The researcher concentrated on listening versus engagement during the interview in order to allow the respondent to talk (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014). This aided in the process of eliciting information versus engaging in conversation without a specific purpose and the avoidance of leading questions.

Another limitation is that the information is not generalizable to the larger population (Creswell, 2015) of faculty who have been in a mentoring relationship with online doctoral students. Yet, that is not the purpose of qualitative or phenomenological research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Rather, the primary objective of this research was to lend insight and a deeper understanding of the perceptions of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. This exploratory study may generate an awareness that does not currently exist regarding the lived experience of faculty engaged in mentoring with online doctoral students.
Conflict of Interest

The researcher was currently a doctoral student in an online Ed.D. program at the University of New England (UNE). In order to decrease any conflict of interest, the scope of research participations disqualified faculty from UNE. Therefore, a conflict of interest was not present relative to degree completion or vested interest in a potential or existing mentor relationship. Additionally, faculty who participated were not at risk of revealing information about the program and university in which they were employed. Narrowing the participant selection supported a responsible approach to addressing potential conflicts of interest. Through a journaling process, the researcher attempted to diminish biases that may exist from past and current mentor relationships.

Conclusion

This chapter started by restating the phenomenon that this study sought to investigate: the lived experience of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. The purpose of the study as well as the research question and design are then reiterated. Phenomenology was the selected methodology for this research study, which complements the conceptual framework of constructivism as highlighted in Chapters 1 and 2. Due to the nature of this study, a physical setting was not relevant. Next, the criteria for participant selection and what was done to recruit participants is explained. Additionally, how participant rights were protected and valued is delineated. This is followed by what was anticipated for the data collection and the process of analysis. The analysis section is where the researcher described how the data was managed, organized, and analyzed. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stated that analysis can be done only after the data is collected and the findings have been written up. Therefore, this chapter was revised from the point of research proposal to final dissertation write up; and to provide a foundation for
the extant discussion to follow in Chapter 4 regarding the data results and method of analysis.

Finally, attention to possible limitations in the study’s methodology brings Chapter 3 to an end. The following chapter focuses on the results generated from this research study. The method of analysis is fully delineated to provide context for how the data was organized, coded, evaluated, and interpreted. Results from data analysis is presented, followed by implications and recommendations from this researcher.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students pursuing an Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.), and to examine themes that surfaced as important to the mentoring relationship. Such an exploration helped to uncover the substance of the phenomenon of faculty mentoring online Ed.D. students. This chapter provides an overview of the analysis methodology, the method of data collection, and a description of the participants in the study. This is followed by the findings from the twelve semistructured interviews that were conducted with faculty from online Ed.D. programs across the United States, which capture their shared lived experiences in mentoring online Ed.D. students. At the end of this chapter, the emergent themes from this study are explored.

Researchers reviewed in the literature identified several gaps in previous research conducted regarding mentoring with doctoral students. These included minimal research regarding: (a) mentoring in Ed.D. programs (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006); (b) the mentoring of students in online doctoral programs (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner, 2014; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Terry & Ghosh, 2015); and (c) exploring faculty perceptions of the faculty-student mentoring experience (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012). This study investigated the lived experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. Learning directly from faculty about their experiences and insights concerning faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students provided insight into the mentoring of online doctoral students that was not found in current literature. A view of this phenomenon from the
perspective of faculty can be beneficial for other faculty and online doctoral programs as they
develop initiatives to support student success.

The researcher strove to uncover the lived experiences of faculty who mentor online
Ed.D. students and any of the nuances that might surface. In light of this, two overarching
research questions were used in this study:

RQ1: What are the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online
Ed.D. students?

RQ2: How do Ed.D. faculty describe the faculty-student mentoring relationship in
online Ed.D. programs?

A phenomenological methodology was particularly appropriate in this study, in that
phenomenology is “interested in the lived experience which requires us to go to the things
themselves” (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). This study gathered information directly from faculty
mentors, the things themselves, by asking them about their experiences mentoring online Ed. D.
students. More specifically, Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenology was employed,
which entails a “readiness to see [phenomena] in an unfettered way, not threatened by customs,
beliefs, and prejudices” (p. 41). The researcher approached each interview with an openness to
learn about the research participant’s individual experiences and hear their perspectives on this
phenomenon, without imposing specific beliefs or a priori knowledge.

Analysis Methodology

This study focused on a constructivist view of the phenomenon of faculty-student
mentoring; that faculty who participate in faculty-student mentoring have unique experiences
impacted by situations, beliefs, and values. In light of this view, it was fitting that this study
applied the qualitative research genre of transcendental phenomenology (Bloomberg & Volpe,
2012; Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014) to understand the phenomenon experienced by faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. Transcendental phenomenology utilizes three processes in data analysis: epoché, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher employed epoché, also referred to as bracketing or bridling, which entails the researcher placing aside his/her preconceived ideas and experiences of the phenomena in order to gain a distinct perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This process was utilized by maintaining a reflection journal throughout the data collection phase. Reflecting on her own thoughts while revisiting the purpose of the study and research questions allowed the researcher “to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78) and set aside her own experiences or thoughts about mentoring when interviewing each participant.

Transcendental phenomenology focuses on the depiction of phenomena as expressed by others without an interpretation of those experiences from the researcher (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014). Therefore, the researcher applied transcendental-phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) by listing out what was stated and reviewing the experiences and their descriptions without an attempt to interpret those experiences. Therefore, sentences and phrases from the interviews were listed out to identify which ones captured the essence of what participants shared about their experience. This list was the development of the textural descriptions of the mentor relationship experienced by faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students; therefore, a revealing of the what in their experiences. Additionally, structural descriptions were generated from the textural to represent a combination of the narratives of research participants and epitomize the essence of the phenomenon.
The third process, imaginative variation, “aims to grasp the structural essence of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 35). In this stage of reviewing the data, the researcher endeavored to uncover how participants experienced their mentor relationship with online Ed.D. students by generating a composite of the narratives shared by research participants into a structural differentiation of this phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The textural descriptions and structural essences were then synthesized to unearth the heart of the lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students.

**Data Collection**

Data collection entailed the recording and transcribing of twelve semistructured online interviews with volunteer research participants from across the United States. As expressed in Chapter 3, the nature of a phenomenological methodology includes selecting six to twelve participants who have a shared, lived experience (Creswell, 2015). The purpose of this study was not to obtain data that could be generalized to the larger population, but to explore the lived experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. All participants shared the characteristic of either being a faculty mentor currently with an online Ed.D. student(s) as part of a formal mentoring relationship or had mentored in the past five years.

A purposive, criterion-based sampling method was used to recruit and select all participants. All research participants had the shared experience of formally mentoring online doctoral students in Ed.D. programs (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). A Participant Recruitment Announcement (see Appendix A) was posted in several groups located within the social media website LinkedIn. These included Higher Education Teaching and Learning, Inside Higher Ed, Higher Education Adjunct Faculty, and Distance Learning Professionals. The researcher contacted the Mentoring Institute housed at the University of New Mexico, which agreed to post...
the recruitment announcement in its upcoming newsletter and on its social media sites. The use of a snowball sampling method, also referred to as network sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009), was also employed. Those who participated in the study, as well as possible participants, were asked to refer others who might meet the selection criteria (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, the researcher sent recruitment information to faculty and peers at several universities, so that they could share the information with possible participants. The recruitment announcement (Appendix A) included information about the researcher’s dissertation proposal, IRB approval, and the selection criteria to participate in the study.

Selection criteria consisted of the following, a faculty member:

(a) Who is or was in an online Ed.D. program;

(b) Who has mentored Ed.D. students and the relationship was paired by their department; and

(c) Who was willing to be interviewed by the researcher during the designated time frame (May 15, 2018 through August 31, 2018).

The researcher relied on participants’ self-report that they formally were, or currently are, part of a mentor relationship that was paired by their department or institution. Additionally, participants’ faculty status was verified through review of the designated university’s website and the individual appearing in the list as a faculty member.

After an individual expressed interest in participating in the study they were sent an Informational Letter (Appendix B) and Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) along with some possible interview dates and times. Once an interview date was confirmed, research participants were emailed information to connect for the interview through Zoom (an online video and audio-
conferencing program) along with a list of eight possible interview questions. The audio recording of each 30–50-minute interview was then sent to Rev.com for transcription. The researcher then cleansed the transcript of any identifying information by reviewing the transcribed interview to ensure all names and identifying information were deleted from the transcript. Each participant’s name was removed from the data transcript and assigned the title of Dr. with a subsequent pseudonym (e.g., Dr. Sequoia), to provide anonymity yet give the researcher a way to discern one participant from another. Additionally, any reference to the university or town where the faculty member taught was removed from the transcript (e.g., Homecoming University in Homecoming, State). Member checks were conducted to support the accuracy of the transcripts, by sending a copy of the cleansed transcript to each interview participant and provide them an opportunity to modify or request a deletion of any of the information in the interview transcript. All interview recordings were destroyed at this point in the research study.

The researcher commenced coding the transcripts after receiving member check feedback. The coding of the qualitative data assisted in capturing the essence of the data (Saldana, 2013). Descriptive coding, in vivo, and process coding were all employed while analyzing the data. The process of coding involves identifying a word or short phrase that represented descriptive meaning in the narrative in order to capture the essence of the phenomenon (Saldana, 2009). Descriptive codes were assigned to indicate primary topics stated by interview participants (e.g., when talking about distance the term geographic distance was assigned). Specific words used by interview participants that represented a primary element of the phenomenon were also coded, which is in vivo coding. For example, if a participant stated trust was important then the word trust was coded (an in vivo code). Process coding was applied
to those statements that represented action in what was shared in the interview (e.g., building the relationship or aspects of this referenced by research participants).

Words, statements, and phrases were identified that captured the meaning of what interview participants shared. This process utilized the textural description and horizontalizing process of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) as it provides a way of delineating the individual expressions of this phenomenon. Textural descriptions were gathered from specific statements in each of the interviews. The process of horizontalizing entailed giving equal value to every statement (Moustakas, 1994), while also considering the overlap with information from other research participants. Horizontalizing provided a mechanism to cluster these meanings into themes. Structural differentiation was then performed after coding each set of transcripts to generate a composite of participants’ narratives and the how of this phenomenon. The how consists of factors and conditions that contributed to the experiences of faculty mentoring online Ed.D. students (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). These procedures were executed in an effort to uncover the heart of the faculty experiences of mentoring online Ed.D. students.

In order to detect saturation, two interview transcripts were reviewed and coded before analysis of additional transcripts. When new information is no longer discovered, saturation is achieved (Glaser & Straus, 1967). Creswell and Poth (2018) also indicated that when the researcher is reviewing the data and information that contributes to understanding the phenomenon ceases to present, then saturation is reached.

The transcribed interviews were revisited throughout the process to ensure that all relevant narrative was captured. Information that was not applicable or pertinent to this research study was not coded and reduced from the transcripts after further review and analysis.
(Moustakas, 1994). Once categories of codes, and possible themes, were identified, interview participants were provided a copy and asked to indicate if they believed any of what was indicated was inaccurate or lacked a goodness of fit with what they shared. The researcher then reviewed all transcripts again, as well as the list of categories, to ascertain emergent themes that were most salient in relationship to the research questions in this study.

**Interview Questions**

Each interview began with the interviewer briefly sharing information about her professional background and the purpose of the study. Moustakas (1994) indicated that “often the phenomenological interview begins with a social conversation” (p. 114). All participants were asked a set of demographic related questions that related to this study, such as:

- How long have you been teaching in higher education?
- What is the size of the program in which you mentor? and
- How long have you mentored online Ed.D. students?

The interview was conducted in a friendly manner to build rapport, as well as a “relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Additionally, information from these questions provided some context and background for each interview participant and his or her experiences.

An interview protocol guided the semistructured interview conversation, which included possible interview questions sent to participants prior to the interview. The use of broad stroke questions facilitated descriptions that were rich and substantive regarding participants’ experience of mentoring online Ed.D. students. Although there was a set of questions that was asked of each participant, there were many divergent follow-up questions that were posed within each interview. This is indicative of the interactive nature of phenomenological research, which
facilitated uncovering the essence of the shared experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

In Chapter 3, the issues of trustworthiness and credibility were addressed. Qualitative research seeks to demonstrate trustworthiness, dependability, credibility, and confirmability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) indicated that trustworthiness is a “criterion [that] refers to whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them” (p. 112). The researcher attempted to maintain trustworthiness throughout the research study via bracketing and bridling (epoché), as recommended by Vagle, (2014). Additionally, excerpts assembled through the horizontalizing process were compared to the full transcript to ensure compatibility (Moustakas, 1994).

In qualitative research, “dependability refers to whether one can track the process and procedures used to collect and interpret the data” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113). This researcher provides detailed information about her research and data collection process in order to demonstrate the dependability of this study. The processes used to recruit participants, conduct the interviews, transcribe the interviews, conduct coding processes, and follow the application of transcendental phenomenology when analyzing the data are all explained in this chapter.

The criterion of credibility indicates that research participants’ perceptions match with that of the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In order to support credibility and confirmability in this study, member checking was executed by giving research participants a copy of their interview transcript as well as the initial code categories relative to their interview (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher disassociated any statements participants identified as incompatible from those themes.
Description of Participants

Twelve faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students participated in this study. Each volunteer interview participant was assigned a pseudonym: Dr. Oak, Dr. Birch, Dr. Elm, Dr. Maple, Dr. Alder, Dr. Walnut, Dr. Chestnut, Dr. Spruce, Dr. Beech, Dr. Willow, Dr. Pine, and Dr. Sequoia. Additionally, they are associated with six different universities across the United States. These universities are located throughout three of the four different U.S. Census Bureau regions of the country: Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin), South (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia), and West (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming).

Overall descriptors of the research participants are provided in Table 1, while still maintaining the confidentiality of those who participated. The research participants reported teaching in higher education between six and twenty-five years, with an average of twelve years. Five of the participants were female and seven were male. Information about a participant’s race or ethnic identity was not collected. Four of the twelve individuals interviewed are currently the director/chair/co-chair of their Ed.D. program. Participants reported the size of their program ranging from 60 to 350 Ed.D. students, and the size of their university ranging from 5,000 to 22,000 students. The average number of years that participants reported having mentored online Ed.D. students was seven, with a range of two to fourteen years. Participants reported that they are presently mentoring from five to fifty online Ed.D. students. Another point of information is
that while a few of the faculty were from the same program, that fact was not shared with them by the researcher nor was it discussed in the interview.

Table 1

Descriptors of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Number Years Teaching in Higher Education</th>
<th>Size of the Institution</th>
<th>Size of the Program</th>
<th>Number Years Mentoring Online Ed.D. Students</th>
<th>How Many People Mentoring Now</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Unk.</td>
<td>Unk.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Unk.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5100</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8,600</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8,600</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8,600</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
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<td>13,000</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>West</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Research participant pseudonyms are not used in order to help maintain confidentiality.

Maximum variation is described as the inclusion of diverse perspectives through a range of extremes that helps to maximize transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; List, 2004; Merriam, 2009). While maximum variation was not part of the sampling strategy (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), it became apparent when reviewing the research participants’ demographic information. A range of extremes is demonstrated among the research participants in the number of years research participants have taught in higher education, the size of their programs and universities, as well as the number of Ed.D. students they are mentoring and number of years they have mentored online Ed.D. students.
Participants’ Definition of Mentoring

Transcendental phenomenology concentrates on participants’ depiction of their experiences and less on the researcher’s interpretations. In this section and the following, the textural descriptions and structural differentiations derived from the interviews are provided to share research participants’ stories of mentoring online Ed.D. students. This segment of the chapter provides an overview of how each participant defined and understood mentoring. Responses to this question in the interviews provide a foundation for understanding participants’ narratives relative to the mentoring experience and the themes that came forth, as well as the themes identified from the overall shared experiences of mentoring online Ed.D. students. Thirteen codes, or characteristics, are reflected across participants’ definitions: coach or coaching, counseling or counselor, develop their skills, guide or guiding, mutual benefit, peak performance, personal, safe space, scholar, successful, teach, think like a scholar, and trust. There was overlap among the definitions conveyed by participants in this study, as well as some nuance when looking at the elaboration of their stated definitions.

The word trust was used by eight of the twelve research participants and was incorporated into participant responses much more frequently (29 different times) than any of the other characteristics. Guide (or guiding) and successful were terms that were also used with high occurrence (12 and 11 different times respectively). However, the former was used across seven of the participants, whereas successful was mentioned by only two. An overall sense of how these faculty define mentoring is captured in their specific remarks.

A definition of mentoring as a “trusted counselor or guide” was offered by Dr. Oak. This sentiment is echoed by Dr. Willow in her statement, “Mentoring is the process of building a trusting relationship with the intent of providing needed support to whom the mentee happens to
be . . . in a true mentoring relationship, there should be a goal or a focus that would be supportive.” She added that an important aspect of this definition is that “different people need different kinds of things.” Dr. Pine also referenced trust when identifying important elements in a mentoring relationship. He shared that first and foremost trust is what came to mind for him, adding, “ultimately the student has to have trust that the mentor has the students’ interests, best interests at heart.” For him trust is number one.

Trust is what came first to mind for Dr. Maple as well when considering what is important in a mentoring relationship. As she defined mentoring she indicated that mentoring “is something that’s more meaningful than just being a faculty advisor or even being a dissertation chair . . . it’s also a relationship that would probably go beyond graduation, where you’re collaborating and you’re working longer term by choice.” She also stated that at times “the student becomes vulnerable when talking about their challenges” and so the mentoring relationship needs to develop “so that they [the mentee] trust that the faculty member will be sort of nonjudgmental, sort of help them through those things and have an understanding.” In her view, the development of trust in the mentoring relationship can greatly aid students as they complete their dissertation work.

Dr. Walnut related that trust is demonstrated when “a student feels that he or she can share something, and it can be taken seriously.” He included that empathy, and being clear about expectations, can support the development of trust in the mentoring relationship. This can be demonstrated by “listening to students’ concerns and needs and helping them sort out challenges.” This is echoed by Dr. Spruce in his comment that there needs to be “trust, respect, a level of expertise, good clear communication, time, and teachability by both the mentor and protégé.”
Merriam-Webster defines *guide* as “one that leads or directs another’s way” (the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). A summary of Dr. Oak’s definition of mentoring is embodied in the phrase, “A mentor is someone who is there to answer questions, provide a sounding board if necessary, and maybe even offer advice. Sometimes unsolicited whenever that’s necessary.” Along this same line, Dr. Birch described her view of mentoring as,

Guiding them through the logistics of the process and the steps that they need to take towards a successful dissertation, but equally important, perhaps more importantly is guiding them on that transition from moving from being a practitioner to a scholar . . . To think like a scholar. To write like a scholar. To research like a scholar.

The conceptualization of mentoring, as comprising that of being a guide, is also demonstrated in Dr. Sequoia’s remarks when stating that mentoring is “guiding those who are newer to the field, whatever that field may be, based on the experiences that I’ve had over the years.” As he discussed his definition, he highlighted that these experiences might be successes as well as things he did not know previously. From these experiences, “guiding them in the right direction” was an important component for Dr. Sequoia. He also clarified that when he thinks about mentoring Ed.D. students “it’s less about career, and more about the process, being both coursework and dissertation,” which would include “time management, organizational skills, feasibility, and the logistics of the process.” Mentoring being “a process to work with a doctoral student on three specific aspects. To define, develop, and successfully defend the research proposal,” as described by Dr. Beech, connects with the characteristics of guide and success. The latter has been a thread through many of the comments already recounted.
Similarly, Dr. Walnut shared as part of his definition of mentoring, “I would say that my primary view of mentoring has to do with advice giving.” He elaborated further,

My definition of mentoring would play kind of in an actionable way in terms of listening to students’ concerns and needs and helping them sort out challenges . . .

listening to their research ideas and helping them dive down different paths . . .

I would say that there’s a heavy component of listening in it more than anything else.

He described his mentoring as looking like a helping relationship to help students sort out the program as well as their dissertation research. He indicated that for some students they reach a point where they need to be informed of the exact next steps in the program and what the pieces are once they become more autonomous in the program. He conveyed that this might be a type of mentoring but that it might be more guidance than mentoring, because he sees listening to their ideas and exploring different paths with them as separate from the guidance provided through an advisement type of role.

When Dr. Spruce was asked to define mentoring, he stated, “It really depends somewhat on the context, but I believe mentoring involves entering into an intentional relationship between a mentor or a guide expert and a protégé or a novice, and typically to accomplish a specific goal or outcome.” Throughout his narrative, Dr. Spruce referenced the intentionality of mentoring being an important aspect if the relationship is going to be meaningful and valuable for both the mentor and mentee. Intentionality and responsibility were mentioned by Dr. Elm when asked to share her definition of mentoring,

I think mentoring is really a relationship, focused on giving and receiving of advice and feedback . . . it involves coaching . . . It’s not all on the mentor. The
mentee has to take responsibility for their growth, their development, what their
needs are, and then work with the mentor accordingly . . . It is not a work
relationship . . . It should be collaborative and collegial, and a safe space.

Teaching and coaching are referenced directly and indirectly throughout research participants’
narratives with a focus on the development of the mentee’s skills and professional development.
Dr. Elm referenced it in the narrative just shared, and Dr. Pine communicated in his definition of
mentoring a similar reference,

A relationship between two people, where one person is trying to teach the other
person informally often the things that aren’t explicitly taught . . . to enculturate
them into a field of practice, or a way of being, teach them the secret handshake,
help them be successful.

Previously in this section, Dr. Birch’s remarks about mentoring being a relationship that provides
support to mentees as they transition from practitioner to scholar also connects to this idea of
coaching. The idea of guiding and coaching is further demonstrated with Dr. Chestnut’s
definition, “mentoring to me, for me as a metaphor, is more closely aligned to coaching.” She
further explained,

I would define mentoring in a way that you might define coaching, as a
relationship in which there’s a mutual benefit for both individuals, and that one
might be helping another to get to that peak performance, to get into that zone, to
uncover their potential and to strive for that potential . . . the mutual benefit that
the other gets is because that’s their calling . . . When you give kindness it comes
back to you, and I see that in the same way, with whether it’s called coaching or
mentoring, this is what my vocation is, this is my calling, and my ability to do
that, to help another uncover their wholeness or their potential is what I’m called to do.

She agreed with the researcher’s sifting together of her statements to indicate that Dr. Chestnut’s view of mentoring encompasses a relationship that is “important, with mutual benefit, and helping someone get to their peak performance.”

Although alluded to by many of the research participants, Dr. Alder specifically conveyed that mentoring is personal as well as about professionalization. He further stated that it is,

helping [online Ed.D. students] discern a career path post-degree . . . helping them make decisions . . . some of the mentoring is professionalization . . . How to consider, okay, these are the next steps in your academic career. After you finish your degree, how do you take your dissertation and reframe it into article format?

As is evidenced in these remarks, Dr. Alder emphasized the action of helping as important to the execution and definition of mentoring.

**Description of Mentoring with Online Ed.D. Students**

After expressing their definition of mentoring, all research participants were asked to share their experiences relative to faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students. Their responses provided threads for themes that arose to provide a collective story depicting the experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. Highlights from their narratives are provided throughout this section with textural and structural descriptions, which illustrated what participants experienced (textural descriptions) and the situations and contexts of those experiences (structural descriptions) relative to the phenomenon of mentoring online Ed.D. students. The following section illuminates the emergent themes.
While sharing about their experiences mentoring online doctoral students, all participants discussed their role as a dissertation chair. The role of advisor was mentioned by five of the research participants, whether that was as a dissertation advisor or general program advisor. Generally, all mentor/mentee matches were made by program chairs. However, some programs elicited student preference or interest regarding who they would like to work with as they developed their research. Several research participants shared that the match was influenced by faculty identifying online Ed.D. students they felt reflected their own research interests. Yet, a few research participants indicated that the mentor match was “pretty much done arbitrarily.”

Dr. Oak stated, “students are absolutely looking for people they can talk to and turn to regarding their classes and professional situations. Their eagerness to communicate with those they trust and identify with is really high.” He further stated that it might be a “reflection of being in an online situation for so long, that the opportunity to connect with somebody on a professional personal level takes on a really high level of interest for them.” Therefore, his experience centered on ways that trust and availability are cultivated.

“Invigorating and intellectually stimulating” is how Dr. Birch described her experience. However, she also described her experience as challenging. She elaborated on her depiction of challenging by adding,

the dissertation process is challenging and learning how to be a researcher and going through a lit review and design of a study and all the iterations of it is very challenging, for students learning how to write as a scholar and think as a scholar is just a challenging process.
Dr. Birch also indicated that it is challenging to mentor online due to a geographic disconnection between mentor and mentee, “not being able to sit down in a room with a student and just have an hour or two to really work through things is very challenging.”

Sharing about a desire to have her students “know that they can reach out to me, and when they’re not, then I reach out to them” was central to how Dr. Elm talked about her experience mentoring online Ed.D. students. She stated that her experience is that when students get to the point of working on the dissertation “they feel isolated, and like they’re on an island.” She reaches out and continually thinks of ways that she might be able to engage them so that they do not feel isolated. She also stated that “my experience is we need to almost formalize it a little bit more than it already is,” meaning that there is an assumption that students have access to support and the necessary information relative to their program and dissertation, and that dissertation advisors provide this information.

Dr. Maple indicated that the online environment greatly impacts her experience mentoring online doctoral students. The online classroom, advising students as they progress through the program, as well as serving as dissertation chair were contexts she related as important dimensions of her mentoring experiences. She stated that often feedback shared can be easily misinterpreted and “often loses its sense of emotion or body language or encouragement that you might have if you were providing feedback in a classroom or in person.” The use of phone calls, Zoom (a video and audio conferencing tool), or on campus writing workshops were also components of her mentoring experience with online Ed.D. students. Dr. Maple relayed that she believes mentoring in this context has lost “that personal touch.”

Dr. Alder described his experience as “helping people” and that the help is going to vary depending on the needs of the students he is working with at that time. Some, he says, rarely
reach out and do fine. He still sends out general notes to touch base and invite communication, if needed. However, most of the students in the program are mid-career professionals. He added,

So, they are working and getting a degree at the same time . . . they have families and jobs and everything else . . . [yet] there’s times where [they’re] going to freak out. And [they] need to talk to somebody about that. So, I’ve had experiences like those.

Dr. Alder reflected on working with some students who might have dropped out of the program and then reach out when their “life circumstances have changed where they’re in a spot where they can do it.” Another experience shared was “helping them make their dissertations better than they think they can be.”

“My experience of mentoring so far is that I’ve been pretty blessed with students who are pretty capable,” Dr. Walnut reflected. However, he also disclosed that “some students, need, have you heard the expressing being talked off a ledge, because it is a very stressful and emotional time.” Additionally, he states, “I miss sitting down with folks and having a chat with them over a beer or whatever else,” which is something he does not enjoy about the online dynamic. However, he “kind of break[s] that barrier” when he goes to professional conferences and meets many of his students there. He also stated he attempts to look for ways to break that barrier down virtually (e.g., use of technology in innovative ways).

Dr. Chestnut stated that she would categorize her experiences mentoring online Ed.D. students into three parts. These included advisees, those she serves as the doctoral dissertation chair or is a committee member for, and then also through formal instruction in the courses she teaches. She sees each of these as unique. When explaining each of these roles, she couched advising as being another word for mentor or coach. She helps them with their progress in the
program. Her experience chairing a student’s dissertation is that she approaches it as a co-collaboration relationship “to help them guide their independent research endeavor, to emerge as a scholar practitioner, [and] to learn applied research methods.” Dr. Chestnut also described all three roles as ones where she strives to “create the safe, trusting environment that they [students] can push off, leverage off of that, and hopefully support them in that.” Additionally, she reflected on the power structure and believes there might be a benefit to the relationship to break that power structure down. She explained that by deconstructing that power structure between professor and student, students will be able to “fully go into the comfort of wrestling with the ideas, not with the relationship necessarily, or the power dynamic.” Her experience led her to note that “it’s important to explore and be open to many interpretations and perspectives” and that “relationship is shaped around shared responsibility.” Therefore, she stated that she wants to sculpt a relationship that “in a certain way says this is a safe place for you to make mistakes, take risks, be comfortable.”

Dr. Spruce indicated that he would focus his conversation about the mentoring experience on the dissertation process “because that’s when the mentoring is actually more intentional during that dissertation phase.” His experience varied depending on the level of expertise of the student. He has found that there are some students who do not engage in the process and then others who “were in the process to learn and they wanted to grow through the process.” The latter he considered true mentoring. Dr. Spruce expressed this difference in his description of conversations with his mentees. Many conversations,

were generally centered around topics or issues with the dissertation . . . there were also conversations that dealt with their jobs and situations in their jobs or
Dr. Spruce indicated that due to the size of his program such relationships have been few. Rather the majority have been students assigned to him who just wanted to know what is needed for them to get finished. When he considers the comparison of mentoring relationships with online students to students in all face-to-face programs, he states the biggest difference is the “depth of relationship . . . we had a lot more out of class time together, so the deepening of the relationships occurred prior to actually entering into the dissertation.”

When describing his experience, Dr. Beech indicated that faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students has been very positive. When probed about what he thought contributed to it being positive, he replied “I give a lot of credit to the students . . . my experience has been positive because they are very engaged in the program.” He further described the students he worked with as being very committed. He added that he thinks a reason that students in online doctoral programs are successful is that “they can apply what they are doing in the research to the dissertation.”

The experience of faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students was described as multilevel by Dr. Willow. She shared that before her program became a fully online program, she was not a strong proponent of online courses or programs. Yet, she indicated that her mentoring of online Ed.D. students was good overall, even though she expected it to be a very negative experience. In fact, she stated “I’ve actually seen it to be not all that different than a face-to-face program, at least for students.” Dr. Willow shared that she misses the face-to-face experience. Additionally, from what she has observed “students in the online program feel like they’re getting great instruction, great rapport.” Through her comments she indicated that it is the
mentee and mentor that contribute to the relationship and whether it is a positive or negative experience. It depends on what one decides to focus on and what faculty (mentors) are “going to do to build in some support.”

When defining mentoring, Dr. Pine emphasized that it is about a relationship. As he developed the description of his experience with mentoring relationships with online Ed.D. students, he focused on communication and ways to connect, even though it is an online program. Whether that is meeting students who might be more locally located, joining them at conferences, talking regularly through Zoom sessions, etc., he says it does not matter but he tries to incorporate various opportunities to connect and build a relationship. One comment he made was “just because it is an online program doesn’t mean that it has to be fully online.” When relating with students he “highly encourage[s] all of our students in the program, not just the ones I’m the advisor for, to go to this one professional conference” so that they have an opportunity to meet faculty from the program. Dr. Pine encourages students to work on a conference proposal. He states that he thinks “of them as professional colleagues that I want to have the next 20 years of our career, that we have this relationship still.” He continually reflected on how he can help students he is working with as well as future students so that they do not stumble in the same places.

Dr. Sequoia began his description of his experiences mentoring online Ed.D. students by stating “I’ve had very good experiences with online mentoring of my students in all of the environments, with the exception of maybe one.” He indicated that forms of communication were all virtual and conducted through phone calls, emails, and Adobe Connect (a video conference program). He shared there is not the luxury of students just stopping by the office to
sit face to face to have a discussion, but he does not believe this has set online students back at all in regard to his “relationship with guiding them through the process.”

**Emergent Themes**

The previous two sections highlighted the process of Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction (Moustakas, 1994) by sharing the textural and structural descriptions compiled from research participants’ narratives. The focus remained on mentoring online Ed.D. students, “the thing, its presence, and elucidation” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 91). Reflection and reduction are instrumental in this practice, with the intent of “explicating the essential nature of the phenomenon” (p. 91). Husserl (1970, as cited in Moustakas, 1994) indicated that “the sole aim of the research participant is to see, to describe fully what is seen, just as it is” (p. 93). Reflecting on these accounts, the researcher was able to reduce the narrative to texturally and structurally meaningful components while presenting the shared story of the research participants. The researcher employed the practice of horizontalizing, “every statement [was] treated as having equal value” (p. 97); therefore, supporting an organic movement to the imaginative variation, which seeks meanings by looking at the phenomenon from various points of view.

Imaginative variation encompasses the identification of structural descriptions of the phenomenon that are derived from the textural and structural depictions (Moustakas, 1994). This step allows the researcher to identify themes that represent the essence of the phenomenon itself. As a result, five primary themes emerged from the narrative provided by the research participants. These themes developed as the data was analyzed and reviewed to provide a collective story of the shared experience reported by faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students.
The distribution of participant responses relative to the emergent themes is demonstrated in Table 2. This table demonstrates the emergent themes derived from responses of multiple research participants, thereby offering evidence of breadth for each of these themes. Depth is also present, as many of the participants relayed information relative to respective themes more than once while sharing their experience.

Table 2

Distribution of Emergent Themes by Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Development of Trust</th>
<th>Experience as a Doctoral Student</th>
<th>Mentoring Is Challenging</th>
<th>Relationship Building</th>
<th>Varying Types of Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Alder</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Dr. Elm</td>
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<td>Dr. Maple</td>
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<td>Dr. Oak</td>
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<td>Dr. Spruce</td>
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<td>Dr. Willow</td>
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</table>

Note: The themes and participants are presented in alphabetical order with no value attached to their organization.

As each theme is examined throughout this dissertation, the experiences are not attached to the specific participant (as demonstrated by the omission of pseudonyms and gender pronouns) who stated that element. This is done in an effort to share the collective narrative that came forth from the lived experiences of all twelve participants. This approach in delineating the data may provide a deeper understanding of the essence of the phenomena experienced by faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students.
**Theme 1: Development of Trust**

Trust was a characteristic mentioned 29 times as research participants defined mentoring and it also surfaced as a theme relative to the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students. As a characteristic of mentoring, trust was mentioned in several ways. One research participant stated, “If you share a truly quality mentoring relationship, people need to be able to trust each other.” This same person explicated why trust toward the mentee, as well as mentor, is an important part of the mentoring experience.

the student becomes vulnerable when they're talking about their challenges in writing or their research and they always feel vulnerable anyway. So, that they trust that the faculty member will be sort of nonjudgmental, sort of help them through those things and have an understanding. Another thing would be that honoring timelines and communication, showing up for meetings on time, people doing their best to meet those expectations [for both mentees and mentors] . . .

that [way] I know if I'm setting a meeting that person's going to be there.

Another participant denoted, “mentoring is a process of building a trusting relationship with the intent of providing needed support to whom the mentee happens to be.” While another research participant asserted, “for me trust is number one” and voiced that a mentee “ultimately . . . has to have trust that the mentor has the student’s interests, best interests at heart . . . they have to trust that I’m going to help them get through this.” Trust, as a shared phenomenon in the mentoring relationship, was also articulated in statements such as, “I want them to trust me back . . . that tells me whether that mentoring relationship is strong,” which explicated the idea of a reciprocity of trust.
Another participant stated, “I think trust comes into play as well because we’re going to be having some courageous conversations along the way . . . so trust is very, very important.” One sentiment disclosed regarding the importance of trust was “getting to know the student as a person . . . really opens it up to building trust and building a relationship.” This statement relates back to what Dr. Willow shared when defining mentoring “mentoring is the process of building a trusting relationship,” who further stated that mentoring is all about building a “trusting communicative relationship.”

A statement that epitomizes how a faculty member sees trust as important from a mentee’s perspective is, “I think students that have that personal relationship with faculty in that level of trust, they feel like there’s somebody cheering for them and somebody wants to see them through.” Additionally, another research participant described a trustworthy process as transparent and reciprocal. They conveyed this with the statement “so trust starts with the giving of it, not with the are you trustworthy or not? It’s like here, I trust you.”

**Theme 2: Experience as a Doctoral Student**

While dialoguing with research participants, nine research participants shared about their personal experience(s) of when they were pursuing their doctorate and how they were, or were not, mentored. Further, these participants commented on how that may influence their perception of the definition as well as what they try to incorporate into their current mentoring relationships. During the coding process, these reflections came forth from the transcribed responses to several different interview questions. The experiences ranged from reporting they had no guidance and felt isolated to having had really supportive mentors and knowing they could lean on their mentors when needed.
When the question “What has impacted your experience of faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students?” was posed to one participant, she disclosed that she was a working professional when pursuing her doctorate. While not an online program, her dissertation committee members were located in different states than where she resided, and one was out of the country. She made the statement, “I’ve been there. I know how stressful it gets when you’re just the weekend warrior trying to write. You feel all isolated.” This participant followed her statement by stating that “my own personal experiences with really good mentors” coupled with being a working adult doctoral student influenced how she approaches mentoring with her mentees.

Similarly, another participant responded to this same question by first recounting his experience when pursuing his doctorate. He shared “I was mentored, so a lot of what I do with my students in regards to communication and mentoring and guiding them through the process are things I learned when I was a student.” He recalls his doctoral student experience, as a mentee, as positive and has a continued relationship with his mentor to this day. While he had a very positive experience with a mentor, he indicated that when pursuing his master’s that was not the case, “so, I learned what not to do.” This research participant also related that a focus on the positive experiences and ways to convey that to students in the mentoring relationship is important to him.

“Mentors helped me to reach for those goals that I probably wouldn’t have otherwise thought I could attain,” shared another research participant. Therefore, indicating he believes mentoring is very impactful. He further recounts that his relationship with his advisors and dissertation chair “probably most influenced how I approach it. They were there for me if I needed them, and they were responsive to me when I reached out to them. They were very
helpful to me.” He stated that he tries to embody those same characteristics for students he mentors. “I wouldn’t have known what I didn’t know” and he feels his mentors helped him develop overall professionalism and move beyond a basic threshold of the work he produced.

A similar sentiment was reflected by another participant, “I’ll be the first to admit, my first iteration of a lit review that I turned in to my chair, he was probably thinking, ‘What in the world is this?’ but he worked with me and helped my research and dissertation become better than I would have generated otherwise.” The existence of a natural rapport with her mentor was referenced by another participant, “we had a good relationship, so it helped us to keep that relationship going. It was productive for us.” She affirmed that the relationship with her mentor developed into continued collaboration after she completed her doctorate.

One participant stated that the program he attended for his doctorate clearly stated that training researchers was not an important element for their program, and “if that is what you are looking for you’re in the wrong program.” He indicated that he shared this to provide context for his statement that during “the first three or four years, there was really no mentorship” while pursuing his doctorate. Therefore, this research participant tries “to teach students things [he] learned the hard way” and encourages them to work on developing mentor relationships with their dissertation advisor and committee. He also stated that eventually, he developed a good mentoring relationship during his doctoral program; one that he loves and cherishes to this day, but “it wasn’t all that I needed, and it could have been more. I’m trying to be a better mentor as a result of that.” Finally, because he was publishing while working on his doctorate, he urges students to afford themselves of opportunities to do that as well.

One research participant indicated that she “had no guidance” or mentorship when pursuing her doctorate. At least, in comparison to the mentoring that is expected to occur in the
program where she teaches. She followed her initial comment with “I shouldn’t say no guidance, but like 10% of the guidance that is provided here.” The Ed.D. program in which she teaches has many specific guidelines and benchmarks that mentors are expected to achieve with their mentees. While she would have appreciated more mentoring than she feels she received, she also shared that she thinks when there is as much guidance as there is in her program, it can be overwhelming to students and may be more of a hindrance than an aid for them as they complete their dissertation work.

In a different interview, a participant indicated that he was a full-time doctoral student in a face-to-face doctoral program. He recognizes that his experience was different than that of the online Ed.D. students he mentors. One difference being that he was full-time and “I was on campus. All my time was focused on my classwork or dissertation.” Therefore, since the students he mentors are generally working full-time and located in various time zones, he reminds himself that it is different for them and that he needs to try to be available for them. These comments surfaced when dialoguing about recommendations he had for effective mentoring.

When discussing how he defined mentoring, one participant reminisced about his mentoring experience when he was a doctoral student. He shared that the relationships he has with students is in many ways unlike those he had as a doctoral student. This is in part due to his program being what he termed a “traditional program on campus.” He misses the ability to just “sit down with folks and have a chat with them.” As a doctoral student he and his peers would meet their professors regularly to informally gather and they would also go to conferences together to present papers. Additionally, he stated, “you know some of their mentoring was done over a meal at their house” because of everyone being in close proximity and seeing one another on a regular basis. Due to this positive experience, he strives to incorporate a semblance of that
into his mentoring relationships with online Ed.D. students. He will meet up with many of his students at conferences and “break that barrier that distance creates.” Another element of his experience that he observes as different for online doctoral students is that he attended a professional seminar every week where twenty to thirty other doctoral students, at various points in the program, would come together and share knowledge about their research, progress, conferences, and other professional and scholarly endeavors. He reflects on this as an important experience and thinks it would be beneficial to try to incorporate that virtually for students in online doctoral programs.

**Theme 3: Mentoring Is Challenging**

Participants gave various accounts when describing their experience of mentoring online Ed.D. students as challenging. The explanations offered encompassed the dissertation process, geographic distance and relating online, varying needs of students, and mentoring many students at one time due to their program’s size. While the experience was shared as demanding, participants did not relate that their description of mentoring as challenging was a debilitative quality. As one participant stated when asked how they would describe their experiences mentoring online Ed.D. students, “I would say it is challenging. It is invigorating and intellectually stimulating to be engaged in research alongside learners and help guide them.” This characterization demonstrates the idea that while there may be obstacles there are also fortifying dimensions.

In reference to the dissertation process, one participant stated, “I think it [mentoring] is challenging just because the dissertation process is challenging . . .” This was echoed by several participants who contributed comments such as “students learning to write as a scholar and think as a scholar is just a challenging process” as well as “I do think students would want quicker
feedback from me” and “learning how to be a researcher and going through a lit review and the design of the study and all the iterations of it is very challenging.” Additionally, one faculty member shared, “there’s some students that need little pokes and structure that help” them complete the dissertation. Another research participant reflected on how they share with their mentees about their dissertation experience because of “the fact that this is such a discouraging and scary process and that we all feel like quitting at some point,” which they think deescalates anxiety that the mentee may experience. In a similar vein, another participant disclosed, “I think we all have the similar thoughts of ‘This is academic hazing. Just because your dissertation process sucked, doesn’t mean you have to make mine’” when reflecting on the dissertation experience and thoughts they believe students have while completing their research. The sentiment of trying to find a balance relative to how much follow-up and prodding a student would benefit from versus to what degree space is needed for the student to delve into the process and reach out for assistance when needed was also referenced as a challenge in the dissertation process.

The challenge of connecting with their mentee as a result of geographic distance was mentioned by several participants. Geographic distance was explicated as the experience of not having face-to-face contact, or very irregular face-to-face opportunities. One research participant conveyed this sentiment with the statement “distance in that it creates an interesting challenge to the development of relationships.” Therefore, a student may feel disconnected from their mentor and approach interactions “in more of an immediate and pragmatic manner for achieving their goals.” This same faculty member stated that “many of the students don’t spend hours with me as they might in a face-to-face setting . . . so they don’t really know me, and I don’t really know them,” which can impact the collaborative nature of the relationship. Another participant stated
that due to geographical distance and irregular contact, “they [students] can easily become disconnected from it,” with “it” referring to the dissertation and mentoring process.

Research participants expressed that geographic location contributes to intermittent communication through statements such as distance can create “the absence of communication that will make a big impact on our relationship and what we’re working on” and developing a personal relationship “is easier to do in person than it is to do online.” One research participant stated that there are times when “all of a sudden the communication stops” and with the geographic distance and communication being primarily through email, it is challenging to connect and find out what might be going on so that support can be provided. Another participant indicated that not having the resource of proximity sometimes made working on aspects of the dissertation more dubious because they are not “able to sit down in a room with a student and just have an hour or two to really work through ideas,” this individual also stated that they are a very relational teacher, so this aspect of mentoring online doctoral students they found especially challenging.

Research participants relayed that another challenging element in their experiences entailed mentors understanding the varying needs of online Ed.D. students. As one research participated stated, “Students are busy full-time professionals who are joining an online program; they have a different context and a different set of needs.” When talking about students, one research participant shared that they believe “students are absolutely looking for people they can talk to and turn to regarding their classes and professional situations.” Another faculty indicated that “some [students] really need a lot of external support—this is the deadline, you have to submit it on time. And others of them are very personally driven to accomplish certain things;” therefore there is a need to
adapt to either give more structure or less structure and sometimes with learners, they'll be all in for a year or two . . . half a year and then, they'll be kind of . . . I don't hear from them and so, I have to push back in. I always struggle with how much that responsibility can, and should, lie with me and how much of it should lie with them.

This is similar to what another research participant stated, “Some people want hand-holding in every decision. Some people are self-reliant.” Regardless, a different faculty member shared that there are times when some “students are afraid to ask or tell their chair that they are confused or can't figure out the research question.” Then another stated their view as, “the degree to which students reach out or not is really kind of left up to them.” The participant added, therefore they try to be available and ready when the mentee makes the effort to get in touch.

Another need is the student’s comfortability with the research process. Especially applied research in the social sciences, according to one research participant. They stated that they find it challenging “to gently get [students] to see that in a social science perspective, we're trying to allow skepticism and doubt into the picture, and uncertainty. That’s a challenge.” Another felt that some students do not “care about learning. It’s more about getting finished.” While another research participant viewed their mentees as passionate, achieving adult learners who “have a way of reasoning, which is largely oriented towards, here is a point of view that I have that’s rooted in my experience. And they unconsciously seek to find evidence to support that position.” Therefore, finding ways to empower that continued passion but help them understand the nature of research inquiry can be challenging as a mentor.
While many shared these types of perspectives relative to student needs academically, one participant stated,

there's a lot of psychological things that are going on at this time besides just getting a dissertation done. So, in those cases, some students need, have you heard the expression being talked off a ledge, because it's a very stressful and emotional time.

This response to such situations was to listen and provide some feedback, but if the situation warranted they would refer the person to professional help. At the same time, a perspective divulged from a different research participant was “my students are principals and superintendents. They don’t need me to help them get through whatever they’ve got going on. They have a support system.” The sentiment expressed by this faculty mentor was that the support really focused on getting through the dissertation and not personal issues that may arise.

There were research participants who indicated that they found it challenging to mentor so many students at the same time, due to the size of their program. As indicated in Table 1, faculty mentors who participated in this study reported currently mentoring anywhere from five to fifty mentees. Reading, processing, and providing feedback to a large number of mentees can make what is perceived as mentoring quite a challenge. This aspect of the mentoring phenomenon is demonstrated with what one research participant shared: “the number of relationships that I’m juggling . . . impacts my experience with building and maintaining and fulfilling my end of the relationship;” and, then further confirmed with another research participant’s reflection “so you have fifteen students who are not practiced writers, that have to produce this massive tome of work. It's very difficult to have a true mentoring relationship in that setting.” These statements reflect a desire on the part of the participant to be connected with their
mentees so that the relationship has value and substance, but the reality is at times it is unachievable due to situations outside of their control.

**Theme 4: Relationship Building**

When describing the experiences of mentoring online Ed.D. students, various ways in which mentors engage mentees in the relationship was shared. This statement, “What I try to do is be really encouraging and human and supportive in the process,” conveyed by one research participant, encapsulates the sentiments revealed by eight of the other faculty interviewed. Building rapport was one aspect of relationship building demonstrated in participants’ responses. Strategies for developing bonds with their mentees were displayed in different ways. One research participant stated that they send their mentees a welcome message at the beginning of each quarter and include “a quote of something I’ve been reading about grit or resiliency or persistence or dreams or something like that and try to help them connect with their why—why they’re doing [their dissertation].” A similar statement by another research participant also represents how the relationship is built, “I think getting to know the student as a person such as what’s going on at work, what’s going on in their life, really opens up to building trust and building a relationship.” Additionally, a participant shared,

I’m very open, too, if they self-disclose something about their family or their work challenge or something like that, just to talk about that. So, I try in the conversations we have by phone, have one or two minutes of just talking.

Another research participant identified the use of humor as an important element for building relationships that are personal and strong. They explained, “I just think that humor is one of the best things to release tension and anxiety and help people to just realize, ‘Oh, yeah’ this isn’t the end of the world.” This participant added that if a mentor or mentee does not have a sense of
humor then mentors need to remind themselves to stay humble and take different obstacles with a grain of salt. This is what will contribute to developing relationships. The participant also shared a recent experience with an individual they mentored, who was a CEO and in the Ed.D. program. When the participant had the individual as a student, before the mentoring relationship grew, the student resisted applying APA citation format. The research participant made a statement about their putting more effort into the work than the student was, to which the student acknowledged “You know what? You’re so right, I’m not giving this the effort I should.” This participant indicated that while their response to the student was not initially meant to be funny, the situation is something they laugh about now. They indicated an unwillingness to let the student throw in the towel; and currently, the two collaborate on writing articles. The research participant concluded that they cultivated “a very productive relationship” by investing time and trusting the process.

Another research participant disclosed that the creation of a safe place is vital to building relationships with mentees, important in building the relationship is to create a safe place. This is demonstrated in their comment “I create that, try to anyway, create the safe, trusting environment that they can push off, leverage off of that, and hopefully support them in that.” A different participant shared that being sensitive to the mentee’s experience of the dissertation process was another element brought up when expressing how relationships with mentees are created, “I try to be hypersensitive to the fact that this is such a discouraging and scary process.” Therefore, finding ways to support the mentee through the process and sharing reflections from their own experiences are used to connect with the mentee.

Additionally, at least four research participants focused on connecting with their mentees where they are at in their thinking, their process, and understanding. Another way of expressing
this is “care for the whole person.” One stated, “actually talking with them and having a conversation to understand, hear their voice . . . the personal connection part is every bit as important as any other part of the program.” Another participant conveyed this quality by stating “it’s that a person is who they are, and so you care for them for who they are. You meet them where they are idea.” Such an approach can take time and may entail patience. A central aspect of meeting the mentee where they are entails the mentor letting go of their own goals for the mentee, and investing in discovering those of their mentee.

The personal aspect of connecting with mentees carries over into what another participant shared, “I think of them as professional colleagues that I want to have the next 20 years of our career, that we have this relationship still.” Another research participant indicated a similar view of their mentees while also reflecting about their experience as a doctoral student “they saw us as colleagues and that’s certainly how I try to approach my students.” This aspect of the relationship is also informed by “one person trying to teach the other person informally often the things that aren’t explicitly taught . . . teach them the secret handshakes, help them be successful.” Helping support the mentee on what and how to explore and pursue positions within academe is alluded to here with the reference to a secret handshake. The colloquialism of a secret handshake denotes the unspoken and unwritten rules or norms that are a part of positions in academia (e.g., professor, associate dean, dean, student program director, etc.). These norms include navigating the politics of a university’s culture while not jeopardizing one’s professional status.

**Theme 5: Varying Types of Communication**

The notion of communication was experienced and expressed in a number of ways and was apparent across all research participants as part of the faculty-student mentoring relationship
with online Ed.D. students. While the following statement is from one research participant, it embodies the narrative of all twelve, “I naturally value communication . . . it’s all about communication.” One faculty member shared “the quality of the communication and how hard both mentor and mentee work to build that communication” is what influences the mentoring relationship the most. When reflecting on this relative to mentoring online doctoral students, one research participant stated, “you do have to learn to communicate a little differently in an environment that’s online . . . you can’t reach into a screen and pat somebody on the hand who is having a difficult time.” Another participant expressed, “the absence of communication will make a big impact on our relationship and what we are working on,” which also indicated the importance of communication in their experiences mentoring online Ed.D. students. Still, other participants felt that demonstrating a presence and communicating with them quickly was of extreme importance for an online mentoring environment as expressed in this statement, “first and foremost the most important thing with an online mentoring environment, is that you communicate with them, and show a presence . . . communicate with them quickly and effectively.” Such pointers may derive from the challenge of geographical distance and online communication as was evidenced in Theme 3: Mentoring Is Challenging.

When reviewing the transcripts, different approaches to communication surfaced. So, while all research participants indicated communication was important, how they talked about communication varied. Some preferred structured modes of communication and others unstructured. Examples of structured forms of communication included setting boundaries and specific times for dialogue or meeting. An unstructured approach was described as informal and flexible in how and when mentors communicate and respond to mentees. One participant shared what they viewed as structured communication approach when they stated, “I communicate with
them through scheduled meetings.” This participant does not share their cell phone number because they say, “I like to be kind of structured in my work and my time off. So, what we do is schedule times to meet. I also email or communicate within Canvas or Blackboard [a learning management system].” On the other hand, an example of unstructured communication from another participant is “I sleep with my iPhone next to my bed and if it dings off, I immediately check it.” These are two very different approaches to communication with mentees and might exist on a fluid continuum from structured to unstructured. There were some research participants who talked about finding the balance of being available and accessible while also setting boundaries.

“Keeping [open] the opportunities for communication is essential in whatever form it needs to take,” was the view of one research participant. Six research participants referenced to availability and various communication tools as important elements for cultivating useful communication with their mentees. One research participant shared their approach to communicating with students as being available when the mentee is available, and so they are available by phone into the late evening. To demonstrate this the participant declared, “[mentees] can’t believe it’s Saturday night at 8:30 pm and I’m available.” Another research participant stated that “the timeliness of the communication is essential.” Still other participants indicated they use various mechanisms to communicate with their mentees. These ranged from using email, the telephone to talk, Zoom or Adobe Connect meetings (virtual video meetings), learning management systems like Canvas or Blackboard, and cell phones to text. The statement “I find I need to be ready at any time, to be there when they are ready to communicate” is indicative of this variability across participants and the desire to be accessible, just in different ways and with different boundaries.
Regardless of rate of recurrence, type, or mechanism used, what seemed to embody the comments and sentiments shared by the faculty mentors interviewed was that “facilitating the opportunity to communicate is important” to their experiences of mentoring online Ed.D. students. When asked what has most impacted their experiences of mentoring online Ed.D. students, one research participant shared, “I think what most influences would be the quality of relationships. I think in that degree, it has to do with how people communicate.” This individual added, “how we communicate and what we communicate. Are we discerning as to when to communicate certain kinds of things? Are we discerning about the way we’re going to communicate those things? I would say those are usually important.”

Summary

This chapter provided insight on the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students. The twelve research participants expressed their experiences and perceptions of faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students. The chapter began with a review of the analysis methodology used in this qualitative research of phenomenology. Reiterating that in qualitative research the intent is not to quantify or statistically analyze the data; rather, the researcher engages in an “interactive and recursive process” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 153) in order to report findings in a narrative manner. The application of phenomenology was exhibited throughout this chapter as specifics of the data collection and a description of the participants were reviewed.

Many descriptive, in vivo, and process codes were generated across the twelve transcripts, to provide the researcher with ample data to describe the experience of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students. Sharing research participants’ narrative of their definitions and descriptions of mentoring online Ed.D. students was central in this process. After
a review of these textural and structural descriptions relative to the research questions, five themes (development of trust, experience as a doctoral student, mentoring is challenging, relationship building, and varying types of communication) surfaced relative to the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students. In this chapter, the researcher presented this information while recounting the application of époché, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation.

The next chapter will explore how the data and emergent themes illuminate the theoretical framework of social learning theory, constructivism, and transformative servant-leadership. The relevance of the synthesis of these findings to the research questions and literature reviewed before conducting the study will also be described. Implications for continued research as well as for online Ed.D. programs will be discussed, along with recommendations generated from this research study.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Mentoring is a topic of interest for this researcher, which spans many years. Her past encounters as a mentor and mentee, professionally and academically, coupled with the knowledge that indicates the student retention rate in doctoral programs is 50%–57% (Cassuto, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015), stimulated this research study. As identified in Chapter 1, although specific data regarding the retention rates in online doctoral programs is not available, several researchers indicated that student retention in online doctoral programs is the same, or slightly higher, than the overall national average for doctoral programs (Asatryan, 2015; Haynie, 2015; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015). Additionally, many researchers noted that mentoring is an important factor that contributes to graduate education retention (Chesler & Chesler, 2002; Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2010; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Noonan, Ballinger, & Black, 2007; Patterson & McFadden 2009; Villanueva, 2015; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008). Very little is reported in the literature regarding mentoring in online doctoral programs (Simmons, 2006; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012). Further, according to Yob and Crawford (2012), few studies examined the perceptions mentors have of the faculty-student mentoring relationship.

In the review of the literature several researchers identified gaps in the research regarding mentoring in doctoral programs. These consisted of: (a) mentoring in Ed.D. programs (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006); (b) the mentoring of students in online doctoral programs (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner, 2014; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Terry & Ghosh, 2015); and (c) exploring faculty perceptions of the faculty-student mentoring experience (Bell-Ellison & Dedrick, 2008; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012). Therefore, this study explored the lived
experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students by applying a phenomenological methodology. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students (specifically in online Ed.D. programs) and examine mentoring components that may influence online doctoral student success. The findings in the study enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of mentoring online Ed.D. students from the perspective of faculty mentors, as well as mentoring elements that faculty mentors see as important to support the success of online doctoral students.

This chapter provides an interpretation of the findings in this phenomenological study as well as implications and recommendations. The transcripts from twelve semistructured interviews were reviewed, coded, and analyzed, which provides an understanding of the lived experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students from the viewpoint of faculty. A review of the theoretical framework of this study is at the beginning of this chapter. Next a discussion interpreting the findings and emergent themes is explored relative to the research questions and literature reviewed. Implications for continued research, as well as for online Ed.D. programs, are examined. The theoretical framework and research questions of this study guided the interpretation of the findings; and, informed the implications and recommendations that surfaced.

**Review of the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study consists of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), social field theory (Bourdieu, 1990), and transformative servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). As written in Chapter 2, these four perspectives emerged as relevant to mentoring relationships in online doctoral programs. The primary principles of these theories guided the analysis of the data in this study to uncover the phenomenon of faculty mentoring online Ed.D. students.
The foundational work of Bandura (1977) emphasized modeling and self-efficacy as central elements in his social learning theory. These characteristics are reflected in the mentor-mentee relationship where mentees seek to emulate the behaviors, skills, and often values of their mentor. According to Bandura, individuals learn how to behave, respond, and think by observation and interaction with another who is considered a role model. Therefore, it is through interactions with one’s mentor that a mentee may gain the skills, requisite knowledge, and support relative to the pursuit of their doctorate and professional goals.

Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) focuses on the dynamic of interaction and its influence on how individuals create meaning and understanding of their environment. Therefore, the meaning that develops from the dynamic experienced in the mentoring relationship relates to constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Bourdieu’s social field theory (1990) provides a useful constructivist frame relative to mentoring due to the resources that are cultivated from a mentoring relationship (e.g., knowledge, networking, understanding). Bourdieu developed the concepts of social and cultural capital, which characterize elements within society’s social structure that contribute to how individuals succeed (e.g., mentors represent social capital and an understanding of research in academia denotes cultural capital). Additionally, Vygotsky’s constructivist view that people construct their meaning of the world around them illustrates the focus of phenomenology’s concentration on bringing to light the essence of a social experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The focus of this study concentrated on the experiences and viewpoints of faculty mentors, which links to Greenleaf’s (1977) transformative servant-leadership theory. Greenleaf asserted that transformative servant-leaders focus on the empowerment of others. His seminal work focused on a leader’s motivation to lead as well as their need to serve others. Servant-
leadership is coupled with Burns’s (1978) transformative leadership theory, which focuses on
leaders supporting others through a reciprocal relationship of encouragement and improvement.
Transformative servant-leadership is characterized as a relationship where one individual
identified as more experienced invests in the success of another individual newer to the field to
build confidence and strength, also referred to as empowerment. Empowerment is a
characteristic used to describe mentoring relationships where mentors invest in the growth and
support of their protégés (mentees) (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Terry &
Ghosh, 2015). van Dierendonck (2011) stated that “going beyond one’s self-interest” (p. 1230) is
a core characteristic of servant-leadership. These characteristics are reflected in the narrative and
themes generated from participants in this study.

**Theoretical Framework Reflected in the Data**

When reviewing the data drawn from these twelve semistructured interviews, all four of
these theoretical perspectives emanated through the statements and anecdotal information shared
by research participants. Social learning theory connects to several of the comments made by
research participants. One demonstration of this theory is in Dr. Oak’s statement, “students are
absolutely looking for people they can talk to and turn to regarding their classes and professional
situations.” Dr. Oak mentioned his effort to be that role model when providing feedback to
mentees. He stated it is important that the feedback “is individualized and meaningful. And those
things are very much appreciated.” Dr. Spruce reflected, “it's really modeling instructional
leadership and serving as a resource to our students.” Further, several research participants
shared that Ed.D. students are generally administrators in education, teaching in higher
education, or already in leadership positions. Therefore, there is a level of self-efficacy already
apparent, but still a need for specific and relevant feedback to the student’s level of expertise,
research familiarity, and research endeavor. Three of the research participants shared that while their doctoral students were professionals with many years of experience in the field, their level of experience with social science research and the inductive nature of methodology in social science research was an area where students needed modeling and coaching.

The statement that mentoring is “a relationship in which there's a mutual benefit for both individuals, and that one might be helping another to get to that peak performance, to get into that zone, to uncover their potential and to strive for that potential,” shared by Dr. Birch, reflects an essence of constructivism as part of the mentoring relationship experienced. Another example of constructivism from mentors’ remarks is the following comment when Dr. Elm was discussing important elements in the mentoring relationship, “it’s important for people to understand that it's two people talking and sharing experiences and figuring out how can I learn from your story, and what's my story going to be.” Both of these statements also reflect self-efficacy, which is highlighted by Bandura (1977) in social learning theory. However, the latter statement also embodies Greenleaf’s (1977) transformative servant-leadership theory. The following comment about the purpose of mentoring, “to help another uncover their wholeness,” also reflects transformative servant-leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf’s theory is further explicated with Dr. Oak’s comment about the need “to have empathy and complete understanding of what's happening in their lives,” when mentoring online Ed.D. students.

Several research participants shared about their efforts to impart knowledge and skills relative to academia and publishing. This is consistent with Johnson’s (2016) definition of mentoring in higher education,

Mentoring is a personal and reciprocal relationship in which a more experienced (usually older) faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor
of a less experienced (usually younger) student or faculty member. A mentor provides the mentee with knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge, and support in the mentee’s pursuit of becoming a full member of a particular profession. (p. 23)

Additionally, Bourdieu’s social field theory is reflected in participants’ narratives about their mentoring experience. One example is when Dr. Pine defined mentoring as to “enculturate them into a field or practice, or a way of being, teach them the secret handshakes, help them be successful, but in a less structured way.” Social and cultural capital are reflected in this statement, as well as when Dr. Birch defined mentoring as,

Guiding them [Ed.D. students] through the logistics of the process and the steps that they need to take towards a successful dissertation, but equally important, perhaps more importantly is guiding them on that transition from moving from being a practitioner to a scholar. And really guiding them as they develop their ability to do independent research. To think like a scholar. To write like a scholar. To research like a scholar.

Therefore, mentees gain cultural capital as mentors guide them and impart the steps involved in the dissertation, research endeavors, and becoming a scholar. Mentors transmit social capital through the cultivation of the mentoring relationship as well as sharing informal rules and expectations of the profession and academia. The explication of social and cultural capital dovetails with aspects of social learning theory, constructivism, and transformative servant-leadership and their theoretical application to the narratives in this study.
**Interpretation of Findings**

This phenomenological study uncovered the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students in Ed.D. programs and identified relevant themes. Two overarching research questions were used in this study:

- **RQ1:** What are the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students?
- **RQ2:** How do Ed.D. faculty describe the faculty-student mentoring relationship in online Ed.D. programs?

Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenology was employed to learn about the experiences of faculty mentoring online Ed.D. students, which enabled the researcher to learn about this phenomenon from the people themselves. Application of a phenomenological approach enables the researcher to decipher the essence of a phenomenon from the individual experiences identified in collected data (Moustakas, 1994). “Any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for an investigation” (p. 26) and provides a vantage point for a synthesis of the “perceived meanings” (p. 29) of that phenomena, so that others are able to see the essence of the phenomenon as well. In this study that object is the lived experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. While conducting the interviews and compiling the findings, the researcher focused on research participants’ depiction of the phenomena without incorporating her interpretation of those experiences. However, this chapter provides an opportunity to interpret the data and emergent themes as informed by the theoretical framework and review of the literature.
Five emergent themes surfaced from the synthesis of the textural descriptions and structural essences that arose during data analysis of the twelve semistructured interviews conducted with faculty who are or have been involved in mentoring online Ed.D. students:

(a) Theme 1: Development of trust

(b) Theme 2: Experience as a doctoral student

(c) Theme 3: Mentoring is challenging

(d) Theme 4: Relationship building

(e) Theme 5: Varying types of communication

As these themes are reviewed, the heart of the lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students is illuminated. The research questions posed in this study overall support information gleaned from the literature and yet advance the understanding of mentoring through the lens of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students.

Shared Lived Experiences of Faculty Who Formally Mentor Online Ed.D. Students

Consideration of the first research question was paramount throughout this research study. Findings that reflect the what of research participants’ experience are relevant to this research question. Shared elements among the twelve faculty interviewed included (a) the roles they hold as a faculty mentor with Ed.D. students, (b) the mentor/mentee match was done by their program, (c) the influence of their experience when pursuing their doctorate on their mentoring relationship, (d) mentoring is challenging, (e) development of trust, (f) relationship building, and (g) varying types of communication. These aspects and others contribute to the collective narrative of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students.

Role as dissertation chair and advisor. All of the research participants identified themselves as serving as a dissertation chair when sharing about their identification as a mentor
to online Ed.D. students. Fulfilling the role of dissertation chair involved guiding doctoral students through the steps required to complete their dissertation, providing feedback to written material, and giving final approval on their research and written dissertation. Another role that participants referenced as part of mentoring online Ed.D. students was that of advisor. This latter reference is reflective of definitions of mentor located in various dictionaries (Dictionary.com, n.d.; the English Oxford Living Dictionary, n.d.; and the Webster Dictionary, n.d.). A review of the literature indicated that a faculty advisor was identified as a faculty member who provides academic guidance to student(s) regarding program requirements and academic concerns (e.g., course enrollment, dissertation completion) (Creighton et al., 2010; Welton, Mansfield, & Young, 2015; Wyman, 2012).

Additionally, several scholars (Barnes & Austin, 2009 as cited in Creighton et al., 2010; Crookston, 1972; Monsour & Corman, 1991; Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006; Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004 as cited in Mansson & Myers, 2012) argued that the advisor-advisee relationship is one of mentoring. However, several research participants offered that there is a distinction between the role of advisor and that of mentor. This was also cited in the literature review regarding the view of several researchers (Creighton et al., 2010; Johnson, 2016; Mansson & Myers, 2012). The advisor role is seen as giving advice regarding program or degree progression, whereas engaging as a mentor is dynamic and relationship-oriented even though there is the overall purpose of dissertation completion. Dr. Alder stated that when comparing mentoring to advising, “mentoring is more personal.” His description of advising entailed technical guidance regarding forms and where to find information, whereas he characterized mentoring as helping mentees discern a career path or make decisions about their need to take time for personal and professional development. Similarly, Creighton et al. (2010) and Johnson
(2016) indicated that a mentor is a faculty member who has a working relationship with the mentee regarding personal and professional goals and guides them. Additionally, both the literature review and the research participants indicated that the specifics of a mentor relationship are not as structured as that of advisor.

**Mentor/mentee match.** Another aspect of research participants’ shared experiences was that the mentor/mentee matches were made by program chairs. However, this process ranged from that of no involvement of faculty or students in that pairing process to the participation of either or both faculty and students in the matching process. While a couple of participants indicated that the matching was “pretty much done arbitrarily,” six shared that students and or faculty were asked for their preference and efforts are taken to meet those leanings as much as possible. Programs highlighted in the literature regarding specific mentoring efforts within the California State University system, as well as at Howard University, the University of Alabama, the University of Georgia, , and the University of Michigan, reflected a similar range of mentor/mentee pairing practices. These ranged from mentees identifying a mentor to a program identifying a faculty mentor for a mentee based on specific criteria. There was a sentiment from six research participants that their preference is to select mentees who have similar research interests because this would be more beneficial to them as a mentor and the mentee might benefit more by being able to tap in to their mentor’s expertise. An example of this was if a faculty mentor’s research area was that of online learning and the student’s interest area was centered on ethical leadership, it might not be the best fit.

**Mentor’s experience as a doctoral student.** All five of the emergent themes identified in this study contribute to understanding the essence of the mentoring relationship of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. One theme that emerged was that of the mentor’s own experience
of mentoring as a doctoral student. Throughout and across interviews, research participants referenced their experiences when pursuing their doctorate and their mentoring experience, or lack thereof. While none of the research participants indicated they pursued their doctorate online, they felt that the mentoring experience they were a part of as a student informed how they see mentoring, and what they attempt to incorporate into their mentoring relationships with online Ed.D. students. This aspect of their shared experience correlates to constructivism (Vygotsky, 1977). An aspect of this theory is that one’s experiences (past and present) influence how one relates with others.

Faculty mentors’ own status as either a full-time doctoral student or a working professional while pursuing their doctorate was also referenced, and how that either provided them with a symbiotic understanding of those they mentor or resonated with mentors as a difference that they needed to be aware of relative to their own experience. These reflections exhibited a sense of being able to understand the experiences of those they mentor. One participant’s statement that demonstrates this is, “I’ve been there. I know how stressful it gets when you’re just the weekend warrior trying to write. You feel all isolated.” Two participants related that the way they relate to mentees has a lot to do with how they were mentored and what they learned as a student. Participants who shared about their experience of mentoring while a doctoral student indicated they either had a really positive experience and wanted to provide that experience to others or that they did not have a good experience, or no mentoring, and they did not want students they worked with to go through a similar dilemma. Either way, their past experiences influence their approach to mentoring and demonstrate their investment in caring for their mentees. This self-reflection provided by faculty mentors may benefit their mentees.
Noonan et al. (2007) referenced several studies that reported students indicated feeling they received benefits from caring experiences while in their graduate program.

Mentoring is challenging. Mentoring is challenging is another theme that appeared as part of the shared lived experiences of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. This theme appeared in all but one of the participant’s narratives. Some referenced the communication occurring at a distance and primarily online (e.g., email) as a challenge, because they missed the face-to-face communication exchange. There was a shared sense that primarily communicating electronically slowed the relationship building process and may contribute to feeling disconnected. A lack of spontaneity that is sometimes created when students drop by the office for an unplanned discussion was also referenced as challenging because several participants mentioned this as part of what they enjoyed when pursuing their own doctorates. Participants who shared about this challenge indicated they felt that being able to see their professors without an appointment supported the development of a personal relationship. Findings highlighted by Kumar et al. (2013) indicated that mentoring conducted online is unlike traditional mentoring, which is demonstrated in the comments made by research participants.

Yet, one participant disclosed, “I personally feel that the faculty member and the students gain far more from a face-to-face, but what I observed is, the students in the online program feel like they're getting great instruction, great rapport.” This statement confirms information derived from the literature review, that although some characteristics of mentoring online may be different, there are many elements that are relevant regardless of its occurrence online or in traditional face-to-face mentoring (Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Kumar et al., 2013). The characteristics highlighted by these researchers included developing mutual trust, pairing mentors and protégés who have shared interests, providing an orientation, setting goals,
maintaining commitment, and consistent contact. Additionally, Kumar et al. (2013) discovered that flexibility and the use of multiple technologies to facilitate doctoral student learning, growth, and autonomy contributed to successful online mentoring.

**Development of trust.** Trust was referenced by eight of the research participants. Additionally, the development of trust surfaced as one of the five themes in this study. One participant described the mentoring relationship as “a process of building a trusting relationship with the intent of providing needed support.” Another shared “I think trust comes into play as well because we're going to be having some courageous conversations along the way.” These reflections embody information gleaned from the literature. Several researchers described mentoring as a relationship of trust, guidance, and empowerment through an interactive exchange between both the mentor and mentee (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Research participants who discussed trust saw this characteristic as very important in the relationship and expressed that it was a building block to long-lasting, positive mentoring relationships. Eight of the participants referenced their having had good or positive relationships with many of the Ed.D. students they have mentored. Therefore, an experience of trusting relationships was not only seen as important but a part of the shared lived experience of faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students.

**Relationship building.** Central to faculty mentors’ relationships with their mentees was an emphasis on relationship building. This theme emerged as research participants described their experiences mentoring online Ed.D. students. Participants shared various ways they built relationships with their mentees. Rapport building, listening, sending out encouraging quotations, expressing humor, investing in the student and what is going on in their life, as well as creating a safe space were all approaches participants indicated they used to build relationships with their
mentees. Seeing their mentee as a professional colleague was referenced as an aspect of developing a relationship that not only supported the mentee in completing their dissertation but a long-lasting collaboration for decades to come. Relationship appears in the literature as a core element of transformative leadership (Burns, 1978; Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Riggio, 2013). Holley and Caldwell (2012) referenced the importance of building relationships where online doctoral students can express their feelings, gain clarity and support regarding tasks (e.g., dissertation completion), and seek advice from someone who is in the position to guide, lead, and empower them, as supporting academic and professional success. The narratives of research participants in this study demonstrate this as part of their reality.

Communication is an element of the relationship building process as well as the development of trust. All research participants referenced communication when dialoguing about the faculty-student mentoring relationship with online Ed.D. students. However, varying types of communication, the fifth theme deduced in this study, were shared ranging from email, learning management systems, Zoom or Adobe Connect sessions, phone calls, to text messages. Choosing to use some of these communication formats and not others may be influenced by the experience and comfortability level of the different research participants. One participant shared they only communicate through email and the learning management system, which sometimes includes video conferencing, and that was to help her maintain communication boundaries and keep her different roles separated. Yet, several research participants disclosed that they provide their cell phone numbers to their mentees and talk on the phone as well as respond to text messages regularly. As shared in Chapter 4, one participant stated they keep their phone by their bed and respond if it dings. Additionally, familiarity with various technological tools that can aid in
developing the relationship or what tools are available through their program may influence what is used.

Four of the research participants referenced finding ways to *break the barrier* created by communicating primarily via email or the telephone. Developing a type of online office hour drop-in time is something one participant provides for his mentees. Being available into the late evening and on weekends was mentioned by three other participants. Five participants also shared that they invite students to work on a research project with them or coauthor a paper for publication or presentation. Announcing to students in the program when a professional conference is happening and that the faculty mentor will be in attendance was yet another strategy employed to connect with mentees. These efforts were identified in reference to connecting with mentees and being available. Three research participants mentioned the characteristic of availability, which became evident to this researcher while examining the research participants’ narratives relative to what they do while mentoring online Ed.D. students. Research participants expressed a desire to be accessible and responsive to their mentees, which demonstrates a desire to help their mentees succeed.

**Faculty Mentors’ Description of the Faculty-Student Mentoring Relationship**

The second research question in this research study was,

**RQ2:** How do Ed.D. faculty describe the faculty-student mentoring relationship in online Ed.D. programs?

Findings that relate to this second question also reflect elements of research participants’ shared experiences of this phenomenon. A specific difference between this research question and the first is the focus on the programs in which the faculty-student mentoring takes place.
Research participants were asked, “What does mentoring consist of in your program?” While there was variability in responses to this question, eleven of the research participants described faculty-student mentoring in their program as being informal. However, all twelve participants stated that the relationship itself was formally set up by their program in some fashion. While there was a range of specific tasks that faculty mentors were to perform in their role as dissertation chair, how they are to connect with students and how that relationship is maintained is not prescribed by the program. One participant did state that there are very specific steps their program expects faculty mentors to move through with their assigned mentees and that the formal expectations are to be adhered to strictly. These expectations included responding to all student emails within a 48-hour timeframe and providing feedback to any written work within two weeks. The other eleven participants did not refer to such communication and relationship expectations in their programs. However, they categorized these types of programmatic criteria as formal mentoring programs or formal mentoring.

Since there is a concerted effort to create a mentor/mentee relationship for Ed.D. students, this researcher surmises from the information gathered that programs consider mentoring important. Yet, structured elements (also referred to as formal mentoring programs), as reflected in the literature, were only apparent in one participant’s program. Strategies identified in the literature as part of a formal mentoring program include specific meeting times, constructing a goal plan, specifying role expectations of both the mentor and mentee, and addressing disempowerment, stress, and opportunity barriers (Creighton et al., 2010; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Villanueva, 2015; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008). Additionally, Johnson (2016) described formal mentoring as consisting of someone in the program coordinating the mentor
pairing, touching base with those in the program, and arranging group meetings or interactive gatherings for all mentoring pairs to come together (Johnson, 2016).

Eleven of the research participants described mentoring in their programs; therefore, a continuum of formal mentoring to informal mentoring surfaced as a possible characteristic of programs where participants teach. While this is not evident in the literature, six of the twelve participants related a mixture of the characteristics used to describe a structured or unstructured mentoring program. While not limited to the following, these elements consisted of specific response time-frames, designated times for communication between mentor and mentee, informal availability, and lack of schedule for work submission and communication. Conducting an on-campus orientation for Ed.D. students was referenced by six of the participants as part of their program, which reflects a level of structure to mentoring in Ed.D. programs. Additionally, all mentor/mentee matches were arranged by the program, albeit in different ways. Some matches were constructed with no involvement of faculty or students in that pairing process. Six research participants related that students were involved in the matching process by completing a form indicating their research interests or identifying three faculty they wanted to work with as their dissertation chair. Three faculty shared that faculty were asked which students they wanted to work with based on the student’s identified research topic. A couple of participants indicated that the matching was “pretty much done arbitrarily.”

Three participants shared that they hold Zoom (video conference) sessions with their mentees, which one person referred to as a writing workshop. Another participant referred to this type of session as a research lab, and another indicated the program had synchronized meetings with faculty and Ed.D. students once a month. All but one research participant described their
mentoring relationships as informal and that the faculty mentors in their programs approached and executed their role as a mentor differently.

**Implications**

The purpose of this phenomenological study entailed uncovering the essence of the shared lived experience of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students. This study contributes to the body of literature regarding the mentoring of doctoral students, and more specifically contributes to filling gaps identified in the literature. Through this study a voice is given to faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students. Their perspective is rich with threads of care, help, investment, and trust as they support the success of online Ed.D. students.

Bringing to light this experience from a faculty perspective can provide Ed.D. programs with pertinent information as they consider how they administer the mentoring of online Ed.D. students and their expectations of these relationships. Faculty who engaged in these interviews and subsequently reviewed their transcripts may gain insight regarding their commitment to mentoring online Ed.D. students. Additionally, consideration of the findings from this study may lend further awareness as faculty hear from each other from across the nation and where their experiences overlap as well as diverge. Such reflection could serve to strengthen mentoring relationships that exist and those yet to be formed.

Revealing characteristics of how programs manage the mentoring of online Ed.D. students adds to the literature as well. These elements along with research participants’ remarks regarding important mentoring components could be gathered together to generate a best practices model for mentoring online doctoral students. The creation of such a resource could support mentors as they strive to provide worthwhile support to mentees. Additionally, a best practices guide that delineates possible points to consider when developing, modifying, and
evaluating a doctoral student mentoring program could aid online Ed.D. students and their engagement in the mentoring relationship. Reflection on elements that the research participants highlighted as important mentoring components as well as recommendations for effective mentoring would support the applicability of a mentoring guide for programs of varying size, available resources, and unique program features.

An ethic of care (Held, 2006/2014) is reflected in the findings of this study. Held described the ethic of care as consisting of there being a “compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the need of particular others” (p. 144). Taking responsibility for meeting the needs of specific people is a central component to this theory. A desire to help emanated through research participants’ remarks as well as the emergent themes. Held contended that “practices of care should express the caring relations that bring persons together, and they should do so in ways that are progressively morally satisfactory” (p. 148). Participants echoed the ethic of care, as demonstrated in this statement from Dr. Willow, “Mentoring is the process of building a trusting relationship with the intent of providing needed support to whom the mentee happens to be . . . in a true mentoring relationship, there should be a goal or a focus that would be supportive.” This sentiment also came forth in Dr. Maple’s assertion, “they [the mentee] trust that the faculty member will be sort of nonjudgmental, sort of help them through those things and have an understanding.” Dr. Pine shared the following reflection which also embodies the notion of care,

A relationship between two people, where one person is trying to teach the other person informally often the things that aren’t explicitly taught . . . to enculturate them into a field of practice, or a way of being, teach them the secret handshake, help them be successful.
Application of constructivism guides this researcher to ascertain that this ethic of care may resonate not only in each of the research participants but also within the Ed.D. programs where they teach.

Transformative leadership literature references the building and cultivating of relationships as central components (Burns, 1978; Fullan, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). The themes of development of trust and relationship building that emerged in this study reflect core elements described in transformative leadership. The research participants in this study were all from programs that focus on educational leadership, which may in part explain the notion of transformative leadership, and the ethic of care, shining through their experiences. The alignment of transformative leadership theory with the account of their mentoring approach adds to an awareness of effective transformative leadership practice.

As faculty disclosed their experiences and perceptions of mentoring online Ed.D. students, this researcher was greatly touched. Each participant served as a mentor and guide in this researcher’s dissertation and doctoral journey. Their willingness to participate in this research study and share personal accounts and perceptions of their mentoring experiences provided not only data or this phenomenological study, but offered encouragement while completing the dissertation. The collective narrative from their dialogue and reflection exhibited their desire to help and support online Ed.D. students. Their openness to disclose their story demonstrated their investment in the care of others, even a doctoral student they had never met and who was not in their Ed.D. program.

**Recommendations for Action**

The narrative that developed from the reflections of these twelve research participants facilitates an understanding of the phenomenon experienced by faculty who mentor online Ed.D.
students. Mentoring being intertwined with the role of dissertation chair is a shared perspective of all participants in this study. While mentoring may occur with students that are not seeking the faculty member’s feedback and authorization to move forward with their dissertation, being a mentor is seen as an aspect of what dissertation chairs are to emulate, as presented by the faculty in this study. This view may or may not be how online Ed.D. students experience the relationship between themselves and their dissertation chair. Therefore, a recommendation for action could be that programs, or dissertation chairs themselves, should articulate that mentoring is considered an aspect of the dissertation dynamic as students work with faculty who chair their dissertations.

Language can be very important in the construction of understanding one’s environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Articulating expectations of self and of others can aid in the building of trust and relationships (Millwater & Yarrow, 2006). Ensuring students are aware that this relationship is more than that of task only could open up opportunities for relationship building and support as mentees explore their professional trajectory.

Developing trust, relationship building, and varying types of communication were relevant themes expressed by research participants. Each of these elements may contribute to the challenges that mentors expressed as they described their mentoring experience with online Ed.D. students. The geographic distance that is a characteristic of online students relative to the university where they are matriculating can create obstacles relative to how and when to communicate with one another. Research participants explicated geographic distance as the experience of not having face-to-face contact, or very irregular face-to-face opportunities with their mentee. Physical distance coupled with various time zones and schedules can also impact relationship building efforts. Dr. Birch explained that not having the resource of proximity sometimes made working on aspects of the dissertation more difficult because they are not “able
to sit down in a room with a student and just have an hour or two to really work through ideas.”

The dedication and commitment of research participants became apparent in their narrative regarding a desire to help mentees successfully complete the program despite the obstacles that might present.

Another recommendation is for online programs to train their faculty on the use of video and audio-conferencing technology (such as Zoom, Adobe Connect, WebEx, etc.) so that there is a comfortability with using it for synchronous communication. Additionally, online programs and faculty who mentor online Ed.D. students may want to mindfully consider regular intervals of using the various modes of communication and even create a type of drop-in time. Some research participants noted the difference in relationship building when they were doctoral students and could just drop in on their professors to chat without an appointment, compared to online students who make an appointment to talk about a specific aspect of their dissertation. Informing mentees of times that the faculty mentor will be online, albeit working on other tasks, should mentees want to connect without a specific appointment, might aid relationship building.

Incorporating these strategies could support the consistent sentiment from research participants who stated that developing a personal relationship “is easier to do in person than it is to do online.” At the same time, several research participants indicated they implement strategies to break the barrier of distance and work at using technology to create opportunities to build relationships with their mentees, and students overall.

Research participants stated that mentoring positively impacts the retention and degree completion of online Ed.D. students. Review of the literature also revealed research studies that demonstrated a positive connection between mentoring and retention, as well as program completion for doctoral students (Creighton et al., 2010; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015;
 Noonan et al., 2007; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Villanueva, 2015). When participants were asked if they had suggestions for effective mentoring, five referenced consideration of the ratio of mentees to mentor needed to be reviewed. Research participants in this study reported currently mentoring anywhere from five to fifty students. In light of the work involved to review and give feedback on dissertations, as well as the responsibilities that reach beyond that to cultivate supportive mentoring relationships, this researcher recommends that online Ed.D. programs might consider examining the number of mentees assigned to one faculty mentor. Reflecting on the faculty dissertation chair to doctoral student ratio and how to best provide support to students completing their dissertation as well as to the faculty who are assigned are important considerations relative to a program’s structure, mission, and resources available could strengthen the mentoring provided to Ed.D. students. While the numbers may not be able to change, providing faculty release time and advocating for additional faculty hires to administration might benefit Ed.D. mentoring and the overall Ed.D. program.

As stated earlier in this chapter, doctoral student retention is identified as 50%–57% (Cassuto, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Hyder & Gilliam, 2015; Johnson, 2015) without reliable data of online doctoral student retention. Another recommendation for action is that the Council of Graduate Schools collect and maintain data from universities with online doctoral programs regarding student matriculation including retention rates. This could contribute to a more accurate picture of the success of doctoral students who complete their degrees online. Programs would more accurately be able to compare themselves to other programs of similar size and delivery.

Even with the variability in research participants’ experiences and program characteristics, themes emerged from their narratives to uncover the shared lived experiences of
faculty who formally mentoring online Ed.D. students. Each research participant identified components of mentoring that they felt were important, as well as recommendations for effective mentoring. As referenced throughout this dissertation, literature regarding online doctoral programs is sparse (Simmons, 2006; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Yob & Crawford, 2012); therefore, there is also little information pertaining to mentoring in online Ed.D. programs. To complement the previous recommendations, this researcher proposes that a best-practices mentoring guide for online Ed.D. programs be developed to aid faculty and programs as they provide this important support to doctoral students. The Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan provides a mentor guide (University of Michigan, 2015) to its faculty and a “how to get the mentoring one desires” manual for graduate students. These two guides are not program specific and focus on traditional face-to-face programs offered at the University of Michigan. Due to variability of program mission statements, focus, and faculty constellation, the inclusion of tools for evaluating one’s mentoring efforts could inform strategies for the delivery of a mentoring program in one’s online Ed.D. program. Mentoring strategies at the micro and macro level would be an important feature of this guide for mentoring online doctoral students. This researcher believes such a tool would support programs to assess what they currently do and identify elements to add to their mentoring efforts and support student success.

A final recommendation for action is to include mentoring as part of faculty professional development. Providing support for faculty regarding their needs around mentoring, as well as mentoring skills, could be beneficial. Two research participants recommended training for faculty so that they can provide effective mentoring. Providing mentor training could benefit faculty, students, and the programs of which they are a part. Incorporating professional
development with this focus could demonstrate to administration the importance of mentoring
and its contribution to faculty and student success.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

This phenomenological study unearthed the shared lived experiences of faculty who
formally mentor online Ed.D. students. The narrative constructed from research participants’
interviews contributes to the literature regarding mentoring and specifically that done with online
Ed.D. students. One area for further study entails exploring the perspective of mentoring of
online doctoral students from a programmatic and administrative level. Terry and Ghosh (2015)
recommended in their study that “future studies should examine the institutional stance on
mentoring, i.e., whether the mentoring is explicitly noted to be a part of the job description of
faculty or the dissertation committee members makes any difference” (p. 203). Two research
participants in this study shared that they would like greater support from their institution relative
to their mentoring role. One stated that the compensation provided is not commensurate with the
amount of time required to give support to their mentees. Additionally, when faculty are
reviewed for tenure or rank promotion, time and investment relative to the mentoring of doctoral
students is not given any substantive value. Therefore, participants shared when they make
decisions about time spent on different projects or activities, their mentoring responsibilities may
take a lower priority. Incorporating the mentoring role as service to the university could
demonstrate the institution’s valuing of the mentoring role as an integral component of a faculty
member’s excellence in academia. Investigating how university administrators see the
importance of mentoring and inquiring in what ways do they offer support to faculty who mentor
doctoral students could add to this area of study.
The interviews in this study were conducted using Zoom (a video conferencing software). This tool can be used to talk with multiple people at the same time. While compiling the shared experiences of research participants, this researcher wondered what might have emanated from a conversation with several of the faculty mentors synchronously. Conducting online focus groups with faculty mentors as well as with doctoral students from several university campuses could add further depth and breadth to the literature relative to mentoring online doctoral students. Additionally, interviews with mentor/mentee pairs could lend new insights to this phenomenon and the outcomes of doctoral student mentoring. Each of these approaches could contribute to identifying a continuum of mentoring techniques and strategies, which could be utilized by other mentors and programs in the evaluation and development of their mentoring efforts.

Conclusion

The Council of Graduate Schools’ Ph.D. Completion Project (2010) indicated that mentoring relationships are a “cornerstone of the most effective and promising practices” (as cited in Holley & Caldwell, 2012, p. 244). The literature regarding mentoring in online graduate programs is sparse (Columbaro, 2015; Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013; Simmons, 2006; Terry & Ghosh, 2015; Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). The purpose of this study was to explore the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students. Learning directly from faculty about their experiences and insights concerning faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students provided insight into the mentoring of online doctoral students. This study adds to the existing literature on mentoring in online doctoral programs. There are many studies regarding mentoring in doctoral programs overall. However, the emphasis of this study on the faculty perspective of mentoring online doctoral students is unique.
The overall goal of this study was to discover the phenomenon of mentoring online Ed.D. students as experienced by faculty mentors. New insights can be cultivated when “. . . we hold awareness of the whole as we study the part, and understand the part in its relationship to the whole” (Wheatley, 2014, p. 143). The literature examined for this study, the methodology of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), two research questions, and semistructured interviews with twelve research participants guided the analysis of transcripts. A transcendental phenomenological approach was applied to reveal the textural and structural descriptions of participant’s narratives. These descriptions served as threads for compiling five emergent themes: Theme 1, Development of Trust; Theme 2, Experience as a Doctoral Student; Theme 3, Mentoring Is Challenging; Theme 4, Relationship Building; and Theme 5, Varying Types of Communication. Participants in this study disclosed a desire to help and care for the online Ed.D. students they mentor. The faculty mentors interviewed in this research endeavor imparted a commitment to cultivate trust and build supportive relationships with their mentees while guiding them through the challenge of completing the dissertation.

In addition to unearthing the shared lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students, this study provides a foundation for continued research and the development of a best-practices guide for mentoring online Ed.D. students. All participants expressed an investment in people and a desire to better support the students they mentor. Including mentoring strategies as part of professional development initiatives could add to the experiences of faculty mentoring online doctoral students. Additionally, providing tools for programs to assess their efforts to furnish quality mentoring to online doctoral students, and identify strategies to strengthen their current efforts could aid faculty efforts to support student
success. These insights were derived from the research participants in this study, giving voice to a narrative of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students.
References


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PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENT

Greetings,

I am seeking volunteer participants for my doctoral research study on mentoring in online Ed.D. programs. This is a preliminary invitation for you to consider participating in this study. As a part of the Doctor of Education program at University of New England, this investigation will satisfy the dissertation requirements for a degree in Educational Leadership.

Very little research has been done to explore the perceptions of faculty who mentor doctoral students. This study will focus on how faculty teaching in online doctoral programs perceive the mentoring of online doctoral students and uncover their lived experience when mentoring online doctoral students. The information gleaned from this study will not only add to the body of literature regarding online mentoring, but could also provide relevant information for the construction of a best practices model for mentoring online doctoral students.

Selection criteria for participation in this study include the following:

1. Participant is a faculty member in an online Ed.D. program.
2. Participant is either currently mentoring a student in an online Ed.D. program or has mentored within the past five years (2013 to present).
3. The mentor relationship was setup by the program or institution where the student attends.
4. Participant is willing to be audio recorded for an interview of 30 – 45 minutes.

Participation in this study is voluntary. For willing participants who meet the selection criteria, participation will consist of a 30–45 minute semistructured interview at a mutually convenient time. Withdrawal from the study is allowed at any time and you may also decline to answer any question without negative reprisal. With informed consent, all data collected will be recorded and kept in the strictest of confidence. Names and other personal identifiers shall be stripped prior to analysis and will not appear in the resulting dissertation. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant. You will also be given the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts before analysis. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study. Be assured that this study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at University of New England. If you have any questions, or would like additional information, you may contact me or my lead faculty advisor via email.

Project Title: Threads of Support: Mentoring in Online Doctoral Programs
Principal Investigator: Debra Welkley, Researcher (916)730-8781 or dwelkley@une.edu. Faculty Advisor Joel Lowsky, Ed.D. (415)658-4610 or jlowsky@une.edu

Thank you very much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you. If you do not meet the selection criteria, but know someone who does, please pass this information to them for consideration.

Regards,
Debra
Debra L. Welkley
Doctoral Candidate, University of New England
INFORMATIONAL LETTER

Project Title: Threads of Support: Mentoring in Online Doctoral Programs
Principal Investigator: Debra Welkley, Researcher (916)730-8781 or dwelkley@une.edu. Faculty Advisor Joel Lowsky, Ed.D. (415)658-4610 or jlowsky@une.edu

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is purely informational and serves as an invitation for you to consider participating in a study I am conducting. As a part of the Doctor of Education program at University of New England, this investigation will satisfy the dissertation requirements for a degree in Educational Leadership.

Many doctoral students report the importance of mentoring while pursuing their degree. Further, a recommendation discovered in the literature indicated that more research is needed relative to the mentoring of online doctoral students. The purpose of this study is to explore the common lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students (specifically in online Ed.D. programs) and examine mentoring components that influence online doctoral student success. Capturing how faculty perceive the mentoring relationship with online doctoral students will add to the small amount of existing knowledge on this phenomenon.

Very little research has been done to explore the perceptions of faculty who mentor doctoral students. This study will focus on how faculty teaching in online doctoral programs perceive the mentoring of online doctoral students and uncover their lived experience when mentoring online doctoral students. The information gleaned from this study will not only add to the body of literature regarding online mentoring, but could also provide relevant information for the construction of a best practices model for mentoring online doctoral students.

Participation in this study is voluntary. For willing participants who meet the selection criteria, participation will consist of a 30–45 minute semistructured interview at a mutually convenient time. Withdrawal from the study is allowed at any time and you may also decline to answer any question without negative reprisal. With informed consent, all data collected will be recorded and kept in the strictest of confidence. Names and other personal identifiers shall be stripped prior to analysis and will not appear in the resulting dissertation. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant. You will also be given the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts before analysis. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study. Be assured that this study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board, University of New England. If you have any questions, or would like additional information, you make contact me or my lead faculty advisor via email.

I look forward to receiving your consent form and voluntary participation in my study. My hope is that the resulting doctoral dissertation contributes to the larger research and academic community.

Warmest Regards,
Debra
Debra L. Welkley, Principal Investigator
Doctoral Candidate, University of New England

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: Threads of Support: Mentoring in Online Doctoral Programs

Principal Investigator: Debra Welkley, Researcher (916)730-8781 or dwelkley@une.edu.
Faculty Advisor Joel Lowsky, Ed.D. (415)658-4610 or jlowsky@une.edu

Introduction

• Please read this form; you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
• You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

• The purpose of this study is to explore the common lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online doctoral students (specifically in online Ed.D. programs) and examine mentoring components that influence online doctoral student success. Capturing how faculty perceive the mentoring relationship with online doctoral students will add to the small amount of existing knowledge on this phenomenon.
• The researcher does not have a consultative or financial interest related to conducting this study. The study is solely for the purpose of adding to the existing knowledge base while satisfying the Doctor of Education Degree dissertation requirements of the University of New England.

Who will be in the study?

• University faculty from the 50 United States who self-identify as a faculty member in an online Ed.D. program.
• You must be at least 18 years old to participate.
• All participants must have at some point during the past five years, or are currently doing so, mentored an online Ed.D. student.
• Faculty who participated in a mentor relationship that was set up by the program or institution where the student attends.
• As a transcendental phenomenological study, a maximum of 12 and minimum of 6 participants will be selected from the total study population for individual interviews. This will allow for data saturation. The individual interview responses will serve to validate and explain the lived experiences of university faculty with credibility from their own unique perspectives.
• The time commitment of the 6–12 participants purposefully selected for individual semistructured interviews is approximately 30–45 minutes.

What will I be asked to do?

• If selected for a semistructured individual interview, the participant will be contacted by the researcher, asked to complete the Informed Consent Form, and interviewed in a manner that they deem comfortable (i.e., web conference, telephone) at a mutually convenient time lasting approximately 30–45 minutes.
• Interview responses will be recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service, Rev.com (a professional online transcription service that ensures confidentiality and encryption of data) and then analyzed by advanced coding software, ATLAS.ti. Recurring themes will be
analyzed to the fullest extent to gain a holistic perspective of the viewpoints of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students. Participants may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.

- Participants who agree to take part in an individual interview will provide verbal and written consent electronically. The participant will be contacted via a preferred mode of contact of their choice at a mutually beneficial time to the interviewer and interviewee. The interview will be conducted over the telephone or through a web conference tool (i.e., Zoom). Audio recordings for each interview will be obtained using the audio recording software and then transcription services will be used.
- The time commitment of the individual interview will not exceed approximately 30–45 minutes.
- The principal investigator will be the only person collecting the data recordings to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and to provide uniform collection procedures. All data will be kept on only one personal home computer, password protected and accessed only by the principal investigator, with a back-up external hard drive system on site. Identifiable data will be omitted from the dissertation text and results will be summarized based on participant responses. Individual responses will be reported without the use of participant’s names or institutional affiliations and will not be accessible for use in future studies.
- A copy of the transcribed interview will be provided to you in order to member check the accuracy of the information shared. Also, after codes and themes are identified from your interview, that information will be shared with you so that you are aware of the description and interpretation of the interview data.

What are the possible risks of taking part in the study?
- There are minimal, if any, foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.
- Participants may feel burdened by the time commitment made to complete research study procedures.
- Any problems or discomfort will be addressed immediately as they occur by the researcher and the advisory committee. Withdrawal or refusal to participate will not impact or affect the participant in any way. The decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?
- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, through reflection and repeated lived experiences, faculty may develop distinctive perceptions and expectations of their mentoring in their professional settings.
- Data collected may provide valid, informative accounts of lived experiences of faculty who formally mentor online Ed.D. students, which may provide insight to others about mentoring.

What will it cost me?
- There are no costs affiliated with your participation in this study.

How will my privacy be protected?
- All demographical information, descriptive encoding, and interview question responses collected from participants during the individual semistructured interviews will be kept strictly confidential. Only the principal investigator will be aware of the identity of participants.
- The data collected from this study will be used in a published doctoral dissertation and stored in the online centralized institutional repository of the University of New England.
- Only the principal investigator will have access to the identity of the participants. All research records will be kept in a locked file in the locked home office of the principal investigator. As an
added provision of privacy, the identity of participants will not be revealed at any time and pseudonyms will be assigned (e.g. Participant #1). Following receipt of verbal and electronically signed consent, your name and school affiliation will not be shared with anyone else. Any audio recording will be protected in compliance with the University of New England’s research with human participants’ policies and procedures.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**
- The recordings of the interview will be electronically stored and password protected. Only the researcher and the faculty advisor will have access to the recordings, which will be deleted upon interview transcription.
- Data collected will be given a random numerical code to maintain the confidentiality of individually identifiable interview transcripts and recordings. Research data will be physically destroyed or erased after the dissertation is completed and has been deposited in the institutional repository of the University of New England. Only the researcher will know the identity related to the data collected.
- Regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records. A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed.
- Consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only principal investigator will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project. You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research. Inquiries or concerns about the research can be directed to the Principal Investigator, Faculty Advisor, or the IRB office at University of New England.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**
- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of New England.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw at any time, for any reason.

**What other options do I have?**
- You may choose at any time to not participate.

**Whom may I contact if I have questions?**
- The researchers conducting this study are Debra Welkley, Principal Investigator (PI) and Joel Lowsky, Ed. D., Lead Faculty Advisor. For questions or more information concerning this research study, you may contact Debra Welkley, PI at (916) 730-8781 or dwelkley@une.edu. Lead Faculty Advisor, Joel Lowsky, Ed.D., may be contacted at (415)658-4610 or jlowsky@une.edu
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Debra Welkley, PI at (916) 730-8781 or dwelkley@une.edu. Lead Faculty Advisor, Joel Lowsky, Ed.D., may be contacted at (415)658-4610 or jlowsky@une.edu
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph. D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu
Will I receive a copy of this consent form?
- You may print/keep a copy of this consent form.

Participant’s Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in this research and do so voluntarily.

____________________________________________  ______________________
Participant’s Signature (electronic is accepted) or Date
Legally Authorized Representative

____________________________________________
Printed Name

Researcher’s Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

____ Debra L. Welkley ________________________________
Researcher’s Signature Date

Debra L. Welkley ________________________________
Printed name
APPENDIX D

CITI ONLINE TRAINING ON HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION

This is to certify that:

Debra Welkley

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Research
Social & Behavioral Research Investigators (Curriculum Group)
1 - Basic Course (Course Learner Group)

Under requirements set by:

University of New England

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify?w13b811df-4932-4a34-bbb6-1e6796650049-25980182
Dear ______ ,

Thank you for your time and participation in the study *Threads of Support: Mentoring in Online Doctoral Programs*. As a part of the Doctor of Education program at the University of New England, this investigation will satisfy the dissertation requirements for my degree in Educational Leadership.

Your willingness to participate and the information you shared is greatly appreciated. As was communicated when you volunteered to participate in the Informed Consent form, all data collected will be recorded and kept in the strictest of confidence. Names and other personal identifiers will be stripped prior to analysis and will not appear in the resulting dissertation. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant. You will also be given the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts before analysis. Be assured that this study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of New England. If you have any questions, or would like additional information, you may contact me or my lead faculty advisor via email.

**Project Title:** Threads of Support: Mentoring in Online Doctoral Programs  
**Principal Investigator:** Debra Welkley, Researcher (916)730-8781  
 or dwelkley@une.edu  
 Faculty Advisor Joel Lowsky, Ed.D. (415)658-4610 or jlordsky@une.edu

My hope is that the resulting doctoral dissertation will contribute to the larger research and academic community.

Warmest Regards,

Debra

Debra L. Welkley, M.A.  
Principal Investigator  
Doctoral Candidate, University of New England  
dwelkley@une.edu
EXAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Threads of Support: Mentoring in Online Doctoral Programs
Debra L. Welkley, Researcher

1. How do you define mentoring?

2. What do you think are important elements in a mentoring relationship?

3. What have you experienced relative to faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students?

4. What has impacted your experiences of faculty-student mentoring with online Ed.D. students?

5. What does mentoring consist of in your program?

6. How do you think the impacts of mentoring can be evaluated?

7. What impact do you think mentoring has on student retention and program completion?

8. What suggestions or recommendations do you have for effective mentoring of online doctoral students?