

# You DO Belong: The Reciprocal IMPACT of Peer Mentoring in an Online Doctoral Program

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The IMPACT Mentoring Program is a peer mentoring program serving doctoral students in an online EdD program. The program pairs mentors completing their dissertation defense with mentees at the beginning of the dissertation process through small group mentoring. These groups serve as a critical component of the EdD program's developmental network, in addition to faculty advisors and peer working groups. IMPACT specifically focuses on supporting students' wellbeing across two critical junctures in their program journey. New World Kirkpatrick Model (2016) was employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the IMPACT Mentoring Program in promoting mentor and mentee wellbeing as part of their developmental network. The model's levels— reaction, learning, behavior, and results—provide a comprehensive framework to assess how mentors and mentees perceive their place in the program, their sense of belonging, their ability to succeed, and the resulting impact on their wellbeing during key stages of the dissertation process. This qualitative single case study included two embedded units: all the mentors and mentees who participated in the mentoring program during one specific trimester. Data were collected through mid- and end-of-term questionnaires and reflections. These multiple data sources provide rich insight into how the program influences student wellbeing and belonging, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and outcomes within each embedded unit. The study found that the addition of the IMPACT Mentoring Program to students' developmental network fostered belongingness through an improved sense of community, critical to success in online and doctoral spaces. It also found that both mentors and mentees gained self-confidence, equally vital for retention. The finding aligns with other literature studying peer mentoring in doctoral spaces.

*Keywords:* Online doctoral education, peer mentoring, student wellbeing, community, and belonging

## Introduction

Online doctoral programs pose unique challenges to students, particularly during the dissertation phase. Navigating the demanding landscape of doctoral education, compounded by the inherent isolation of online learning, can create significant barriers to persistence and success. Recognizing these obstacles, leaders within Baylor University's intensive online Doctor of Education (EdD) in Learning and Organizational Change (EdD-LOC) expanded developmental networks to include the IMPACT (Intentional Mentoring Partnerships Across Cohort Teams) Mentoring Program—a cross-cohort, peer-to-peer mentoring initiative designed to support students during critical dissertation junctures. While mentoring is a well-established practice in higher education, peer mentoring models in online doctoral contexts remain underexplored, particularly regarding their potential impact on students' sense of wellbeing, belonging, and community. This embedded single case study aimed to explore how IMPACT mentors and mentees described their participation as influencing their wellbeing and sense of community. Evaluating the program's effectiveness through

the New World Kirkpatrick Model (2016), this research investigated IMPACT as a revelatory case, offering insight into how cross-cohort mentoring promotes connection, reduces isolation, and enhances resilience and wellbeing. This study addresses a clear gap in the literature and is presented in five sections: the Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion.

These sections respectively cover relevant scholarship, research design and methods, key findings from mentor and mentee experiences, connections to existing research with future recommendations, and a summary of effective practices.

## Literature Review

Doctoral education plays a crucial role in advancing scholarship and professional practice. However, the journey to a doctoral degree is often fraught with challenges, particularly for students in online programs, which often leads to retention challenges (Fraenza & Rye, 2021).

The growth of online doctoral programs has introduced complexities such as social isolation and difficulties in fostering a sense of community

among geographically dispersed learners (Berry, 2017; Buss & Wolf, 2021). These challenges underscore the importance of robust support systems for student retention, graduation, and overall wellbeing (Brown et al., 2020; Lively et al., 2021). Research indicates that online doctoral student persistence often stems from community integration and institutional support rather than solely from individual student characteristics (Lehan et al., 2021). Thus, understanding and implementing effective support structures are paramount for online doctoral student success (Buss & Wolf, 2021).

Historically, mentoring often took the form of a 1:1 dyadic relationship where an experienced individual guided someone with less experience (Christou et al., 2017; Yip & Kram, 2017). However, a single mentor is often insufficient to meet a mentee's multifaceted developmental needs, especially in academic environments (Yip & Kram, 2017). This understanding has led to a shift towards a broader concept of developmental networks, which include both formal and informal relationships that collectively support the mentee (Christou et al., 2017; Yip & Kram, 2017). These networks may include various sources of support (Christou et al., 2017), such as formal and informal mentors, faculty advisors, and peers. Within these developmental networks, peer mentoring has emerged as particularly critical for graduate students. Peer mentoring occurs when a more experienced student offers advice and support to a less experienced one (Liu et al., 2022).

At the graduate level, scholars have found that peer mentoring increases social support, sense of community, retention rates, and ultimately, graduation rates (Fraenza & Rye, 2021; Geesa et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022). Beyond these direct benefits, peer mentoring through communities of practice (CoPs) can further support doctoral students' learning and development, including leadership skills, academic writing, and professional networking, aiding their transition from doctoral student to scholar leader (Adkisson et al., 2020).

For EdD students, who often navigate unique academic, social, and professional challenges, mentoring programs are particularly beneficial. Such programs aim to address the specific needs of EdD students, acknowledging the different proficiencies required compared to traditional doctoral students (Brown et al., 2020; Geesa et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a strong sense of community is vital for retention and success in online doctoral programs (Berry, 2017), where actively fostering community becomes a strategic imperative (Buss & Wolf, 2021; Lively et al., 2021). Strategies for community building in online doctoral spaces include developing programmatic support structures that encourage peer collaboration, provide strong student support services, utilize synchronous live sessions, and facilitate robust relationships with faculty (Lively et al., 2021). Peer mentoring programs significantly contribute to this effort by enhancing students' sense of belonging

and promoting social integration, addressing the challenges of isolation in online settings and fostering a cohesive learning environment, which positively impacts student wellbeing (Fraenza & Rye, 2021; Geesa et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022).

Student wellbeing and self-confidence are closely linked to retention. Increased self-confidence is vital for students to persist and succeed in their doctoral programs (Sverdlik et al., 2020). This persistence is not solely dependent on individual student characteristics; broader institutional support and integration factors within the program play a significant role (Lehan et al., 2021). Many doctoral students grapple with imposter syndrome, characterized by feelings of inadequacy despite evidence of success and often intertwined with students' perceived belongingness within their scholarly community, which significantly impacts their overall wellbeing (Sverdlik et al., 2020).

Peer mentoring programs play a crucial role in mitigating these challenges. By providing a supportive and understanding environment, peer mentoring, particularly within communities of practice, contributes to increased self-confidence for both mentors and mentees, aiding their transition from doctoral student to scholar leader (Adkisson et al., 2020; Geesa et al., 2020). For mentees, the guidance and shared experiences from more advanced peers can normalize their struggles and validate their capabilities (Geesa et al., 2018). For mentors, the act of supporting others can reinforce their own knowledge and confidence (Adkisson et al., 2020). Ultimately, programs like IMPACT, which integrate peer mentoring into a developmental network, foster belongingness through an improved sense of community and enhance self-confidence for both mentors and mentees, thereby positively impacting their wellbeing during critical stages of the dissertation process.

To assess the effectiveness of interventions like peer mentoring programs, robust evaluation frameworks are essential. New World Kirkpatrick Model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016) is a widely recognized evaluation model that provides a comprehensive framework across four levels: reaction, learning, behavior, and results. This model is commonly applied to evaluate educational and training programs, including mentoring initiatives. For a program like IMPACT, the Kirkpatrick model allows for a multi-faceted assessment, exploring how mentors and mentees perceive their place in the program (reaction), what they learn from the experience (learning), how their actions and interactions change (behavior), and the resulting impact on their wellbeing, sense of belonging, and ability to succeed (results).

In conclusion, peer mentoring programs within online doctoral education serve as indispensable components of students' developmental networks, offering critical support that extends beyond faculty advising. These programs are instrumental in fostering a vital sense of belongingness and community, crucial for student retention and

success in online learning environments (Fraenza & Rye, 2021). By addressing challenges such as imposter syndrome (Sverdluk et al., 2020) and social isolation, peer mentoring contributes significantly to students' overall wellbeing and boosts their self-confidence (Adkisson et al., 2020). The evaluation of such programs using frameworks like New World Kirkpatrick Model provides valuable insights into their effectiveness, though evaluators must also consider the model's inherent limitations (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). As online doctoral education continues to expand, the design, implementation, and evaluation of peer mentoring initiatives remain paramount to enhance student experiences and foster positive academic outcomes.

### **Methodology**

Baylor University's fully online doctoral program in education equips experienced professionals to lead transformative change in sectors such as education, business, government, and nonprofits. The program serves approximately 350 students, aged 25 to 81, from diverse backgrounds and industries. Students earn 54 credits over nine trimesters in a cohort model, with a curriculum that can be completed in three years. Students develop a problem of practice research dissertation to address real-world challenges through rigorous, applicable research. The intensive schedule has posed significant challenges to student wellbeing and community engagement, particularly when beginning and completing their dissertation, prompting program leaders to expand developmental networks to support student wellbeing and build community.

IMPACT Mentoring Program is a peer mentoring initiative designed to support EdD-LOC students through these critical dissertation junctures. By pairing mentors completing their dissertation defense with mentees beginning the process in small group settings, IMPACT fosters cross-cohort connections, enhancing wellbeing and developing community. Mentees receive guidance when developing Chapters 1 and 2 of their dissertation, while mentors, enrolled in EDC 6346: Principles and Practices of Mentoring, defend their dissertations. Alongside faculty advisors and peer working groups, IMPACT serves as a critical part of the students' developmental networks.

We utilized a qualitative embedded single case study design to explore how IMPACT mentors and mentees describe the influence of IMPACT participation on their wellbeing and sense of community. According to Yin (2018), a case study is a research approach that examines a case "in depth and within its real-world context" (p. 15). We bound the case as Cohort 11 (n = 25) mentors and Cohort 15 mentees (n = 30) enrolled in IMPACT in the Fall 2024 term. As Yin (2018) notes, this design is particularly valuable for "revelatory cases," offering insights into phenomena "previously inaccessible to social science research" (p. 50). The IMPACT Mentoring Program served as such a case;

while mentoring programs are common in higher education, peer-to-peer models within online doctoral contexts remain largely underexplored, with limited research on their contributions to online doctoral student wellbeing and community. By examining this revelatory case through the lens of its two embedded units, our study provides a nuanced analysis of the program's influence across different participant roles, addressing a significant gap in the literature regarding peer mentoring dynamics within an online doctoral program. The study was guided by one research question: "How do mentors and mentees describe that their participation in the IMPACT Mentoring Program influences their sense of wellbeing and community?"

We used five data sources to answer the research question. We used three data points for the mentors and two data points for the mentees, ensuring that we captured both midpoint and end-of-term data. Collecting data at these two points ensured a holistic understanding of wellbeing and community dynamics, supporting ongoing improvements and a final assessment of the program's effectiveness in promoting these outcomes.

### **Results**

We conducted a thematic analysis to explore how participation in the IMPACT Mentoring Program influenced both mentors' and mentees' sense of wellbeing and community, drawing from multiple data sources. Our process for both embedded units began with first-cycle coding, where we leveraged Box AI to analyze de-identified data by providing it with a priori codes related to wellbeing and community connections. The AI helped extract relevant text segments, which we then organized into preliminary categories and performed a frequency analysis by counting participant mentions. Following this, we engaged in second-cycle coding to identify initial themes by embedded unit. We then performed a cross-case analysis to group our initial themes into more comprehensive themes and subsequently developed thematic statements to represent each. We organized our findings by each component of New World Kirkpatrick Model (reaction, learning, behavior, results), reporting out themes across the embedded units.

For Embedded Unit A, the Cohort 11 mentors, we found their participation in IMPACT positively influenced their wellbeing, sense of community and connectedness, confidence, and personal and professional growth as evidenced through key codes such as managing or promoting health and wellbeing, support during challenges, shared vulnerability and openness, and authenticity or empathy in relationships. Mentors highly valued the meaningful connections they built with their peer leadership team and mentees, as these directly fostered their sense of belonging within the program and contributed to their overall wellbeing. In reflection, Mentor 5 shared,

“Establishing a trusting environment where mentors and mentees feel comfortable with being vulnerable has allowed our group to form meaningful connections,” explicitly illustrating how psychological safety and genuine interaction are central to both connectedness and a strong sense of belonging. Mentors reported developing a variety of mentoring competencies, including active and empathetic listening, effective questioning, emotional awareness, and the ability to balance structure with flexibility to adapt to mentee needs, which boosted their confidence and supported their mentees’ emotional and academic needs, reinforcing overall wellbeing and connection. Mentors intentionally incorporated practices within their peer leadership teams to promote wellbeing and connectedness, such as prioritizing self-care and engaging in open communication with their co-mentors. Ultimately, mentors expressed feeling personally fulfilled by contributing to mentees’ success and professional growth. The mentoring experience also led to significant personal and professional development that they anticipate applying in future roles, alongside a strengthened sense of community with peers and a sustained commitment to supporting their mentees after they graduate.

For Embedded Unit B, the Cohort 15 mentees, we found that participation in the IMPACT Mentoring Program significantly enhanced their wellbeing, community, connectedness, confidence, self-efficacy, and academic success through a combination of emotional support, practical guidance, and personalized mentorship. Key codes, such as providing motivation to persist, validating mentees’ feelings, and building trust and openness, illustrate how mentors helped reduce stress and imposter syndrome while fostering a strong sense of belonging and vulnerability within the cohort. The program was especially impactful in creating a supportive community, with mentees highlighting how it “helped me shed some of the isolation I have felt during the process and grow the circle of people I can relate to as I work through this experience,” emphasizing the importance of connection and peer support in their doctoral journey. Mentees reported increased confidence and resilience, noting growth in their ability to handle feedback constructively and manage complex dissertation tasks, supported by codes like increased confidence, resilience, and assistance with dissertation writing. The sharing of mentors’ personal experiences normalized struggles and inspired persistence, while practical strategies for time management and navigating program milestones further empowered mentees, boosting their self-efficacy and contributing to tangible progress on their dissertation. Overall, mentees found that IMPACT created a nurturing environment that enhanced their wellbeing and supported their academic growth.

After conducting within-unit analysis, we conducted cross-unit analysis using the four levels of the New World Kirkpatrick Model. Key findings included psychological safety, the transformative

power of authentic interactions, and reciprocal benefits for both mentors and mentees. The program effectively addresses doctoral student challenges like isolation and imposter syndrome, cultivating a supportive community. This evaluation highlights IMPACT’s significant contribution to holistic student support and its potential as a sustainable model for academic success and professional development.

When assessing Level 1, reaction, we found that mentors actively cultivated psychological safety and trust, recognizing it as foundational for open communication. They used authenticity, humor, and empathy to create a positive emotional environment, guided by the principle, as described by Mentor 7, that “trust is the foundation of effective mentoring.” Mentees reported high satisfaction with emotional support and availability, feeling less isolated and more connected. They appreciated mentors sharing personal experiences, which normalized struggles and fostered a sense of belonging, with one mentee feeling like they “had two big sisters that were helping me through!” The program’s success at this level established a critical emotional bedrock, enabling vulnerability and reducing isolation, as mentees felt they had “permission to be vulnerable.”

In assessing Level 2, learning, we noted that mentors observed mentees gaining awareness of self-care and wellness practices, often through modeling, with Mentor 3 stating, “I also emphasized the importance of self-care to prevent burnout... modeling a healthy work-life balance.” Mentees also developed emotional intelligence and an understanding of community support, as mentors observed them “support one another through shared experiences.” Mentees reported acquiring practical dissertation writing skills, strategies for managing deadlines and feedback, and increased awareness of program milestones. Crucially, mentors themselves reported significant learning, improving “active listening and communication.”

At Level 3, behavior, mentors observed mentees demonstrating increased engagement and vulnerability, actively participating and cheering each other on, with Mentor 9 noting, “The most powerful aspect has been seeing a group of people come together and truly cheer each other on.” Mentees adopted wellness strategies and engaged in goal setting and reflection. Mentors adapted their own behavior, incorporating flexibility and addressing wellness topics, recognizing that “mentoring isn’t just about career advice.” Mentees reported applying time management and writing strategies to progress on their dissertations and expressed a “greater willingness to seek help, ask questions, and engage vulnerably.”

Finally, for Level 4, results, we found that mentors observed a sustained sense of belonging and improved resilience. Mentees reported enhanced wellbeing, reduced stress and imposter syndrome, and a strengthened sense of community, stating the program helped them “shed some of the isolation” and “keep going... when I felt inadequate and like I might like to quit.” Increased confidence and self-

efficacy led to tangible academic progress and contributed to retention and success. The strong convergence of results from both units confirms the program's effectiveness in mitigating common doctoral challenges and fostering lasting positive impacts.

## Discussion

This study explored how the IMPACT Mentoring Program influenced the wellbeing and sense of community for mentors and mentees within Pseudonym University's online EdD program. The findings demonstrate the program's effectiveness in addressing challenges inherent in online doctoral education, particularly during dissertation phases. The program's success in providing holistic support as a catalyst for persistence and success directly counters the significant challenges to student wellbeing and community engagement observed within the EdD-LOC. This finding aligns with literature indicating that online doctoral student persistence stems from community integration and institutional support, not solely individual characteristics (Lehan et al., 2021). This comprehensive approach is crucial given the retention challenges often associated with online programs (Fraenza & Rye, 2021).

Furthermore, the program's ability to build connections and contribute to a thriving community is critical. Online doctoral programs frequently introduce complexities such as social isolation and difficulties in fostering a sense of community (Berry, 2017; Buss & Wolf, 2021). Our findings corroborate that peer mentoring increases social support, sense of community, and retention rates (Fraenza & Rye, 2021; Geesa et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022), directly addressing the strategic imperative of community building in online settings (Buss & Wolf, 2021; Lively et al., 2021). This study, as a "revelatory case" (Yin, 2018, p. 50), contributes to the limited research on peer-to-peer models in online doctoral contexts.

The study also highlights reciprocal growth and mutual benefit as a sustainable model. This finding aligns with the concept of developmental networks, where a single mentor, or faculty advisor, is often insufficient (Christou et al., 2017; Yip & Kram, 2017), and peer mentoring benefits both mentors and mentees, including leadership skills and confidence (Adkisson et al., 2020). Finally, the transformative power of authenticity and vulnerability emerged as a key mechanism to mitigate challenges like imposter syndrome, which is intertwined with students' perceived belongingness and impacts wellbeing (Sverdlik et al., 2020), by supporting students within an engaged community environment (Geesa et al., 2018).

Limitations of this study include its single case study design (Yin, 2018, p. 15), which, while providing in-depth insights, limits generalizability. A second limitation is that the findings are based on self-reported data and the potential for response bias. Finally, a key delimitation of the study was

the focus on only the Fall 2024 term, with only one cohort of mentors and mentees.

Recommendations for future research include larger studies across multiple cohorts. We would also like to study the impact of the size of the mentoring groups, looking at the overall size as well as the specific ratio of mentors to mentees. Finally, we recommend studies on the pairing process utilized in peer mentoring models in online doctoral spaces.

## Conclusion

The IMPACT Mentoring Program, a peer-to-peer, cross-cohort initiative, supports doctoral students in Pseudonym University's online EdD program during critical dissertation phases. Designed for both mentors, students defending their dissertations, and mentees, students beginning the dissertation process, the program fosters trust, psychological safety, and authentic interactions through small group mentoring. It promotes connection, reduces isolation, and provides essential support, enhancing students' wellbeing, sense of community, belonging, resilience, and self-confidence while driving academic success. Additionally, IMPACT supports mentors' professional growth through improved mentoring competencies while strengthening mentees' dissertation-related skills.

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