

Building Developmental High-Quality Connections in an Online Graduate Program

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This case study examines how an online graduate master's program harnesses mentoring and coaching relationships to create sustainable developmental networks. The program intentionally cultivates robust connections, enabling participants to build meaningful relationships while examining contemporary organizational challenges from multiple perspectives, thereby enhancing individual and collective resilience. Our case builds upon Stephens and Morse's research on structured mentoring support systems in graduate education, which emphasizes the importance of intentional relationship development in online learning environments. This integrates with Huizinga's findings on group mentoring's capacity to create dynamic interconnected support networks providing evidence for how strategic relationship cultivation can transform traditional mentoring limitations into opportunities for sustainable personal and professional growth. The online graduate master's program intentionally addresses isolation in online learning by creating an evolving ecosystem where wellbeing and professional growth intertwine. Alumni transition naturally into mentors and community builders, expanding the network's capacity to support emotional and professional development. This structure intentionally cultivates cross-disciplinary connections enabling participants to build meaningful relationships to support positive professional growth through multi-faceted vantage points enhancing both student and alumni networks. The online graduate master's program transcends traditional online education by creating an ever-expanding professional ecosystem of enhanced professional purpose, stronger interpersonal relationships, and a deeper sense of belonging. The program's success in fostering sustainable personal and professional growth through reciprocal mentoring relationships has created a model for wellbeing and growth with each cohort adding new perspectives and expanding the ecosystem's capabilities for addressing contemporary organizational challenges.

Keywords: Online graduate education, mentoring networks, student belonging, coaching culture

Introduction

Online graduate programs often provide accessibility or flexibility, but they are also vulnerable to challenges such as limited interpersonal connections, lack of classroom engagement, and isolation, which often impact students' emotional wellbeing and decrease student retention. Implementing a structured mentorship program and a bundle of engaging relational opportunities is an effective approach to navigating such challenges and can help in building student interconnectedness, wellbeing, belonging, and success in online learning environments (Stephens & Morse, 2023). Wellbeing in graduate online education is deeply connected to mentoring, coaching, and a sense of belonging. Effective mentoring and coaching offer students with guidance, feedback, and emotional support, which help them navigate challenges and celebrate achievements. These relationships foster

trust and connection, which are crucial in an online environment where isolation can be common (Grocutt et al., 2022). This case study explores how an online master's level program structurally incorporates mentoring and coaching as core components of the program to create and promote students' sense of wellbeing. The program stands out as an example of how graduate students and alumni develop belonging, networks, leadership, and wellbeing through scheduled opportunities incorporating structured mentoring both within and outside of the academic coursework (Dominguez, 2023). The relational activities, which we collectively call the Master of Science in Management (MSM) Bundle, include fireside chats, mentor circles/ally chats, and executive group coaching by ICF-certified coaches. This case study expands the understanding of how faculty and institutions can create meaningful developmental mentoring relationships within an online, asynchronous, modular academic program.

Literature Review

Blended and online environments, when designed with care and intentionality, can enhance student engagement, inclusion, and support—especially for those at risk of feeling isolated (Dukhan, 2022). Prompting students to reflect on their expectations, learning approaches, and emotional state encourages active engagement and self-regulation, which is especially valuable in asynchronous or blended online environments (Dukhan, 2022). This is the very nature of the MSM Bundle built into our master’s program. A key element of the MSM Bundle is the focus on group vs individual mentoring as a vehicle to build connections and community. Kaye and Jacobson (1995) first described the use of group mentoring to foster personal and professional development, share advice, and meet psychosocial needs among mentees. They also identified five task roles for mentors: guide, ally, catalyst, perceptive insider, and advocate. Limbert (1995) identified ten benefits to the group mentoring model: “flexibility, inclusiveness, shared knowledge, interdependence, broader vision of the organization, widened external networks, providing a safe space, developing team spirit and skills, personal growth, and friendships.” In addition to providing individual benefits, group mentoring fosters an environment of community for the group. Mentoring circles are a group-based alternative to one-on-one mentoring in higher education. They provide opportunities to increase the sense of belonging, boost confidence, broaden networking opportunities, and form strong interdisciplinary collaborations. Mentoring circles, when well-supported, can be a valuable resource for professional development and institutional participation (Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

Skillful executive coaching improves vital skills such as communication, leadership, and self-awareness. Integrating coaching culture within educational institutions enhances student achievement and encourages sustainability in both education and leadership (Reiner et al., 2024; Seemann et al., 2024). Framing mentoring and coaching as a partnership highlight that all participants, whether students, faculty, or staff, benefit from the experience. Both mentors and mentees together gain new insights, skills, and a sense of shared purpose, reinforcing a culture of continuous growth and wellbeing for everyone involved, regardless of their specific roles or backgrounds (Roncaglia et al., 2025). Building relationships between current students and program alumni enhances the continuity of connection and support and has benefits for both the participants and the institution (Dollinger et al, 2019).

Method

The focus of this case study is a fully online asynchronous graduate program in a business school located in a public Midwestern University. Unlike traditional programs that prescribe a core

and/or elective set of courses in a specified sequence, the master’s program is built from modular certificates: sets of three to four courses that build skill in a specific area. Students can and some do take these courses only to complete one or more certificates. Students can also choose to combine certificates into a master’s program that includes two required/core certificates and two elective certificates of the student’s choice. All students take the management and leadership certificate. Then students take other disparate certificates to build knowledge in differentiated areas and may not be in classes together again until closer to their capstone experience. In this case study, we focused on students who have been selected to complete the full master’s program. We note the structure of the program as, by design, students enter the program as a cohort but individually proceed through their elective certificates and then are reunited for their capstone certificate.

To mitigate the challenges of student isolation and limited engagement in online learning, our online master’s program used structured group mentoring and coaching to create an inviting, vibrant environment that encourages belonging, leadership development, and long-term engagement. The goal is to counteract the inherent challenges of building interpersonal relationships in online stackable certificate programs and nurture a keen sense of community. The program incorporates the four forms of group mentoring developed in Huizinga’s typology. At the outset, program faculty utilized their professional networks to develop a cadre of executives and managers who contribute to the program in one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-one settings. A key component of this endeavor was the incorporation of embedded coaching and mentoring activities both inside and outside of coursework. The community building included current students, faculty mentors, alumni executive coaches, executives from a variety of fields, and other alumni programs. The result is an interconnected multi-modal ecosystem of alumni mentoring executive group coaching (ICF certified coaches), group events, and support. From their first day of orientation, program faculty intentionally engage with students on a personal level. Students participate in regularly scheduled “fireside chats,” where they hear from academic discipline experts or business leaders. This can be the first point of contact for a student who can reach out to that speaker and consider developing a mentoring relationship with the professional.

Current students who are further along in their programs and more recent alumni serve as guides to incoming students in one-to-many or many-to-many purposeful mentoring formats, building the mentorship fabric of interlaced guidance that connects students to their peers across programs start dates and naturally weaves in alumni. Finally, students in the program have the opportunity to receive mentoring and or be guided by willing faculty members from a variety of disciplines who often attend many more program events and

opportunities than required. The effectiveness of these evolving initiatives is continually being considered through the multiple data sources of information, including instructor evaluations, narrative Assurance of Learning (AOL) reports, and narrative reflections from students who completed the program.

Theoretical Framework

Mentoring programs are crucial for fostering graduate students' growth, especially those that prioritize professional development. According to Stephens and Morse (2022), relational structures are crucial for fostering satisfaction among learners and engagement in online learning environments. Students' sense of belonging and program satisfaction can be increased through implementing high-impact learning opportunities where they engage meaningfully with peers, mentors, and professionals.

The work of Stephens and Morse offers a conceptual framework for our study to deliberately integrate organized relational behaviors into curriculum design to promote student performance in completely online or hybrid environments. Based on the theoretical frameworks of Stephens and Morse (2023) and Huizing (2012), the program actively promotes relational behaviors as a technique for improving online learning outcomes and the satisfaction of students.

Data Collection

For the data collection, open ended exit surveys and alumni testimonials were used from Fall 2022 to Fall 2024. Exit surveys were completed by each student upon finishing all the required courses and prior to their graduation application.

The surveys asked students to express their overall experience in the program, and the role of mentoring and coaching in their academic and professional growth. We used data from exit surveys and included in the analysis. Likewise, 20 alumni testimonials were collected from the most recent alumni primarily for program marketing and promotional purposes during different times.

These testimonials provided rich qualitative information about mentoring and coaching and how it contributed to student development and the program's effectiveness. A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the data. Each member from the research team independently assessed the data to explore the initial patterns.

Then, we collaboratively worked to revise the data into broader categories while ensuring consistency and credibility.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the student responses. Themes are discussed below.

Meaningful Connections and Sense of Belonging

Students mentioned that effective mentoring and coaching provided guidance, feedback, and emotional support, which helped them navigate challenges and celebrate achievements. A keen sense of belonging—feeling accepted and valued within the academic community—boosted motivation, engagement, and persistence. Students experienced genuine connections with mentors, coaches, and peers, that improved their well-being. This sense of support not only enhanced their academic success but also encouraged personal and professional growth throughout their graduate journey.

Alumni Engagement and Networking

Students in this program stated that they benefitted from alumni involvement and professional connections. Participants frequently expressed that the online structure of the program, along with small class sizes, created an environment that supported meaningful interactions among peers, and alumni. They mentioned that the program linked them with experts in different fields which widened their professional networks. Through the development of cross-disciplinary connections, the program allowed participants to form meaningful ties that supported professional growth by offering a variety of perspectives that improved the networks of both students and alumni.

Professional Growth and Leadership Development

Many students expressed significant emotional and professional transformations because of their enrolment in the master's program. Through courses, group projects, and faculty guidance, students reported feeling more confident, having a better understanding of themselves, and developing their leadership skills. Students reported that faculty members also served as career mentors and role models, sharing their knowledge to help students match their aspirations and strengths with their career objectives.

Individual and Collective Resilience

Students reported that the relational program elements help them to stay engaged with their coursework, but more importantly with their peers, instructors, and group mentors. Individuals mention being able to manage the pace and the rigor of coursework because of the community that has been built. Faculty and mentors were repeatedly mentioned to be accessible for consultation regarding coursework, career development, and personal challenges.

Discussion

This study brings together two streams of literature: engagement and persistence in online

graduate education and group mentoring. Academically, the program was developed and designed to provide a flexible, modular curriculum that individual students can customize to meet their academic and professional goals.

The element that sets this program apart is the intentional embedding of relational group mentoring activities into both the curriculum and the program experience. From their first semester, students are involved in non-academic program activities that foster interaction, personal and professional growth, and build a sense of solidarity and community. The impact of these activities can be seen through the students' own words in exit surveys and testimonials. Students become part of a community of learners as they move through the program and immediately begin paying it forward by holding out a helping hand to incoming students. Anecdotally, one of the most common statements heard from the students who enroll in the program is "I never saw myself as a graduate student," or "I never thought I could make it through graduate school." The results of this case study demonstrate that intentionally building mentoring structures assists students in enrolling and completing online graduate programs while enhancing their feelings of belonging, their sense of wellbeing, and their resilience. Moreover, the effectiveness of group mentoring interventions increases their sense of community and reduces the number of mentors that must be recruited.

Previous research had established that each of the four forms of group mentoring had positive results on participants. Our case suggests that the benefits of group mentoring can extend to online formats and that each of the four group mentoring formats can (a) be implemented in an online program setting, but also (b) be used to enrich and extend online education. For working professionals, a program such as the one under study can create a path to graduate education that allows students to see themselves succeeding in graduate studies, a feat they never thought was possible. For the institution, it enriches the portfolio of graduate programs and extends the potential graduate student population.

Conclusion

This paper examined the potential of an online graduate program to cultivate relationships that transform student learning, wellbeing, and professional development. To conclude, digital resources can be utilized purposefully to establish private and safe spaces for students to express difficulties, pose questions, and offer feedback, which is far more challenging in online settings.

Likewise, alumni transitioning into mentors and community builders contribute to expanding networking capacity and support emotional and professional development. This intentional structure cultivates connections across discipline enabling participants to build meaningful relationships while examining contemporary organizational challenges through multiple

perspectives and enhancing both individual and collective resilience.

Moreover, success in online education requires discipline and self-efficacy. However, our master's program demonstrates that geographic or physical distance does not have to be an impediment to developing a positive and supportive community of adult learners. While our case study demonstrates successful outcomes, we note that this case study has limitations. The number of students in the program is relatively small which allows for manageable interactions and connections but may not be applicable in larger online programs. In addition, the qualitative insights from the surveys and testimonials offer valuable information on student's experience but we currently lack comparative or longitudinal data which limits our ability to derive more concrete conclusions. Future studies might explore how other factors such as changes in curriculum; student demographics or broader institutional trends might influence mentoring and coaching interventions which we are continuing to explore.

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