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FEATURE

**Research Mentoring of Students in
Christian Higher Education**

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Mentoring of graduate students is an important part of developing their research skills and habits, and can affect how and whether they do research in the future. This qualitative study examines research students' preferences for mentoring qualities as well as their analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their current mentoring relationships. Students wish for better communication and faster turnaround for feedback, but they vary in the amount of guidance they desire. Those who desire more guidance seemed to be less satisfied with their relationship with their current mentor. The spiritual aspect was also mentioned as an important part of mentoring relationships in a Christian setting.

The term mentoring originates from the ancient Greek word meaning *counsel*. Odysseus, in Homer's *The Odyssey*, entrusted the care and training of his son, Telemachus, to his servant, Mentor, before going to the Trojan War (Miller, 2002). Such a mentoring relationship between a mentor and a mentee can be found throughout history, such as between Socrates and Plato, Haydn and Beethoven, and Freud and Jung (Stone, 2004). In such cases the more experienced person functions as a role model, teacher and friend in order to help the less experienced person to develop and advance personally and professionally.

Today the topic of mentoring is used in different settings including education, business, government, and the health professions (Mullen & Lick, 1999). The focus of this study falls within the area of education, student mentoring in particular. Much literature can be found on mentoring teachers, mentoring at-risk students or mentoring programs for young people, but much less material exists about mentoring students in higher education, particularly during the research phase. Mentoring contributes to graduate students' success in terms of progress towards their degree, and professional and personal development (McElroy & Altarriba, 2001; Reis, 2002; Yahner & Goodstein, 2004). The phase of writing research seems to be a stage where sensitive guidance is needed most. The aim of research is to increase theoretical and/or practical knowledge. Vyhmeister (2001)

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distinguishes between twelve different kinds of research, naming the thesis or dissertation as one of them. Furthermore, she describes the process of research, which includes collecting, organizing, evaluating and presenting data of a certain topic in a logical and clear manner. It involves skills of observation, analysis, synthesis, judgment, and good writing. For most students, writing a thesis or a dissertation is new territory and their research skills in such areas as critical thinking, finding resources, and academic writing are underdeveloped. Furthermore, the research process is demanding and can bring feelings of excitement and joy, but it may also “be accompanied by moodiness, irritability, despair or even existential crisis” (Lofland, 1971, p. 124). The mentoring relationship with an advisor can be key in helping the student understand what is happening, and in providing them with the necessary support to finish the research project successfully.

The purpose of this study is to understand how students experience the mentoring relationship during the research phase. What are the effects of mentor relationships on the motivation, communication and self-concept of graduate students? How is the mentoring relationship (between advisors and graduate students) during the writing stage of the thesis or dissertation perceived by the students in terms of quality and satisfaction? What are the student’s needs during this phase of study? In order to address these questions and to describe and explore what and how the students think and experience, a qualitative design was chosen. Through in-depth interviews with graduate students in the research phase of their degree, the writer sought to gain deeper and richer insights into the students’ thinking process and personal ideas about mentoring, which quantitative methods are less likely to provide. This phenomenological approach attempts to add understanding in the field of student mentoring in higher education.

Related Literature

The definition of mentoring varies depending on the setting in which the term is used. In academia, *mentor* is often used synonymously with *faculty advisor*. According to Zelditch (as cited in the Council of Graduate Schools, 1997), mentors have multiple roles: “Mentors are advisors, people with career experience willing to share their knowledge; supporters, people who give emotional and moral encouragement; tutors, people who give specific feedback on one's performance; masters, in the sense of employers to whom one is apprenticed; sponsors, sources of information about and aid in obtaining opportunities; models, of identity, of the kind of person one should be to be an academic.” This (para. 5) definition indicates that a mentor is much more than an advisor to the student (mentee), in the sense that it includes a professional as well as a personal relationship. An advisor might or might not be a mentor, depending on the quality of the mentoring relationship.

While mentoring has been a research interest in business for three decades, educators have only recently begun to explore the outcomes of mentoring in academia (Johnson, 2003). Authors such as Miller (2002) give

a general idea about the topic, dealing with historical and theoretical foundations of mentoring, as well as practical implications of student mentoring programs. In the chapter dedicated to higher education, the author narrows student mentoring down to peer coaching.

The present study takes a different perspective on student mentoring in higher education dealing with graduate students being mentored by their advisors. Studies within this scope attest to the significance of mentoring for graduate students (Luna & Cullen, 1998; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). Luna and Cullen found in their survey that the majority of graduate students consider advisors and professors as mentors and feel that mentors are important. Studies have shown that a satisfying mentoring relationship increases student satisfaction with graduate education, as well as increasing student productivity (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000; Tenenbaum et al., 2001) and raising the quality of student work (Kring, Richardson, Burns, & Davis, 1999).

What assistance do mentors offer graduate students? Researchers differentiate between different types of help (Kram, 1985, 1986; Luna & Cullen, 1998; Tenenbaum, Crosby & Gliner, 2001). The latter studies replicated Kram's findings about graduate mentorship. Kram (1986) delineated career functions of coaching, sponsorship, protection, exposure, and challenging work. Psychosocial functions in contrast include role modeling, counseling, acceptance, confirmation, and friendship. It seems that advisors can give graduate students different kinds of help, which can support career and personal development and/or advance a growing trust and intimacy between mentor and mentee.

Advisors are given different types of responsibilities (Acker, 2001):

They become responsible not only for helping students organize their work and giving them feedback but for explaining institutional procedures; troubleshooting with the committee and other faculty; editing and proofreading ... inducting the student into the professional culture of conferences, networks, and publications; supporting the student through personal crisis ... and remaining an active mentor for years to come." (p. 65)

Nevertheless, not all mentoring experiences are positive. Luna and Cullen (1998) reported that students faced problems of time and access, as well as high expectations by their mentors. Other research underscores the difficulties of diversified mentoring relationships due to different values, attitudes or expectations (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000).

The literature about graduate mentoring includes discussions about meeting the needs of minority students, at-risk students, and female students, who may face disadvantages and barriers to their educational and career progression (Brown, Davis & McClendon, 1999; Daley, 2004; Dohm & Cummings, 2002; Heinrich, 1995).

Of particular interest for the present study is the research of Gray and Smith (2000), who used a qualitative design to elicit qualities of an effective

mentor from the perspective of student nurses. According to their findings, students were very clear regarding the characteristics of good and poor mentors. Good mentors were described as being enthusiastic, friendly, approachable, patient and understanding, a good role model, professional, organized, caring, self-confident, and having a sense of humor. Good mentors involved students in activities, made an effort to spend time with students, were genuinely interested in the student, had confidence and trust in the student's abilities, and gradually withdrew supervision. On the other hand, poor mentors were described as breaking promises, lacking knowledge and expertise, having poor teaching skills, having no structure in their teaching, being either over-protective or delegating unwanted jobs to students. Poor mentors were seen as distant, less friendly, unapproachable, or intimidating to the students. It would be interesting to find out if other graduate students have similar perceptions about mentors.

In a study on research mentoring in higher education, women in clinical psychology who had been mentored were found to do significantly more research as part of their careers and to be significantly more likely to become research mentors for others (Dohm & Cummings, 2002). This study follows the lead of Dohm and Cummings in focusing on research mentoring in higher education.

Research, writing, and professional publication guidance is listed as one of the 10 most frequent activities in graduate mentoring program pamphlets (Brown et. al., 1999). Most graduate students are engaged in relationships with their advisors while writing a thesis or dissertation as part of their program requirements. Nevertheless, few formal mentoring programs exist for graduate students in higher education, which provide structured interactions with faculty and administrators in order to increase the likelihood of degree program completion and career success.

More studies in this area of research mentoring are needed, in order to understand how to increase student and faculty satisfaction during this difficult phase of study, to increase quality of research, and encourage further research engagement during a future career, etc. Therefore this qualitative investigation about how graduate students from different disciplines experience their research mentorship, aims to contribute to further understanding.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach best suits the purpose of this study to find out how students make sense and meaning of mentoring relationships experienced with their advisors during the research phase in a Christian institution of higher education. In-depth interviews were used "to enter the other person's perspective" (Patton, 1997, p. 109). Because of time limitations and convenience, eight interviews were arranged at the same institution where the writer herself is presently enrolled. Open-ended interviews using an interview guide assured that all eight respondents were

asked the same set of questions to reduce interviewer bias and increase comparability of responses. The informants were purposefully selected in order to represent students from both the seminary and graduate school at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS) in the Philippines. The interviewees were writing either a thesis or a dissertation and had a relationship with a main advisor. The data represent a balance between female and male students and advisors, and cover students from different nationalities (Asian, African, Western) doing research in three different programs (Theology, Education and Public Health). The advisors were all different professors, except in one case, where two students had the same advisor. Each interview was from 30-40 minutes, and interviews were tape recorded and completely transcribed to facilitate analysis.

Analysis of Data

The eight interviewees' comments are numbered by respondent, and are represented below as being from I 1, I 2, I 3 – I 8. The following themes emerged from analyzing students' perspectives about research mentoring: Feelings during research, challenges during research, relationship with the mentor, the role of the student, the role of the mentor, a good research mentor, study habits, recommendations for beginning researchers and spirituality during research.

Feelings during Research

The data support the literature that research can be accompanied by positive as well as negative feelings. A wide range of feelings was expressed by the students, from feeling sad, angry, depressed, ashamed, frustrated, nervous, scared, rejected, abandoned, lonely, worried, not supported, not cared for or guided to feeling happy, joyful, rewarded, optimistic, and satisfied.

It is interesting that the students from the seminary expressed more negative feelings than those from the graduate school. Not surprisingly given their culture, the Western students tended to be more open with personal negative feelings and criticism than other nationalities. Positive and negative feelings seem to be closely linked with the experiences with their advisors or committees:

I have many mixed feelings, sometimes I am happy, sometimes I am sad, sometimes I am angry. At the moment I am angry. He and the committee have had my paper for over three weeks now and even today when I called again their life is busy with other things.... (I 1)

Feelings may also derive from the research experience itself as increased knowledge causes joy when "you hit the point" (I 6) or when you find you "understand work and young people better" (I 5). Certain feelings may also derive from non-research-related circumstances. For example, Interviewee 2 expressed loneliness caused by the family being far away.

Challenges during Research

The research process brings different challenges with it, which can be classified into the areas of formal, personal, and mentor relationships. Considering research as a *formal* act of inquiry, students struggle for example with “difficulties of ideas and content” (I 2), “difficulties to locate resources” (I 6), “having no structure” (I 8), “how to develop the concept of dependent variables and to support with literature” (I 5), “methodology ...how to collect data” (I 3), or “difficulties with ... the processor program” (I 4). The student’s formal difficulties varied depending on the stage of their research at the time of the interview.

Challenges of a personal nature were expressed with the following words: “problems in time management” (I 5), “my wife is also writing a thesis” (I 6), “writing is very difficult” (I 7), and “big financial needs” (I 3). Personal problems can be based on different things such as lack of organizational and writing skills, financial burdens or difficult family situations. Interestingly, all interviewees from the graduate school mentioned experiencing writing difficulties. Four students from both the seminary as well as the graduate school mentioned financial challenges. AIIAS is an international university, where for most students English is a second language. Most of them also come from developing countries and some of them are not sponsored. So, in this context, writing and financial challenges seem to affect the research process noticeably.

The data further show that students’ challenges during the research are often experienced in their *mentor relationships*, which is an area of particular interest in this study. Most of the students at AIIAS experience the busyness and time limitations by their advisors as problematic. Advisors from time to time are not available because they teach in Distance Learning Centers (DLCs), are on holidays or are on writing leave, which can delay a student’s research progress: “My advisor had a lot of DLC teaching; also writing leave delays progress...I wish she would give priority to my work and read [it] right away” (I 3). Interviewee 8 seems to be an extreme case, but represents how mentor relationships can be experienced as challenging during research: “He is always in a hurry...he only reads the first page or skims....[He does not] think...deeply enough within my topic...the advisor is not prepared.”

It is clear that there are important concerns that students face during the research process, and many of these need to be resolved through cooperation and communication with their mentor. The next categories deal with mentor relationships in more detail, how they can affect research. Later, what roles the student has in such a relationship, and which responsibilities belong to the mentor, will be discussed.

Mentor Relationships

This is the major question of this study—how students experience the mentoring relationship during the research phase in AIIAS. The majority of

respondents experience their mentoring relationship as good and satisfying. One student even expressed that the advisor “is like a father” to him (I 6). Only two (I 1 and I 8) of eight respondents seem to be unsatisfied with their advisor and committee situation. In contrast, those students who were satisfied with their mentor relationship expressed more positive feelings during research. The two of the interviewees from the seminary (I 2 and I 6), even though they themselves were satisfied, referred to unsatisfied classmates “I am aware of other students who had differences among committee members...[which] caused delay” (I 6). The data seem to support that the mentor relationships experienced by students in the seminary tend not to be as satisfying as in the graduate school. This could be due to differences in the type of research being done, a pronounced lack of staffing at the time, or other reasons which are more subtle. A quantitative evaluation including a larger pool of students could give more detailed information.

Reviewing the data, it further seems that satisfaction is closely related to the intensity and quality of communication between students and advisors. Those satisfied students seem to have regular contact and can express themselves freely. They experience support and guidance by their advisors. According to the data, the student in general, is the one who approaches the advisor to ask for a meeting. For three students in the graduate school their mentoring relationships seem to be very structured: “we have regular meetings every day...I have the priority” (I 7), “[the] advisor developed a support group once in two weeks with other students...we get feedback and motivation how to go along with writing” (I 5), “once in two weeks come together and talk with [the] advisor and other students about our research...those questions open my mind and lead me what to do next and what to include” (I 3).

Role of Students

In a mentoring relationship, both parties are involved and responsible for a successful relationship and the successful outcome of the research. The students seem to see their personal responsibility and role in working efficiently every day and getting their ideas down on paper. Students are aware that the speed of the research process depends heavily on them and that they have to do their part so that the advisor can help. Students feel a need to keep in touch with their advisors, and they see their duty in raising questions and stopping by for discussions as often as needed. Some students expressed the need of pushing the advisor, while at the same time they seem to be aware of the necessity also to respect the work load and privacy of the professor.

The Role of the Mentor

The role of the mentor is expressed here from a student’s perspective. It would be also interesting to find out in a further study how professors perceive their role as advisors and if expectations from students and advisors

differ from each other. Similar responsibilities of mentors mentioned in this study can be also found in literature (Acker, 2001).

All respondents see the main job of their advisors as reading and correcting the research paper in terms of technicalities, grammar, content, and methodology. They should further ask questions, make suggestions (for example to include certain literature) and enter into discussions with the student, in order to make the research stronger: "He is sort of a spring [board] for me where I can test my ideas" (I 6). The mentor is perceived as a personal guide during the research phase and functions as facilitator in case of disagreements with the other committee members. The advisor's role is not to dictate his/her own interests, but to let the students develop their own ideas: "She gives her opinion, but it is my decision...she opens my mind to different options...she never decides for me" (I 7). In case of difficulties or problems, the mentor helps to find a way out. Also the advisor looks ahead to deal with issues likely to be addressed in the defense later. In the research process, the mentor supports the student by giving personal time, ideas, resources and encouragement. For two students in the graduate school the support went even to the following extent: "She is doing data analysis for me... In problems with the software she advised me to look...in the Internet, and she also looked up" (I 4). "She asked for books...She equips herself with topic and ideas about my dissertation" (I 7). The expression "I am writing together with her" (I 3) shows two parties involved together in the research process. And most likely it depends on the level of involvement of both how the research may progress in terms of speed and quality.

A Good Research Mentor

For half of the respondents, a good research mentor needs to have expertise in the topic of the study. With such background, it is probably more likely that the advisor can give quality feedback and suggestions. Most of the students said they appreciated a mentor who takes time and puts them as a priority, so that intellectual sharing can take place like between colleagues. According to the respondents a good mentor senses problems ahead and saves the student from pitfalls the advisor may have experienced in the past. And in the case of problems, he or she helps the student to find a way out. The student wants to feel the interest of the advisor personally and academically, as well as the willingness to help. A short encouraging telephone call, email, advice on books to read, or when the advisor finds time in researching for the particular study, can show this. Students suggested that a good mentor further is able to develop a personal relationship with the student based on friendship and is patient, easily approachable and not distant. With such a basis, the student has the room to express him/herself freely and feels in good hands. Thus, mentor and mentee can work together. One student suggested that a good mentor "is someone who makes you work hard, [and] does a lot of corrections to your paper" (I 5). This suggests that the advisor takes time to read the research paper carefully, and such input and feedback may lead to improvement of the

paper. Students were clear that papers should be given back to the student within a reasonable time. In terms of facilitating committee meetings, a good mentor was seen as someone who “fights for you...believes in what you are writing. He defends you in the committee...protects you...is on your side (I 1).”

Study Habits

The data reveals that students seem to have different study habits. There are those who need external pressure, structure and deadlines and those who manage the vastness of research without deadlines and who are very disciplined in their working. Therefore it seems necessary for advisors to know their students well in order to meet their varied needs.

Furthermore, the data show that those students who expressed the need for pressure and structure were not satisfied in their mentor-mentee relationship. It would be interesting to find out if opposite study/work habits of mentors and mentees negatively influence the experience of research mentoring by students. For example, a mentor who does not need pressure or deadlines to finish work, may be more likely to unconsciously expect the same from his/her student. But when the student in contrast needs a certain amount of pressure and structure, the relationship is grounded on different assumptions and may be more likely to be disappointing for the student.

Recommendations for Beginning Researchers

Out of the data, three themes seem to be of importance for beginning researchers: finding an interesting topic to research and finding it early on, choosing a good advisor and committee, and the development of personal skills and traits.

Five of the respondents pointed out that for writing a thesis or dissertation it is important to choose a *topic* wisely, a topic the student is “ready to die for” (I 6). A topic of deep personal interest may give intrinsic motivation, which will help the research to progress. The earlier the student finds a suitable topic, the better. One student suggests, “to dig out [the] area within class work” (I 2) if possible. Classes like *Research Design* or *Research Methods* may be helpful in this endeavor and the required writing project can be used as the groundwork for the research. Hereby, time can be used efficiently in advance to explore the topic and to begin to gather meaningful material early.

The respondents emphasized the importance of choosing a good advisor and committee, an advisor “you believe [to be] helpful and not too busy” (I 5); someone you “trust...who can stand for you” (I 6); and a “committee made of people who can work together...[in a] homogeneous . . . relationship” (I 6). The relationship with the advisor and the relationship among the different committee members seems to be perceived as crucial by graduate students.

Helpful skills and traits for research are considered as the following: computer and English skills, organizational skills, diligence, the ability to work on your own without relying on others, patience, and taking care of one's health. Those skills and traits can make research easier.

Spirituality During Research

Two spiritual dimensions seem to be prevalent in research—the involvement of spiritual aspects initiated by the advisor, and personal spiritual experiences by the student. Christian students experience prayers with the advisor as meaningful, prayers during advising sessions, or encouragement by the advisor to pray for the content and procedures of the research. Students seem to experience help and guidance in research by a supernatural power. Especially in challenging situations three students (I 4, I 6, and I 8) expressed their trust in God, who provided strength and wisdom needed at the stage of research they were at. Such guidance may exceed the advisor's abilities. It seems that some Christian mentor-student relationships allow the involvement of a third party to influence the research process. This may reflect the co-operation of human and divine power in research endeavors.

Conclusion

Relationships are often taken for granted; the principles involved seem to be too trivial to invest time in further discussion. But often the every-day matters such as caring relationships need more attention in order to deeply understand the roles one needs to fulfill and how to build successful relationships. This is certainly also true for mentoring-relationships.

Merely the fact of having an advisor does not guarantee that both will work well together. This qualitative study helps us to understand the critical role an advisor plays in the success of the student's research. Negative feelings and challenges during the research phase are often connected to the student's experiences with their mentor. Thus, satisfaction with the mentoring relationship is closely related to the intensity and quality of the communication between the two parties. Both the student as well as the advisor have to take responsibility in building the relationship and doing their part. Students need to be diligent and respectful of the advisor's load and privacy, while at the same time advisors need to give sufficient time, feedback, and encouragement to their students.

According to Noddings (2000), a caring encounter involves two parties and reciprocity is essential to relationship. From the findings of this study, however, a third divine dimension may also be added. Nel Noddings' idea of caring relationships being the core of educational success can be translated to higher education. In this sense, intellectual caring in mentoring relationships can be seen as a necessary accompaniment for successful research. Therefore, this sort of caring needs to be promoted in teacher training and professional development. In order to support young

researchers, advisors need to build caring relations with their students and strive to meet their individual needs in the research phase, be they needs for structure, freedom, or emotional or academic support.

Research mentoring of graduate students is more than reading and correcting papers within a reasonable time. The advisor becomes a personal guide and facilitator through the research process, maybe even beyond that time frame. The intellectual and personal sharing between an experienced professor and an inexperienced student may not only lead to the successful finishing of a thesis or dissertation. In terms of research, this relationship experience may determine the student's attitude about research in general and whether he or she continues doing further research after graduation. If we in Christian institutions desire to help young people develop scholarly attitudes and thinking, and through this nurture a Christian research culture, then much more attention needs to be given to effective research mentoring in higher education.

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