Helping Online Students Be Successful:

Mentor Responsibilities

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About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring *Michigan Virtual University*® (*MVU*®) to establish a center for online learning research and innovation, and through this center, directed *MVU* to work on a variety of projects. The center, known formally as *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*™ (*MVLRI*™), is a natural extension of the work of *MVU*. Established in 1998, *MVU*'s mission is to advance K-12 education through digital learning, research, innovation, policy and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of *MVLRI* are:

- Research – Expand the K-12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high quality, high impact research;
- Policy – Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K-12 community;
- Innovation – Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- Networks – Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K-12 online and blended learning best practices.

MVU dedicates a small number of staff members to *MVLRI* projects as well as augments its capacity through a Fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K-12 online learning from K-12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside *MVU* staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

Executive Summary

As online enrollments increase, there is a growing need to examine strategies with the potential to improve course outcomes, especially since students in online courses tend to have less success compared to their face-to-face counterparts (Freidhoff, 2016; Miron, G., Gulosino & Horvitz, 2014). One strategy that shows promise is to provide students with an on-site mentor in addition to their online teacher. Previous research has found that a dedicated and skilled mentor can improve student retention in online courses. However, school administrators and course providers commonly fail to provide mentors with sufficient resources, direction, and professional development to have a meaningful impact on students. Before mentors can be provided with the direction and professional development that they need, we must first work to identify effective mentoring practices.

For the purposes of this report, we selected 12 highly successful mentors (pass rates ranged from 80-97%) who varied in the number of students they mentored (student loads ranged from 15-300) and in their geographical location (urban, suburban, town, and rural areas). Each participant then agreed to participate in two, hour-long interviews.

Interestingly, 11 of the 12 mentors required the large majority of their students to attend a daily lab. The exception to this rule was a vice principal who required his students only to attend a weekly lab session. However, due to the flexibility inherent in his position he was able to pull students "in at lunch or ... out of class" throughout the week as needed.

Mentoring activities changed based on the time of the semester. At the beginning of the semester, mentors were especially busy and focused their efforts on:
- Orienting students to their online courses and establishing learning expectations.
- Supplying students with the required technology and materials.
- Troubleshooting technological issues.
- Building relationships with students.

Mentors explained that by week 3 or 4, things "really settled down" and they could focus on:
- Monitoring students' progress and levels of engagement.
- Motivating students to more fully engage in learning activities.
- Facilitating instructional support and collaboration.

Toward the end of the semester, mentors again shifted their focus to:
- Closely monitoring student progress and "prodding" students to complete the course.
- Proctoring final exams.
- Recording students' final grades.

When asked to name their "keys to success," mentors most commonly believed that they were successful because they:
- Had a dedicated time and space to mentor students.
- Developed successful relationships with students early in the semester.
- Had administrators with a vision for the school's online learning program and understood the importance of mentors in achieving that vision.

In addition to the 12 mentors, we interviewed 12 online teachers to get a more general perspective on mentoring at *Michigan Virtual School*® (*MVS*®). The online teachers unanimously agreed that mentors play a critical role in students' online learning and could prove to be the determining factor in some students' ability to pass their online course. However, the quality of mentoring across schools varied greatly. While the mentors interviewed for this report were effective at working with students, teachers described the overall mentoring in their courses as just "pretty good" overall. Teachers also believed that many mentors were simply "thrown into the position" without fully understanding their responsibilities or having the skills and knowledge to have a significant impact on students' learning.

In light of these findings we make two recommendations to administrators seeking to improve their students' success in online environments:
- Ensure students receive structured and consistent mentoring.
- Ensure mentors receive adequate professional development.

Introduction

K-12 online learning has seen tremendous growth over the past two decades. The majority of online enrollments are used to supplement students' face-to-face courses for a variety of reasons, such as to:

- recover previously failed course credits,
- access advanced placement or elective courses not offered at their school (especially in rural areas),
- resolve scheduling conflicts, allowing them to pursue academic and non-academic interests more efficiently, and
- maintain a level of consistency in their learning that is not possible in a face-to-face environment due to health or personal safety issues.

Regardless of students' motivations for enrolling, online courses should provide each student with a challenging learning experience. Gee (2004) explained that challenging experiences are a critical element to effective learning experiences:

> Learning works best when new challenges are pleasantly frustrating in the sense of being felt by learners to be at the outer edge of, but within, their "regime of competence." That is, these challenges feel hard but doable. (p. 19)

However, too often online students are asked to perform tasks that are beyond their individual regime of competence without the level of support that they require to be successful. These students can become frustrated to the point of giving up.

In any educational context, the primary obstacle is to learn and master the course content. However, for some students the issues surrounding learning the content can be just as challenging—if not more so—than mastering the course content. This is especially true when students are learning online. Lowes and Lin (2015) explained that online students "not only need to learn a subject online but need to learn how to learn online" (p. 18). While each online student faces somewhat idiosyncratic challenges, there are three common challenges that many students face when learning to learn online.

1. **High degree of flexibility.** Typically, online students are provided more flexibility in when and where they work than what they have previously experienced in their traditional schooling. This flexibility can be especially problematic for adolescent students who tend to lack the metacognitive abilities to recognize and use effective learning strategies or the self-motivation and self-regulation skills to set and meet goals. Somewhat ironically, the very reason why many students enroll in online courses (the need for flexibility) also proves to be a major obstacle to successfully completing the course.

2. **Online communication.** Although students may be accustomed to communicating socially with their friends online, they can feel uncomfortable communicating online with teachers and adults. Communicating online for academic purposes also requires students to follow a different set of norms or netiquette which can prove a barrier to interacting and collaborating with peers online. The lack of non-verbal cues in most

online communication can also cause students to misinterpret messages from their online teacher and develop a sense of isolation.

3. **Technological competence.** Online learning requires a level of technological competence that face-to-face courses do not. For instance, face-to-face students do not need to be taught how to open the classroom door and walk into their classroom, but online students will likely need instructions for logging in and gaining access to their online course. Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) explained that students' inability to use technology might prohibit them from successfully participating in online learning activities.

These obstacles can appear especially insurmountable when online students lack the necessary support. Some online programs rely heavily on parents to play an active, supportive role in their students' learning. However, parents commonly misunderstand the rigors of online learning – similar to their students – and have other time commitments that may prevent them from providing the level of support that students require.

Some supplemental online programs now require that each student be assigned an on-site mentor who works with the student in their brick-and-mortar school. On-site mentors are not meant to replace the online teacher but to enhance and support the work that online teachers are currently doing. On-site mentors' physical presence also allows them to provide types of support that are difficult for online teachers. More specifically, as the content experts, teachers are primarily charged with providing students with content-related tutoring and support. Teachers are also responsible for assessing students' understanding of the course material and their ability to apply their understanding in authentic ways. On-site mentors are primarily charged with developing relationships with students and motivating them to engage fully in learning activities. Mentors are also charged with helping students develop the communication skills, organizational skills, and study skills to learn online effectively. When working with multiple students, mentors can also promote co-presence and collaboration (Harms, Niederhauser, Davis, Roblyer, & Gilbert, 2006). Hannum, Irvin, Lei, and Farmer (2008) summarized that it is teachers' primary responsibility to teach the content and mentors' primary responsibilities to ensure "everything is working smoothly and order is maintained" (p. 213). Harms et al. (2006) also explained that there is "considerable overlap" between online teachers' and on-site mentors' facilitating responsibilities. However, little is known regarding how successfully mentors fulfill their responsibilities and how their efforts are perceived by online teachers.

Research Methods and Purpose

In an attempt to provide some clarity and insight into effective mentoring practices, we interviewed 12 on-site mentors and 12 online teachers who worked with students enrolled in *Michigan Virtual School*® (*MVS*®). More specifically, using online student pass rate data from the previous academic period (Fall of 2015), we identified highly successful schools (pass rates ranged from 80-97%) from a variety of geographical locations. For schools with multiple mentors, we sampled the mentor with one of the highest student loads. We then surveyed the sampled mentors to obtain general demographic information. Of the sampled mentors, seven were full-time mentors, and five completed their mentoring responsibilities in addition to their other responsibilities at the school (two mentors were classroom teachers, one was a vice-principal, one was a counselor, and one was a librarian). Mentors' student loads ranged from 15 to 300 with an average of 95 (SD=79.6), and their years of mentoring experience ranged from 2 to 10 years (m=4.4, SD=2.1) (see Table 1). Mentors also provided recommendations for online teachers who they felt were especially good at

working with their students. Based on their recommendations, 12 teachers were sampled and interviewed.

Table 1: Mentor demographics

Mentor Pseudonym	Position	# of current students	Past student pass rate	School Location	Years of mentoring experience	Level of education
Luke	Full-time mentor	300	90-100%	Town	6	Master's degree
Caitlyn	Full-time mentor	160	80-89%	Suburb	3	Bachelor's degree
Lisa	Full-time mentor	160	70-79%	City	3	Bachelor's degree
Samantha	Full-time mentor	113	90-100%	Town	4	High school diploma
Nathan	Full-time mentor	72	90-100%	Suburb	3	Bachelor's degree
Lynda	Full-time mentor	53	90-100%	City	10	Associate degree
Amanda	Full-time mentor	36	90-100%	Rural	2	Bachelor's degree
Tanner	Part-time mentor and full-time teacher	78	80-89%	Rural	3	Master's degree
Casey	Part-time mentor and full-time vice-principal	63	90-100%	Suburb	4	Master's degree
Kay	Part-time mentor and full-time librarian	60	90-100%	Rural	5	Master's degree
Carl	Part-time mentor and full-time counselor	30	90-100%	City	5	Master's degree
Dana	Part-time mentor and full-time teacher	15	90-100%	Town	5	Master's degree

Interestingly, 11 of the 12 mentors required the large majority of their students to attend a daily lab. The exception to this rule was a vice principal who required his students only to attend a weekly lab session. However, due to the flexibility inherent in his position, he was able to pull students "in at lunch or … out of class."

Michigan provided an especially appropriate setting for this research because in 2014 the state passed legislation that allowed all students grades 6th through 12th to enroll in up to two online courses during each academic semester. They also required that each student be assigned an on-site mentor employed by the student's home district who "monitors the pupil's progress, ensures the pupil has access to needed technology, is available for assistance, and ensures access to the teacher of record." However, there was no professional development requirement for mentors. This vague description of responsibilities coupled with a lack of mandatory professional

development left mentors to experiment with ways to effectively support their assigned online students (Freidhoff, Borup, Stimson, & DeBruler, 2015). By interviewing successful on-site mentors and teachers, it was our hope to identify effective practices that could prove insightful to other onsite mentors.

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Findings

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Importance and Quality of Mentoring

Interviewed teachers universally agreed that mentors played an important part in their online students' success. One online teacher, Walter, explained that mentors are "extremely, extremely important. For some students, [mentors] will either make or break their experience completely." Sabrina added, "I think that [the mentoring] system is probably the best thing that we could have for online teaching."

Although online teachers agreed that mentors played a critical role in students' learning, they found that the actual quality of mentoring varied greatly. When asked about the quality of mentoring that he has experienced, Rick stated:

> To be honest with you, it's kind of all over the board. We get some mentors who are awesome…On the other side of the table, I get several mentors who I'll contact, send progress reports to, send emails, and I never hear back from them at all.

Jason described the mentoring that his students received as "pretty good. It's not terrible, but it's not great." One strategy that an online teacher, Daphne, used to gauge mentors' involvement was simply to ask her students to name their mentor. She found that about "fifty percent of them" thought that she was their mentor, and she had to tell them "No, I'm not your mentor. You need to ask your counselor who your mentor is."

Teachers empathized with many mentors whom they believed were asked to mentor a large number of students on top of their already high teaching, counseling, or administrative responsibilities. Rick believed that "often mentors will just get thrown into the position" indicating that some mentors are given neither the time nor the professional development to do much good to students.

The interviewed mentors in this report were highly successful and, as expected, highly engaged in fulfilling their mentoring responsibilities. As mentioned earlier, one mentor held a weekly lab with students, and the remaining 11 required the majority of their students to attend a daily lab. This lab-based mentoring model provided mentors with the time and space to work with students.

Mentor Responsibilities

Mentor and teacher interviews found that mentors' responsibilities varied greatly depending on where they were in the semester. As a result, in this report we will share mentors and teachers' perspectives regarding mentors' responsibilities at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester.

Mentoring at the beginning of the semester. Mentors' responsibilities were especially great at the beginning of the semester. One mentor, Luke, stated, "There are just different things that are going on, and at times it can be very, I guess, overwhelming." The analysis of the interviews found

that mentors spent the majority of their time at the start of the semester (1) orienting students to the online learning environment, (2) supplying and troubleshooting technology, and (3) building relationship with students.

Orienting. Teachers and mentors agreed that their students needed "an adult to get them in the right direction, for the most part." Online teachers, such as Rick, sent similar welcoming emails to students, their mentor, and in some cases parents:

> I have two different letters. One goes to parents and mentors, and then one goes to the students. In the letters, I outline what the goals are of the class, the expectations, what I expect their students to accomplish through the semester—abiding by plagiarism policies and [showing] integrity. And then I also include on there what they can expect of me and how soon I will return their phone calls or emails and how to get in contact with me.

Students were then typically greeted with similar information when they logged into the course; in addition, "a lot of [teachers] provide instructional videos" as a way of giving a visual tour of the course. However, some teachers, like Debra, questioned how closely students attended to these efforts, "Sometimes I don't think they read them. They just want to get going and get moving." Another teacher, Alec, added, "I wish I could…make it a requirement that when they get started, that they have to either call me or they get on like Google Hangout or something like that." While some teachers held live question and answer sessions for students, scheduling conflicts prevented teachers from making these types of sessions mandatory and – while useful for those who attended – were poorly attended overall.

Online teachers stated that they were thankful to those mentors who met with students to ensure that they were able to "log in and get the basic information." Interviewed mentors, like Samantha, provided students with a high level of orienting support – especially when students were new to online learning, "It's kind of amazing how many kids are deer-in-headlights when they come in here at the beginning. They are really nervous; they don't have any idea what to do."

Mentors typically provided their students with whole-group and individual orientation sessions. Lynda and other mentors provided students with time to "push every button" in the course and then would individually ask students "What does that do? What does that do? What does that do?" Carl also enlisted the help from more experienced students "who have been through this process" and acted as "resident experts" in the lab.

Supplying and troubleshooting technology. Mentors worked to ensure that students had access to a computer with an updated web browser. Some courses required students to have access to additional hardware such as a microphone and a webcam. Mentors also found that some of the external resources and websites would be blocked by their school's firewall. One mentor, Luke, shared:

> I don't physically set up my lab and put the software that the kids need on it. I have our tech people that physically do that. But classes change, things are updated, and all of the sudden there is something that will be blocked, and something won't work.…[Students] know to email me and put right in the subject "blocked" and then copy and paste the URL.…I just forward it to our tech people. They know what it is because the subject says 'blocked.'

Another mentor, Caitlyn, summarized that troubleshooting technological problems at the start of the semester requires "a lot of patching and a lot of duct tape, and a lot of spit, and a lot of backdoor working."

Building relationships. Teachers and mentors focused on developing relationships with students at the start of the semester. Teachers commonly began their courses with ice-breaker discussions and surveys. Teachers also helped students get to know them by sharing introductory pages and videos. However, they shared two obstacles to developing relationships with their students. First, teachers could only learn about their students if they were willing to share personal information with them. One teacher, Sabrina, explained:

> If they don't tell me that they're interested in the [Detroit] Tigers or their family goes to every U of M game, I don't know that…If they've got a Michigan t-shirt on, or if they talk about going to the game with their friends as they're walking in the classroom, those are all things that I don't really get a chance to overhear and observe.

As a result, teachers were happy that mentors could provide their students with "the human contact" that they could not. Although teachers did not believe mentor-student relationships negated the need for them to form student relationships, one teacher, Alec, argued, "mentors' relationships could be even more important."

It was not uncommon for mentors to have pre-existing relationships with students. Samantha said, "Because I've been [mentoring] for four years, I would say I know at least a third to a half of my class that comes in." Mentors also developed relationships with unfamiliar students through consistent communication. Nathan's interactions with students he mentors "starts from the time they walk in" because he stands "by the door greeting them." Lynda explained that at the first of the semester she had to start conversations with the students she mentored about non-content related topics but "by five to six weeks, they're bringing those topics by to [her]." Kay added, "It's so much easier to talk to [students I mentored] face-to-face about 'oh you did a great job at the football game last night.' Or 'Hey, nice job in the choir concert.' Or just 'I like your hat.'" Caitlyn emphasized, "They respond better to me than they will to any one of their [online] teachers because they see me every day. They know me as a human being. They know me as an individual."

Mentoring in the middle of the semester. One mentor, Luke, explained, "Usually about the third or fourth week, my lab has really settled down." After the students had settled down into their courses, mentors shifted their focus to monitoring and motivating student engagement and ensuring that students received the instructional support that they needed.

Monitoring and motivating student engagement. While online teachers and mentors found that "a certain percentage of students…are self-sufficient once you get them started," they also agreed that most students required monitoring and motivating support. Teachers explained that they closely monitored student progress and sent students regular progress reports and encouragement. Teachers stated that they could also see students' login data but were unaware of the quality of time students spent in the course or if students were "just goofing off the whole hour." They also found that students could easily ignore their motivational efforts. As a result, online teachers, like Devon, relied heavily on mentors to monitor and motivate students – especially those students who failed to reply to their communication attempts, "I don't think I could do my job without [mentors]…just because they are in the classroom every day: they're there. They're my eyes and ears."

When working with students in a lab, mentors were "mobile and go around the room and interact with the kids and look at what they are doing" and ensured that classroom order was maintained that students stayed on-task. Mentors also regularly met with students individually to discuss their progress in their courses. For instance, one mentor held weekly "grade-check Mondays" where she would meet with students to compare their progress with their course pacing guide. When students fell behind, mentors would act as "cheerleaders" and encourage them to catch up. However, mentors also tried to "light a fire" by removing student privileges. For instance, several mentors, such as Caitlyn, assigned students to "an assignment completion session" after school or during lunch when students were "three or more assignments behind where they should be."

Facilitating instructional support. Teachers provided students with a high level of instructional support. They were available to answer student questions. Online teachers also provided students with detailed feedback and invited students to revise and resubmit their projects. Typically teacher feedback and communication was via text. However, some teachers provided students with feedback via an audio or screencast video. Similarly, some teachers created instructional videos for the class or individual students. However, teachers, such as Sabrina, found that some students did not contact them when they were confused, "Lots of times [a] student hasn't even reached out to me, so they're just sitting there, frustrated, and I have no idea." As a result, teachers relied on mentors to recognize students' confusion and encourage them to contact their online teacher for assistance.

When mentors recognized student confusion, they responded in several ways. Mentors attempted to assist students themselves if students' confusion was regarding course procedures or general academic skills such as grammar. However, when students required content related support, mentors, like Amanda, typically referred them to their online teacher unless they had a level of content related expertise:

> There are some things that I occasionally will read over for grammar – an essay or a paper. I actually have a math background, so sometimes I'll be able to say, "Hey, you should look at this formula or that formula."...Their questions about the content are directed to the teacher.

However, at times students either lacked the skills to effectively communicate with teachers at a distance or were confused by their teachers' response. As a result, mentors commonly helped students to develop netiquette skills and talked through teacher feedback comments. One mentor, Dana, shared, "If the teacher gives some feedback and they don't really know what the feedback means, I'll read it and see if I can interpret it for them."

Mentors, like Casey, also found that students could provide each other with instructional support:

> When I register kids, I try to register them with the same teachers, when I know that they've got a certain class, just so they can collaborate a little bit better and they can go to somebody else and say, "Hey, I'm not understanding this. Do you have any insight on it?

Similarly, some mentors would ask students who were enrolled in more advanced courses to tutor students in the lower level courses. For instance, Kay explained that she had mentored a student in ASL (American Sign Language) 2 tutor a student in ASL 1. Teachers were generally positive about student-student collaboration and tutoring. Daphne "encouraged [students] to study together, and do the daily work together." However, teachers and mentors also found that this could result in academic dishonesty if mentors were not closely monitoring students.

Lastly, five mentors stated that they referred students to other teachers in their building for content-related tutoring. This was most common in math or skill-based courses. For instance, Kay explained, "If they're having trouble and they need more help, they'll often stop after school and ask like our Spanish teachers here for clarification or help and the same with math." While teachers were not opposed to other teachers providing instructional support, they preferred mentors first referred students to their online teacher so that they were aware of student confusion and possible weaknesses in the course.

Mentoring at the end of the semester. While mentors were required to maintain consistent effort throughout the semester, the start and the end of the semester were particularly challenging and busy. One mentor, Nathan, summarized that "the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester…are crazy." At the end of the semester, the majority of mentors' efforts were focused on (1) proctoring final exams, (2) closely monitoring student engagement and prodding students to complete the course, and (3) recording students' final grades.

Proctoring exams. Courses commonly included assessments that required proctoring. Daphne, an online teacher, explained that mentors "need to take the time to proctor [exams]…make sure those books are closed, there are no notes out." However, in reality, teachers, like Kandice, found that exams were not always proctored as expected, "If you have a mentor who never responds or that isn't willing to do that, I can't really force it." One way that *MVS* attempted to ensure proctoring was to require students to have a mentor enter an exam access code into their computer.

While mentors proctored exams throughout the semester, online teachers explained that "most of our tests are not proctored, but the final exams are." One mentor, Carl, stated:

> When we get to the end of the semester, it's just more about making sure we set aside time so that each student can get their final exams and their pass codes, and everything is proctored as it's supposed to be.

Elevated monitoring and prodding. The last portion of the semester was particularly busy in part because *MVS* courses did not include regular due dates – just a recommended pacing guide. The only exceptions were advanced placement courses which had weekly due dates that students had to follow. Although mentors' monitoring and motivating efforts earlier in the semester helped students to progress in the course, mentors still found that many of their students procrastinated finishing course assignments requiring them to finish a larger portion of the course in the final weeks of the course than what was recommended in the pacing guide. This also required mentors to increase their monitoring efforts to match students' pace of learning.

In some cases, students finished their courses early, allowing mentors to focus their attention on fewer students. However, the remaining students were also the least motivated, which required mentors to increase their motivational efforts. Not only did mentors have to increase their motivational efforts, but the types of motivational strategies also changed to a degree. For instance, Caitlyn described herself as a cheerleader for the students she mentored during the semester but that she was required to become "a drill sergeant towards the end because [her students] are teenagers and they do procrastinate." Similarly, Lisa found:

> Our upperclassmen have open campus privileges once they are finished with their class, so there are some incentives to get done…That kind of eases up my numbers, but the kids I'm left with are often the procrastinators who are scrambling to get everything done in the last

few weeks. That's where I spend the majority of my time trying to poke and prod and make sure that they get finished.

One strategy that mentors would use to "poke and prod" students was to contact parents. When Nathan was interviewed near the end of the semester, he stated, "I read my progress checks last Friday and went in and looked up all the kids that hadn't reached 60% yet. So all of those kids got to talk to me, too, and the parents also got a specific email." While mentors regularly sent progress reports to parents, most parents did not respond to these contacts until closer to the end of the semester when mentors began "communicating with parents every day." One mentor, Amanda, stated:

> As we get closer to the end [of the semester]…I'm making sure parents are aware. [Having] parent meetings. I get the administration involved to get the parents in. I make phone calls, emails, whatever it takes to make sure that parents are aware of exactly where their student stands and what's going to happen if they're not at a certain point.

While earning a 60% and passing a course was important, mentors wanted their students to set higher goals and finish all of the assigned course work. This proved challenging when students were complacent with just passing the course. One mentor, Caitlyn, shared, "The goal is to get them 100% through the class. Some of them come in with the thought process that 'I get to 60%, I pass. I finish the class. Yea!' That's not my goal for them." Whenever one of the students who Linda mentored told her, "I'm happy with a C," she responded, "I'm glad you are, but we're not!"

Recording grades. While *MVS* provided the online course and teacher, they did not award course credit. When describing her responsibilities as an online teacher, Debra explained:

> I don't give a grade. What we do at Michigan Virtual is report points to the local district. The local district will then take the points that we've given them, and they convert it to a grade, to their grading scale, so they are the person to make sure that it's going to get on the transcript.

Because local districts used their grading scales to determine grades, two students with the same percentage of available points may receive slightly different grades. For instance, a 93% may earn a student an A in one school district and an A- in another school district. At face value, this may seem unfair at the course level, but it actually ensured students were treated equitably within each school district. One mentor, Amanda, explained, "We want consistency in the rigor of the courses. We don't want…students making a choice on where they want to take [a course] solely on the purpose that they think it might be easier or harder."

Depending on the school, the mentor could enter the grades in themselves or the school counselor would do it for them. Carl summarized:

> At the end of each semester, we're able to access the percentages that each student has earned…I just meet with the counselor, they have the opportunity to then enter the letter grade into the computer, and it becomes a final credit for the student.

Mentors' Keys to Success

At the end of interviews, we asked mentors what it was that made them so successful. The following were the most common responses.

Having a dedicated time and space to mentor students. Mentors believed that the ability to require daily or weekly lab attendance was critical to the success of their program. Kay, similar to the other mentors interviewed, said, "I believe that we'd have a much higher failure rate if we just let [students] go home and do their thing." As a result, mentors and school administrators worked to limit the number of seat-time waiver students with no physical attendance requirements at their building. Amanda explained, "I'm there every day and [students] can't escape…That's my secret sauce."

Caitlyn stressed that having lab time is not enough and that mentors also need to:

> Watch the kids. Make sure that you know they're doing what they're supposed to be doing…That's [mentors'] biggest role. Just walk around the room. Talk to every kid, every day, constantly, and understand the ins and out of the course.

In part, this level of mentoring helped to ensure that students were not only attending the lab but that they were also productive with their time. Tanner believed that "The more we can direct them and keep them focused on what they're doing, the better success we're going to have."

Developing relationships early in the semester. When asked to describe his key to success, Casey said,

> I think it's just student relationships. I work very hard…to build those relationships with the kids. You get so much more out of the kids when you build those relationships…If you're trying to build it at the end [of the semester], it's just not going to work.

Caitlyn also stressed the importance of developing relationships "right at the beginning," and Carl found that if mentors "put the time in upfront, then we get pretty good returns on our investment." Similarly, Dana found that "the first couple weeks, that's where you lose kids." However, Lisa added that simply developing relationships at the start of the semester is not enough and that students require "constant interaction" throughout the semester.

Having administrators with a vision. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of having administrators who understand the obstacles that students face when learning online and have a vision for helping students overcome those obstacles. Lynda recalled that when she started mentoring she "had a counselor and a principal who were very ahead of the game and saw this as a way we could continue to retain our students." Similarly, when asked what his key to success was, Luke stated:

> When I very first started, he had a very good vision for want he wanted things to be … He was very open to new opportunities, very supportive. [He] had a vision of how he wanted this lab to look and how he wanted the setting because at that time it was new for us, but he thought it was very important to have supports in place for the students.

Luke also appreciated that when the program encountered "some bumps in the road," his administrator worked collaboratively with him and others in the school to find a solution.

When administrators have a vision of their online program, they appeared to become more involved in supporting students and mentors. Nathan was grateful that he did not have to go it alone and described the online program at his school as "an all hands on deck affair." Amanda also appreciated it when her principal would become involved when a "student's not on pace…to make sure that the student finishes the course needed for graduation." Kay explained that administrative and counselor support began when advising students and determining if a student was a good candidate for learning online. Unfortunately, she found that the counseling department treated the online program as a "dumping ground" for students which was "very, very frustrating" to her. She added:

> I wish I had more support from my own administration and counselors…Their version of mentoring is, "I'll sign you up for the class, and I'll check on you the last three weeks" which is obviously not mentoring. So they don't understand what the job is.

When asked what has helped him to be an effective mentor, Nathan summarized that administrators set the tone: "What is the biggest thing? High standards, based on what our administration puts on us."

Recommendations

Stakeholders (e.g. administrators, online teachers, and on-site mentors) can gain important insights from this research on how to better support students who are learning online. This section contains two recommendations for supporting online students.

Ensure Students Receive Structured and Consistent Mentoring

In this research, we sampled 12 mentors across the state. Aside from their student loads and students' pass rates, we knew nothing about the mentors or the strategies that they used to support students' learning. Although the qualitative nature of this research prevents generalizations from being made, the fact that each sampled mentor required the majority of their students to attend a weekly or daily lab supports previous research that has found students perform better in online courses when they attend a monitored class period. In fact, Roblyer et al. (2008) found that students who attended a monitored class period were almost twice as likely to pass their course than students who had more flexibility in when and where they worked. Having a dedicated time and space where they were required to work provided students with a consistent rhythm to their learning schedule similar to what they were already familiar with in face-to-face courses, while still providing students with flexibility in their learning pace.

By sharing the same space as students on a consistent basis, mentors could more efficiently and effectively develop relationships with students and monitor their progress and time-on-task. Mentors also believed that their ability to form relationships with students early in the semester enhanced all of their subsequent efforts to impact students' engagement. When it is not possible to provide students with a daily or weekly lab, mentors should be given the time to meet with students individually on a regular basis – especially at the start and end of the semester – so that they can better form relationships with students, recognize students' needs, and respond to those needs in ways that improve student performance.

Ensure Mentors Receive Adequate Professional Development

This research found that mentors are tasked with complex and nuanced responsibilities. Not only do mentors need to fulfill several responsibilities, but those responsibilities also change depending on the time of the semester and the type of student with whom the mentor is working. Not surprisingly, previous research has found that students with mentors who have received professional development perform better than students with mentors who have not received professional development (Hannum et al., 2008; Staker, 2011). Roblyer (2006) stressed that successful mentors "are made, not born."

Unfortunately, few mentors receive adequate professional development due to the added cost (Lewis, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Rick explained, "Often mentors will just get thrown into the position." In fact, few mentors we interviewed received any formal or informal professional development. For instance, Amanda described, "The first day on the job I was to take these kids in here and get them going, and I figured it out from there." As a result, mentors learned by doing, requiring them to make "a lot of assumptions" without knowing if their "assumptions are accurate." Caitlyn added, "I wish I knew what my responsibilities were. Like I said, I make it up." Amanda, who only had two years of mentoring experience at the time of the interview, explained, "I'm hoping that things become more clear, and I get better at it the longer I do it." With experience, mentors were able to refine their practices and demonstrate success but were still unsure how they were to continue to improve because they "don't know what [they are] missing." When asked what type of professional development he would like to have, Luke stated:

> I think the thing I would really like is to sit with other mentors….and to just share, "Hey, what are you guys doing? What does your program look like?" I have no idea. I have never seen another online mentor at work. What does their day look like? What supports do they have? How do they do things when this happens, or this is a problem? Just in general, to just bounce ideas off of one another.

Mentors in buildings with multiple mentors can take the initiative to discuss their responsibilities with each other. For instance, Casey worked in a building with a less experienced mentor who he communicated with regularly, "When I'm covering the lunches, he and I can chat. I'll say, 'Hey, how are things going? How are your kids doing? Any thoughts or questions that you have?'" Caitlyn did not work with other mentors and was required to learn her responsibilities independently by "hunting down" resources.

Mentors were appreciative of the little professional development that they received. For instance, Casey attended a face-to-face professional development offered by the course provider. Casey appreciated the opportunity to "just talk about how best to help kids" and believed that he "learned a ton from it." However, face-to-face professional development can be burdensome, especially for mentors in rural areas where travel can be time-consuming. MVU helps to alleviate some of that burden by sending trainers to a mentors' building. Kay explained that "Michigan Virtual sends out representatives every couple of months, just to kind of check up on us, see how we're doing, show us new things." However, this type of professional development does not allow rural mentors to interact with other mentors. One solution is to provide rural mentors the opportunity to interact with each other online. For instance, Keane, de la Varre, Irvin, and Hannum (2008) found that online professional development can be effective, especially if it allows for mentors to discuss how they would respond to various authentic scenarios.

It would also be beneficial for there to be opportunities for mentors and online teachers to discuss the roles of on-site mentors. Rick explained, "It's extremely important for there to be some

understanding between the mentors and the teachers, exactly what the expectations for the mentor should be." O'Dwyer, Carey, and Kleiman (2007) recommended that new mentors receive mentoring from an online teacher. de la Varre, Keane, and Irvin (2011) also recommended that online teachers and on-site mentors have an "in-depth instructor-facilitator conversation at the outset of the course regarding communication preferences, the extent of content support by the facilitator, and local school factors that potentially conflict with the course timetable" (para. 26). Important professional development topics include strategies and best practices for:

- Orienting students to the learning management system and the rigors and expectations of online learning.
- Learning and troubleshooting technology.
- Involving various stakeholders in the learning process.
- Forming caring relationships with students.
- Recognizing student disengagement and increasing student motivation.
- Managing a lab environment.
- Managing mentoring responsibilities and providing each student the attention they need.
- Fulfilling administrative responsibilities (e.g. advising students on course enrollments, proctoring exams, sending progress reports, recording students' final grades).

Conclusion

In this research, we interviewed 12 online teachers and 12 on-site mentors who had high student pass rates in an attempt to identify the strategies that mentors used to improve student success in online courses. Online teachers believed that it was critical that mentors fulfilled their responsibilities and that mentors had the potential to be the deciding factor in whether students passed or failed their courses. However, in practice teachers reported that many mentors fell short and that the mentoring in their courses was just "pretty good" overall. Of the 12 mentors we identified and interviewed, 11 required the majority of their students to attend lab daily, and the remaining mentor required his students to attend lab weekly. This highlights the importance of providing students with a regular time and place to work. Mentors' consistent proximity to students allowed them to better monitor students' progress and time-on-task and motivate them to complete the course. Unfortunately, online teachers explained that "often mentors will just get thrown into the position" without the time, space, or professional development they need to fulfill their responsibilities effectively. As a result, online teachers found that the mentoring that their students received was "not terrible" and "not great." As K-12 online enrollments increase, it is imperative that researchers, course providers, school administrators, online teachers, and on-site mentors work to improve the mentoring support that is provided to students. Although these efforts can be difficult, it is critical to the success of all online students.

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Resources

In response to stakeholder requests gathered through surveys, focus groups, customer feedback, and conversations, *Michigan Virtual University*® and *Michigan Virtual Research Institute*™ staff have developed practical resources for mentors, teachers, and parents supporting students taking online courses. All of them are freely available online.

Parent Guide. One of the most popular resources is *The Parent Guide to Online Learning.* The Parent Guide is a 16-page publication prepared for parents, guardians, counselors, mentors, and others to help students decide whether online courses are a good option for them. The guide details what online learning is and introduces some of the benefits online learning offers. It also includes information about the characteristics of successful online learners and how to prepare for learning online. The guide contains questions and an online learner readiness rubric to help students self-evaluate their skills, knowledge, and dispositions for online learning. The rubric also helps educators, mentors, parents, and guardians understand what extra supports students might need during their online coursework. The Parent Guide is available free at
http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/parentguide.pdf.

Mentor Fundamentals. Like the Parent Guide, *Mentor Fundamentals: A Guide for Mentoring Online Learners* is full of practical, research- and experience-based best practices for school employees or parents who provide on-site support for online learners. Much of the content for Mentor Fundamentals was distilled from interviews with 14 experienced mentors from a range of school settings. These interviews yielded significant shared conceptions about mentor roles and responsibilities, proven practices that lead to increased student success, and common concerns about pacing and communication issues. The guide also includes a section that highlights the research conducted around mentoring online learners. Mentor Fundamentals fills an important void for schools as the professional development and assistance that many mentors receive has been lacking. Mentor Fundamentals is available free at
https://micourses.org/resources/pdf/toolkit/mentorguide.pdf .

Mentoring Basics. To further address the need for mentor training and professional development, *MVU*, in collaboration with Dr. Borup, produced an online mentor orientation and training module, Mentoring Basics, an online mentor orientation and training module that combines research with best practices shared through the mentor interviews. Mentoring Basics is available at
http://mentorsmatter.org/training/mentoring-basics .

The Student Guide to Online Learning. The Student Guide to Online Learning is a 10-page publication prepared for middle and high school students who are interested in taking virtual courses. Most of the content comes from teachers, mentors, and students who have personal experience with online learning and includes sections focused on what students like about taking online courses, what they need to think about before enrolling, how to decide what course is right for them, and how to prepare for taking a virtual course. Parents, guardians, counselors, and others who want more resources to support their students may also find this guide helpful in beginning informed conversations. The Student Guide is available for free at
http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/studentguide.pdf .

OLOT. *MVU*'s Online Learning Orientation Tool – OLOT – is a free, self-paced, web-based resource intended to help students understand what online learning entails and introduces students to the skills and knowledge that are key to success in online learning. OLOT is available for free at
http://olot.mivu.org/.

Supporting Online Learners: Michigan Mentor Program Case Studies. The case studies are a snapshot in time that describe what mentoring of online learners looked like from the perspective of 14 mentors in 10 schools during the 2013-14 school year. The profiles illustrate the range of mentoring programs across the state and offer points of comparison for mentors, teachers, administrators, parents, and students about alternative support structures and strategies for online learners. The report reveals the variety in staffing configuration, how mentor time is allocated, mentor preparation, mentor experience, program size, and student demographics. The summary gives an overview of what programs have in common and where they differ. A section on advice from mentors to administrators, teachers, and parents works as a primer on what the mentors interviewed think is most helpful in, for example, understanding what the mentoring relationship looks like and what elements to focus on when making decisions. Administrators and mentors may find the descriptions of successful programs will help guide them in decision-making about new programs and in improving existing programs. The report is available as a free download here: http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/MentorProfiles15.pdf

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