

# The Bilateral Journey from Mentorship to Colleagueship and Friendship in an EdD Leadership Program

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this reflective essay is to demonstrate the transformative journey from a doctoral mentor-mentee relationship to one of colleagues and friends, highlighting the influence of the education doctorate on research and leadership practices. As is common in many mentoring relationships, the primary objective is to foster learning. This exceptional experience proved to be mutually advantageous for both the mentor and mentee. Now, two years after their initial pairing, the duo reflects on their journey toward their current professional collaboration, supported by relevant literature. This essay examines the key elements of a successful mentor-mentee relationship that extends beyond the completion of the degree to further academic endeavors. Specifically, we illustrate how communication, shared values, and commitment are interconnected components that enhance the quality of mentorship, ultimately leading to long-term, productive partnerships.

## KEYWORDS

*mentee-mentor collaboration, virtual doctoral mentorship, professional relationship building*

In this reflective essay, we provide guidance for approaching the doctoral student mentor and mentee partnership and how that relationship may continue beyond the earned degree. We describe a unique, formal doctoral mentoring program that provided the setting during our pairing as a student mentee and professor mentor to illustrate how mentoring interactions are at the same time informative and rewarding. In line with its purpose, this is a personal reflection on the benefits and challenges we encountered with conclusions that highlight the importance of the mentorship accord as professionally and personally reciprocal. Finally, we reflect on different opportunities in which the relationship evoked in scholarship could be expanded beyond the formality of the doctoral program.

## BACKGROUND OF THE LEAD DOCTORAL FACULTY MENTOR (LDFM)

Most doctoral programs in educational leadership employ the expertise of dissertation committee chairs. Generally, the expectation is a faculty member, serving in the capacity of dissertation chair, will help steer the doctoral candidate through the institutional requirements for successful completion of the degree (American University, n.d.; University of Texas at Tyler, 2024). Marymount University's School of Education utilizes the title of lead doctoral faculty mentor (LDFM) for a similar, though not identical job description. Marymount's (2023) EdD Handbook describes the LDFM position as:

...a crucial member of the [Doctor of Education] EdD program, approved by the Director of the School of Education, who

holds a terminal degree in educational leadership, or a related field of study, and guides the doctoral student and candidate through the Dissertation in Practice (DiP) process. The LDFM is responsible for making sure that expectations of guidance and support to the student, the academic discipline(s), and the professional field(s) of practice are carried out. LDFMs oversee, monitor, coordinate, and assess the progress of the DiP with their doctoral students (p.42)

The framework and best practices of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) informed the creation of the LDFM program at Marymount University (MU). CPED's (2022) nine mentoring and advising design concepts of "equity and justice, mutual respect, dynamic learning, flexibility, intellectual space, supportive learning environments, cohort and individualized attention, rigorous practices, and integration" (p.7) were thoughtfully integrated into the foundation of MU's LDFM program. Thus, the LDFM role specifications at MU are more of a confluence of typical dissertation administrative and academic support and humanized high-touch engagement and mentorship. A healthy, professional working relationship between mentor or LDFM and mentee or doctoral candidate is well-cited as a critical factor in doctoral student perseverance (Mullen, 2021; Storms et al., 2011).

## DOCTORAL MENTORING DEFINED AND A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MENTORING



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While mentorship is a ubiquitous practice across industries, we sought to locate an illustrative and comprehensive definition of mentoring in an EdD program. Brown et al. (2020) defined

... mentoring as a mutually beneficial relationship between scholar practitioners in the field of education that does not adhere to the typical tiered approach, but rather supports readiness, self-efficacy, and progress by providing sustained support and networking opportunities to achieve the participants' desired outcomes (p. 21).

With a meaningful definition of doctoral mentoring, we sought a conceptual framework that held value in our work. Yob and Crawford's (2012) Conceptual Framework for Mentoring resonated with our working relationship while the mentee was in the program and continues to be insightful as we approach current scholarly work. Figure 1 exemplifies the importance of activating the academic and psychosocial domains to construct meaning in doctoral mentorship.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Mentoring**



**Note.** Permission granted to include the framework by the corresponding author [iris.yob@waldenu.edu](mailto:iris.yob@waldenu.edu)

The dual domains of Yob and Crawford's (2012) framework aligns with the humanistic approach practiced in the EdD program (Hauth et al., 2024). Beginning with a person-centered perspective, a natural pathway to collegueship and friendship was provided.

## INTENTIONAL PROGRAMMATIC PAIRING

The careful pairing of a doctoral candidate and LDFM is determined early in the DiP process at Marymount University's (MU) School of Education by a team of faculty and staff during a *match day* exercise. This exhaustive practice takes into consideration factors including but not limited to the doctoral candidate's topic of interest, experience, research questions, methodology, and the LDFM's areas of expertise, experience, research, and scholarship. The insightful team making said determinations for mentor-mentee pairings also possesses exceptional foresight and relationship acumen.

## Evolution of the Mentor and Mentee Relationship

The doctoral student mentee is a goal-driven learner who engaged in MU's online doctoral program because of intrinsic motivation and having the ability to take initiative within the program of study. Meanwhile, the mentor is an experience-driven guide whose role is to offer insight that help in the process of self-discovery, problem solving, and growth. When mentors and mentees are effectively matched, the relationship is more likely to succeed. Each individual is unique, and each person has their own

preferences, needs, goals, and aspirations, so no two mentor mentee relationships are the same. As with any relationship, mentorship requires dedication and commitment from both parties with one providing support to the other. Without these two, there will be no responsibility or accountability, and this can easily lead to failure. Success needs to be defined to set the goals that measure progress and a favorable outcome. There must be trust established for the relationship to work. Major (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of 18 original studies on doctoral mentoring and found "Trust emerged as essential to helping a mentee feel comfortable sharing their challenges and successes with their mentor, who in return could provide guidance and feedback in a safe and supportive environment" (p. 16).

Both mentor and mentee must be able to align their values and principles as well as be honest, but tactful, in their evaluations when there are differing opinions. While the relationship is being built, trust is fostered by emotional presence and can be defined by cohesion of values, connection, commitment, and communication. When these elements are intentionally expressed by both the mentee and mentor, the challenges of distance and time are no longer a barrier to doctoral success, as they can be factors in many online programs. Although neither the mentor nor the mentee received formal training, they successfully navigated their relationship by utilizing the program resources as a guide. They maintained a flexible, consistent approach with well-defined expectations. The LDFM program's framework ensures that mentors adopt this balanced approach, combining adaptability with reliability and transparency. The evolution of this mentor and mentee relationship was innate due to years of experience mentoring others, which naturally mirrored the CPED (2022) Guiding Principles of Design for mentoring and advising for a doctorate in education:

- equity and justice;
- mutual respect;
- dynamic learning;
- flexibility;
- intellectual space;
- supportive and safe learning environments;
- individualized attention;
- rigorous;
- integration

Our mentorship experience was naturally guided by a high degree of integrity, work ethic, and the aforementioned guiding principles for mentoring and advising.

## HIGHLY EFFECTIVE MENTORING INTERACTIONS

Since the guiding principles are well-defined and discussed in CPED's (2022) literature, we highlighted six interactions that furthered our journey from mentorship to collegueship and friendship. The reciprocal interactions are establishing rapport, cohesion of values, communication, connection, commitment, and sense of belonging.

## Establishing Rapport

In addition to academic writing prowess, excellent research skills, and quantitative and qualitative methodological expertise, soft



skills such as encouragement, empowerment, and creativity are paramount for building a strong, trusting working relationship between doctoral candidate and LDFM (Rigler et al., 2017). We found that regularly planned meetings with the agendas set by the doctoral candidate to be a highly effective mechanism for repeated exposure. We always spent time at the beginning of our meetings sharing a bit about our lives, bonding over shared interests, and developing rapport. Scholars agree that quality mentorship is fundamental to student success and persistence in doctoral programs, arguing that strong personal relationships, frequent touchpoints, and a sense of trust encourage student persistence and retention (Bair et al., 2004; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005).

## Cohesion of Values

The values emphasized within the working relationship are reflective of those within the EdD program. Both the mentor and mentee felt a commitment to the program values, and this mutual commitment grew into the discovery of mutual professional and personal values. On an intellectual level, staying the course within the EdD structure of completing the dissertation was pivotal to the mentee and fully supported by the mentor. The level of commitment from both parties led to the successful completion of the dissertation. Realistic goal setting, resilience, problem solving, integrity, and responsibility to the relationship as it pertains to completion of the dissertation was paramount to success. Mutual respect for differing viewpoints, a commitment to understanding the research, providing valuable guidance and support as well as willingly offering practical knowledge was the cornerstone of this relationship (CPED, 2022). As the mentor-mentee relationship evolved, our shared beliefs and principles became evident. On a personal level, the value of mutual respect strengthened the trust we had in each other and the relationship so much so that it was a form of solidarity as the journey toward earning the degree progressed. As a budding research practitioner learning the trade, the mentee relied on the mentor's expertise. A dedicated mentor takes this responsibility seriously knowing that the mentee's doctoral fate could rest in his/her hands. By instructing the mentee in how to become a better researcher, the mentor serves as a role model showing how to respect the process and instill new skills. These values continued well after the defense and paved the way for post-doctoral projects as colleagues. Additionally, because the mentor was such a good role model, the doctoral candidate after earning the degree became an LDFM in order to impart the same wisdom and guidance to future students.

Research suggests that the transformation from mentor mentee to friends or peers often occurs when there is mutual respect and shared values between the individuals involved (Beres & Dixon, 2016). Both of us are relatable, approachable, dynamic and worked to continually grow our relationship. Mutually, we respected space, time, and the desire to follow our intellectual pursuits (Singe et al., 2021). This mentality fosters intellectual humility. Porter and Schumann (2018) indicate that intellectual humility is positively associated with values such as empathy, gratitude, benevolence, and universalism that lends itself to the idea that within scholarly circumstances others care more about the well-being of others. By embracing the metacognitive components of intellectual humility, individuals can cultivate more open-minded thinking, engage in more constructive intellectual dialogue, and continuously learn and grow. The peripheral social and behavioral features of intellectual humility include recognizing that other people can hold legitimate beliefs different from one's own and a willingness to reveal ignorance and

confusion to learn. This was the crux of our mentoring relationship; we were learning from each other and through our connection, we grew our intellectual capacities.

## Connection

Values cement the mentorship relationship, but shared goals and interests that develop in the time working together lent itself to a deeper connection. Over time, the hierarchical nature of the mentorship dissolved which led to a more reciprocal relationship rooted in collaboration on research, writing projects, and co-presenting at conferences, only adding to the success of the relationship. This newly formed collegial relationship allowed for us to reap both the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards such as rejuvenation of creative energy and developing new ideas through our collaborative relationship. When mentors and mentees have common interests or professional goals, they are more likely to form lasting friendships. We shared passions and professional objectives that created a strong foundation for our enduring relationship beyond the mentorship and acquisition of the doctoral degree. Reciprocity was critical in the development of our relationship. The mentee was reliant on the mentor to guide intellectual curiosity in a more structured manner as well as help develop research acumen. As the mentee gained experience and developed expertise in the field of educational leadership, the ease of speaking with the now former mentor and current colleague about ways to advance the field through innovative methods became comfortable. This exchange of knowledge and support further solidified our transition from mentorship to peership.

The CPED (2022) concepts for mentoring and advising highlight the importance of a supportive and safe learning environment. Vulnerability is at the heart of this type of learning environment and success in achieving our goals could not have happened without a solid connection between mentor and mentee. As the relationship evolved and a deeper professional connection was forming, the natural progression of any relationship is to share personal experiences and challenges that may relate to the research journey. As a new researcher, there were times of doubt that exposed weakness, but the mentor expressed humility by sharing mistakes and lessons learned that paved the way for the professional relationship to turn into peership. The mentor's ability to separate ego and intellect fostered a stronger relationship because she was able to revise her viewpoints when learning from me, as the student. When discussing the mentee's insecurities, doubts about academic skills and personal anxieties, the connection we had addressed these negative aspects without having to ask for help from the mentor. The mentor's professional experience lent to the ability to recognize strengths, help with remaining focused and encourage independent scholarship by avoiding micromanaging my dissertation process. Her doctoral experiences were shared to provide perspective and to show that it was common to have feelings of insecurity. As a skilled mentor, reflective thinking was a tool used that enhanced the receptivity to feedback and built intrinsic motivation. Never once was there the perception of a lack of support or intimidation. Quite the opposite, this coaching methodology from the mentor served as motivation to not only persevere through challenging times, but to encourage building the relationship that paved the way to continue working together after the completion of the dissertation.

Dennis and DeMatteo-Gibson (2022) discuss the benefits of relational mentoring which is generative in nature and exhibits

qualities of interdependence. Because we chose to build upon the cohesion of values established during the mentorship, the concept of interdependent connection encourages a peership that is enhanced through collaboration, versatility, making sacrifices for the good of the relationship, encouraging resilience, being present both professionally and personally, as well as having confidence in each other.

## Communication

Effective communication is essential throughout the mentoring relationship. Open and honest conversations about the changing dynamics of the relationship helped both parties navigate this intellectual endeavor more effectively, especially in an online format (Brown et al., 2020). A unique elementary of this mentoring relationship was the mutually beneficial feedback cycle. As a mentee, it was essential that each meeting encompassed completed tasks, questions about the scholarly process, and an agenda in order to respect the mentor's time. Positive feedback helped with the identification of goals, evaluating and synthesizing ideas, constructive discussions about the data, and best research practices that fostered autonomy in taking charge of the learning process. The essential element of this feedback technique was the mentor's ability to actively listen and coach to better understanding. Her skill afforded the mentee the opportunity to improve metacognitive skills, while developing intellectual and scholarly communication abilities. The mutuality of positive feedback enhanced the mentor's knowledge of the chosen topic of study and enhanced her ability to provide realistic expectations as is dictated by the CPED (2022) concepts of mentoring and advising. Communication is more than just active listening. Asking probing questions through the Socratic method expanded the mentee's view and introduced more perspectives (Roberts et al., 2019). Our mentoring sessions often involved lightbulb moments for us both. As we reviewed coding, interpretation of the data, and emerging themes, we each identified new directions for extending the analysis. Through solid communication skills, the mentor would refocus the mentee's attention on the research at hand, which only expanded Chapter 5. The rigorous nature of our mentoring relationship emphasized the development of new knowledge for both parties as well as tackling challenges together through open and honest communication (CPED, 2022).

## Commitment

CPED's (2022) concepts for mentoring and advising encourage intellectual space which allows for idea exchange that fosters deeper understanding. This can take many forms when the mentor relationship transforms into a peer relationship. Research discusses the importance of collaboration as scholarship activities that reflect this mentorship situation (Hixon-Bowles & Paz, 2015). This is the natural by-product of mentors who are passionately curious, confident enough to exchange ideas freely without ego interference, and who care more about the collective goal of seeing the dissertation through to conferring the degree. The mentor and mentee had a shared purpose that guided what we achieved together with an ethic of contribution through a distinctive set of values. During our mentoring, motivational interviewing was ever present. This is a mechanism used for discussions about change and growth (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). While mentees are the experts on their topics, motivational interviewing allowed the mentor to walk beside the mentee on this dissertation journey through partnership

and the melding of expertise and scholarship. There was no imbalance within the level of commitment. The mentor actively encouraged mentee autonomy by fostering intellectual curiosity and allowing a structure whereby we arrived at the shared goal (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Ethically, the mentor understood and respected the power balance as well as the mentee's need for autonomy. Fidelity was valued, commitments were kept, feedback was honest, and the intellectual give and take was respected as well as celebrated. The level of commitment accentuated integrity for the relationship to develop and extend beyond the doctoral degree. By offering individualized attention (CPED, 2022), our emotional bond grew without compromising personal or professional boundaries. Guided autonomy gave the mentee the space to grow as a research practitioner, but the mentor was intentional to be available when needed. This humanistic nature encouraged a caring approach that showed the mentee was valued as a person, not just another doctoral candidate. The LDFM program provides the structure, organizational resources, and professional guidelines through CPED (2022) for ethical mentoring. Additionally, the mentoring relationship encouraged professional advocacy whereby the mentor was invested in the mentee's success and work while sharing knowledge openly and with intellectual curiosity.

After the completion of the dissertation and defense, graduation was approaching as was the anticipation of a void in both our lives. After all, the intensity of engaging in this level of intellectual exchange requires multiple levels of commitment. As the finality of our relationship was approaching, the mentor was moving toward intentional modeling, both professionally and personally. The mentor was present, showed a sincere interest in the mentee's professional goals after graduation, and showed mindfulness in helping develop the mentee's growth and improvement as a scholar practitioner. This mindset and commitment to the mentee's future success enabled us to move from an authoritative relationship to one that was more collaborative. We began to speak about future projects and the possibilities of a peership beyond graduation.

## Sense of Belonging

Belonging is intrinsic to the human experience. In higher education, a student's sense of belonging is essential to their overall connectedness to the campus community and has been linked to academic success and persistence to graduation (Strayhorn, 2018). Belonging also contributes to students' intrinsic motivation to learn and persist in educational endeavors. Rost and Krahenbuhl (2023) found "...real-time opportunities to interact informally also provide meaningful chances to display what they learn and what they are thinking about through talking with their faculty and one another" (p 47). Through our mentorship journey, we intentionally made time for informal conversations and instructional opportunities that reinforced the dissertation work. While we met for the first time at commencement activities, we had no difficulty building rapport and further developing a connection to each other, the EdD program, and the School of Education. This sense of belonging encouraged the mentee to apply to the School of Education to serve in an adjunct capacity and LDFM. Thus, our professional collegiality was formally born.

## LASTING EFFECTS OF MENTORING



According to Erdem and Ömüris (2014), four stages of mentoring provide a foundation upon which a relationship such as an intellectual friendship can grow. As outlined in this reflective essay, the relationship between this mentor and mentee followed the stages of initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition (Erdem & Ömüris, 2014). We have discussed the initiation and cultivation stages at length, but separation does not mean that a formal termination of the relationship is imminent. We have committed to the ongoing development of the transition from mentorship to peership. This stage of redefinition has encouraged the development of a more collegial status whereby we are progressing toward engaging in joint activities that stimulate professional growth. Effective mentorships can evolve into lifelong partnerships. Genuine interest in keeping the relationship going forward beyond earning the doctoral degree was important to both this former mentor and mentee. The relationship began with the mentor's commitment to preparation as a leader who can make a positive difference in the educational world and was cultivated into a personal and professional collegial relationship that has been built to last. The evolution of this relationship from mentorship to peership continues to be a work in progress. We continue to collaborate, plan strategically, celebrate achievements, take intellectual risks together, and reaffirm our commitment to scholarship, reciprocity, and strengthening the bond by bringing different qualities and pushing each other to embrace differing perspectives. Growth, emotional presence, and mutuality are the keys to proving that we are stronger together as we bring out the best in each other both personally and professionally, as well as how this type of relationship contributes to the integrity of MU's EdD program.

## CHALLENGES

We would be remiss to discuss our mentorship journey without mentioning a few challenges along the way. Maintaining an optimistic outlook is especially important for doctoral mentors. While it's important for mentors to encourage and support their mentees, unrealistic idealism would overlook the real obstacles in the research and writing of a dissertation. There were a few occasions when conflicting advice from the LDFM and course faculty was unintentionally given in the drafting of the dissertation. Because of the strength of the relationship that developed, the mentee placed trust and faith in the professional direction provided by the mentor. Despite the skill of the mentor, imposter syndrome was ever present during the doctoral process. While imposter syndrome can often manifest itself as comparison to other students, the experience of new challenges and priorities forced the mentee to question the acquisition of skills as a scholar practitioner and the quality of the work that was being produced. Developing resilience was critical to not only the mentee's success in the program, but was encouraged by the mentor, which only enhanced the values instilled and contributed to a lasting relationship.

## CONCLUSION

The drafting of this reflective essay was a meta experience for the mentor and the mentee. Yob and Crawford's (2012) Conceptual Framework for Mentoring served as a reminder that our mentorship journey was perpetual, humanistic, and intellectually stimulating. While many doctoral students work well with their mentors during their studies, the relationship often ends with commencement. We

clearly understand how fortunate we are to have experienced such a positive and engaging professional relationship that will continue as a colleagueship and friendship. The best outcome we can envision from the readership of this essay is that it inspires careful and intentional metacognitive introspection of actions and interactions in one's previous, current, and future mentorship relationships. As educators, leaders, and lifelong learners, the process of serving as dissertation mentors is transformative and exceptionally rewarding.

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