Mentored Learning Communities to Impact E-Learning Student Success
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Challenges and values
- Wide variance in student technology capacity, access, skills, comfort, etc.
- Faculty resistance to fully online program
- Wide geographic spread among students
- Importance of relationships in SW practice
- Value of relationships for presence and engagement in the learning environment
- Faculty desire for “eyes on the ground” with students – for better feedback and monitoring

Cohort, Learning Community, & Mentor Model
- One cohort of students admitted every year
- Each cohort is divided into regional learning communities of 4-6 students that meet regionally for ITV class sessions
- Each learning community is assigned a faculty mentor who is with the students for the duration of the program and serves as field liaison during 2nd and 3rd year of program.

Mentored Learning Community Model

Specifics of the Mentor-led Learning Community (LC) Model
- Annual 4-5 day in-person Summer Institute on campus where all students and mentors participate
- Once per month (Saturday) simultaneous local meetings all LCs linked together and connected with Faculty through videoconference technology
- Approximately 80% of course content online
- Mentors’ role course-support-only in Year 1, course-support plus field liaison Years 2 and 3
- Learning communities established their own patterns for connecting between face-to-face meetings

Results and challenges
- MSW Program completion rates of 90-100%
- Learning outcomes greatly exceed benchmarks……
  BUT
- Variance in faculty use of mentors
- Variance in mentor engagement, group skills, impact of personalities in groups
- Issues in identifying and preparing mentors
- General drift from the “ideal” model
Student and Mentor Surveys

- Summer, 2014
- Involved all mentors and students
- Conducted through SurveyMonkey
- Good response rates:
  - Mentors – 15/15
  - Students – ranged from 39 to 91% for the three different cohorts

Survey results from mentors

- Enjoyed watching students develop
- Many learning communities bonded well
- Played an important role in the field program
  BUT
- Some LCs did not bond well with the mentor
- Personality conflicts and personal stressors
- Sometimes unclear about roles and expectations

Survey results from students

- Generally felt positive about mentor roles
- Definitely helped with field issues (liaison)
  BUT…..
- Questioned mentor commitment (e.g., not engaging during class, little contact between sessions)
- Did not handle student issues and group dynamics well
- Field integrative seminars could be improved

Lessons and next steps

- Clearer training and support for mentors
- More explicit expectations for faculty on how they use mentors and learning communities
- More explicit expectations for students and mentors regarding behavior in Saturday sessions and contacts between sessions
- Increased resources for field seminars
- Increased effort to identify a pipeline of future mentors (our alums?) and recruit faculty

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Questions and comments?