

**Engaging Virtual Volunteers in Agricultural Teacher Education: The Volunteers'
Perspective**

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Introduction

Mentoring is a part of successful educational programs regardless of discipline to help students navigate from classes to careers. Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn (2000) define mentoring in teacher preparation programs as the complex social interactions in which mentor teachers and pre-service teachers construct and negotiate for various professional purposes and in response to contextual factors. Meaningful and collaborative relationships between pre-service teachers and mentors allow for focused dialogue on teaching and learning (Liu, Tsai, & Huang, 2015).

The Pennsylvania State University sought to capitalize on mentoring relationships through a mentor team approach for their teacher candidates utilizing multiple digital communication platforms. The mentor team effort was piloted in 2017-2018. Mentor teams include the traditional triad of teacher candidate, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor, as well as a virtual team of a recent program graduate; an out-of-state thought leader of the profession and an in-state member of the profession not currently serving as a cooperating teacher. Engaging in a virtual mentoring program offers team members valuable time to interact meaningfully and to participate in a virtual community of practice with agricultural educators from a wide range of experience and backgrounds (Carney, Dolan, & Seagle, 2015, Reese, 2016).

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The framework for the virtual mentoring process is rooted in Anderson and Shannon's (1988) framework for mentoring. Mentoring is not a linear process, but is a circle of a continuous series of behaviors and events centered on the tenants of mentoring relationships, functions of mentoring, and mentoring activities. Throughout the mentoring process, mentors and mentees take turns leading, expressing care and concern, and opening up to one another. The virtual mentoring program recreates these crucial aspects of the mentoring process with the use of digital technology.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess the perspectives of agricultural educators volunteering in a virtual mentoring program. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What motivates agricultural educator volunteers to participate as virtual mentors?
2. What are the virtual mentors preferred methods for digital communication?
3. What do virtual mentors enjoy most about the mentoring experience?

Methodology

Participants in this study included one individual from each of three virtual mentor categories: recent program graduate, in-state agriculture teacher, out-of-state agricultural educator. Participants were selected as a convenience sample by demonstrating their willingness to provide information on their experience as a virtual mentor. Participants engaged in individual interviews conducted through Zoom that lasted one half hour, and were video recorded. All Participants were asked the same four questions:

1. Why do you mentor?
2. How do you mentor and what are your preferred methods of communication?
3. What is your favorite mentoring activity?

4. What is your advice for future mentors?

As recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000), data were collected with video and field notes. The constant comparative method of coding, categorization, and generation of themes was used (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Findings

The findings from the mentor interviews were organized into five major themes that centered on different aspects of the mentoring process.

Theme 1: Volunteers mentor to give back to the profession

Theme 2: Volunteers virtually mentor as a more approachable means to stay connected

Theme 3: Volunteers engage across different platforms, dependent upon need and fit

Theme 4: Volunteers love the process and the multiples ways of engagement with mentees

Theme 5: Volunteers see value in learning and growing along with their mentees

Conclusions

Participating in the virtual mentoring program was viewed as positive by mentors. Mentees were able to receive feedback, guidance, and support, while mentors were able to give back to the profession and participate in valuable professional development experiences. Together, mentoring teams were able to create the types of virtual communities of practice suggested by Carney et al. (2015) where they could discuss and exchange ideas and resources related to agricultural education. The community of practice sharing allowed mentees to experience new and innovative approaches to teaching agricultural education, and afforded mentors the change to provide expertise on agricultural education to future teachers from diverse perspectives (Lewis & Flannery, 2016).

Implications

The Pennsylvania State University will continue to implement virtual mentoring practices with future cohorts of pre-service agricultural educators. Additional input from mentor volunteers will be solicited to help ensure that the digital technology being used accurately reflects that being used in the agricultural education classroom. New mentor volunteers will actively be recruited each year to aid in creating hybrid vigor of the mentoring teams. New mentorship opportunities afford more individuals the chance to participate as mentors, thus more agricultural educators in developing their mentoring skills and giving them the opportunity to give back to the profession (Reese, 2016).

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