

Dialogue for Change: A Distance Mentoring Program Study for Higher Education
Professionals

by

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ABSTRACT

As an administrator, it is essential to understand the varying theoretical perspectives and frameworks surrounding leadership and organizational development that support employee and student success. After conducting the first two cycles of action research, it was confirmed that there was a need for an intentional focus on the employees' experience and their professional development. This focus led to administering a distance mentoring program for higher education administrators. The distance mentoring program was a mixed-methods action research project that ran a total of eight weeks with an orientation, mentoring sessions and individual activities during the first five weeks, and individual interviews three weeks following the intervention. There were eight participants in the study who were paired into four groups of two in order to foster a mentoring relationship using the "other" mentoring model. The purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of the distance mentoring program with respect to increasing educational outcomes, innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning for higher education professionals. The distance mentoring program was successful in generating innovative thoughts relevant to the participant's workplace challenge, increasing job satisfaction, stimulating better solutions for strategic action planning, and creating a positive impact on the mentoring relationship. Results surrounding productivity were mixed and inconclusive. The implementation of the distance mentoring program was designed to initiate dialogue, brainstorming, planning, and supportive measures by each participant and delivered the social and strategic elements necessary to achieve a more positive, productive, and successful work environment.

DEDICATION

It is with an abundance of gratitude and love that I dedicate this to my family:

immediate and extended, near and far, past, present, and future.

I am thankful for the continuous support shared by my husband, Kevin; my thought partners and unofficial editors, Mom and Tony; my brain break buddy/golfer, Auntie; all of my loved ones who continually reached out and provided encouraging words. I am deeply grateful to have accomplished my doctoral degree at this stage of my life, as a mother of three beautiful, intelligent, and talented boys, Kristopher, Kaleb and Kole. Over the years, they watched me diligently work on my educational goals. They may not have always understood what I was doing but they knew it was important. I am delighted that I could model the way for them, and I pray my journey paves the way for future generations to accomplish so much more and contribute to this greater body of work. Without a doubt, my family was with me every step of the doctoral process and was my source of motivation. They will forever be appreciated and cherished.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The work environment for many organizations forever changed during the spring 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees across the nation were abruptly quarantined and forced to work remotely. This caused a huge shift in services, which required employees and customers alike to swiftly adjust to online and virtual services. Yarberry and Sims stated “31% of employees transitioned from on-site to virtual/remote platform within 1 month amid the COVID-19 pandemic” (2021, p. 238). In higher education, most students were thrown into a predominantly online learning environment, which was an uncomfortable and uncertain learning modality for many students. Unfortunately, there was a significant number of students who faced financial hardships and negatively experienced the spring 2020 semester with some withdrawing from college while others opted out of attending school during the following fall semester (Kovacs, 2021). Alternatively, there were high school graduates who traditionally would have transitioned to college over the summer. Those students shifted their priorities to help their families by working additional jobs, caring for loved ones while their parents worked, or simply waiting until more certainty was restored following the pandemic.

This dramatic reaction caused by the pandemic left many colleges experiencing decreased enrollment and reduced student engagement with an increased focus on college budgeting, staffing, and course scheduling decisions. Administrators, faculty, and staff were forced to reevaluate their methods in teaching and learning. The pandemic created an elevated review of instruction, enrollment services, and student success programming. This review highlighted an express need for colleges to develop new and innovative

solutions to attract and retain students while simultaneously supporting employees in a dynamically changing and competitive educational market. It was unimaginable that the pandemic would last beyond 2020 and that colleges would continue to face lingering uncertainty about enrollment and campus operations.

Larger Context

The education community, in particular higher education, was dramatically impacted by the global pandemic nationwide. Community colleges were affected the most with a 9.5 % decline in enrollment from the previous year with undergraduate programs continuing to show a decline (NSC Blog, 2021). This staggering decline in student enrollment and phenomenal circumstances left higher education leadership teams with the responsibility of figuring out how to navigate external factors from the pandemic that impacted their workforce such as: self-quarantining, campus closures, limited to no childcare, exclusive online learning for K-12 systems, and increased COVID protocols resulting in reduced staffing levels on campus (Strada, 2021). Additionally, classes moved to online learning platforms, “non-essential” employees were sent home to work remotely across the country, and repeat conversations occurred about how to plan for these unprecedented times. The inadequate or lack of technology at home, including computer, internet, and phone access was exposed for both students and employees (Guyot & Sawhill, 2020; McDonald, 2020). All of these factors disrupted the learning environment for students and employees, impacting enrollment and business operations.

Studies from the Harvard Business Review and New York University found that meetings overall increased by 12.9% and productivity reduced during the pandemic (Gorton & Mankins, 2020). Employees and students experienced isolation as a result of

the pandemic and were forced to learn new means of connecting and communicating with each other through different yet similar platforms (Guyot & Sawhill, 2020). Fain (2020) addressed the changes in online learning and the lack of face-to-face interaction prevented students from seeking advice from their professors in person. It was noted that students felt faculty and staff were less accessible during the pandemic (Fain, 2020). Despite the increase in technological services such as chat systems, online workshops, video conferencing and website messaging, there were new challenges centered around communicating effectively and efficiently through the variety of mediums. According to a survey of 450 college students, “13 percent of respondents said faculty and staff were much less available during the pandemic, with 42 percent saying they were somewhat less available” (Fain, 2020, p. 1). The additional technology, the reduction of in-person services, and the swift transition to online learning and virtual services left many organizations faced with an overwhelmed and stressed workforce.

Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the country during the spring 2020, a second pandemic hit the country almost equally as hard. The second pandemic related to racial tension and escalating social justice concerns where Williams and Youman noted that “the effects of the two pandemics are inextricably linked” (2020, para. 6). COVID-19 shined a spotlight on the long-standing inequities among minorities including “economic instability, food and housing insecurity, lower educational attainment” (American Public Health Association, 2020; Williams & Youman, 2020, para. 10). Dimpal (2009) pointed out that racism is not presently overtly hostile as in the past but it is real and rapid in higher education. Unfortunately, the lingering racial issues of the past reached a boiling point during the summer of 2020. The widespread coverage

on social injustice and racial disparities in America intensified conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion on college campuses. As institutions of higher learning, it is expected that colleges engage in civil discourse surrounding social justice matters in an effort to educate and prepare students for the diverse communities in which they live and work. Additionally, colleges should provide training for college administrators, faculty, and staff to address the negative and subjective perceptions that one may experience in and outside of the college campus community (Dimpal, 2009).

As a result of the two simultaneously occurring pandemics, administrators were faced with managing uncertainty, stress, and inundating effects of employees working from home, budget reductions, enrollment declines, and new initiatives surfacing while also processing and addressing the often-politicized comments about DEI. This diverted focus caused more friction and tension within the workplace. As the world settled into the emerging issues from the two pandemics and an extreme desire to “return to normal” intensified, a new hybrid learning and work environment emerged. The increase of online services paired with existing in-person services created multiple access points for students and a variety of work schedule options for employees. This new hybrid work and learning environment paired with an intensified need for administrators to be innovative, efficient, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse populations they served led to initiative-fatigue and increased stress.

The challenges colleges faced to improve student enrollment and completion rates along with employee morale and productivity during these unprecedented times were a wicked problem requiring a level of *professional accountability* to fully execute and accomplish set goals. Fullan et al. (2015) address professional accountability as “being

the collective capacity of the profession and its responsibility for continuous improvement and for the success of all students” (p. 6). Professional accountability includes optimizing existing talent, providing professional development, and looking within the organization for answers to delivering results. It discourages an early reliance on external factors such as consultants and focuses on internal accountability to promote teamwork, professionalism, and trust.

Due to persistent internal and external challenges faced by higher education leaders, there was concern about the recruitment and retention of employees within the field. Survey results from a study conducted by the Student Affairs in Higher Education Administration (NASPA) reported that student affairs professionals were uncertain about the status of their profession and were greatly concerned about the heightened level of responsibilities placed on senior leaders (NASPA, 2022). The NASPA survey of 957 respondents found that “a little less than a third of respondents do not know if they will continue working in the field in the next 5 years” (NASPA, 2022, p. 22). The report indicated that professionals shared great concern about the workforce and the potential for a decline in interest from early career student affairs professionals to remain in the industry. This point of concern did not go unnoticed as colleges responded to current challenges, planned for new initiatives, and developed succession plans that addressed maintaining relevance within the higher education community.

The need for collaboration and intentional planning was necessary to build and increase both the students’ and institutions’ performance (Fullan et al., 2015). It is for this reason that there was a collective responsibility by each higher education professional to produce a meaningful and successful college and employee experience for all. This

charge for administrators was a difficult task but a requirement as the workforce continued to navigate multiple competing priorities and external societal factors.

Local Context

While the nation continued to adjust to the effects of the pandemic in 2020, the Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD), a 10-college district, developed new strategies and approaches to the changing dynamics of higher education. MCCCD focused on several key initiatives to propel the institution forward despite the pandemic conditions. The key initiatives pertained to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), guided pathways, and strategic enrollment management. Each college area played an important role in the student experience and was a critical factor for stabilizing college budgets and enrollment trends. These initiatives were positioned as the most pressing issues impacting operations district-wide and warranted the assembly of both college committees and district-wide workgroups. All three initiatives were emphasized fairly consistently across the 10 colleges; more specifically, Estrella Mountain Community College (EMCC) and GateWay Community College (GWCC) were fully executing components to fall in line with the MCCCD's strategic goals.

EMCC experienced declining completion rates for the 2019-2020 academic year by approximately 10 percent according to data presented during campus presentations. Some of the external factors that affected EMCC's, and colleges' across the nation, spring 2020 completion numbers included the transition to online classes and associated health and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Strada, 2021). This decline magnified the need for additional and more intentional student support services, and motivated senior leadership to continue pursuing the three key initiatives. GWCC did

not experience the same enrollment decline at that time. The GWCC administration felt this contributed to its selection of trade, technical, and workforce programs that maintained student interest due to the continued demand of healthcare careers. GWCC, however, faced many similar challenges with remote work, staffing changes, and the increased desire to improve student completion rates. Both colleges serve student populations with a majority of minority student groups presenting additional considerations needed by faculty and staff to provide personalized, holistic support to ensure student success. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) emphasize the need to develop multiple strategies, which include the identification of different touchpoints throughout the students' journeys. In the years prior to this study, especially during the pandemic, there was an increased need by the senior leadership team to implement new strategic initiatives and technology focused on driving up enrollment and productivity. Both colleges dedicated significant attention to DEI, guided pathways, and strategic enrollment management to ensure the issues stayed top of mind for all key stakeholders. The work that happened around each of the priorities is explained below.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

By the end of summer 2020, EMCC assembled a diversity, equity, and inclusion team (DEIT) to develop a comprehensive plan for supporting DEI work at the college. During this time, committees and departments examined student data and identified intentional student success programs to launch in support of the gap in enrollment. Additionally, a series of campus conversations were held regarding race relations. A number of opportunities for employee support such as professional development and advocacy were provided at EMCC in the wake of increased DEI conversations.

GWCC launched a newly designed DEI Center courtesy of an approved federal grant proposal that supported the intentional work surrounding DEI on campus. GWCC's awareness of DEI issues and concerns led to a more deliberate plan that helped bring a physical DEI center to fruition. A series of events were planned to showcase the diversity of talent within the neighboring communities and educated the campus community on inclusive practices. The attention to developing structured DEI and social justice teams along with the establishment of the DEI Center were critical elements to sustaining the goals and objectives related to this initiative. However, the real work began when implementing DEI strategies to address the issues surrounding equitable practices and social justice on each college campus.

Guided Pathways

For more than five years before this study occurred, MCCCCD was on the guided pathways journey. MCCCCD implemented the guided pathways framework to improve completion rates and goal attainment for college students. The primary drivers for this transformation included creating a clear path for all students, increasing graduation and transfer rates, and decreasing debt and unnecessary credit accumulation with a goal of increasing overall 3-year and 6-year completion rates by 50 percent (Maricopa Community Colleges, 2019). Collectively and individually, the 10 Maricopa Community Colleges created teams to address district-wide issues and initiatives related to guided pathways implementation. Studies indicated that students who were given more choices without clear direction were more likely to lead to “indecision, procrastination, self-doubt and decision paralysis” (Baily, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015, p. 3). Students that do not select

a degree and enter a program within their first year take longer than three years to graduate and may not transfer to a 4-year college or university.

Using the guided pathways framework to redesign an entire college system that removes structural barriers for all students was a lofty goal that included phased approaches and sustainable strategies. Guided Pathways was intended to implement strategies in stages with comprehensive buy-in from all divisions of the college to support the students with equity. This work was important and time intensive to implement at scale in accordance with best practices.

Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM)

The strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan was a critical tool for MCCCCD colleges to use to ensure they were attentive to the short-term and long-term enrollment goals for the college. Recognizing that enrollment was a priority for all areas of the college, the strategic enrollment management planning process was a collaborative approach to identifying strategies and tactics aimed at increasing new and continuing student enrollment. MCCCCD also adopted the Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX) concept, which is a goal-setting model designed to help colleges keep their streamlined, intentional weekly commitments aimed at achieving their goals of increasing enrollment and completion rates. The implementation of 4DX required its own set of change management and training. It was another significant project that latched itself onto the three priorities, specifically pairing itself with the work done in coordination with strategic enrollment management.

The work happening around the three priorities was completed through committees and councils at the college and district levels. Each college had several

committees, taskforces, or workgroups. Some committees were limited to division representatives whereas other committee structures provided cross-functional, cross-college representation that presented a broader view of the college's needs. Across MCCCCD, there was a significant number of committees, sub-teams, and councils that presented additional opportunities for employees to connect with peers and colleagues across the 10 colleges. MCCCCD had a variety of councils that allowed employees, managers, and senior level positions the opportunity to meet regularly and discuss specific issues related to their work. The councils were a great place for employees to convene from across the district to share concerns, brainstorm ideas, and address urgent matters. The three areas of DEI, guided pathways, and strategic enrollment management were generally recurring topics and high priorities on most agendas. Often, council members realized that many of their colleagues were doing similar work, which confirmed the good work happening to support students and the consistent approaches among all 10 colleges. However, the same group of thought partners limited the innovation and creativity necessary to have a competitive edge among other higher education institutions. Therefore, the ability for higher education administrators to broaden their knowledge, strategize, and learn of best practices outside of MCCCCD was of benefit to the institution.

Leadership Connection

Prior to and throughout the study, my work in higher education was motivated by a desire to implement student success programs and services for students to achieve their educational goals, while concurrently advocating for employees to obtain the necessary professional development and growth to be positive and productive contributors to the

work environment. As a senior level higher education administrator, it was essential to understand the varying theoretical frameworks surrounding leadership and organizational development. I wanted to apply this knowledge and understanding to my local context because on many occasions I observed a disconnect between various senior leaders' vision with the execution of the goals and objectives of the organization. This driving force remained a priority and area of interest as I assumed different leadership roles in higher education.

As a higher education administrator, it was imperative that student enrollment, retention, and completion stayed top of mind for all team members to collectively meet strategic planning goals and objectives. In an effort to advance the work and increase graduation/completion rates in the midst of challenging times, it was also imperative that the colleges enhanced their services and moved from reactive to proactive efforts of strategic planning and organizational management. As a senior administrator, I was charged with leading higher education professionals focused on organizational success. I was responsible for identifying, implementing, and reviewing best practices to ensure the college was efficiently and effectively offering student success programs with equity.

The positions in which I served throughout this study included being the interim Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA) at GWCC and the Dean of Students - Retention at EMCC. In both positions, I oversaw areas related to enrollment and retention with a focus on operational and strategic planning. Both the dean and vice president roles presented unique vantage points to understand the daily operations of the division while working closely on the development and execution of division and college strategic goals. Previously, I led a team that included two deans, an athletic director and program

coordinator. The deans had four to six management level direct reports with additional team members who served in a variety of roles and capacities. Overall, the division included more than 75 full-time employees with additional part-time and student workers. As a dean at EMCC, I led a team that included three managers, a division chair, and an administrative associate coordinator. These structures were consistent among most colleges in the district, with some variability based on each college's campus and student needs.

As a member of the college leadership, I was charged with leading effective teams, developing strategic enrollment management and retention plans, aligning division goals with the college's strategic plans, and monitoring Student Affairs' business operations, budgets and grant projects. Ultimately, my leadership responsibility was to ensure my team members had the skills, training, and tools necessary to execute plans and provided quality services to students and the campus community. My role as a member of the leadership team was to ensure the students and employees achieved success. Due to increased responsibilities and competing priorities, I heard colleagues express their concerns about the loss of engagement and reduced sense of productivity by employees. Without a concentrated focus on supporting employees there was great risk to the organization. The organization needed to balance operational goals with the sensitivities of key stakeholders' circumstances. To do that, there was a need to develop realistic action plans while keeping the employees' professional development a priority.

Purpose of Study

Taking all of the research surrounding the pandemic and current conditions into consideration, and after a thorough analysis of the larger and local context, I examined

ways to enhance professional accountability, professional development, and organizational management at my institution. During the summer 2021, I reflected on how the staff was facing initiative-fatigue from competing priorities and experienced added pressures from the pandemic; yet there was still a need to be innovative and efficient. Many employees within my district were turning to sister colleges for advice. However, the same information and ideas were often recycled resulting in the need for higher education administrators to create a support network outside of MCCCDC. Additionally, throughout the pandemic travel restrictions were put in place. This presented the chance for more virtual leadership programs and professional development sessions that could establish relationships in a distant environment and not be limited to local connections.

The implementation of the distance mentoring program created an expanded network of higher education professionals that connected internal MCCCDC administrators with peers in similar roles at colleges external to MCCCDC. The distance mentoring relationship, where both colleagues experience a mutually beneficial professional relationship and have someone who “can provide a fresh perspective about what they're experiencing elsewhere while still understanding you and your strengths” was an ideal solution for the study (Zackal, 2021, para. 11). This level of mentorship defined by Zackal (2021) as *the other mentor* who works at a different institution and helps provide a fresh perspective to understand the nature of the work gave the administrators a new and different professional development outlet. The other mentor provided and received mentoring support from the individual they were paired with to form a mutually beneficial mentoring relationship. It is important to note that the use of

this particular mentoring model did not label one participant as a mentor or mentee but rather both individuals served in equally supportive roles to give and collect feedback. This shared experience to operate as both the mentor and mentee was delivered with the intent of increasing productivity, innovation, and job satisfaction for all participants involved.

The study was designed to deliver strong leadership, strategic planning, and management practices as well as apply adult learning techniques in a professional environment while cultivating a professional connection. The distance mentoring program included an orientation, mentoring sessions, and individual activities throughout the course of five weeks. The purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of the distance mentoring program with respect to increasing educational outcomes, innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning for higher education professionals.

Research Questions

This study involved administering a distance mentoring program for higher education administrators internal to MCCCCD who were paired with colleagues of similar roles and responsibilities external to MCCCCD. The study was designed to observe and analyze each administrators' interactions, reflections, and strategies and to gain a better understanding of how the distance mentoring program influenced leadership, innovation, and performance at their individual work environments. The research questions listed below focused on the administrators' perceptions of their own performance and the application of the learning to their work environment. I was equally interested in how the

distance mentoring program influenced those who worked internal to MCCCCD and those who worked external to MCCCCD. Below are the three research questions addressed:

RQ1: How and to what extent does the distance mentoring program influence (a) innovation, (b) job satisfaction and (c) productivity for higher education administrators?

RQ2: How and to what extent does the implementation of a distance mentoring program stimulate better solutions to a college's efforts which lead to enhanced strategic action planning and educational outcomes for higher education administrators?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the extent to which the distance mentoring program helped to develop positive mentoring relationships and enhance professional development?

This study used a mixed-methods action research design. The quantitative data provided descriptive insight into the opinions and perspectives of higher education administrators about their productivity, innovativeness, and effectiveness as a leader. The qualitative data offered insight into the participants' level of strategic action planning, application of best practices, and collaborative approaches to manage and drive organizational change due to participating in the distance mentoring program. All data informed the overall effectiveness of the distance mentoring program. There were several key terms referenced throughout the study. To help understand their meaning as it related to this study, a list of the operational definitions is provided (see Appendix A).

Delimitations of Study

As I prepared for my action research project and reflected on the factors that contributed to the distance mentoring program, I identified several key areas that although important, were not factored into my study. These factors are considered delimitations, as I chose to not include and focus on them at the time of the study. One delimitation was not focusing on any specific priority, including the three priorities outlined above (e.g., DEI, Guided Pathways, and SEM). The participants were not limited to a specific priority but rather had the opportunity to select a workplace challenge that was most meaningful to their work and develop a plan of action appropriate to their selection. Related to the priorities, this action research study did not emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion unlike previous cycles of research. The decision to not approach this study through a DEI lens was due to the broadness of the subject matter and inability to fully integrate within the identified timeframe. There is strong interest to use a DEI lens in future studies and will be further explored to effectively integrate in a meaningful way. The last delimitation is the study did not limit the participant scope of responsibility to the division of Student Affairs. Participants were at a director level or above and were recruited, contacted, and confirmed based on their interest in the program. Each one of the delimitations was carefully considered and will be reviewed for future iterations of the study.

Summary

As a higher education administrator, I constantly examine opportunities to enhance professional accountability, professional development, and organizational management. This desire led me to exploring the creation of a support network that expanded beyond my local college district. Participation in the study allowed higher

education professionals in similar roles to share best practices, give solid feedback, and provide a safe place to exchange ideas with someone who understood their role. The distance mentoring program was critical to career development and employee engagement for all participants (Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

Employee engagement and inspiration matter. According to our research, an engaged employee is 45% more productive than a merely satisfied worker. And an inspired employee — one who has a profound personal connection to their work and/or their company — is 55% more productive than an engaged employee, or more than twice as productive as a satisfied worker. The better an organization is engaging and inspiring its employees, the better its performance. Of the three productivity factors, Covid-19 has hit energy the hardest (Gorton & Mankins, 2020, para. 15).

The goal of the distance mentoring program was to energize administrators through the identification and implementation of more innovative practices to increase job satisfaction and improve operational efficiency for the team and institution. This study aimed to produce a distance mentoring program that gathered individual and collective feedback and data to inform future iterations of the distance mentoring program (Given, 2008; Zackal, 2021).

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES & GUIDING RESEARCH

My action research focused on studying how to better support employees by developing a distance mentoring program designed to increase innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning. The distance mentoring program helped create a platform where higher educational professionals could build connections, lead, and develop cohesive teams capable of executing the goals and objectives identified by the college. Having well-supported administrators, fully prepared to intentionally deliver on intended outcomes, helps to maximize the operations of the institution.

The theoretical concepts and frameworks explored were based upon concepts that examined employee development and organizational success in higher education. Specifically, the theoretical perspectives used to guide my work and the development of my intervention were constructivism and social learning theory with complementary concepts of change management, mentoring, and transformational leadership. Each theoretical concept and framework provided a different perspective and a varied approach to supporting employees to enhance their levels of engagement and strategic action planning for a more desirable work environment.

Theoretical Perspectives

Due to the analysis and heightened level of awareness stemming from employee challenges the institutions were facing, my problem of practice and purpose changed throughout the different cycles of action research. The changes created an opportunity to review my selection of theories and interconnected concepts and address the issues through a new, more applicable lens. The theoretical perspectives and research guiding

the project are listed below highlighting the origination and pertinent components that explain their relevance to the study.

Constructivism

Coghlan and Brydon-Miller explain constructivism as “a view of human beings as actively constructing knowledge, in their own subjective and intersubjective realities and in contextually specific ways” (2014, p. 183). Constructivism is an epistemological idea meaning that it is learning theory that helps explain how human beings learn. Simply stated, the theory of constructivism is the ability for learners, or employees, to process and problem-solve new information and knowledge that can be applied to their current environment (Lohmeier, 2018). The earliest known developments of the meaning for constructivism were provided by theorists Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Gaston Bachelard, contributing as early as the 1920s (Lohmeier, 2018; Marechal, 2010). Their work aimed to address how learning occurs through engagement and real-world application “rather than simply memorizing rote facts” (Lohmeier, 2018, para. 3).

Viewing action research through the lens of constructivism presented an examination of knowledge gained from the relationships between the participants. The use of constructivism gives researchers an opportunity to view different, more personal perspectives and interactions that can provide greater understanding of the conditions, variables and external factors of the study that aid in intellectual growth for the participants. Some of the key principles of constructivism are learning is active, learning is social, learning is contextual, and learning is personal (Western Governors University, 2020a). Due to the very personal and individualized learning that occurs, the application of constructivism varies according to one's perspective and position (Ultanir, 2012).

Lohmeier (2018) describes a scenario of constructivism in action where a professor introduces a topic, asks students to discuss and share what they know, further explore the information, develop questions and seek out the answers, and reflect on their responses in a group setting. This explanation of constructivism in action mirrors the approach that a distance mentoring program entailed to engage active participation and learning from the participants both individually and collectively. The use of guided instruction and conversation starters during the distance mentoring program was a way to incorporate the theory of constructivism into the study. While critics would argue that there is no need to have students learn on their own. The teacher could deliver the information directly without the added responsibility on the learner to go out searching information on their own (Lohmeier, 2018). Constructivists would counter that the retention of knowledge is not as effective as one seeking information on their own and actively engaging in the problem-solving. By helping the participants think about new information in a different way, gain insight from their peer mentor, and apply new knowledge to their work environment helped them move from passive learning due to self-guided training materials to more active learning (Lohmeier, 2018). This method of application that falls under the framework of constructivism was incorporated into my intervention to assess the effectiveness of learning in this manner.

My study had two primary areas of focus. One area of focus was learning by observing others in similar roles to identify new, innovative practices that would enhance individual work. The other was to apply leadership principles to effectively support team goals and drive strategic initiatives. Constructivism aligned with my study due to its emphasis and incorporation of mutually beneficial relationships, shared experiences, and

active learning techniques to enhance individual and collective work environments. My study was viewed through a constructivism lens. The selected theory, social learning theory, and the interconnected concepts highlighted further below were rooted in constructivism. This perspective was chosen to implement learning strategies that measured the knowledge gained from the developing relationships, experiences, and observed behaviors throughout the distance mentoring program.

Social Learning Theory (SLT)

Social learning theory (SLT) was first introduced by social psychologist Albert Bandura in 1977. Bandura's social learning theory influenced many areas of inquiry including education, health sciences and social policy (Big Think+, 2018; Growth Engineering, 2021; Navabi, 2012). The premise behind social learning theory is that learning happens by observing, modeling, and imitating similar positive behaviors (McLeod, 2016; Navabi, 2012). SLT focuses on four elements, or steps, as part of social learning, which include attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Western Governors University, 2020b).

Attention is the first step, which emphasizes creating an experience that captures the learner's attention. Retention, the second step, reinforces the actual focus on learning and obtaining new knowledge. Reproduction is a critical third step as this is "social learning in action" and involves the core element of modeling positive behavior that both SLT and the mentoring concept strives to incorporate into the individual's actions. (Growth Engineering, 2021, "Step 3 – Reproduction" section). The final step is motivation and is the intended outcome to help sustain the behaviors. The four steps reinforce the cycle of skills being demonstrated and retained due to the amount of

engagement and interaction that occurs during the socialized learning environment. This level of socialized learning is demonstrated by three different types of observational modeling: live, verbal instructional, and symbolic. The live model, which has the individual demonstrating or acting out a behavior, is a natural complement to the mentoring process that requires individuals connecting and interacting with one another (Navabi, 2012).

Yarberry and Sims (2021) conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study on the effects of working in a virtual/remote environment and conducted it through the lens of social learning theory. Their interpretation and use of social learning theory called attention to the significance of connections and mentoring relationships. The Yarberry and Sims (2021) study acknowledged the positive impacts and potential influence that stems from the participation in an intentional learning community of practitioners striving to enhance career and personal development. The mentoring component emphasized emotional support through relationship building and helped professionals re-engage with the organization due to “feeling a sense of accomplishment and achievement, reducing a tendency toward turnover, and improving morale” (Yarberry & Sims, 2021, p. 240). The study found that several participants struggled with a sense of belonging and yearned for leadership support. The addition of virtual mentoring addressed some of the deficits in the workplace obtained during the pandemic. It created an inclusive environment that Yarberry and Sims indicated could help with diversity and inclusion efforts by establishing support networks that drew in marginalized groups who experienced certain levels of isolation and inequities (2021).

The theory of social learning applies very well to adult educators serving in

administrator roles. It is an opportunity for informal learning and professional development to take place, consciously and unconsciously, and create a culture of learning (Big Think+, 2021). Self-determination can be a positive offshoot of effective social learning that can also be used as a motivator to drive optimal outcomes. Growth Engineering reports that research has shown “70% of individuals who seek social affirmation are far more successful in meeting their goals” (Growth Engineering, 2021, “4. Keep motivation levels” section).

Fortunately, social learning can occur in person or virtually. The digital age paired with the shifts from the pandemic make creating a virtual social learning environment and mentoring program ideal for employees to connect and collaborate with peers from similar positions yet different campus environments to compare ideas and strategies (Growth Engineering, 2021). Growth Engineering (2021) stated the effects of social learning were more impactful than traditional web-based training boasting a 75:1 return on investment, which could create strong results for an organization. Hightower (2018) suggests several reasons for a more robust social learning culture with one specific example being to implement reward systems and incorporate modeling from higher performing teams. Employees in high-performing companies engage in knowledge-sharing four times more than those in lower-performing firms (Growth Engineering, 2021).

The criticism that follows this theory is that it cannot encompass all aspects of learning, nor does it take into account natural or biological behaviors (McLeod, 2016). This criticism stems from beliefs that the biological behaviors are not factored into the ability to apply the learned or modeled behaviors. Knowing that everyone has their own

set of interpretations, perceptions, and applications, can alter or lessen the positive impact from socialized learning. Additionally, there is the potential of learning negative behaviors that negates the intent of connections. There are many types of engagement practices that go well with the intent of a mentoring program such as connecting with colleagues in an informal setting, collaborating on projects, and exposing peers to new resources and content (Big Think+, 2021). The portion of learning that will occur as a result of social learning will help increase operational efficiency and effectiveness. This aspect of social learning from administrators reinforced positive modeling with the outcome of participants gaining mutually beneficial information from their paired participant. My study's environment was structured in a way that it promoted, produced, and reinforced positive learning outcomes to yield the desired results.

Connected Concepts

To reinforce constructivism and social learning theory, and dive deeper into the intended outcomes of the study, below are different yet interconnected concepts that tied closely to my proposed intervention and action research. The theoretical perspectives listed previously were the lens through which I saw the development and implementation of the study to effect change and learning. The change management, mentoring, and transformational leadership concepts explained below are direct ties to the content creation for the distance mentoring program. The associated research collected and reviewed guided the development of the learning outcomes, the integration of related information, and resources into the training materials, and the overall direction of the study's research design. The connected concepts shaped the confidence in delivering a

distance mentoring program during the critical period of navigating through challenging times as an administrator in higher education.

Change Management

Organizations face change at various points and varying degrees based on planned and unplanned circumstances. The introduction of an innovation into an organization's business process requires simultaneous project management and change management to ensure effective and efficient execution of the innovation. As a researcher, I want to also help facilitate change. My innovation included creating awareness for change, having the ability to change, and maintaining a proper mindset for change. In addition to effective leadership and innovative thinking, a strong change management approach was needed to facilitate lasting change.

The Prosci Change Management Model (Prosci, 2020) includes five key outcomes in the change process. The outcomes are *awareness*, *desire*, *knowledge*, *ability*, and *reinforcement*, which are referred to as ADKAR. *Awareness* is the first step in creating an understanding of what the change is and why there is a need for it. *Desire* is the raised level of interest in the change as a result of understanding its importance as well as a willingness to be a part of the change process. *Knowledge* is the ascertainment of information about the change and how to implement it. *Ability* is being equipped with the right tools, systems and training to fully execute what is expected. *Reinforcement* is the fifth component that ensures the intended outcomes are being met and sustained (Prosci, 2020). This model works well to emphasize change for participants and influence change as an administrator due to the amount of time, information, resources, and training needed to successfully implement change.

Mentoring

Mentoring is the practice of connecting two individuals together to learn from each other, support each other's career and personal development, and provide feedback to support growth. Mentoring combines two key aspects of development for employees, which are learning and human connection (Zachary, 2007). Mentoring is a relationship building tool that can increase employee productivity and engagement through the intentional, positive, and encouraging interactions with colleagues. Zachary (2007) states that mentoring is reported to increase morale, job satisfaction, and stronger and more cohesive teams. These components were essential to the ever-changing and dynamic work conditions presented by the pandemic. Zachary's Four-phase Mentoring Model identifies four key phases: preparing, negotiating, enabling, and coming to closure (Zachary, 2011). There are seven elements of a learning-centered mentoring paradigm that builds on the model by elaborating on the different responsibilities and expectations for individuals in the mentoring relationship. The seven elements are as follows: reciprocity, learning, relationship, partnership, collaboration, mutually defined goals, and development. Further explanation of each element is below:

- Reciprocity is when both partners learn and grow from each other, experiencing mutually beneficial effects from the relationship.
- Learning is a central tenet of the mentoring model and described as the purpose, process, and product of the relationship.
- Relationship is the understanding that both parties must be open, trustworthy, and willing partners throughout the relationship.

- Partnership is the next level above a relationship and provides the security for safe conversations that help to hold each one accountable.
- Collaboration is the conscious effort to work together to achieve the desired goals and outcomes.
- Mutually defined goals are essential to help guide the direction of the relationship and ensure the relationship is heading in a meaningful direction.
- Development is the element that helps to drive momentum for seeing and believing the necessary skills and abilities are obtained to achieve success (Zachary, 2011).

To further expand, a good mentor is more than a successful individual. A mentor is one who is willing to provide the necessary support to help develop others, has relatable knowledge and skills, a growth mindset, and ability to reflect upon their own experiences to provide constructive feedback (Abbajay, 2019). According to a Big Think+ article on applying social learning into the workplace, it stated that “an effective mentor is one who not only watches what you do, but also allows you to work with them to help you to learn and grow from their actions and decisions” (2018, para. 9). A good mentee, someone who is receiving feedback and support from the mentor, should be open and receptive to feedback, clear on career goals and needs, and have the availability to meet in order to cultivate a positive relationship that will gain mutually beneficial outcomes (Abbajay, 2019).

There are a variety of mentoring models, theories, and approaches to the relationship structure that can be used to connect individuals and inform the effectiveness of the relationship. Scholars such as Kathy Kram believe mentoring progresses over time

(Ragins & Kram, 2007). One common practice that has been used within my local context is a more traditional mentoring model that pairs an individual as the mentee with an experienced, senior-level individual who can offer support as the mentor to achieve optimal benefits out of a mentoring relationship. Another practice that has been utilized within my workplace is a peer mentoring model that also incorporates a mentor and mentee dynamic between two individuals. What differs from the traditional model is the two individuals are peers from similar backgrounds or experiences. Within my local context, both models have been used to support professional development among employees and build positive relationships.

The lens to which I sought out the creation of a mentoring model was focused on supporting organizational development and implementing change within each institution. The relationship element was secondary but a very important concept for participants to apply learning and key strategies to their workplace challenge. I wanted the mentoring relationship to be a more organic process, addressing scaling up excellence through shifts in behaviors and mindsets and doing so with talent, accountability, and execution (Sutton & Rao, 2014). For the distance mentoring program, I selected a third model referred to as the *other* mentoring model presented by Zachal (2021). Since participants were higher education administrators at a director level or above and not novice employees, and taking into consideration the conditions these administrators faced during the pandemic, I felt the other mentoring model was most appropriate to connect leaders seeking thought partners and professional support during these challenging times. With this model, individuals served as both the mentor and mentee, were partnered with individuals with

similar responsibilities, and provided as well as received mentoring support to form mutually beneficial mentoring relationships.

Combining social learning with a structured other mentoring program is a potential benefit to any organization. This choice capitalizes on the 80% of informal learning reported to occur in the workplace (Big Think+, 2018). Therefore, a distance mentoring program was an ideal practice to incorporate at the time of the study. Despite the many benefits for the employees involved and organizational output, there were potential challenges and pitfalls to conducting a distance mentoring program and promoting mentoring relationships. The new normal of a hybrid work environment, a combination of virtual and remote work environments, presented a challenge to sustaining an engaged mentoring relationship. Prioritizing the development of individuals and being intentional with modality when designing a virtual mentoring program was important in order to implement and sustain the program. Recognizing the social needs of engagement during and after the pandemic as well as the added benefits of connecting with a peer who served as an other mentor type, was of great value to the study. The incorporation of key principles from mentoring models enhanced the distance mentoring program being developed for this action research project.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership was presented in 1973 by James Downtown and then refined by James McGregor Burns in 1978 with more adaptation by Burns in 1985 (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021). Transformational leadership is a leadership approach to motivate and encourage individual team members. The application of this leadership theory centered around building an effective team, one team member at a time, and

emphasized the support needed to influence change in an organization. This form of leadership takes on different characteristics that can create a strong followership. Transformational leadership provides a broad way of viewing leadership and encompasses qualities such as being a good role model, articulating a clear vision, empowering others, and “acting” in ways that develop trust in their followers (Northouse & Lee, 2019, p. 75).

The critical conditions experienced from the pandemic required leaders to be skilled communicators with the ability to help ease tension and concerns from staff while thinking critically and strategically to sustain operational needs. Sutton and Rao (2014) use an analogy about the appropriate application of different leadership techniques based on the present needs. The right timing can be useful, the wrong timing can be disastrous. “The art of scaling up excellence is very much about knowing when to create a tight connection between poetry and plumbing versus when to stretch, flex or even set aside your most precious beliefs” (Sutton & Rao, 2014, p. 95). A transformational leadership style focuses on the big picture so individuals can contribute to accomplishing set goals. It can, however, lead to the leader missing key details (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021). This level of oversight can affect the success of a team. Additionally, if team members do not buy into the leader’s style there can be a misalignment and lack of synergy, leading to concerns about an abuse of power and self-promotion (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021; Management Study Guide, 2021). Therefore, it is critical that leaders find a balance, and stay attuned to the big picture as well as minor details.

Despite some of the critiques and key considerations surrounding the application of transformational leadership, it has its share of advantages. Transformational leadership

presented opportunities to build individual relationships with team members; to reinforce the continuation of positive modeled behaviors with the administrator's team members; to focus on change that would be necessary in an evolving work environment filled with many lingering unknowns. Transformational leadership benefits administrators who also serve as change agents. Kouzes and Posner (2007) identify five practices of exemplary leadership that pair well with the transformational leadership. The five practices are: *model the way, enable others to act, encourage the heart, inspire a shared vision, and challenge the process*. Each practice encompasses key attributes of a leader, which help develop leaders focused on both the strength of the people, and the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. The five practices of leadership demonstrate the need to support both the individual and the broader strategic direction of the organization.

Knowing that transformational leadership encourages a broad spectrum of leadership, Kouzes and Posner's (2007) five practices deliver specific attention to these qualities. These practices complement transformational leadership and are of benefit to an organization during challenging times that require heightened levels of professionalism, empowerment, advocacy, clarity and execution. Leaders are found at every level of the organization. However, higher education administrators serving in supervisory capacities are expected to not only manage but lead during critical and uncertain times. I would have been remiss to not draw direct attention to effective leadership strategies as part of the distance mentoring program.

Supporting Research

The support of the work related to my problem of practice was tied to research based on mentoring models and professional development opportunities for higher

education professionals. The research literature below highlights successful implementations of programs at other colleges and professional organizations. The strategies and techniques highlighted in the studies were considered in the implementation and analysis of my distance mentoring program.

Professional Organizations' Webpage Review. During the planning and research process in preparation for the study, three professional organizations' leadership development programs well-known in higher education were explored. The organizations are as follows: AACC John E. Roueche Future Leaders Institute, NASPA's Leadership Educators Institute, NCSDE Walter Bumphus Leadership Institute mission (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021; NASPA, 2021; National Council on Student Development, 2021). The key purpose of researching the sites was to identify key learning outcomes and leadership development approaches for mid-level managers within higher education. When reviewing the site, key terms that surfaced as focal points for emerging leaders were crisis management, future trends, managing change, leadership competencies, and strategic planning.

As part of the design and delivery of my distance mentoring program study, an observation from all the sites' content was that each organization referred to a parent company or alternate professional organization, either as a connected entity or as a reference for more information. Prospective participants were directed to the alternate site to gain additional information and material about leadership and professional development. This link to other established professional organizations provided the appearance of a heightened level of credibility for the program. It was beneficial to view

the phrasing and framing of the program by each organization as part of the development of my distance mentoring program for higher education administrators.

Staff Retention Mentoring Study. A formal mentoring program study looked at five different mentoring relationship pairings within the undergraduate admissions office staff at the university (Pizzo, 2012). The pairs included new employees paired with assistant directors from the same department, although some of the employees may be physically located in a different building or state. The study extended six weeks and presented feedback from the mentees that indicated the mentoring relationship was worthwhile. The timeframe of the study was a limitation and Pizzo (2012) indicated that “based on Kram’s definition of a developmental relationship phases, this intervention only allowed for the initiation phase of a mentoring relationship” (p. 62). Despite the short timeframe, there was positive feedback captured and reported. Two of the mentees shared that they would not have sought out their mentor due to the physical location (Pizzo, 2012). There was a suggestion that spreading this concept to other departments would also be of value to learn from others and gain experience in another area. The researcher was surprised to find that the mentoring relationship benefited the mentor as much as or more than the mentee. Both sets of insight reinforced the potential of a distance mentoring program exposing individuals to new ways of operating, gathering solid advice to support performance, and gaining mutually beneficial results.

Formal Mentoring Study. On the contrary to the previous study, the Raabe and Beehr (2003) study of 61 mentoring pairs, a 49 percent response rate, indicated there was little agreement about the effectiveness of the formal mentoring relationship. This study paired mentees with a mentor who was two levels higher than the mentees current

position. The study also used Leader-Member-Exchange (LMX) theory due to it being a dyadic leadership theory (Raabe & Beehr, 2003). Both the formal mentoring relationship and LMX were chosen for the study because of the development aspect of the relationship. The formal mentoring relationship selection is a different approach than a paired mentoring relationship that looks at peers providing support based on similar experiences and levels of support that could be offered. Based on the findings from the Raabe and Beehr study, a paired mentoring relationship may yield better outcomes because the data showed the greatest level of support stemmed from the psychosocial support function and the mentees “were modeling their behaviors after the mentors more than the mentors thought” (Raabe & Beehr, 2003, pp. 280-282).

Previous Cycles of Action Research

My research journey from Cycle 0 to Cycle 1 led me to my final determination for theoretical concepts and frameworks. The details of that journey are captured next, with first sharing my initial focus. My problem of practice first started out centered around how to better support community college students during the first-semester experience to increase student retention and completion. Studies indicated that students who were given more choices without clear direction were more likely to lead to “indecision, procrastination, self-doubt and decision paralysis” (Baily, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015b, p. 3). College students experience many educational barriers that may affect their success in college such as food insecurity, financial challenges, low family support, and competing obligations from work, school, and home. These educational barriers create more obstacles when paired with an educational system that does not provide sufficient guidance or equip students with the proper tools to complete their academic goals in a

timely manner, leading students to experience low student completion rates and increased student debt.

When applying a holistic student support approach, rather than looking at each experience singularly, colleges provide a better experience and deliver critical programs and services for student success (Ireland & Lawton, 2018). Therefore, my 10-college district adopted the guided pathways (GP) framework around 2017, and my college began to implement best practices surrounding student success and completion. At that time, I decided to focus my action research on the first-semester experience and considered ways to increase career exploration early on using guided pathways, the loss momentum framework (LMF), and critical race theory as the lens to which I was developing that cycle's intervention. The frameworks were used for the first two cycles of research.

Cycle 0 Findings

The initial action research project design from the fall 2020 semester was framed around the critical examination, identification and implementation of college success strategies that would increase student persistence and graduation/completion rates. As a student affairs practitioner in higher education, the idea of helping students to clarify their career path early on was extremely important. The purpose of the study at that time was to better understand the current situation with respect to increasing students' career exploration and selection, self-efficacy, and persistence and retention by participating in a first-semester experience program.

Research Questions. Cycle 0 included interviewing four faculty and staff members during the fall 2020 to gain a better understanding of current practices, career

exploration efforts and the student experience. The research questions selected for this cycle of the study focused on the faculty and staff's perceptions of how well students connected to career-related departments and services. The questions were meant to gather the participants' understanding of guided pathways, and their influence on student engagement and persistence. Below are the research questions formulated due to the problem of practice identified for Cycle 0:

RQ 1: How do students connect with career-related departments and services?

RQ 2: How is engagement with career-related departments and services associated with student success and retention?

The qualitative data collected provided insight into student lifecycle planning and the development of intentional experiences throughout the student lifecycle. The examination of the data helped in the identification of a more targeted student population of new, incoming first-year students to positively impact strategic planning goals with equity.

The challenge colleges face to improve student persistence and completion rates is a wicked problem requiring a level of *professional accountability* to fully execute and accomplish its goals. The need for collaboration and intentional planning were necessary to build and increase both the students' and the institution's performance (Fullan et al., 2015). It was for this reason that there was a collective responsibility by every Student Affairs department and each individual contributor to produce a successful first-semester experience that included a robust career assessment and exploration model for all students. Although the students' needs were critical and continued to be a central part of all higher education work, the emerging competing priorities of the college and the

challenges facing employees elevated the need for more employee training and development.

Cycle 1 Findings

Upon further reflection after the fall 2020 semester, and taking a realistic view of my research timeline, I decided to shift my focus during the spring 2021 semester from directly studying the students to developing a training program for the Career and Educational Planning Department's team members who would be supporting the students of which the elements of the first-semester experience were designed to target. I developed a three-part training session that focused on the use of a new career assessment tool, Pipeline AZ, the integration of the growth mindset concept, and the application of career advising strategies through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion in order to better assist students in selecting a degree path early on. The training was intended to equip Career and Educational Planning team members with the tools and strategies that would aid them throughout the advising process, help students manage change, and assist students from diverse backgrounds with career exploration and selection. I was able to collect both quantitative and qualitative data through employee training session observations and surveys.

Research Questions. The study used a mixed-methods approach that included both quantitative and qualitative data collection. It gathered feedback from the Career and Educational Planning team members through a series of pre- and post-surveys that followed each of the training sessions. The analysis provided new considerations for the study and helped to make appropriate adjustments for the next cycle of research. The research questions that guided Cycle 1 during the spring 2020 are listed below:

RQ1: How and to what extent does implementation of the training program affect the advisors' confidence around (a) growth mindset and (b) diversity, equity and inclusion?

RQ2: How and to what extent does implementation of the training program influence the advisors' knowledge and application of career advising tools, strategies and techniques?

Four survey instruments collected data throughout the innovation in order to identify changes in responses as additional training information and material were presented. This cycle of research began in March 2021 and concluded approximately eight weeks later. The time frame included three consecutive Fridays for training, time to administer the surveys, and additional time for data analysis and reporting. The analysis and reporting consisted of reviewing each of the surveys, coding the data, identifying themes, making recommendations for future cycle research, and preparing a final report of findings.

There were several lessons learned during the spring 2020 training session due to working with the director of the department and the instructional coordinator from the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to deliver the training. Some of the lessons were related to initiative fatigue, technology issues, and logistical challenges that impacted employee engagement. Employees dealt with a lot of challenges over the past year due to the pandemic, racial tension, low enrollment, budget conversations and competing priorities. The additional attention to this training program along with staffing reductions and limited budget caused staff to become overwhelmed and stressed while attempting to meet the college's goals. My staff, which included frontline employees and managers,

were experiencing initiative fatigue that created apathy toward any new idea, project, or training opportunity. The added stress made it difficult for them to want to take on another project or training at that time.

It was difficult to offer the training as intended and within the timeline developed due to an unanticipated, district-wide technology outage. It was also challenging to collaborate with differing interpretations of the training by my co-presenters. I learned that in order to execute according to my timeline and expectations, I needed to build in contingency and maintain more control of the research process by leading the training or project myself.

Delivering a training session in an online environment presented its own share of challenges. All three of the training sessions were conducted online using the Webex video conference service. The participants kept their cameras off, utilized the chat function and responded to questions by unmuting. The inability to view the participants made it difficult to observe their real-time reactions to the questions and responses given by the training facilitator or others. When considering the development of future online training sessions, I was sensitive to those conditions and incorporated more active engagement in the design of the distance mentoring program.

One other major change in my study that shifted the theoretical lens was the intentional approach to support Black/African American students. During this cycle, I focused on completion rates and specifically considered Black/African American students. The Black/African American student population's retention and completion rates at my college were consistently lower than other student groups. Additionally, feedback from student surveys administered by our Institutional Effectiveness department

indicated many Black/African American students and other minority groups lacked a sense of belonging and support. My level of advocacy was heightened due to these findings that were of no surprise to myself and many faculty and staff of color. As a result, I researched critical race theory and planned to use it as a major framework.

Even though I wanted to create programs that supported marginalized students and offered intentional support to increase student success, I did not lose sight that many minorities, in particular Black employees, felt a lack of belonging, support, and professional growth and advancement opportunities. I wanted to find a way to address those concerns. However, my action research project was no longer designed to address the needs of a minority populations. Due to lessons learned during Cycle 1, I moved away from students as participants and sought to have administrators as participants. As a result, I did not zero in on race or ethnicity but rather the role and level of the administration within the organization. Therefore, my participants stemmed from any racial or ethnic background and varied in age and gender. The problem of practice was then rooted in finding ways to enhance organizational culture along with individual leadership and success. The focus shifted toward a distance mentoring program for higher education professionals with a broader focus on empowerment. As I explored new theoretical frameworks, I reflected upon Dr. Koro's explanation of critical theory as a means for advocacy and maintained that level of awareness when designing the distance mentoring program intended to raise awareness of support and professional development for higher education administrators (Ljunberg, 2017). The goal for the distance mentoring program continued as being impactful and purposeful. It was designed to advance the

work of higher education professionals and was focused on employee achievement that drove organizational and student success.

Summary

The need for more effective and influential leadership was critical during such challenging times and work conditions that did not have plans of reverting to pre-pandemic ways of operating. The work dynamic and environment shifted broadly creating new conditions and greater opportunities for effective leadership. Hightower (2018) provided insight into the future of training opportunities for the anticipated dominant makeup of millennials in the workforce by indicating they might be less likely to want training manuals. This suggested that a more innovative approach to learning and professional development that engaged and enhanced the work environment was critical moving forward.

Therefore, the development of a multifaceted distance mentoring program required a methodical approach to implement critical and necessary components of strategy paired with support for higher education professionals to excel in administrator positions. The theories and concepts selected to support the creation of a distance mentoring program were complementary and intentional. The theoretical frameworks addressed the needs of the administrator as it related to holistic support and personalized learning strategies. This design helped jumpstart administrators' ideas and action planning to accomplish great achievements for themselves, their teams, and their organizations.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The distance mentoring program action research project was designed to provide higher education professionals with an opportunity to network, strategize, and implement innovative practices to support their current work environment during challenging times while also creating a heightened level of job satisfaction for the participants. The selection of the distance mentoring program as an action research topic was an effort to address the problems associated with initiative-fatigue and related stress.

Action research is a type of research meant to address a particular problem in order to identify appropriate solutions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The problem should be complex, sizeable, actionable, and situated within the action researcher's local context (Mertler, 2020). There are four stages of action research, which are planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. This cyclical approach to studying a problem and implementing a solution, or intervention, that will ideally address the identified problem and present an opportunity to assess, reflect, and modify for future iterations is an effective approach to research. Due to action research's focus on improving the current conditions, this distance mentoring program study applied the four stages of action research to increase employee development, performance, and action planning within a short timeframe. This study applied a descriptive mixed-methods action research design using both quantitative and qualitative data.

This chapter of the dissertation outlines the methods of data collection and research used to conduct the study. It further highlights the setting used for the action research project, the intervention, the proposed timeline, and research plan including data

sources. This action research inquiry helped to collect, analyze, and interpret data to develop a plan of action for research that aligned with the research questions (Mertler, 2020). The following three research questions (RQ) were used to guide this study:

RQ 1: How and to what extent does the distance mentoring program influence (a) innovation, (b) job satisfaction, and (c) productivity for higher education administrators?

RQ 2: How and to what extent does the implementation of a distance mentoring program stimulate better solutions to a college's efforts which lead to enhanced strategic action planning and educational outcomes for higher education administrators?

RQ 3: What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the extent to which the distance mentoring program helped to develop positive mentoring relationships and enhance professional development?

Using theoretical perspectives and connected concepts of constructivism, social learning theory, change management, mentoring, and transformational leadership, I launched a distance mentoring program aimed at enhancing higher education professionals' levels of engagement and strategic action planning for a more desirable work environment. The elements that follow provide detailed information about the steps taken to conduct the action research.

Intervention

There is a critical need to better support higher education administration in identifying strategies that promote innovation, job satisfaction, and productivity. A dedicated focus on strategic action planning and providing educational outcomes that

increase performance and support professional development will aid in administrators better leading their teams and positively contributing to their institution. There are different ways in which administrators can enhance their work and improve their level of productivity. A distance mentoring program is one way to stimulate personal growth and contribute to the broader needs of the college while expanding an individual's network. The purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of the distance mentoring program with respect to increasing educational outcomes, innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning for higher educational professionals. Three intended outcomes from the study were as follows: engage in meaningful dialogue, identify new ideas, strategies and educational outcomes relevant to departmental needs, and develop a list of action steps to implement within the participants' local context.

The distance mentoring program included a pairing of higher education administrators from two different institutions, one internal to MCCCCD and one external to MCCCCD. The administrators external to MCCCCD were identified from a college where the action researcher established a partnering relationship with the Vice President at the designated institution. The action researcher received advance support from the Vice President and followed Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols in order to reach out to the participants that met the criteria of the study. The pair of administrators participating in the study participated in a 5-week mentoring program designed to help them get better acquainted with someone in a similar role outside of their current network, exchange ideas, and brainstorm immediate and long-term strategies that to help impact positive changes within their respective organization. The distance mentoring program included an orientation session, up to three mentoring sessions scheduled by

each group that were between 30 minutes to one hour per session, and five weekly opportunities for participants to share reflective thoughts about their contributions as a leader in higher education.

The orientation session kicked off the distance mentoring program by providing an opportunity for me, the action researcher, to meet with each group of mentoring pairs to share the learning objectives and key elements of the program. I conducted the orientation session at different times based on the participants' availability, and each session lasted for approximately one hour. The orientation session explained the roles of the participants, which was to both share and receive feedback. The orientation session included a brief training about being a mentor. The information highlighted the mentee and mentor expectations and explained to the participants they would serve dual roles as part of the other mentor model. The orientation session also involved the selection of meeting times based on the predetermined meeting dates to avoid any scheduling conflicts and ensure adherence to the anticipated timeline. Each mentoring pair was able to select their own times. However, throughout the study there were scheduling conflicts that created cancelled or rescheduled sessions. Overall, each group met approximately three times throughout the five weeks for 30 minutes to one hour for each session.

The conclusion of the orientation session involved administering a pre-intervention survey (see Appendix B) for all participants to complete. Six of the eight participants completed the pre-intervention survey. One week following the orientation session, participants attended their first of a three-part series of mentoring sessions. The mentoring sessions were scheduled based on each pair's availability. Each participant's individually shared Google folder had conversation starters (see Appendix C) placed in it

to help the participants get to know one another and engage in a discussion about personal experiences, strategies, and tools. The participants were expected to capture their ideas during each mentoring session in the Plan of Action template (see Appendix D) and build upon those ideas over the next four weeks. Only three of the eight participants filled out the Plan of Action template. Of those who used the template, all of the sections were completed.

Another component of the distance mentoring program was a weekly reflection journal (see Appendix E) to be completed by each participant. This was an individual task for participants to journal their weekly experiences, giving them a chance to capture bright spots or missed opportunities from the week that could have been shared during their next session or addressed during the following week to improve their work conditions. Seven of the eight participants submitted weekly reflections for a total of 21 reflections entered.

At the conclusion of the mentoring sessions, a post-intervention survey (see Appendix F) was administered to all participants to collect their opinions about the effectiveness of the distance mentoring program. Five of the eight participants responded. Three weeks following the last mentoring session, participants were interviewed to further assess their opinions about the effectiveness of the mentoring program as it related to innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning. The interview consisted of four primary questions along with clarifying, follow up questions to gather any additional information the participants wanted to provide (see Appendix G). Seven of the eight participants participated in the interviews.

The distance mentoring program was designed to run a total of five weeks from the orientation with a follow up interview approximately three weeks later. Recruitment for the program began June 2022 and ran throughout the summer to secure participation. The launch of the program commenced in September 2022 and concluded by October 2022. The September date was after the start of the semester and the October date was prior to open registration for the spring 2023 semester according to the Maricopa County Community College District academic calendar. This period of time can be a busy point in the semester for many higher education professionals, in particular, Student Affairs professionals preparing for the next major enrollment cycle and retention of currently enrolled students. The selection of dates and specific timeframe for implementation was to offer the program at a convenient time in the semester for the participants that avoided as many scheduling conflicts as possible. This timeframe for the study was also chosen to be considerate of the amount of time away from direct responsibilities and make it more feasible to participant. Table 1 provides a timeline of events that occurred to implement the study. The table includes the necessary actions and associated outcomes that were completed throughout the implementation process.

Table 1

Timeline of Study Implementation

Timeline	Actions	Outcomes
April 2022	ASU IRB Submission	Received study approval April 25, 2022.

June 2022	Internal Participant Recruitment	Sent an initial recruitment email with a more detailed letter about the study. Confirmed 3 participants from within the Maricopa Community Colleges by June 2022. Sent confirmation emails and calendar invitations for the study.
July 2022	External Mentor Pairing Recruitment	Confirmed 4 participants from outside of the Maricopa Community Colleges and 1 additional internal participant by August, 2022. Sent confirmation emails and calendar invitations for the study.
August 2022	Study Reminder	Sent a follow up email reminder about study and date commitments.
September - October 2022	Distance Mentoring Program Implementation	Program elements were held on each Friday or that week based on availability: 9/2 Orientation Session 9/9 Mentoring Session #1 Weekly Reflection #1 9/16 Weekly Reflection#2 9/23 Mentoring Session #2 Weekly Reflection #3

	9/30	Weekly Reflection #4
	10/7	Mentoring Session #3
		Weekly Reflection #5
	10/28	Interviews
November -	Data Analysis	Reviewed and synthesized all data collected.
December		Drafted study findings.
2022		

Role of the Researcher

Action research can be used to solve educational problems by identifying viable solutions that positively impact change for the local community (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The action research process involves following a series of steps that help to identify the problem, locate resources to address the problem and ultimately, implement a plan of action. An action researcher leads the effort by following the necessary steps, collecting and analyzing data, and working collaboratively with participants to develop and execute the plans. My role as an action researcher was to actively participate in the research process. I did that by developing and collecting quantitative pre-intervention and post-intervention survey data from the participants. I also collected qualitative data by capturing feedback from weekly reflection journal submissions, plan of action template entries, and post-study interviews completed by the participants. Considering this mixed-methods action research study included a smaller, purposive sample size there was greater opportunity as the researcher to be actively involved in the study to ensure the

participants were engaging and connecting at designated times throughout the program to accomplish the intended amount of time devoted to the study.

Research Setting

The Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) is a 10-college district and served as a local context for the study. Two of the 10 colleges are Estrella Mountain Community College (EMCC) and GateWay Community College (GWCC). EMCC is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), where the student body was 67 percent first generation with 55 percent Hispanic, 7 percent Black, and 60 percent female (Estrella Mountain Community College, 2020). In 2019, EMCC celebrated a student headcount that surpassed 10,000 students. Due to extraneous factors from the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment declined during the fall 2020 semester. Similarly, GWCC is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), where the student body was 77 percent enrolled part-time with 47 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Black, and 63 percent female (GateWay Community College, 2021). Despite the pandemic, the need to increase enrollment and retention-based strategies to support student persistence and completion rates continued and remained a primary focus for both institutions. Unfortunately, issues related to the pandemic continued to impact the work environment, requiring critical, creative, and innovative thinking to address college goals.

The two college locations, EMCC and GWCC, were selected due my direct involvement with leaders across the college and their responsibility to support the execution of the college's strategic plans as they related to MCCCD's goals and priorities. There was a direct interest in supporting professional development of directors and above at my college, within MCCCD, and the higher education professional

community to positively influence the outcomes of our collective body of work. For the other mentoring relationship model to exist as part of the distance mentoring program, participants from within MCCCCD were paired with participants external to MCCCCD.

More specifically, the participants external to MCCCCD were affiliated with three institutions that I purposively selected based on my relationships with the administrators at these campuses. The colleges and universities were Arizona State University (ASU), Bergen Community College (BCC), and College of Eastern Idaho (CEI). Table 2 summarizes information about each participant’s institutional profile (Bergen Community College, 2022; College of Eastern Idaho, 2022; Estrella Mountain Community College, 2020; GateWay Community College, 2021; U.S. News, 2022).

Table 2

Institutional Profile

Institution	Location	Type	Enroll ^a	Student Population					
				Age ^b		Academic Load ^c		Race ^d	
				Group	%	%	Group	%	
ASU	Arizona	4-year	64,716	20-21	30.5	–	White	49.5	
BCC	New Jersey	2-year	11,192	>21	56.9	52.6	White	34.0	
CEI	Idaho	2-year	3,225	18-20	27	31.0	White	70.3	
EMCC	Arizona	2-year	9,621	22	-	28.0	Hispanic	58.0	
GWCC	Arizona	2-year	4,699	24	-	77.0	Hispanic	58.0	

Note. This table demonstrates data ranging from the fall semesters of 2019, 2021, and 2022 as provided by each institution.

^a The numbers reflect undergraduate students enrolled in credit courses.

^b EMCC and GWCC provided the average age of their largest student group rather than a percent of their student population.

^c The percent shown reflects full-time enrollment of students in 12 or more credits.

^d The percent listed reflects the largest student group based on race/ethnicity.

Participants

The study focused on participants who had the responsibility of leading others to assess their performance and effectiveness as an administrator. Therefore, the study focused on leaders who played roles in departmental decision-making and impacted divisional operations. To achieve the expected level of work experience and responsibility, I used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling uses an intentional approach to selecting the individual participants in the study (Ivankova, 2015). More specifically, a typical case sampling was used to obtain the right combination of pairings that was “representative of the studied participant group” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 184). This was an ideal approach for the study to gain more depth of information and experiences from the participants. Overall, the study included eight total participants (i.e., four pairs) from different colleges within higher education.

Four of the higher education administrators participating in the study were employees of the Maricopa County Community College District. All MCCCCD participants worked at a director level (grade 121) or above. At MCCCCD, a director level position or above is an exempt, mid-level manager who supervises others, directs the

work of a department with potentially multiple service areas, and participates on both college and district-level committees. For the purpose of this study, I will refer to them as internal participants.

To recruit the internal participants, I created a list of eligible participants from EMCC and GWCC at the director level and above. On May 31 and June 1, 2022, I sent a recruitment email (see Appendix H) with an attached recruitment letter (see Appendix I) via email to the first round of six internal participants requesting their participation in the study. The first round of recruitment included a random selection of three employees on the list from EMCC and three employees on the list from GWCC for a total of six internal requests. I heard back from five of the six employees. Two employees confirmed on June 1, 2022 and one employee confirmed on June 2, 2022. Two employees declined to participate. Due to three initial confirmations from MCCCCD participants, I did not send another round of recruitment emails to the internal pool.

Next, I noted the MCCCCD participants' role, title, and scope of responsibility. Based on their role, title, and scope of responsibility, I reached out to three vice presidents from external colleges to identify individuals from their institution who had similar roles or areas of responsibility as the three confirmed internal MCCCCD participants. I will refer to this set of individuals as external participants. The three vice presidents were selected due to professional connections that were established prior to the start of the study. Based on the vice presidents' recommendations of individuals who matched the internal participants' roles, three external participant names were provided. For all external participants, I sent the recruitment email with an attached recruitment letter. I emailed one of the external participants on June 29, 2022 and received

confirmation on July 7, 2022. I emailed the other two external participants from the same institution on July 15, 2022 and received one of the confirmations on July 20, 2022. I did not hear back from the third external participant by the end of July 2022. I elected to send a follow up email to the third external participant recruitment along with an email to two other external participants from a different institution on August 22, 2022 so that all three internal participants were paired up. Unexpectedly, I received confirmations from two of the three additional external participants for a total of four external participants. As a result, I recruited one additional internal participant from EMCC who had a similar role and title as the external participant. Overall, I confirmed eight total participants by August 29, 2022.

Once the internal and external participants were confirmed, the pairings were finalized. Each of the four internal participants was paired with an external higher education administrator who worked outside of MCCCDC at another college or university, was similarly titled, operated at a comparable level, and worked within the same scope of responsibility. Two of the participants worked in Workforce Development and were paired together based on the similarities of their roles and responsibilities. The remaining six participants worked in the Student Affairs division at their respective institution and were paired together based on the similarities of their roles and responsibilities. All participants varied in age, race, gender, and experience. For more information about the participants' backgrounds, refer to Table 3.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Participant's Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Highest Edu.	Years in H.E.	Years at Inst.	Years in Role	College Affiliate
Affie	Female	White	45-54	Master's	25+	6-10	6-10	Internal
Butch	Male	White	55+	Master's	25+	6-10	11-15	External
Chris	Male	Hispanic	35-44	Doctoral	16-20	> 2	> 2	Internal
Dorothy	Female	White	--	--	--	--	--	External
Eloise	Female	White	35-44	Master's	11-15	11-15	2-5	Internal
Eva	Female	White	--	--	--	--	--	External
Lea	Female	White	35-44	Doctoral	16-20	11-15	> 2	External
Sonny	Male	Hispanic	35-44	Master's	16-20	> 2	> 2	Internal

Note. The + symbol denotes 'more than'; the > symbol denotes 'less than'; the – symbol denotes no value provided; the shading represents the participant pairing of an internal with an external participant.

Data Collection

This mixed-methods action research design incorporated descriptive quantitative data from pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys as well as qualitative data from interviews, weekly reflections, and Plan of Action documents to understand how the distance mentoring program impacted all participants. The list of data sources explains the type of quantitative and qualitative data collected to answer the three research questions posed for this study. Each type of data was requested from all participants.

Pre-Intervention Survey

The pre-intervention survey asked questions to help capture the participants' assessment of their own beliefs and perceptions of their current work environment, and feelings about their contributions and abilities as a leader within their organization. The pre-intervention survey requested demographic data and had 26 questions using multi-point rating scales to capture quantitative data. Portions of the pre-intervention survey were developed by taking information from survey instruments created by authors Raabe and Beehr (2003), The Society for Human Resource Management (n.d.), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2022). The pre-intervention survey included several changes from surveys created by The Society for Human Resource Management and the University of Wisconsin-Madison to better align with the distance mentoring program. The changes were as follows: modifying the rating scales, changing some of the response selection terms, and utilizing a reduced number of questions. In terms of the quality of the original measures, Raabe and Beehr (2003), The Society for Human Resource Management (n.d.), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2022) did not report any information about instrument quality, i.e., reliability or validity. In addition, the modified surveys used as part of this study were not piloted prior to administering to participants involved with this study, nor did I conduct any analyses to determine the validity or reliability of the instruments.

The pre-intervention survey was administered immediately following the orientation session as a Google Form with the link provided in the Google Meet session's chat box as well as emailed to each participant. The responses were anonymous and confidential. Each participant created a unique identifier known only to them, which included the first three letters of their mother's first name and the last four digits of their

phone number. The unique identifier allowed me to match their pre-intervention responses with their retrospective, post-intervention survey responses when analyzing the data. A total of six out of eight participants responded.

Plan of Action Template

The Plan of Action template referred to a separate document created and shared in a Google folder for each participant to use throughout the study. The folder had conversation starters to use when meeting during the mentoring sessions. The folder also provided access to the Plan of Action template. The template included directions for the action planning process, which involved participants discussing an individual or shared workplace challenge. Only the participant and the action researcher had access to the participant's individual folder. During the orientation session, each participant was informed about the intent of the Plan of Action template and confirmed their approval of me reviewing the document throughout the program.

Access to their individual document was sent via email. Two email reminders about the ability to use the Plan of Action template throughout the study were sent at separate times. The Plan of Action template content was anonymous and confidential. The participants used the same coding system described above to track their pre-intervention survey responses. The unique identifier allowed the action researcher to match qualitative and quantitative data collected. Three out of the eight participants completed the Plan of Action template. One participant completed it during week one, a second participant completed it during week two, and the third participant completed it in week 3.

Weekly Reflections

The weekly reflection submissions were collected via a Google Form that captured the participants' leadership, planning ideas, or applied strategies throughout the week. During the orientation session, I informed each participant about the intent of the "Weekly Reflections Google Form." I created five Weekly Reflection Google Forms and sent a Google link for that week's Weekly Reflections Google Form to each participant. A reminder email went out the following week for those who had not submitted. The responses were anonymous and confidential; however, the participants used the same coding system that was described above to track their responses. The study concluded with a final reminder notifying participants to complete their weekly reflections and post-intervention surveys along with a request to meet for the post-intervention interview. There was a total of 21 reflections submitted using the Weekly Reflection Google Form. Seven out of the eight participants submitted weekly reflections with six out of those seven submitting multiple reflections at different weeks throughout the study.

Post-Intervention Survey

The post-intervention survey included 37 questions. Each question used a multi-point rating scale to capture quantitative data. Portions of the post-intervention survey were also taken from survey instruments created by The Society for Human Resource Management (n.d.) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2022) to develop the pre-intervention survey. The post-intervention survey included several changes from surveys created by The Society for Human Resource Management and the University of Wisconsin-Madison sources to align with the distance mentoring program, and included modifying the rating scales, changing some of the response selection terms, and utilizing a reduced number of questions (The Society for Human Resource Management, n.d.;

University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2022). The post-intervention survey developed as part of this study, using elements of the surveys referenced above, was not piloted prior to administering to participants involved with this study.

The post-intervention survey was administered the last of week of the program. A survey link was emailed to each of the participants. The responses were anonymous and confidential; however, the participants used the same coding system as described above to track their post-intervention survey responses. A total of five participants completed the survey. Three of the participants did both the pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys that provided an opportunity to compare their beliefs and opinions prior to and after the distance mentoring program. Four of the participants who completed the post-intervention survey represented two groups of mentoring pairs. The two groups presented the ability to compare each participant's beliefs and opinions against their paired mentor to analyze their levels of agreement or differences in their beliefs and opinions about the mentoring relationship.

Post-Intervention Interviews

Interviews were conducted separately with each participant at the conclusion of the study to gather feedback about the distance mentoring program. I sent an email to each participant requesting an interview with suggested times. Once the date was identified, a calendar invite was sent confirming the date, time, and modality of the interview. During the interview, I confirmed each participant's approval to participate and audio recorded each session using Zoom, an online meeting platform. There were four primary questions along with follow up questions asked to each participant. Each question allowed for an open-ended response to collect qualitative data that was

categorized and analyzed. I captured notes, concepts, and ideas about their experience with the distance mentoring program, opinions about the effectiveness of the program, and suggestions to enhance future iterations of the program. There was a total of seven interviews conducted. For a complete list of the interview questions see Appendix G.

There was a total of five different data sources for the study. Table 4 reflects a tally of involvement by all of the participants who provided data for each data source.

Table 4

Tally of Involvement

	Pre- Intervention Survey	Weekly Reflections	Plan of Action Template	Post- Intervention Survey	Post- Intervention Interview
Number of Participants Providing Data	6	7	3	5	7

Data Analysis

My mixed-methods action research study included both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data included pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys, which I analyzed using descriptive statistics due to the small sample size of the study (Mertler, 2020). More specifically, I used the technique of frequency analysis to examine the similarities and differences between the pre-intervention survey and post-intervention survey results. I used the frequency results to describe the changes in beliefs about the participants’ individual work environment and opinions about mentoring behaviors as well as described the participants’ opinions and beliefs about the mentoring

relationship and distance mentoring program. During the analysis of the quantitative data, I compared the individual pre-intervention (n=6) and post-intervention (n=5) responses. There were two pairs of participants that responded to the post-intervention survey. In addition to examining the individual pre- and post-responses, I compared the two pairs' responses to determine differences and similarities in their opinions about the mentoring relationship.

Qualitative Data Analysis

There were three sources of qualitative data selected due to the potential amount of related content and meaningful messages that could be applicable to my study (Prior, 2008). The sources of data were the Plan of Action template, the weekly reflections submissions, and the interview responses. To analyze the data, I followed a sequential process. I began by coding the Plan of Action template then I coded the weekly reflections to develop the coding frame, which was followed by coding the interview responses.

Plan of Action Data Analysis. To analyze the use of the Plan of Action template, I reviewed each participants' Plan of Action template weekly to determine whether the template was being used to list goals, ideas, action items, and/or resources. Using a deductive approach to conduct a content analysis of the Plan of Action template, I regularly reviewed each participants' Plan of Action template that was found in their individual shared Participant Google folder to assess whether it was used and to what extent. I captured notes about those who fully utilized the template as well as those who did not. I conducted an enumeration of how many participants used the tool and the number of sections used. I then analyzed the data using a deductive approach and

incorporated the interpretations. At the conclusion of the study, three of the eight participants completed the Plan of Action template in its entirety.

Weekly Reflections Data Analysis. The weekly reflections also provided qualitative data that were coded and analyzed using a multi-step content analysis process. I conducted the following steps to develop, deliver, and analyze the weekly reflections. Weekly, I reviewed the submissions to see who responded and what feedback was entered. I captured notes about those who utilized the form and analyzed the data using an inductive, multi-step coding process for content analysis. This approach allows for the spontaneous creation of original codes from the data (Saldana, 2021). The first step of the multi-step coding process involved In Vivo coding. In Vivo Coding can be used for participatory research and qualitative data. In Vivo coding includes pulling direct quotes from each line of the data and “honors the participant’s voice” (Saldana, 2021, p. 138). The codes written during the first cycle of coding only had the first letter of the word capitalized to help keep track between cycles. After the first cycle of coding, I applied the code mapping technique, which grouped the 136 codes into 24 related categories.

To confirm that I captured all relevant codes, I repeated the process of In Vivo coding for the second cycle of coding. As a result, I identified 20 more codes. I went back through the groups to make sure each code was assigned to the appropriate group and determined if another or different group or category was needed. After the second cycle of coding, I decided to use code charting to visually see the grouping of codes by categories and sub-categories. Below is a list of the cycles of coding used for the weekly reflections:

- First cycle: In Vivo Coding or verbatim coding

- Transition process: Code Mapping or grouping of the codes
- Second cycle: In Vivo Coding or verbatim coding (24 hours later)
- Transition process: Code Charting or tabling the codes as a summary

Once the codes were listed via code charting, I went back through each of the sub-categories and used process coding, or what is also referred to as action coding. I added a gerund to each sub-category to put the data into action (Saldana, 2021). There was a total of five categories and 22 sub-categories as a result of reviewing the codes from the weekly reflections. The final step for this portion of the coding process involved reviewing the category and sub-category descriptions to ensure the data reflected my qualitative analysis as observed. This step included developing a coding frame that identified main categories and mutually exclusive sub-categories with definitions, and was used for analysis of the interviews (Flick, 2014).

Post-Intervention Interview Data Analysis. Lastly, each participant was asked to participate in a brief interview. The analysis of the interview process involved analysis and categorization of the the data using Schreier's (2014) eight-step process. The eight-step process is as follows:

1. The first step is selection of the research question(s). For this study, there are three research questions being used to address innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning.
2. The second step is the selection of the material being used, which were the interview responses.

3. The third step is to develop a coding frame that includes a main category and mutually exclusive sub-categories with definitions for each category. The coding frame was built based on the analyses from the weekly reflections.
4. The fourth step is segmentation, which means “applying categories to the entire material in a consistent manner, is an important quality criterion” (Schreier, 2012). This was done by analyzing two rounds of the data at two different points in time.
5. The fifth step is trial coding and it included entering the codes into a coding sheet for further examination.
6. The sixth step is the evaluation process. It involved reviewing the coding that took place for consistency and validity during the data analysis process and making necessary adjustments. The application of this documented process to coding helped provide a quality check.
7. The seventh step in the process is the main analysis and was completed once the coding frame was finalized.
8. The last step in the process involved interpreting and presenting the findings.

Synthesizing and Finalizing the Emerging Codes

After individually coding each type of data as described above, I grouped the emerging qualitative results by common, interrelated codes. Codes are short phrases collected directly from the data source used and can range from being a single word to a page of text based on the relevance to the study (Saldana, 2021). The codes were then grouped into closely related, distinguishing characteristics to make sense of the information shared. The groupings of data were then further arranged into more broadly

related categories that were then organized into two primary themes that succinctly captured all forms of data and feedback from the study. When reporting out my outcomes, the themes refer to the main areas of connection discovered from analyzing all the data and drawing conclusions from the results. The categories and subcategories were the next level of findings that created a tiered approach of organizing the data.

Data Collection and Analysis Summary

This chapter intended to address the method in which the study was conducted. The chapter highlighted the intervention, the role of the researcher, research setting, participants, timeline, and research plan. Table 5 summarizes the data sources and approaches to analyzing the data collected used to answer each research question.

Table 5

Data Sources and Analyses

Research Questions	Data Sources			
	1	2	3	4
#1: Program influence on (a) innovation, (b) job satisfaction, and (c) productivity	Pre-Intervention Survey <i>(descriptive statistics)</i>	Weekly Reflections <i>(content analysis)</i>	Post-Intervention Interview <i>(content analysis)</i>	Post-Intervention Survey <i>(descriptive statistics)</i>
#2: Enhanced strategic action planning and educational outcomes for higher education administrators?	Plan of Action Template <i>(content analysis)</i>	Post-Intervention Survey <i>(descriptive statistics)</i>	Post-Intervention Interview <i>(content analysis)</i>	

#3: Develop positive mentoring relationships and enhanced professional development?	Post-Intervention Survey <i>(descriptive statistics)</i>	Post-Intervention Interview <i>(content analysis)</i>
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The careful outline and structure of this action research plan led to the successful execution of the distance mentoring program during the fall 2022 semester.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This dissertation cycle of research focused on assessing the effectiveness of a distance mentoring program. Although the participants worked at their home institutions, the continuance of a hybrid work environment created the flexibility to implement a distance mentoring program conducted via online platforms. This chapter details how, why, and to what extent the distance mentoring program impacted the participants. The following three research questions (RQ) guided this study:

RQ 1: How and to what extent does the distance mentoring program influence (a) innovation, (b) job satisfaction, and (c) productivity for higher education administrators?

RQ 2: How and to what extent does the implementation of a distance mentoring program stimulate better solutions to a college's efforts which lead to enhanced strategic action planning and educational outcomes for higher education administrators?

RQ 3: What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the extent to which the distance mentoring program helped to develop positive mentoring relationships and enhance professional development?

The study used a mixed-methods action research design to assess the effectiveness of the distance mentoring program. The study included quantitative data in the form of pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys. The qualitative data included the review of a Plan of Action document, weekly reflections, and post-intervention interviews. The sources of data were administered to all participants. For a complete list

of the data sources and how they connect with each of the research questions, refer to Table 5 in chapter 3. This chapter addresses the overarching question of how the distance mentoring program impacted participants. The research project involved the use of the other mentoring model where each individual offered and received feedback as part of the mentoring relationship. Under the model, the participants in this study served in the capacity of being both a mentee and a mentor in order to receive as well as provide mentoring support throughout the program. For the purpose of this study, each individual participating in the mentoring relationship will be referred to as a participant.

Research Question 1: How and to what extent does the distance mentoring program influence (a) innovation, (b) job satisfaction, and (c) productivity for higher education administrators?

This research question aimed to explore the influence of the distance mentoring program on each participant's own beliefs and perceptions about their ability to innovate, their level of job satisfaction, and their increased level of productivity. How the distance mentoring program influenced innovation, job satisfaction, and productivity was assessed using qualitative data from weekly reflections and post-intervention interviews. The extent to which the distance mentoring program influenced the participants' beliefs was measured through quantitative data from the pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys.

Innovation

Innovation was defined in this study as the identification of new or enhanced ideas that directly impacted the participant's work environment. Innovation was measured based on the participant's own beliefs, feedback, and perceptions through the form of

weekly reflections, post-intervention survey responses, and post-intervention interviews. Each participants' innovative idea varied depending on their respective workplace challenge.

Weekly Reflections About Innovation. The weekly reflections were incorporated into the study as a method of collecting timely qualitative data from the participants. This reflective activity was an opportunity for participants to journal the week's events and share their plans moving forward. The participants were able to address an innovative idea with their partner and were asked "What innovative idea did you apply this week?" Six of the seven participants who submitted weekly reflections online shared their innovative idea. "Sonny" did not select a specific idea but shared during the first week "We discussed lots of innovative ideas and will be working through them more next week" (weekly reflection, September 8, 2022). The other participants' responses varied from exploring the development of new programs to reorganizing their division to incorporating more reflective time. "Eloise" reported in her second weekly reflection "My mentor and I had many areas of overlap. She had a wealth of information to share. My innovative idea is to combine credit and noncredit classes" (weekly reflection, September 28, 2022). Eloise submitted two additional reflections that shared her continued focus on noncredit classes. "Chris" was also intentional about building in time to focus on his innovative practice. "Affie" and "Butch," who were paired together, discussed reporting mechanisms related to their areas of oversight and exchanged ideas to generate new ways of operating within their respective departments. Although the ideas were different among each participant, it was evident based on the data collected from the

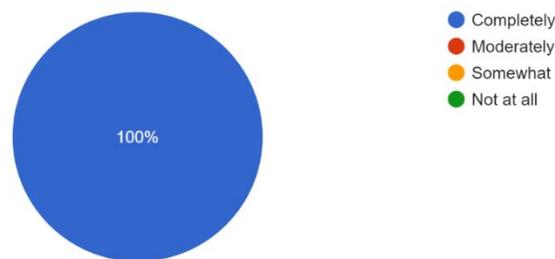
weekly reflections that the time spent during the mentoring sessions presented each one with an opportunity to produce an innovative idea.

Survey Results About Innovation. All five participants who completed the survey responded unanimously that the distance mentoring program helped to generate new ideas or strategies, which was a primary focus for this study. Sonny shared “We had difficulty connecting due to our fluctuating schedules however the conversations we did have were extremely helpful in validating the work, stress, areas to improve, and generating new ideas” (survey, October 14, 2022). Figure 1 represents the participants’ overall opinions about applying new ideas or strategies to their workplace.

Figure 1

Post-Intervention Survey Results About Innovation

To what extent were the mentoring sessions helpful in generating new ideas or strategies?
5 responses



Interview Results About Innovation. The post-intervention interviews were conducted with seven of the eight participants. The data collected from the interviews confirmed much of what the participants’ reflective thoughts expressed throughout the program and provided insight into improving future iterations of the distance mentoring program. During the interviews, I was able to ask more direct questions related to research question one. Participants were asked “Were you able to apply an innovative practice(s) to your work environment following the distance mentoring program? If so,

what innovation(s) did you implement or share with your team?" "Eva" commented on how her conversations with Eloise during the mentoring relationship allowed her to talk about grant opportunities that she "will continue to work on" (interview, October 31, 2022). Three other participants in addition to Eloise and Eva felt the distance mentoring program increased their ability to apply innovative practices. Even though Sonny stated that he was not able to implement an innovative practice, he was able to generate ideas that will support long-range planning. Sonny shared that his team is "limited on staffing and time but it was really cool having that time to figure out how we can approach opportunities with limited resources" (interview, October 24, 2022).

What I gleaned from the interview responses is that the participants appreciated the time to meet with their partner and apply an innovative practice. The innovative practices could have been anything from identifying creative ways to build more planning time into their schedules to developing a new academic program that would be introduced at their respective college. Despite only 57 percent of the participants thinking the program helped with productivity, all of the participants in one way or another expressed that the distance mentoring program led to innovative practices.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction for this study was defined as the level of satisfaction the participant expressed about their current work environment, role, and responsibilities. Job satisfaction was measured based on the participant's own beliefs, feedback, and perceptions. The weekly reflections and survey results provided data to capture the participants' opinions as a result of participating in the distance mentoring program.

Weekly Reflection Results About Job Satisfaction. One of the participants faced significant challenges with their supervisor and acknowledged these challenges in both the weekly reflections and post-intervention interview. Initially, Affie shared the mentoring session conversation stayed very formal and did not dive into the personal aspects of work she was seeking at that time.

Affie shared the following in one of her weekly reflections “I found that the conversation during our meeting was more on the formal side, and didn't really lend to having relaxed and open conversations. I appreciate the opportunity to have these connections, however I don't think that the short time frame in weeks and short meetings allow enough time to build the rapport that would open up to honest and more direct conversation. I am experiencing that the conversation really stays at the institutional level with the same challenges being experienced, the personal perspective/satisfaction is not shared” (October 6, 2022).

Her opinions and feedback evolved over time. During the post-intervention interview, Affie shared more about how she was able to safely express concerns during the mentoring session and appreciated the personal aspect of her mentoring relationship. Affie's workplace challenge ended up being about changing careers. Although her workplace challenge was motivated by her experiences at work, it was a personal change rather than an institutional change. The distance mentoring program provided her an opportunity to share and gather reinforcement about her decision to pursue a different career. The support from her mentor increased her confidence regarding her decision to leave and unintentionally contributed to her level of job satisfaction.

When Sonny was asked “Did any action, decision, or advice contribute to increased job satisfaction?” in the Weekly Reflection form, he responded early in the mentoring relationship with “Absolutely. I found inspiration knowing that other organizations are having the same challenges but still committed to making a difference” (weekly reflection, September 8, 2022). Eloise also responded with “Yes. It is fun to explore different ways to improve programs. It feels invigorating” (weekly reflection, October 7, 2022). Chris agreed to the question and wrote “Yes, commitment to my focus time has helped me with more organized information to move quicker on some of my decision making” (weekly reflection, October 5, 2022). The following week his response was strengthened and continued to affirm his increased level of job satisfaction. “Yes, I had a stronger sense of accomplishment, I was able to check items off my to do list in various areas of interest” (Chris, weekly reflection, October 10, 2022). Of the 18 weekly reflections submitted in response to the weekly reflection question about increased job satisfaction, 16 responses reflected that the participants did experience an increase in job satisfaction. The two responses submitted that did not indicate an increase were from the same participant. She indicated that it was due to increased frustrations on the job. Based on the data collected over the duration of the program, there was significantly more feedback about how job satisfaction increased, which would indicate that the mentoring relationship as part of the distance mentoring program was able to influence levels of job satisfaction.

Survey Results About Job Satisfaction. The pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys provided quantitative data to determine the extent of any changes in the participants’ work environment throughout the duration of the distance mentoring

program. The pre-intervention survey had two sections and the post-intervention survey had five different sections. The first section for both surveys was labeled as “Work Environment” and had 11 workplace factors for participants to assess their level of job satisfaction. The 11 workplace factors were selected to determine areas in the workplace where participants felt more satisfied and areas of opportunity to explore further when implementing future iterations of the distance mentoring program.

When reviewing the group’s pre-intervention and post-intervention survey scores for the Work Environment, the mean score increased for each survey question with the exception of the “networking opportunities” score. The lower post-intervention score (mean=4.0) from the slightly higher pre-intervention score (mean=4.16) indicated the participants felt slightly less satisfied about networking opportunities after participating in the study. However, the mean score indicated that overall, the participants were still satisfied with the amount networking opportunities at work.

In comparing individual and group pre-intervention and post-intervention survey responses, the area of trust among team members increased the most at the conclusion of the study. The survey results about trust indicated a greater level of importance by the participants, which reinforced the need to build that component into professional development opportunities in the future. The next three categories, “Immediate supervisor’s respect for your ideas,” “Autonomy and independence to make decisions,” and “Meaningfulness of job” received relatively close pre- and post-intervention survey mean scores. All three post-intervention survey scores increased indicating that the supervisor’s respect, autonomy in the workplace, and levels of meaningfulness are critical factors to job satisfaction. The post-intervention survey score that received the

highest level of satisfaction was “variety of work.” It had the highest post-intervention score (mean=4.8) and increased by .64 points. The score suggests this factor is of great importance to the participants. Table 6 demonstrates the mean group scores from the pre-intervention survey (n=6) and post-intervention survey (n=5) for each segment of the Work Environment section.

Table 6

Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention Survey Results for Work Environment

Work Environment	Pre-	Post-
Trust between employee team members	3.0	4.2
Immediate supervisor’s respect for your ideas	4.16*	4.6
Autonomy and independence to make decisions	3.83*	4.4
Meaningfulness of job	4.16	4.4
Variety of work	4.16	4.8
Career development opportunities	3.83*	4.0*
Networking opportunities	4.16*	4.0*
Overall job satisfaction	3.83*	4.2

Note. An asterisk (*) indicates a score of 2 or less was given by at least one of the participants.

The fact that the participants’ Work Environment scores increased over time and all participants stated the mentoring sessions were helpful indicated that participation in the distance mentoring program was beneficial.

Productivity

Productivity was defined as the number of projects or tasks an individual was able to accomplish within set deadlines. Productivity was measured based on the employee's own beliefs, feedback, and perceptions. The weekly reflections and interview responses provided data to analyze the levels of productivity.

Weekly Reflection Results About Productivity. When asked about a shining moment from the past week, Chris wrote “the attention to time and reminder helps in handling the unforeseen things that come into play during the week...and it is helping my time feel more manageable” (weekly reflection, October 5, 2022). All of the participants expressed challenges related to time within their work environment. They appreciated what the program offered and described the experiences as “invigorating,” “very rewarding,” and “validating.” Focus time also referred to as “reflection” time, “planning” time, and “me” time was frequently mentioned as needed for the participants and others within their work environment to be at their best. Butch shared “We both have been carrying out our responsibilities but find it hard to be able to focus on any one thing when so many other things creep into view and then requires a shift in focus” (weekly reflection, October 10, 2022). The participants wanted more time to reflect, plan, prioritize, and execute. All of them expressed that they were too bogged down with the day-to-day operations, however, the additional time found during the mentoring sessions helped several of the participants increase their productivity.

Interview Results About Productivity. Participants were asked “Do you believe you are more productive as a result of participating in the distance mentoring program?” Four of the participants stated with certainty that they were more productive. Dorothy shared “Yes. I was more productive. It grounded me” (interview, October 24, 2022).

Chris responded with “It allowed me to reflect on my current workspace, reminding myself that I need to develop intentional time to make the progress that I want to make; not only for me individually as a professional, but also for my team” (interview, October 24, 2022). Sonny shared it was “re-engaging” and “refreshing” (interview, October 24, 2022). There were, however, three of the seven participants who responded that the program did not increase their productivity. Eloise did not believe the program made her any more productive. Instead, she felt more creative and gained new ideas that she planned to bring to her college.

Although no definitive data was collected to confirm an overall agreement about the program’s influence on productivity, there was sufficient data to draw findings that the distance mentoring program served as a way of enhancing or reinforcing their ability to innovate and improve job satisfaction.

Research Question 2: How and to what extent does the implementation of a distance mentoring program stimulate better solutions to a college’s efforts which lead to enhanced strategic action planning and educational outcomes for higher education administrators?

Research question 2 was asked to determine whether or not the distance mentoring program aided in the participants being able to conduct short-term action planning and obtain learned practices that directly aligned with and supported advancing their work at the college. The method of collecting feedback came from three sources, which were the Plan of Action template, the post-intervention survey, and post-intervention interview.

Plan of Action Template Results

The Plan of Action template was shared with each of the participants to use as a planning document. Three of the eight participants completed the document in its entirety by filling out the workplace challenge, goals, and supplemental information sections. In all instances, the three participants did not appear to edit or add new comments after their initial submission but rather referenced working toward their identified goals and action steps during the weekly reflections. Below is feedback from the participants who utilized the Plan of Action template.

Butch focused his workplace challenge on a departmental need that would result in process improvement. He listed action items that involved communicating and interacting with other key stakeholders. His list of resources included a review of existing documents. Butch noted “Inescapable Engagement opportunities” to use as a resource or tool for the identified workplace challenge (Plan of Action template, September 15, 2022).

Chris listed his workplace challenge as bringing stability to the work environment due to leadership changes and competing interests. His focus was on personal practices to manage time and priorities. Chris listed three resources to assist with accomplishing his action items (Plan of Action template, September 23, 2022).

Eloise listed her workplace challenge as implementing a new academic program, which was also referenced at the beginning of the study in one of her weekly reflections. Eloise maintained this topic as a workplace challenge and identified action items that included following up with campus leadership to explore new opportunities to implement. Time was noted as a key resource for Eloise, which was a recurring theme throughout the study. Eloise shared in her Plan of Action template that she “would like it

if she [partner] could connect me with some key players” (Plan of Action template, September 28, 2022).

Upon analysis of the other five participants’ folder, three of the participants did not show any indication of going into their folder. Whereas, two of the participants went into it but did not use the template. The post-intervention survey asked the participants to what extent did the Plan of Action template help in collecting ideas and strategies. Three, or 60%, of the participants responded that it was moderately helpful and two, or 40%, of the participants responded somewhat helpful. The two that responded somewhat helpful did not noticeably utilize the template available in their folder.

Due to findings paired from the post-intervention survey with the post-intervention interviews, the participants’ feedback indicated the Plan of Action template was not helpful. Ironically, during the interviews, the participants who did not use the Plan of Action template appeared to provide contradictory feedback. The participants offered suggestions for improvement that were found in the Plan of Action template. Had the Plan of Action template’s instructions been clearer and accessed by the participants who did not complete it, there would have been potential to address some of their questions related to identifying a workplace challenge or the process for conducting short-term action planning. Despite the low percentage of participants who used the template, the use of the template appeared to be effective for those who used it by stimulating new ideas and capturing key information that led to actionable results.

Survey Results

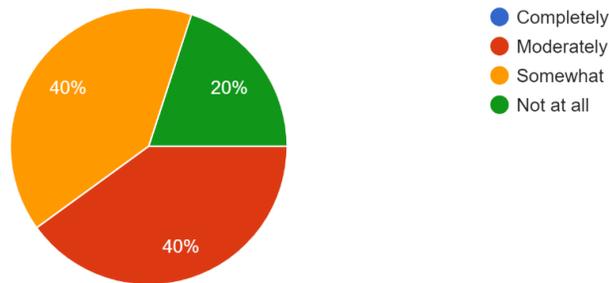
The post-intervention survey included a question about the use of the conversation starters provided at the start of the program and a question about the use of

the Plan of Action template. The participants were asked “To what extent were the conversation starters helpful in stimulating dialogue?” There was a mixture of responses with 40% indicating “moderately” agree, 40% indicating “somewhat” agree, and 20% indicating “not at all” (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Post-Intervention Survey Results About Conversation Starters

To what extent were the conversation starters helpful in stimulating dialogue?
5 responses



To couple with the quantitative data collected, Dorothy indicated that her group did not need the conversation starters. During her interview, she followed up by clarifying they were able to hold conversations with ease and prompts were not necessary.

Another question asked in the post-intervention survey was “To what extent did the Plan of Action template help in collecting ideas and strategies?” The responses were split with 60% indicating moderately agree and 40% indicating somewhat agree. There was a limited amount of data pulled from the survey responses. However, the content analysis from the Plan of Action template and survey results provided a sufficient amount of data to draw conclusions that the tools could be more effective with some modifications for future iterations of the program.

Interview Results

During the interviews, each participant was asked the question “What have you been working on since the completion of the distance mentoring program as it relates to executing your Plan of Action?” Butch felt that carrying out the responsibilities and action items were intuitive, particularly due to his years of experience and comfort with organically executing responsibilities (interview, October 31, 2022). Dorothy’s feedback was presented as a more prescriptive approach. She shared that the distance mentoring program in addition to meeting with her mentor helped reinforce the need for goal setting. In particular, she focused on more short-term, actionable goals. Dorothy implemented “goal setting at the beginning of the week and reflection at the end of the week” (interview, October 28, 2022).

Upon review of the participants’ feedback during the interviews, specifically those who did not use the Plan of Action template, greater clarity by the action researcher around the purpose of the tool should be addressed in future iterations of the study. This clarity could aid in greater use of the tools which in turn would further increase the identification and planning of viable solutions for the workplace. There were several comments made by multiple participants that indicated there was great interest, willingness, and ability to operationalize their plans. All of the participants’ expressed great interest in their work and presented a heightened level of responsibility to produce. The distance mentoring program assisted with that increased level of production. Based on the recurring comments about the participants’ ability to mobilize their work, the distance mentoring program helped to stimulate better solutions.

Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the extent to which the distance mentoring program helped to develop positive mentoring relationships and enhance professional development?

The third research question sought to identify the overall effectiveness of the distance mentoring program. This question was selected to examine the participants' opinions about the mentoring relationship and their overall perception of how it enhanced their professional development. To answer this question, qualitative data from the post-intervention survey along with the post-intervention interviews were analyzed. The key findings helped identify areas where modifications to the study could be incorporated into future iterations of the study in order to enhance the mentoring relationship and overall effectiveness of the program.

Survey Results

The post-intervention survey is an expanded version of the pre-intervention survey. Where the post-intervention survey differed from the pre-intervention survey was that it included three additional sections. Two of the added sections were about the mentoring relationship from both participants' perspective. This presented feedback on how the participant perceived their contributions and their partner's contributions to the mentoring relationship. The third section of the survey was about the overall effectiveness of the distance mentoring program. The reason for adding the three sections was to determine whether the perceptions of each participant differed from their partner and to gain additional insight about the mentoring relationship.

There were six participants who completed the pre-intervention survey and five participants who completed the post-intervention survey. Two pairs of the mentoring

groups completed the post-intervention survey providing an opportunity to compare their responses against each other and assess their levels of agreement about the mentoring relationship. The results and key findings from the survey responses as they related to the mentor behaviors and the mentoring relationship are listed below.

Mentor Behaviors. The section on “Mentor Behaviors” was administered during both the pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys. This section took an individual look at the participants’ perceptions about mentor behaviors to evaluate whether or not there were any changes as a result of participating in the program. There was a total of 17 mentor behaviors listed that asked the participants to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being a score of very unimportant and 5 being a score of very important. When reviewing the data, 14 of the mentor behaviors received an increased mean score. The two areas that received a lower mean score with at least one of the participants giving a score of 2 or less were “considering the other one to be a friend” (pre-intervention mean=3.3, post-intervention mean=2.8) and “establishing a relationship based on trust” (pre-intervention mean=4.7, post-intervention mean=4.6). Upon review of the quantitative data and comparing it with the qualitative data collected at the end of the post-intervention survey, the amount of time available for the participants to develop a significant relationship could have contributed to the decreased scores. In particular, the mentor behavior of considering the other one to be a friend seemed to be more challenging for two of the groups due to scheduling conflicts and limited meeting session times. “I scored some of the areas in the survey low, not because we couldn’t have gotten to a place of friendship or trust etc but there wasn’t enough time to feel like I could focus on those elements”

(Eloise, post-intervention survey, October 7, 2022). This challenge could be addressed with more mentoring sessions over a longer period of time.

Another key finding stemmed from the two scores that had the greatest change over the course of the program. The mentor behavior of “mentor helps to coordinate professional goals” increased by .90 points with a pre-intervention mean score of 3.5 and a post-intervention mean score of 4.4. Having someone else to speak with in confidence proved valuable for the participants and was expressed as nearly very important. The second mentor behavior that increased its mean score by .80 points with a pre-intervention mean score of 3.8 and a post-intervention mean score of 4.6 was “stimulating creativity.” The increase in scores indicated a heightened level of importance by the participants about seeking out opportunities such as the distance mentoring program to identify and set goals for personal and professional development as well as use the mentoring relationship to spark new ideas or enhanced ways of operating.

A third key finding was that two of the mentor behaviors received mean scores of 5, indicating that all of the participants who completed the post-intervention survey believed that “active listening” and “providing constructive feedback” were very important mentor behaviors after participating in the study. This finding reinforces the types of expectations that should be established early on in the program for future iterations to ensure these critically-identified mentor behaviors are emphasized.

The mentor behaviors of “Employing strategies to improve communication within the mentoring relationship” and “Understanding impact as a role model” did not have a change in mean score. The remaining nine scores had a slight increase in their rating ranging from .1 to .6 increase in their score. This indicates that participants’

positive opinions or emphasis on mentor behaviors increased as a result of participating in the distance mentoring program. For more information about the results of the Mentor Behavior section see Table 7.

Table 7

Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention Survey Results for Mentor Behaviors

Mentor Behaviors	Pre-	Post-
Sharing workplace problems	4.2	4.6
Exchanging confidences	4.3	4.6
Considering the other one to be a friend	3.3*	2.8*
Mentor gives mentee special coaching on the job	3.7*	3.8
Mentor helps to coordinate professional goals	3.5*	4.4
Mentor devotes special time and consideration to mentee's workplace challenges	4.2	4.4
Active listening	4.8	5
Providing constructive feedback	4.8	5
Establishing a relationship based on trust	4.7	4.6*
Employing strategies to improve communication within the mentoring relationship	4.2	4.2*
Working to set clear expectations within the mentoring relationship	4.0	4.4*
Helping develop strategies to meet goals	4.2	4.2*
Motivating to meet goals	4.00	4.6*
Building confidence	4.00	4.2*

Stimulating creativity	3.8*	4.6
Understanding impact as a role model	3.8	3.8*
Helping to acquire resources	3.7*	4.2

Mentoring Relationship. The third section of the post-intervention survey focused specifically on the mentoring relationship. There was a total of 11 questions asked about their “Mentor’s Skills.” For the purpose of the study, the mentor was identified as the participant’s partner in the mentoring relationship. The same set of 11 questions were repeated with the second round of focus on the participants’ opinions about their own skills in the mentoring relationship, which was labeled as “Your Skills.” Five of the participants completed the survey, with four of the participants being from the same two groups. For eight of the 11 categories, all participants felt as though the mentor had higher skills than their own skill as a mentee. Two of the categories about “motivating to meet goals” and “building confidence” had the same scores for each paired group.

When comparing scores from group 2, both participants felt similarly about their working relationship. On the contrary, group 3 had slightly different scores about each other’s experiences in a number of areas regarding the mentoring relationship. Where one participant scored higher for their own skills, their mentee’s score for the same response was lower. This particular group’s responses may have been attributed to their difficulties with scheduling mentoring sessions as well as their differences in preferred meeting times. Table 8 displays the mean scores for how the participants rated their mentor’s skills versus their own.

Table 8*Post-Intervention Survey Results for Mentoring Relationship*

Mentoring Relationship	MENTOR	YOUR
Active listening	4.6	4.4
Providing constructive feedback	4.4	4.0
Establishing a relationship based on trust	3.4	3.6
Employing strategies to improve communication within the mentoring relationship	3.6	3.4
Working to set clear expectations within the mentoring relationship	3.6	3.4
Helping develop strategies to meet goals	4.0	3.6
Motivating to meet goals	3.6	3.6
Building confidence	3.6	3.6
Stimulating creativity	4.6	4.2
Understanding impact as a role model	4.0	3.8
Helping to acquire resources	4.2	3.8

Note. This table demonstrates the mean group scores from the post-intervention survey (n=5).

There were two additional survey questions asked that are worth acknowledging to address the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. One question was “To what extent were the conversation starters helpful in stimulating dialogue?” This question received a mixed response (see Figure 2 above). I found these findings necessary to investigate further because the conversation starters were shared during the orientation

session at the start of the study and placed in each participant's shared Participant Google folder. The survey scores indicated a low preference for the conversation starters and a low belief in their helpfulness despite comments arising in the interviews about wanting more instructions about the program and an opportunity to learn more about their paired mentor. The conversation starters (see Appendix C) were a series of questions to spark a dialogue and were intended to help the participants get to know one another better. This feedback presented another opportunity to enhance the messaging and clarify the expectations.

The second survey question asked "To what extent did the mentoring program meet your expectations?" Three of the participants responded with completely and two of the respondents responded moderately. The two that responded moderately were from the same group and both indicated there was difficulty with meeting due to different time zones and scheduling conflicts. Eloise shared "I like the idea of the Distance Mentoring Program and I thought my match had a lot to give...I like the idea of being paired with someone from a different state however it was difficult to navigate busy schedules and large time zone differences" (post-intervention survey, October 7, 2022).

Other Feedback. The post-intervention survey provided participants the opportunity to share additional feedback. Many of the comments reiterated key findings noted above regarding scheduling conflicts, a desire to meet for a longer period of time, and a strong consensus that the distance mentoring program was a great idea. Several of the participants indicated they would have appreciated the program to run longer in order to build greater rapport. The final survey question "To what extent did the distance mentoring program meet your expectations?" received favorable responses. There was a

60% response rate for completely agreeing and 40% response rate for moderately agreeing. Additional comments were made in the open-ended feedback section. One of the participants stated “Although both parties were supposed to be mentors, I still very much felt like I was the mentee (which was great) but my partner had so much experience it was hard not to feel that way” (Eloise, post-intervention survey, October 7, 2022). She added “I felt very driven by looking for the issue or project to focus on rather than getting to the know the other mentor” (post-intervention survey, October 7, 2022). Another participant shared “It was great to build a connection and have someone to talk to in such a relatable space. We will continue our meetings and connection after the formal programming is completed” (Chris, post-intervention survey, October 10, 2022).

Eva shared “I appreciated the opportunity to work with someone in a similar field in a different part of the country” (post-intervention survey, October 13, 2022). Despite time conflicts, the opportunity to participate outweighed the scheduling challenges. All of the data collected as part of the survey confirmed that the distance mentoring program had a positive impact on the mentoring relationship.

Interview Results

The post-intervention interviews were conducted with seven of the eight participants. The data collected reflected an overall positive response to the distance mentoring program and the effects of the mentoring relationship. After analyzing the data, the theme of making strategic connections emerged due to a number of statements about the benefits of meeting and dialoguing with another higher education administrator. Each participant also expressed that being part of the program was worthwhile and they had plans of staying connected with their partner beyond the program. Butch shared “I

got a lot out of knowing that I am not alone. She [partner] felt the same way. For me, it was more of an exchange of ideas. Creating a space to be innovative and validated. I have a friend now that will hopefully remain in touch” (interview, October 31, 2022). Each of the participants indicated there was some element of similarity in their work and/or workplace challenges. “We're all pretty much the same regardless of what part of the country. We're doing this good work at community colleges. Everyone's challenges may be a bit different but their underlying issues are the same” (Eva, interview, October 31, 2022).

Some of the feedback received mentioned creating additional time for the participants to meet in advance to get to know each other. There was a suggestion to offer a pre-program questionnaire or information sheet that highlighted more about the other mentor’s interests and experiences. The participants wanted more of an opportunity to connect on the personal side. Some groups were able to do that sooner and easier than others but collectively, it was noted as an important aspect of the program. Affie suggested building in “some structure, but not complete. Having wiggle room there, or even topics that could bring up more of the personal side, and not so much on the job focus and the goal side. More of the emotion” (interview, October 28, 2022). This personal aspect of the mentoring relationship lends to more comfortable sharing, provides a break from the regular day-to-day operations, and diverts from the expected business conversations that many of the participants experience on a regular basis. A reflective comment by Chris was that he discovered in the distance mentoring program was “my tool is me. I’ve re-energized the focus” (interview, October 24, 2022). Chris’ remark was another poignant comment that captured what the distance mentoring program set out to

accomplish, which was provide an opportunity for self-discovery that fueled innovative, productive, and strategic outcomes in higher education.

Summary of Research Analysis

There was a wealth of information collected from the qualitative and quantitative data sources that both confirmed the success of the program and provided great insight into improving the structure for the next phases of implementation. Throughout the study, common words and phrases centered around establishing trust, improving communication, and creating clear expectations were frequently stated by the participants. All of the key findings focused my attention around two main areas, strategic connections and strategic management, to generate ideas for the next iteration of the distance mentoring program.

There are a number of opportunities in which this study could be expanded to positively impact employees within my local context and the higher education community. I believe the implementation of a distance mentoring program on a broader scale is essential, and this first version was a successful start to connecting higher education administrators as they embarked on their journey to impact change.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

My work in higher education has been motivated by a desire to implement student success programs and services for students to achieve their educational goals while concurrently advocating for employees to obtain the necessary professional development and growth to be positive and productive contributors to the work environment. As a higher education administrator, it is essential to understand the varying theoretical frameworks surrounding leadership and organizational development. I wanted to apply this knowledge and understanding to my local context because on many occasions I observed a disconnect between various senior leaders' vision with the execution of the goals and objectives of the organization. This driving force remained a priority and area of interest as I assumed different leadership roles in higher education.

My action research project evolved over the course of the dissertation process. The first two cycles of research focused on developing a first semester experience for new college students and the training necessary for higher education professionals to best serve students. As I conducted more research and reviewed the findings from the first two cycles, it was confirmed that there was a need for a positive student experience but equally important, an intentional focus on the employee experience and their professional development. As a result of these discoveries, the direction of my study was influenced heavily and I made a pivotal change in what I wanted to explore and how I wanted to impact my local context.

This change in focus led me to administering a distance mentoring program for higher education administrators. The distance mentoring program was an action research

project that ran a total of 5 weeks and had eight higher education professionals paired into four groups of two in order to foster a mentoring relationship. The study began with an orientation session that presented an opportunity for each pair of participants to meet one another and review the expectations of the distance mentoring program. The orientation followed with a series of mentoring sessions with the opportunity for short-term action planning. After the mentoring sessions concluded, approximately three weeks following the last scheduled mentoring session, an individual interview was conducted with each participant. The purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of the distance mentoring program with respect to increasing educational outcomes, innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning for higher education professionals. Three research questions were answered as part of this study.

RQ 1: How and to what extent does the distance mentoring program influence (a) innovation, (b) job satisfaction, and (c) productivity for higher education administrators?

RQ 2: How and to what extent does the implementation of a distance mentoring program stimulate better solutions to a college's efforts which lead to enhanced strategic action planning and educational outcomes for higher education administrators?

RQ 3: What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the extent to which the distance mentoring program helped to develop positive mentoring relationships and enhance professional development?

The opportunity to meet with and connect higher education professionals from across the country with one another was a great experience. There was an extensive amount of

research findings that stemmed from the qualitative and quantitative data collected. There were lessons learned that were instrumental in identifying modifications to enhance future iterations of the program.

Summary of Research Findings

The development of the distance mentoring program was exciting due to its potential effect on operational efficiency, strategic action planning, and most importantly, employee success. The information, literature, and research gathered from colleges and professional organizations across the country indicated positive impacts on employee development and organizational culture from a mentoring program. There are foundational elements to the employee experience that must be in place to support employees and organizations. The implementation of a distance mentoring program that incorporated intentional conversation starters to initiate dialogue, brainstorming, planning, and supportive measures by each participant aimed to deliver the social and strategic elements necessary to achieve a more positive, productive, and successful work environment.

Research Questions

In response to answering research question one about the influence of (a) innovation, (b) job satisfaction, and (c) productivity for higher education administrators, I found the distance mentoring program was successful in generating innovative thoughts relevant to the participant's workplace challenge. The participants shared in their weekly reflections and interviews about how they were able to apply an innovative practice and planned to continue working on what they identified. I also found there was an increase in job satisfaction due to being able to dialogue with another colleague who faced similar

challenges and provided thoughtful feedback in a safe space. My findings about productivity were inconclusive. I received mixed reviews about the effectiveness of the tools and realized that clarity around their use was needed.

In response to answering how and to what extent does the implementation of a distance mentoring program stimulate better solutions to a college's efforts which lead to enhanced strategic action planning and educational outcomes for higher education administrators, I found the distance mentoring program was successful in supporting strategic action planning. There were opportunities to improve communication and clarify expectations but overall, the implementation of a distance mentoring program was valuable. In response to answering what are the perceptions of the participants regarding the extent to which the distance mentoring program helped to develop positive mentoring relationships and enhance professional development, there was unanimous agreement from those who responded that the program was worth participating in and appreciated the opportunity to connect with members of the higher education community external to their local context.

Synthesis of Data

The distance mentoring program captured a great amount of data from five different sources of qualitative and quantitative data. Two main themes emerged upon analysis of the qualitative data. I found it meaningful to group the data into a coding framework that featured the two themes and their respective categories and sub-categories to capture the data in a succinct and organized manner. The coding framework synthesizes all of the key findings from the three qualitative data sources and infuses analysis from the quantitative data. The themes and categories are referred to in greater

context throughout the next sections of this chapter. Table 9 displays the coding framework with an extended version of all codes in Appendix J.

Table 9

Coding Framework

Themes	Strategic Connections		Strategic Management		
Categories	Effects of Collaborating	Impact of Dialogue	Ability to Operationalize	Impediments of Work	Self-Direction
Sub-Categories	Exploring Ideating Improving Planning Sharing	Affirming Confirming Motivating	Communicating Managing Producing Reminding Supervising	Conflicting Feeling Frustrating Lacking	Committing Goal Setting Focusing Prioritizing Reflecting

Strategic Connections. When analyzing the data, strategic connections focused directly on comments and feedback surrounding outcomes related directly to the mentoring relationship that occurred between the two participants. It was evident after hearing from the participants and analyzing the data that there were direct benefits from being able to connect with another higher education professional who shared similar experiences. Under strategic connections, there were two categories that best reflected the key areas of the mentoring relationship. The categories were labeled as the *effects of collaborating* and the *impact of dialogue*.

Effects of collaborating. The first category under strategic connections, effects of collaborating, had 30 different yet related codes that represented the participants' views about the importance and opportunity to *explore, ideate, improve, plan, and share*. These five areas were identified as sub-categories and collectively, identified the participants'

opinions about being able to use the mentoring sessions as time to connect and share resources. The types of resources varied based on the relationship and workplace challenges but there was consistent mention from the participants about the benefits of being able to “bounce ideas off” of one another, have a “discussion and exchanging experiences”, and “explore different ways” of operating. This was a significant finding, and essential grouping of data, to emphasize the importance of being able to explore and share ideas in a safe environment. All of this feedback led to identifying the effects of collaborating as a key finding.

Impact of dialogue. The second category, impact of dialogue, was identified due to the numerous comments about the benefits of being able to meet and hold a series of conversations with another higher education professional. This method of sharing was expressed as “rewarding” and “validating” on numerous occasions and the sub-categories grouped under the category of impact of dialogue were *affirming*, *confirming*, and *motivating*. The participants expressed gratitude about being able to share their situation and listen to each other’s circumstances. There was repeated feedback about how it was refreshing to know that someone else was experiencing similar challenges or had advice to offer based on past experiences.

As an example, participant Eloise shared in one of her weekly reflections “My mentor validated... We have been looking at apprenticeships in multiple areas at the college but this piece of information was helpful in narrowing the industry focus. I do feel energized after I hear what the larger college has in place.”

(September 30, 2022).

There were more than 30 codes from the weekly reflections that captured the participants' appreciation for being able to dialogue with someone in a similar role. The codes also captured the participants' recognition of shared or like experiences and levels of encouragement stemming from the mentoring sessions.

Strategic Management. Where strategic connections focused on the mentoring relationship and ability for participants to dialogue with each other, strategic management emerged as a primary theme due to the amount of data and codes developed related to the actual work to be performed. This theme points to the comments made about the individual, collective, and institutional needs in order to effectively execute the work. These needs stem from a combination of management and leadership, and the participants' shared a lot of great feedback around gaps in their current environment that limits their ability to do the work along with areas of opportunity to contribute and implement more ideas.

Ability to Operationalize. Under strategic management, three main categories emerged. The first one is the *ability to operationalize*, which calls attention to what is needed to shape strategies and drive execution. The ability to operationalize consistently aligns with being able to effectively communicate, manage, produce, and hold individuals accountable.

Impediments of Work. There were a variety of challenges expressed by the participants with some being examples specific to their administration such as lacking resources, trust, or the capacity to perform. Others expressed personal effects such as feeling down, increased frustration, or competing interests. These comments are identified as *impediments of work* and are potential roadblocks to organizations

performing at their best. The impediments require additional attention to successfully mobilize the individual's contributions that will lead to organizational success.

Self-Direction. The third and final category under strategic management is *self-direction*. This relates to the participants' need for more time. Time was a word that came up repeatedly and was referred to in multiple forms including time to focus, time to plan, time to prioritize, or time to reflect. This was probably the most expressed word as both a positive and a negative statement. Therefore, self-direction, which has sub-categories such as goal setting, focusing and prioritizing, is an area that cannot be overlooked when exploring next steps and future iterations of the distance mentoring program.

Quality of Data

Sapsford (2007) highlights several terms connected with validity, which means the data corresponds with what you think it will do. Reliability is a different but related factor that is also used to assess the effectiveness of a survey instrument. By administering the pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys twice, I was able to check for validity (results are as intended) and reliability (similar over time). The validity of the quantitative data was confirmed by triangulation. By following the eight-step content analysis process that built in trial and main analysis steps, I was able to maintain the credibility and quality of the research.

Another aspect of ensuring quality data is the rigor of the action research, which is "typically associated with validity and reliability in quantitative studies" and also associated "with accuracy, credibility, and dependability in qualitative studies" (Mertler, 2020, p. 27). Two ways in which rigor was represented in this study was from the experience of the action researcher with the process and polyangulation of the data

(Mertler, 2020). My experiences within higher education include the past 10 years serving on a women's mentor program planning committee that assists women employees within the Maricopa County Community College District. As a planning committee member, I am experienced with developing learning objectives and aligning them with the appropriate sessions to support emerging women leaders who want to gain additional professional development.

I also designed an employee-student mentoring program to support student retention and completion efforts, and to enhance both the student and employee experience. Along with my professional experience, the different cycles of action research throughout the project provided additional experience with the subject matter that led to greater confidence in establishing rigor. Rigor was also enhanced through triangulation, which uses the multiple sources of data and information being collected (Mertler, 2020). This study used multiple instruments that were analyzed and summarized to capture the changes and effective elements of the distance mentoring program. The combination of sound professional experiences by the action researcher and the diverse collection of data led to a rigorous and quality action research project.

Affirmations from Research Connections

In preparation for the study, several connected concepts and research studies were examined and explained in chapter two to support the development of the distance mentoring program. As I explored the design and anticipated outcomes, I focused on critical components of leadership including change management, mentoring, and a growth mindset. I felt each of these areas were important aspects leaders needed to incorporate into their work and professional development during an evolving and

tumultuous time in higher education. Upon synthesis of the data, review of my key findings, and application of the connected concepts studied early within the research process, I found that much of what the distance mentoring program accomplished confirmed what I discovered from the literature and studies.

When it came to change management and I referred back to the ADKAR model, which stands for ability, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement, the outcome of ability stood out (Prosci, 2020). Ability means being equipped with the right tools to perform and execute the change. As it related to this study, time was a factor and proved to be an essential tool in order to execute necessary or unavoidable change. Many of the participants expressed wanting more time to ideate or implement their innovation. When it came to change and applying new strategies, there was not any resistance to the change. However, having the time and ability to make it happen was difficult. This is an area I would want to explore further and highlight more with senior leaders since the ability to execute and bring forward necessary change are critically important elements for leaders to maintain relevance and workplace momentum. If leaders do not carve out the time nor have time intentionally placed as a priority, there is great risk of stalling progress. I find it necessary to relay this message to leaders within my organization and beyond in support of removing the constraints expressed.

The other connected concept that was a primary focus in the development of my study was the selection of the other mentoring model that incorporated a growth mindset. A growth mindset is a key element of an individual's ability and desire for change. The growth mindset concept looks at the positive aspects of one's own beliefs and willingness to change (Dweck, 2006). As part of this study, an employee's personal belief in their

ability as well as an openness to critique, feedback, and new possibilities were critical aspects of their journey and success as an administrator. There is great value for employees regarding their willingness to learn new concepts, participate in professional development, try new strategies, and encourage others to do the same (Ahmed & Rosen, 2019). The literature indicated the positive effects of mentoring in the workplace due to participants having the opportunity to meet regularly with someone whom they trusted and was able to share workplace challenges in a safe space. The effects of mentoring can impact both career advancement and psychosocial functions “that enhance a sense of competence, clarity of identity, and effectiveness in a professional role” (Murrell et al., 2021). My study coincided with findings from the research. Participants indicated that establishing a relationship based on trust was important and felt both active listening and providing constructive feedback were very important. These behaviors factor into a positive mentoring relationship that can help increase morale and job satisfaction for employees. In particular, the other mentoring model was an appropriate choice and received overall positive feedback about the mentor and mentee arrangement.

Although, my participants shared mixed feelings about their increased levels of productivity, 67% of businesses report an increase in productivity due to mentoring (Cronin, 2022). The mixed results from my study about whether or not productivity increased could be attributed to the shorter duration of the distance mentoring program. Five weeks was not enough time for my participants to establish the personal and professional connection to the extent the participants desired. They expressed wanting more time to connect, goal-set, and continue to brainstorm ideas with their new thought partner. Although the time was limited, it was, however, a great starting point. This

finding was similar to the staff retention mentoring study conducted by Pizzo (2012), which examined different mentoring relationships. Pizzo's study found that the mentoring relationships, both in close and distant proximity, were beneficial to each of the participants. From the interviews I conducted, all seven of my participants planned to maintain contact with one another despite the physical distance. The participants' interest in continuing to dialogue was an excellent measure of success and a motivating factor to further explore an adequate length of time for the distance mentoring program.

Another study on an executive education leadership development program conducted by Murrell et al. (2022) followed 41 mid-level managers from across the country as they participated in a year-long mentoring relationship. The program included peer-mentoring circles, which were formed with 3-4 program participants in each group. Findings from the study indicated strong outcomes from the mentoring program and received positive feedback from the participants about the mentoring relationship. What was identified as the researchers administered mid-program and post-program check-ins from interviews and focus groups was that the early stage of the year-long program allowed the participants to focus on cultivating the mentoring relationship (Murrell et al., 2022). There was limited sharing in the beginning of the study and as the participants progressed through the study, they expressed that it became easier to share and there were greater connections, levels of trust, understanding of their diverse backgrounds, and actionable interpretations of their situations (Murrell et al., 2022). From this study's interpretation of their findings and my key results, a mentoring relationship helps to provide "clarity in thought and action as leaders" (Murrell et al., 2022). With more time added to the distance mentoring program, the other mentoring relationship would only

grow more impactful for personal and professional job satisfaction and increase productivity in the workplace due to the participants' meaningful connections and safe space to dialogue with trusted colleagues.

Study Limitations

Going into this action research project, I knew part of the process was to identify key findings that would adjust or enhance the direction of the next iteration of the study. There were several lessons learned from my own observations as well as from feedback and suggestions provided by the participants. The limitations identified in this action research project were shortcomings that will provide a foundation for future research. One of the first noticeable areas to adjust was the need to clarify the expectations and structure surrounding the intent of the program. There were quite a few expectations listed in the initial recruitment email that might have been overlooked by the participants. Therefore, more guidance during the orientation could be provided to the participants so they are clear on the program's outcomes and individual expectations about when to meet and what to produce as part of the program. Another limitation was the amount of additional time requested by the participants to further develop the connections they established as part of the mentoring relationship. More specifically, I could have clarified program elements around participants getting to know each other, mentoring session meeting times and program length, and the use of participant folders and resources. Below are further explanations about the limitations and intentional ways of addressing them moving forward.

Getting to Know. The participants' historical knowledge of mentoring led some of them to believe the study was designed as a traditional mentoring model rather than as

the *other* mentoring model. This bias could have impacted the ease of getting to know one another within the intended timeline as well as skewed their perspective and feedback on the effectiveness of the other mentoring relationship. The power of the distance mentoring relationship under the other mentoring model is that both individuals play a critical role in supporting and receiving input that influenced goal-setting, innovation, and positive outcomes in their respective work environment. There was great value in working with someone in a similar role and title and being able to exchange ideas with a colleague external to their work environment. This form of professional development was still an ideal concept at the conclusion of the study.

Greater clarification and reinforcement about the definition of the other mentor will be needed to ensure participants understand each other's role and know a little more about each other's personal and professional interests to foster a mutually beneficial other relationship. Also, getting to know each other ahead of the orientation may help them settle into the schedule better and feel more comfortable with sharing information earlier in the mentoring relationship. It was suggested by some of the participants to create a questionnaire or provide an opportunity to connect with their mentor ahead of the first orientation session.

Additionally, as part of the developing the mentoring relationship, participants were told during the orientation they were to schedule three, one hour mentoring sessions two weeks apart. The timeline was also noted in the recruitment email. Some of the participants were prepared to select dates but others requested to schedule on their own and send the meeting dates once confirmed. Unfortunately, three of the four groups experienced scheduling challenges that resulted in one or more of their mentoring

sessions being canceled, missed, or rescheduled due to unanticipated work commitments. Along the way, some were confused about the length of time for each meeting or how frequently they should occur. Moving forward, predetermined mentoring session times will be assigned for the participants ahead of the first session and set as mandatory meetings to avoid any conflicts.

Another aspect related to meetings times is the need to extend the length of the distance mentoring program. The study utilized a five-week timeframe that included an orientation session. This was done to honor the participants' busy schedules during a potentially ideal point in the semester. Eloise acknowledged that had the study been any longer, she might not have participated due to work commitments. However, after participating in the study, she wished it was longer a program. Based on the findings, a longer period of time to connect and develop the mentoring relationship was desired by all of the participants. Therefore, substantial consideration will be given to extending the duration of the program. For example, the next iteration of the distance mentoring program may run for six months with six mentoring sessions rather than one month with three mentoring sessions. This enhanced schedule will still consider the busy schedules of the administrators while creating more opportunities to connect and exchange ideas.

Participant Resources. Not all of the participants used the shared Google folder that included key resources for the program such as conversation starters, the Plan of Action template, and the orientation presentation. Despite the availability of the material and email reminders, there were comments from some participants about what to discuss regarding workplace challenges and the conversations not getting personal enough. The use of the conversation starters and the Plan of Action template would have addressed

some of the areas of uncertainty and may have sparked an earlier dialogue as requested by participants.

For future consideration, I will look into renaming and/or reformatting the Plan of Action template to still be able to document the participants' workplace challenge, strategies, and action items in a way that is useful for them. I will walk participants through the folder and materials and not just refer to them in the presentation. This could be done by creating an informational video or by virtually guiding the participants through the materials. Additionally, I would refer to the materials throughout the study and conduct a mandatory check-in to help ensure the materials and resources were being utilized for full benefit. Although these limitations presented themselves during the study, they identified new considerations to enhance the program moving forward.

Survey Instruments. The pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys were created by incorporating elements from previously developed survey instruments from studies conducted by other researchers. The pre-intervention and post-intervention survey instruments were not piloted in advance of the study. If using the pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys, I would recommend evaluating both instruments and determine appropriate psychometric properties and sufficient reliability. Due to my analysis of the data and key findings, I do not intend on using the pre-intervention and post-intervention survey instruments. The quantitative and qualitative data collected as part of this action research study helped determine the necessity for a distance mentoring program within my institution. Future iterations of the study will assess different aspects of learning and elements of effectiveness of the program. Therefore, I will explore the creation of different assessment tools.

Mobilization Plan

The distance mentoring program was designed to provide higher education professionals with an opportunity to network, strategize, and implement innovative practices to support their current work environment during challenging times while also creating a heightened level of job satisfaction. The selection of the distance mentoring program as a research topic was an effort to address the problems associated with initiative-fatigue and related stress along with the retention of employees. Many organizations found employee development through mentoring to be a successful model for employee retention and support (Big Think+, 2022). My goal for the study was to identify the effectiveness of the overall distance mentoring program structure, the type of mentoring model, and the outcomes experienced by the higher education administrators participating in the study. Based on the analysis of the data, I confirmed the program was beneficial and also identified ways to enhance the program to be impactful for future leaders.

Research shows that the greatest impact to disseminate research findings is when the researcher goes beyond a single outlet (Henrikson & Mishra, 2019). This concept of incorporating a broader awareness strategy by using multiple outlets is known as knowledge mobilization or KMb (Henrikson & Mishra, 2019). The mobilization of this professional development opportunity would include three phases. The first phase would be to focus on my direct reports and develop a more formalized onboarding and professional development plan for managers. All newly employed managers on my team would participate in the distance mentoring program within their first year of employment as part of their annual professional development plan whereas existing

managers would build this into the next annual professional development cycle. As part of their annual evaluation and professional development plan, which is logged and tracked in the Human Capital Management (HCM) system, each manager would be paired with a higher education professional external to the college. This professional development opportunity would run for six months within the annual evaluation period. The managers would meet monthly and virtually for one hour with their paired mentor. The mentoring pair would be able to share about their workplace challenges, identify goals, build a mutually beneficial and trusting relationship, and provide each other with strategies and encouragement to implement the change needed within their respective workplace. The implementation of this formalized program would require planning and coordination by me to ensure the individuals receive an appropriate introduction to one another; orientation to the program including review of expectations, material and purpose; quarterly assessments and check-ins; additional guidance as needed. As part of this phase, I would work with my direct reports, their paired mentor, and their mentor's supervisor to identify a mandatory one hour per month to meet. This date and time would be pre-determined for both individuals to avoid scheduling conflicts and reassure them about the support given to participate in this professional development opportunity.

Once my direct reports participated in the program, I would then look into expanding the program to include managers from other areas of the division. The second phase of mobilizing this plan would be expanding it to all Student Affairs managers who serve in a position at a grade level of 118 and above. Implementing this phase of the program would require additional conversations and planning with senior leadership within the division. The third phase would be to extend it to all managers across the

college and build into the first-year employee experience program. This may take a few years to embed into the system but would be a worthwhile venture due to the data proving it is an effective model for increasing innovation, job satisfaction, and strategic action planning.

An ambitious next series for this mobilization plan would be to expand the program's list of participants district-wide and include managers at colleges within MCCCCD. There are a number of key stakeholder groups that I would need to engage in the expansion of this program including division, college, and district level personnel. This expansion would take more conversations, buy-in, and planning to execute but could gain traction with the right amount of executive sponsorship. Henrikson and Mishra (2019) encourage researchers to think beyond the local context. There are an extensive number of higher education administrators, researchers, scholars, and potentially, mentoring model enthusiasts who would like to learn more about my work. If I continue to refine what I am doing and scale up my research, I could explore ways to share this resource beyond my institution and maybe even the country. Why not think globally, and look into conferences and outlets abroad to share more about my action research project and published works?

Closing Thoughts

As I embarked on the dissertation process and selected the focus of this action research project, I concentrated on developing a program that was directly meaningful for the individual administrator with impact on students and the higher education community at-large. Applying the techniques of social learning theory where an individual learns from another individual's modeled behaviors and applies those techniques to their own

situation proved to be of great value throughout this study. Due to the implementation of the distance mentoring program, the ability to dialogue between higher education administrators from different institutions external to their own systems was made possible for individuals who most likely would have never connected. The ability for participants to collaborate, ideate, and innovate was enriched and delivered great potential in enhancing the work between the participants and their teams. The participants were able to absorb new knowledge, affirm the quality of their work, and gain confidence in the direction they were heading that was unique to their own experiences and desires. Sheryl Sandberg stated “The ability to learn is the most important quality a leader can have” (Derrick, 2022).

I am grateful the participants found their involvement in this study beneficial and they appreciated the exchange of ideas with a thought partner who shared similar experiences, responsibilities, and aspects of the job. Focusing on the future, being able to incorporate this study into a structured professional development plan with a formalized commitment process for participants will help ensure greater engagement and an overall richer experience in all aspects of the distance mentoring program. I am excited about the possibilities with my distance mentoring program and the imprint it will make on leaders within higher education beyond this study.

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APPENDIX A
OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

List of key terms that will be referenced throughout the study.

- Distance mentoring – relates to the geographical distance between the two participants in the mentoring relationship, indicating that each participant will mentor someone who is long distance and external to their current college.
- Effectiveness - the degree in which the distance mentoring program contributed to participants meeting desired results in goals and performance.
- Innovation – the identification of new or enhanced ideas that directly impact the participant’s work environment. Innovation was measured based on the employee’s own beliefs, feedback, and perceptions.
- Job satisfaction – the level of satisfaction the participant expressed about their current work environment, role, and responsibilities. Job satisfaction was measured based on the employee’s own beliefs, feedback, and perceptions.
- Other mentor – a study participant who is paired with a peer participant of similar title, role, and responsibility to encourage and enlighten their other participant about new or different strategies. This mentoring model differs from traditional mentoring, where an individual is paired with someone in a higher position and/or different area of focus.
- Productivity – the number of projects or tasks an individual accomplished within set deadlines. Productivity was measured based on the employee’s own beliefs, feedback, and perceptions.

APPENDIX B

PRE-INTERVENTION SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey: To protect your confidentiality, please create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, please record the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match your pre-intervention responses with your retrospective, post-intervention survey responses when we analyze the data.

My unique identifier is: _____ (e.g., Sar 6789, see paragraph above)

Section A: Demographic Data

Please select your current age.

Please select your gender.

Please select your race.

What is your highest level of education?

How many years have you worked in higher education?

How many years have you been working at your current institution?

What is your current position?

How long have you been in your current position?

Section B: Work Environment

Please consider your current work environment and select the appropriate response for each item using a five-point rating scale of very dissatisfied - dissatisfied - neutral - satisfied - very satisfied.

- Trust between employee team members
- Immediate supervisor's respect for your ideas
- Autonomy and independence to make decisions
- Meaningfulness of job (e.g., understanding how your job contributes to the organization's mission)
- Variety of work (e.g., working on different projects, using different skills)
- Career development opportunities
- Networking opportunities
- Overall job satisfaction

Section C: Mentor Behaviors

A mentor is someone who can advise, guide and / or influence your personal and / or professional development. Please select your level of importance with the following mentoring behaviors using a five-point rating scale of very unimportant - unimportant - neutral - important - very important.

- Sharing workplace problems
- Exchanging confidences
- Considering the other one to be a friend
- Mentor gives mentee special coaching on the job
- Mentor helps to coordinate professional goals
- Mentor devotes special time and consideration to mentee's workplace challenges
- Active listening
- Providing constructive feedback
- Establishing a relationship based on trust
- Employing strategies to improve communication within the mentoring relationship

- Working to set clear expectations within the mentoring relationship
- Helping develop strategies to meet goals
- Motivating to meet goals
- Building confidence
- Stimulating creativity
- Understanding impact as a role model
- Helping to acquire resources

APPENDIX C

MENTORING SESSION CONVERSATION STARTERS

Each week, participants will be provided access to a shared Google document with conversation starters that will link to the Action Plan document. Below are the conversation starter prompts that were posed to the participants following the orientation session.

Conversation Starters

- **CONNECT:** Introduce yourself and share where you work, what you do, and how long you have been in your current organization.
- **REVIEW:** Share about a challenge happening in your current workplace that involves innovation, leadership and/or strategic action from you.
- **PLAN:** What is one goal you want to set for this mentoring program?

Colleague Focus: What type of support (e.g., advice, article/journal, connection, resource, etc.) can you provide to help your colleague complete their goal?

APPENDIX D

PLAN OF ACTION TEMPLATE

Plan of Action Template: To protect your confidentiality, please create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, please record the first three letters of your mother’s first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother’s name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match all of your responses when we analyze the data.

My unique identifier is (e.g., Sar 6789, see paragraph above):

Plan of Action Instructions: Participants will use this template throughout the study to capture their workplace challenge, leadership goal, action items with deadlines, and any additional resources or tools needed to accomplish their goals. The template will be available in the participants’ shared Google folder.

Plan of Action Template

<p>Workplace Challenge: List below a description of the workplace challenge highlighted during your mentoring session that requires your attention and strategic planning.</p>	
<p>Leadership Goal: List below the goal you want to set and accomplish by the end of the mentoring program.</p>	
<p>Action Item(s): List below the key strategies needed in order to accomplish your goal.</p>	<p>Deadline(s):</p>
1.	
2.	
<p>Resource(s) / Tool(s): List any data, information, technology or other resources that will assist in accomplishing your goal.</p>	
1.	
2.	

APPENDIX E
WEEKLY REFLECTIONS

Weekly Reflections Journal: To protect your confidentiality, please create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, please record the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match all of your responses collected when we analyze the data.

My unique identifier is: _____ (e.g., Sar 6789, see paragraph above)

Instructions: Each week for five weeks, participants will be asked five questions to reflect upon and will submit their responses via Google Form. The unique identifier instructions will be asked along with the following five questions:

- What innovative idea did you apply this week?
- What shining moment did you experience to improve productivity?
- Was there an opportunity to execute your plan of action? If yes, what was the outcome?
- Did any action, decision, or advice contribute to increased job satisfaction? If yes, please explain.
- What do you want to focus on for the next week?

APPENDIX F
POST-INTERVENTION SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey: To protect your confidentiality, please create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, please record the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match your pre-intervention survey responses and your retrospective, post-intervention responses when we analyze the data.

My unique identifier is: _____ (e.g., Sar 6789, see paragraph above)

Section A: Work Environment

Please select the appropriate response for each item using a rating scale of very dissatisfied - dissatisfied - neutral - satisfied - very satisfied.

- Trust between employee team members
- Immediate supervisor's respect for your ideas
- Autonomy and independence to make decisions
- Meaningfulness of job (e.g., understanding how your job contributes to the organization's mission)
- Variety of work (e.g., working on different projects, using different skills).
- Career development opportunities
- Networking opportunities
- Overall job satisfaction

Section B: Mentor Behaviors

A mentor is someone who can advise, guide and / or influence your personal and / or professional development. Please select your level of importance with the following mentoring behaviors using a five-point rating scale of very unimportant - unimportant - neutral - important - very important.

- Sharing workplace problems
- Exchanging confidences
- Considering the other one to be a friend
- Mentor gives mentee special coaching on the job
- Mentor helps to coordinate professional goals
- Mentor devotes special time and consideration to mentee's workplace challenges
- Active listening
- Providing constructive feedback
- Establishing a relationship based on trust
- Employing strategies to improve communication within the mentoring relationship
- Working to set clear expectations within the mentoring relationship
- Helping develop strategies to meet goals
- Motivating to meet goals
- Building confidence
- Stimulating creativity
- Understanding impact as a role model
- Helping to acquire resources

Section C: Mentoring Relationship

Please select the appropriate response for how you feel about your MENTOR's skills as a mentor in the mentoring relationship for each item using the rating scale of strongly disagree - disagree - neutral - agree - strongly agree.

- Active listening
- Providing constructive feedback
- Establishing a relationship based on trust
- Employing strategies to improve communication within the mentoring relationship
- Working to set clear expectations within the mentoring relationship
- Helping develop strategies to meet goals
- Motivating to meet goals
- Building confidence
- Stimulating creativity
- Understanding impact as a role model
- Helping to acquire resources

Please select the appropriate response for how you feel about YOUR skills as a mentor in the mentoring relationship for each item using a five-point rating scale of strongly disagree - disagree - neutral - agree - strongly agree.

- Active listening
- Providing constructive feedback
- Establishing a relationship based on trust
- Employing strategies to improve communication within the mentoring relationship
- Working to set clear expectations within the mentoring relationship
- Helping develop strategies to meet goals
- Motivating to meet goals
- Building confidence
- Stimulating creativity
- Understanding impact as a role model
- Helping to acquire resources

To what extent were you engaged as a mentee to receive feedback? Select the following: not at all - moderately - completely

To what extent did the mentoring relationship meet your expectations? Select the following: not at all - moderately - completely

Section D: Distance Mentoring Program

Please reflect on your experience in the Distance Mentoring Program and select the appropriate response regarding your experience.

To what extent were the conversation starters helpful in stimulating dialogue? Select the following: not at all – somewhat - moderately – completely

To what extent were the mentoring sessions helpful in generating new ideas or strategies? Select the following: not at all - moderately - completely

To what extent did the Plan of Action template help in collecting ideas and strategies? Select the following: not at all - moderately - completely

To what extent did the mentoring program meet your expectations? Select the following:
not at all - moderately – completely

APPENDIX G
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Briefing Statement

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to determine the effectiveness of the distance mentoring program with respect to increasing educational outcomes, innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning for higher education professionals. Please respond with your own thoughts about the questions. In your responses do not mention your name or the names of other individuals. We are also asking your permission to audio record the interview. Only the research team will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be deleted immediately after being transcribed and any published quotes will be anonymous. To protect your identity, please refrain from using names or other identifying information during the interview. Let me know if, at any time, you do not want to be recorded and I will stop. May I record the interview?

Interview Questions

1. How was your overall experience with the distance mentoring program? Please explain.
2. Do you believe you are more productive as a result of participating in the distance mentoring program? Please explain with examples of any actions or behaviors that have contributed to your productivity.
3. Were you able to apply an innovative practice(s) to your work environment following the distance mentoring program? If so, what innovation(s) did you implement or share with your team.
4. What have you been working on since the completion of the distance mentoring program as it relates to executing your plan of action?

Debriefing Statement

Thank you for your responses and your time today. I appreciate it very much. I will be using your responses to inform my work this semester and future efforts on this matter.

APPENDIX H
RECRUITMENT EMAILS

For Maricopa employees

Subject: Dialogue for Change: A Distance Mentoring Program Study

Dear Colleague,

I am conducting a distance mentoring study and as a higher education administrator, I am seeking your participation this Fall 2022 semester. The study will run approximately five weeks with a follow up interview three weeks after the final mentoring session. This study will provide an opportunity for you to connect with a colleague at another institution outside of the Maricopa Community Colleges, dialogue about current issues facing higher education administrators, brainstorm strategies to influence your current work environment, and develop a mutually beneficial relationship with another higher education professional.

As an administrator within the Maricopa Community Colleges, I am seeking your participation in the study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Choosing not to participate in the study does not affect your standing at work. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study, and able to provide consent to participate. For more information about the study, please see the attached letter.

If you are interested and willing to participate, please respond and confirm by June 23, 2022.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your consideration.

For non-Maricopa employees

Subject: Dialogue for Change: A Distance Mentoring Program Study

Dear Colleague,

I am conducting a distance mentoring study and as a higher education administrator, I am seeking your participation this Fall 2022 semester. The study will run approximately five weeks with a follow up interview three weeks after the final mentoring session. This study will provide an opportunity for you to connect with a colleague from one of the 10 Maricopa Community Colleges, dialogue about current issues facing higher education administrators, brainstorm strategies to influence your current work environment, and develop a mutually beneficial relationship with another higher education professional.

As a higher education administrator, I am seeking your participation in the study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Choosing not to participate in the study does not affect your standing at work. You must be 18 or older to participate in the

study, and able to provide consent to participate. For more information about the study, please see the attached letter.

If you are interested and willing to participate, please respond and confirm by July 22, 2022.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your consideration.

APPENDIX I
CONSENT LETTER

Dear Colleague:

My name is Kristina Scott and I am a doctoral student in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) at Arizona State University (ASU). I am working under the direction of Dr. Craig Mertler, a faculty member in MLFTC. We are conducting a research study on the effectiveness of a distance mentoring program to stimulate personal growth and contribute to the broader needs of the college while expanding an individual's network. The purpose of the study is to determine the effectiveness of the distance mentoring program with respect to increasing educational outcomes, innovation, job satisfaction, productivity, and strategic action planning for higher educational professionals. This focus is necessary to help improve employee, student and organizational success during challenging times.

We are asking for your help, which will involve your participation in a **virtual** intervention (about 3.5 hours, one hour each mentoring session and 30 minutes for the orientation); completion of an **online** survey on two occasions (approximately 5 minutes each); completion of a Plan of Action template as you proceed throughout the study; submission of a weekly journal on five occasions (one submission per week for five weeks, approximately 10 minutes each); a n interview (approximately 15 minutes) concerning your experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about the distance mentoring program and mentoring relationship. Below is an anticipated schedule.

Study Dates	Activity	Approximate Time Commitment
9/2	Orientation Session Pre-Intervention Survey	30 minutes 5 minutes
9/9	Mentoring Session #1 Weekly Reflection #1	1 hour 10 minutes
9/16	Weekly Reflection #2	10 minutes
9/23	Mentoring Session #2 Weekly Reflection #3	1 hour 10 minutes
9/30	Weekly Reflection #4	10 minutes
10/7	Mentoring Session #3 Weekly Reflection #5 Post-Intervention Survey	1 hour 10 minutes 5 minutes
10/28	Interview	15 minutes

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Choosing not to participate

in the study does not affect your standing at work. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

The benefit of participating is the opportunity for you to learn strategies and practices that will enhance your current work and develop a meaningful relationship that will expand your professional network. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

For the survey, journal entry, and plan of action template, to protect your confidentiality, I will ask you to create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, use the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match your survey, journal entry, and plan of action template responses when we analyze the data.

Your responses will be confidential. Results from this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team – Kristina Scott at kscott16@asu.edu or 480-215-0610 (cell), or Dr. Craig Mertler at craig.mertler@asu.edu.

Thank you,

Kristina Scott, Doctoral Student
Craig Mertler, Faculty

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact Dr. Mertler at craig.mertler@asu.edu or the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX J
CODE FRAMEWORK

The chart below reflects the code framework used upon analysis of the qualitative data and synthesizing all of the data. The coding framework consists of the main themes of strategic connections and strategic management; the five categories of effects of collaborating, impact of dialogue, ability to operationalize, impediments of work, and self-direction; the 22 sub-categories and approximately 150 codes.

Strategic Connections		Strategic Management		
Effects of Collaborating	Impact of Dialogue	Ability to Operationalize	Impediments of Work	Self-Direction
Exploring Best Practice Explore Different Ways Explore More Explored Fun to Explore Learn More Research the Possibility Spend Time Seeking Out	Affirming Found Inspiration Increased Productivity Invigorating Reassuring Refreshing Rewarding Validated Validating Very Rewarding Re-invigorated About My Job Re-motivating Stronger Sense of Accomplishment Decreased Stress Appreciate the Opportunity	Communicati ng Better Communicate Effective Communicatio n Improving on Our Communicatio n Increased Communicatio n Internal Conversations Managing Areas of Overlap Build the Rapport Building Team Productivity Delegate Empowering Empowering My Team	Conflicting Not Able to Meet Short Time Frame Time Difference Feeling Feel Down Feel Energized Not Alone Frustrating Being Reactionary Challenges Challenging Impacted Performance Increased Frustration Lack of Trust Leadership and Management Capacity Leadership Increased Frustration	Committing Balance My Efforts Be Committed Carrying Out Responsibiliti es Commit Myself Commitment Committed to Making a Difference Continuation of Problem Solving Continued Dedication Continuing Efforts to Expand Will Begin Executing Work Commitments Goal Setting
Improving Discussed How to Improve	Confirming Learn More About Each Other			

Improve Experience	Mutual Aspects	Experienced Through My Team Members	Manage Various Competing Interests	Attain Stronger Outcomes
Improve Programs	Same Challenges	Invaluable for Building Team	My Supervisor Made the Change	Being Completed
Strategic Initiatives to Be Put in Place	Same Challenges	Productivity Providing Leadership	Despite Recommendation	Goal Setting Goals
Working to Help Improve	Being Experienced	Support My Work Units and Teams	Were Not Received	Focusing
Planning	Same Concerns and Frustrations	Their Work Ethic	Lacking	Focus
Developed a Plan	Shared by Others		Lack thereof/deficiencies	Hard to be Able to Focus
Discussion and Exchanging Experiences	Sharing Struggles	Producing	Continued Need	Identify Focus for Ideas
Formulate How We Are Proceeding	Understanding and Sharing Struggles	Check Items Off	Fewer Resources Available to Execute	Stay Focused
Plan of Action Plans to Leave	Wealth of Information	Productive Work From Home		Stay the Course
Sharing	Work is the Same	Reminding		Staying Focused
Bounce Ideas Off	Working in Similar Spaces	Remind Remind Me Remind People Remind Them		Focus Time
Connections		Reminder		Prioritizing
Exchanging Experiences	Motivating	Reminder		Higher Priority
Getting to Know	Hope to Build	Helps in Handling the Unforeseen		Organize Weekly
Help Drive Time	Keep Motivated and Engaged			Priorities Organized
Helpful	Kept Me	Supervising		Information
Helpful in Narrowing	Going	Agent of Positive Change		Priorities for Various Spaces
Include the Personal Aspect	Not Sure Yet	Decision Making		Moving Forward
More on the Formal Side	Not yet			Prioritized Task List
Personal				Priority Project Being Completed
				Reorganizing Set Priorities
				Reflecting
				Allowing Myself Time

Attention to
Time
Extra Time
and Energy
Intentional
Intentional
Time
Personal
Reflection
Reflecting
Reflection
Time
Time Daily to
Spend
Time Feel
More
Manageable
Time for
Myself
Time to Plan
Weekly
Expectations

APPENDIX K
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Dear [Molly Ott](#):

On 8/31/2022 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Modification / Update
Title:	Dialogue for Change: A Distance Mentoring Program Study for Higher Education Professionals
Investigator:	Molly Ott
IRB ID:	STUDY00015801
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kristina Scott_IRB Consent Letter, Category: Consent Form; • Kristina Scott_IRB Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol; • PI Acknowledgement, Category: Other;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 8/31/2022.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

REMINDER - - Effective January 12, 2022, in-person interactions with human subjects require adherence to all current policies for ASU faculty, staff, students and visitors. Up-to-date information regarding ASU's COVID-19 Management Strategy can be found [here](#). IRB approval is related to the research activity involving human subjects, all other protocols related to COVID-19 management including face coverings, health checks, facility access, etc. are governed by current ASU policy.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Kristina Scott