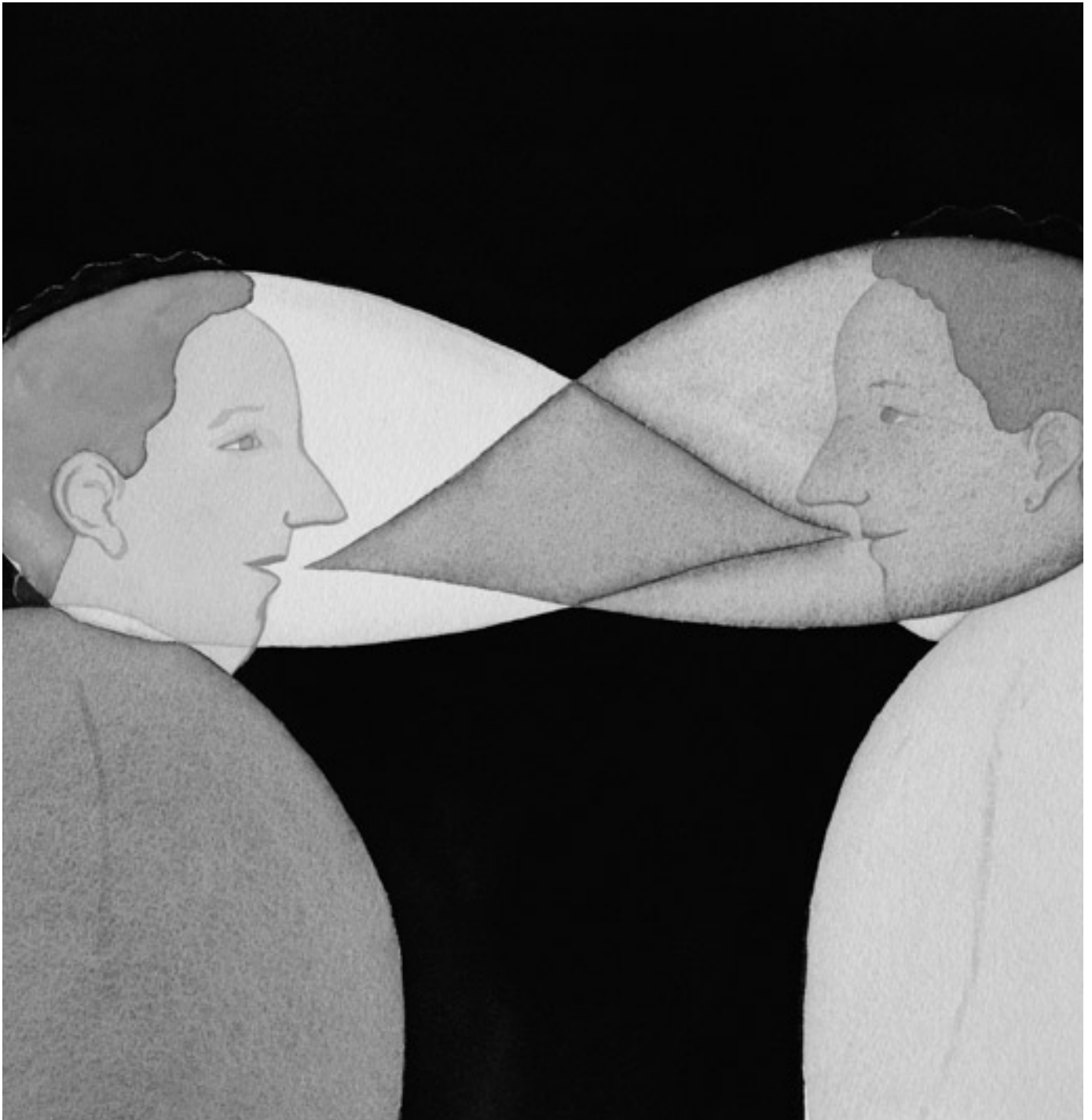# Supporting Online Students with Personal

Interaction

Providing high levels of personal, interactive support to students proved critical to the success of Florida State's online programs

By **Ronald C. Thomas, Jr.**

More and more colleges and universities seek to extend their reach by offering individual courses and complete degree programs online. Planners of such initiatives will find it useful to examine the different challenges and approaches already in use on various campuses, as in the mentoring program at Florida State University (FSU). (See the sidebar for background on the university.)

The critical issue FSU faced was scalability of its curriculum to an online constituency. The university planned to offer existing degree programs through online delivery with the expectation that demand would be high for these programs. The concern was how best to support faculty faced with students in greater numbers. At the same time, FSU needed to provide additional instructional support to the students who would not have face-to-face interaction with faculty or with other students. The importance of providing this support to students was borne out in Alley's research, which stressed the criticality of instructors and mentors to student success in the online learning environment.[1]

The Importance of Interaction

In the burgeoning field of online higher education, some long-standing principles still apply. Among these is the centrality of instructor-student interaction, as eloquently put by Columbia's Paul Goodman. In his description of the characteristics of a community of scholars he wrote, "Teaching and learning are a personal relation; it is necessary for both the teacher and the student."[2] Three decades later, in a description of learning organizations, Peter Senge wrote, "Though it involves individual skills and areas of understanding, team learning is a collective discipline," reaffirming the same concept.[3] While such a collaborative educational experience seems simple to envision in the traditional classroom setting, how could it be transferred effectively to the online environment?

Numerous studies have indicated the need to create personal connections in distance education. A study of distance learning via educational television that compared the attitudes of on-campus and distance students found that the faculty offering courses in distance formats should be trained "to assume a more active role in communicating with the distance learner."[4] Gunawardena and Zittle examined the importance of social presence in the computer-mediated environment. They found that social presence, or "teacher immediacy," was a strong predictor of participant satisfaction in the virtual environment, just as it was in face-to-face instruction.[5] A study by Brown tied this interaction directly to distance student drop-out rates, finding that 67.7 percent of the students who dropped out cited "difficulty in contacting their tutors and insufficient support from them [as] major contributing

About Florida State University

Florida State University was originally authorized by the Florida Legislature in 1851 as one of two seminaries and is the oldest continuous site of higher education in the state. The Seminary East of the Suwannee eventually became the University of Florida, and the Seminary West of the Suwannee became Florida State University in 1947.

In 2004, the enrollment at Florida State University was 37,328. The Carnegie Foundation listed the university as a public, state-supported, institution and categorized it among Doctoral Research Universities–Extensive. Several academic units at FSU began online degree offerings in 1999, although they offered only the junior and senior years or graduate degrees for their respective programs owing to the strong "2 + 2" articulation model between the state community college system and the state university system, as set forth by Florida state statute.

factors in their decision."[6] Carr found that, nationally, administrators were reporting a 10 to 20 percent higher course completion rate for face-to-face courses compared to online courses.[7] The online environment was found to be intrinsically isolating, according to a study at Carnegie Mellon University,[8] and robust communication between instructional personnel and online students holds potential to help them maintain their relationship.

The FSU Model

Florida State University implemented five fully online undergraduate and six graduate degree programs beginning in fall semester 1999, with the bachelor's degree programs consisting of upper division coursework following an Associate in Arts degree completed at a Florida community college or equivalent lower-division coursework elsewhere. This "2 + 2" articulation system was enacted and protected by state statute and exactly parallels the transfer admission requirements for on-campus students.

Online undergraduate degree programs were offered in computer science, software engineering, information studies, interdisciplinary social science, and nursing. Online master's degrees programs were offered in information studies, criminology and criminal justice, mechanical engineering, science education, educational leadership and administration, and open and distance learning. The courses in each program were delivered in an asynchronous mode, with the only time restriction being the university academic calendar. All online courses adhered to the same registration, drop-add, and final-exam dates as face-to-face courses.

The need to provide high levels of personally interactive support to students was perceived as critical to the online program's success. As a result, the FSU model employs a student-centered system with mentors, or online learning coaches, to assist the lead instructor and to support and guide students through the course.

The student-centered model with instructional facilitation is well established, notably at the Harvard Business School.[9] The Open University in the United Kingdom has a similar model in place through its use of faculty tutors for distributed studies.[10] Whitehead described the ideal relationship this way: "What the faculty have to cultivate is activity in the presence of knowledge. What the students have to learn is activity in the presence of knowledge."[11] Whitehead presaged the current active learning movement by half a century; the importance of guiding students in the exercise of their own educational responsibilities is still emphasized. As Silberman wrote, "The participants acquire knowledge and skill rather than merely receive them," making active learning superior in many ways to sustained lecturing.[12] Such a system requires transformational thinking about the relationship with the learner, as described by Dolence and Norris:

> Learning mentors will help students deal not with basic information on a subject, but on sorting out relationships and higher order concepts. Preparation for mentoring sessions will include substantial knowledge navigation by the learner.[13]

The FSU Mentor Personnel Management System

The mentor position at FSU was created to fill the following support roles in online courses:

- Completing course materials
- Initiating and maintaining contact with students
- Responding to students in a timely manner
- Facilitating electronic learning and discussion groups
- Attending to student progress
- Grading assignments
- Reporting grades
- Communicating with faculty

Since mentors might be eligible for visiting appointments in the academic department offering the online course, FSU required them to meet regional accreditation standards—notably, master's degrees in the field of study. Mentors with less than graduate preparation but a bachelor's degree and significant professional experience received nonac-ademic appointments. Additionally, the university sought people with strong interpersonal and communication skills, demonstrated experience, affinity for college students, and good organizational and record-keeping abilities.

Recruitment of Mentors

Mentors for the online programs were found through four sources: the Florida community college system, the university's own graduate programs, public advertising and recruiting activities, and referrals from active mentors after the program began.

Mentors coming from the public community colleges in Florida satisfied several of FSU's requirements. If faculty, they already met the graduate preparation requirements of their disciplines. If in administrative or staff roles, they had documented experience in working with students at the postsecondary level. Additionally, since community colleges hire faculty based on teaching ability rather than research accomplishments, the skill set they brought to mentoring suited the position.

Many FSU graduate students selected as mentors had already taken the course with which they would be working, giving them the advantage of familiarity with the course material and, often, the instructor. Some graduate students had assisted a professor in developing an online course prior to their serving as a mentor for that course.

Recruiting external to the university or community college system took the form of FSU Web site announcements and announcements through professional associations. Some of the external applicants discovered the FSU program through Web surfing. The value in having these persons in the mentor cadre exemplified another of Goodman's principles. "They have the mastery that comes from actual practice," he wrote, "but teach with the ideality of the future."[14] The mentors from the community at large stood to benefit, as well, since "working with students changes the way adults think about themselves and their careers."[15]

Mentors who had served for one semester or more also referred colleagues

and acquaintances to the program. These candidates came from community colleges, graduate programs, and private practice.

Selection of Mentors

The selection process for online mentors consisted of a two-step process. Mentor candidates were initially screened at the Office for Distributed and Distance Learning (ODDL). This unit supports much of the "electronic campus" initiative at FSU, of which distance learning degree programs are a part. The initial review consisted of assessing and verifying credentials, reviewing prior work experience, conducting personal or telephone interviews, and collecting any supporting documents. A summary matrix of candidates by discipline was distributed to faculty offering online courses in those areas, along with copies of each candidate's vita and supporting materials.

Each academic department could conduct its own review according to its own procedures, as a group or as individual members. The endorsement of at least one faculty member is required for a mentor candidate to become eligible for an invitation to FSU's mentor training workshop, held each spring in preparation for the upcoming academic year.

Corollary to the initial selection process is the selection process for actual assignment as mentors for particular courses. Prior to each semester, ODDL staff develop enrollment projections for each online course. Then, working with faculty and staff in the relevant departments, the ODDL projects actual class caps in the university course master system, also taking into account potential enrollment from FSU branch campuses, overseas study centers, and distance students at large.

The total class cap becomes the base number for calculating the number of mentors needed. The base ratio of students to mentor is 20 to 25:1, adjusted in cases where special course circumstances such as number of papers to be graded or complexity of course material leads the faculty member to request a lower ratio. The base ratio is referred to as a "mentor section." Experienced

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The need to provide high levels of personally interactive support to students was perceived as critical to the online program's success.

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mentors are sometimes scheduled for more than one section of a course or sections in more than one course. First-time mentors typically are scheduled for only one section. Both ODDL and academic department staff closely monitor enrollment patterns up to the first day of class, in case adjustments to the mentor staffing plan are needed.

Mentor Training

Mentor candidates receive training in three major areas:
- on FSU's general mentoring principles,
- with the faculty in the discipline where the mentor would work, and
- on the online course management software.

Training was done over three days, with an afternoon session followed by a full day of training and concluding with a morning session. The university paid travel expenses for mentor candidates to come to the main campus in Tallahassee for the mandatory certification workshop. Just as students in the online programs could be located anywhere, so could the mentors (and in some cases the instructors, as well). While 92 percent of active mentors live in Florida, relatively few live in Tallahassee. The majority of mentors living in Tallahassee are FSU graduate students.

The first day featured welcomes, introductions of ODDL staff and the mentor candidates, and a presentation on the history and development of distance learning at FSU. A period was allotted for personnel matters such as collecting and reviewing any employment paperwork, travel expense review, and the issuance of university identification cards and e-mail accounts. Candi-

dates were also introduced to the online course management system. A reception and dinner that evening gave the mentor candidates an opportunity to interact with faculty and staff associated with the distance learning program.

The second day started with a presentation on what the university expected from mentors. This included standards of performance, details of the job description, and resources provided to assist mentors in fulfilling their duties. Particular emphasis was placed on the humanistic aspects of online mentoring. For the remainder of the day, the mentor candidates participated in programs provided by each of the academic units offering degrees at a distance. Each department developed its own agenda, but typical features included a group meeting of faculty and candidates to discuss the overall degree program and its goals, sequence of courses, and other characteristics of the online program. This group meeting was followed by individual meetings between faculty members interested in employing certain mentor candidates and the candidates themselves. This gave the candidates an opportunity to examine individual course materials and begin establishing a working relationship with faculty.

The third day began with a presentation by veteran mentors, each taking part of the job description and illustrating it with lessons learned and tips for success. This was followed by additional computer lab time for the new mentors to practice the skills needed to use the course management software. The mentor candidates also received a manual produced by FSU explaining the principles appropriate to adult learners.[16] The manual served as a workbook to guide them through monitored online exercises.

The mentor candidates were required to perform a series of exercises after they returned home on "dummy" course Web sites FSU created solely for online practice. These exercises became a skills check-off on the tasks mentors perform:
- Downloading online assignments
- Uploading graded papers to the course Web site

- Creating study groups from the online roster
- Posting announcements to the course home page
- Posting questions and answers to the course's threaded discussion page

Once all of the exercises were completed and verified as correct by ODDL staff, the mentor candidates were issued certificates for 12 contact hours. (One contact hour counts as .1 continuing education unit.) The newly certified mentors were added to the pool eligible for employment by FSU.

In rare circumstances, mentors were hired at other times during the academic year. In those cases, small groups of mentor candidates went through an abbreviated evening training program or a one-on-one tutorial. This did not relieve them of the obligation to attend the next full workshop, however, or to do the online exercises to become part of the fully certified roster. No mentor was permitted to work without having completed at least the abbreviated program.

All mentors on the active roster had the opportunity to receive additional training, whether they were employed in a given semester or not. A password-protected mentor resource Web site gave mentors continuous access to online manuals on mentoring, the course management software, and other university resources. In addition, the site provided links to useful aids that mentors could use with their students, such as tip sheets on online searching, time management, study skills, and other topics.

Each semester, ODDL staff held one or more conference calls with mentors, moderating discussions on lessons learned, common problems, and policy updates. Summaries of the conference calls were posted to the mentor Web site for the benefit of those who could not participate. Also, informational e-mails went out to mentors on topics of general interest, such as when new resources were posted to the Web site. Additionally, mentors were asked to participate in threaded discussions on the Web site, which added greatly to FSU's internal research efforts on the mentoring process.

Evaluation of Mentors

To obtain the fullest possible perspective on the mentor model, FSU used a variety of methods. At the end of each semester, lead faculty members completed an evaluation questionnaire on each of the mentors they supervised. Areas covered by the questionnaire (which used a five-point Likert scale) were based on the mentor job description:
- Demonstrate competence in the course content areas
- Demonstrate fundamental computer and Internet literacy
- Demonstrate competence in weekly course administration activities
- Provide students timely feedback on their assignments
- Provide students constructive feedback on their performance in this course resulting in performance improvement
- Grade students' work fairly and accurately
- Facilitate and monitor threaded and/or live discussion
- Respond to students' questions promptly (within 24 to 48 hours)
- Work with students to determine learning needs and provide guidance
- Be responsive to student challenges, needs, and satisfaction
- Initiate and maintain contact with each student
- Meet deadlines and keep records on each student and his or her progress
- Maintain communication with the lead faculty
- Contact the lead faculty with issues requiring his or her attention
- Evaluate assignments and report assessment results to the lead faculty on a timely basis

Open-ended questions allowed faculty to comment on each mentor's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the quality of faculty and mentor support from the ODDL staff. These evaluations formed an important part of the process for mentor retention, promotion, or dismissal.

Faculty comments on the evaluations addressed several ways in which mentors assisted them in the delivery of online courses. Faculty wrote that the mentors helped to establish the relationship with the students, created a human link between FSU and the students, kept the faculty members informed as to student progress, kept the students informed about mid-course adjustments to the curriculum, and provided general support to the faculty on grading and administrative activities.

Students had several opportunities to provide feedback on the mentor system. All students taking online classes at FSU could complete an electronic survey. This standardized tool covered the entire course experience, with a section directly reflecting on the mentor model. The items on the questionnaire were similar in content to those on the faculty evaluation.

Additionally, random samples of students from online courses were selected to participate in voluntary telephone interviews with ODDL staff. Student comments from the interviews were categorized into common topical areas, showing that several topics were addressed repeatedly. These included the general role of mentors, the active engagement between mentors and students, the encouragement provided by mentors, the clarification of course content and assignments, assistance with the course management software, and individual personality aspects of the mentors themselves. Student responses showed that the communication function was considered the most important and effective, with 72 percent of those comments characterized as positive, 21 percent as neutral, and only 7 percent as negative. "Clarification of course materials and processes" and "encouragement" were the two foremost contributions of mentor support in the FSU model.[17]

DeBono corroborated the importance of these functions when he wrote,

The biggest enemy of thinking is complexity, for that leads to confusion. When thinking is clear and simple, it becomes more enjoyable and more effective.[18]

Therefore, it was reasonable to deduce that if FSU mentors did a good job of clarifying online course content, students would perform well.

In 2001, FSU introduced another feedback tool for students in online classes. A Web form called the Mentor

Table 1

Mentor Performance Report*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Totals
1. Responds	928 (53%)	504 (29%)	142 (8%)	105 (6%)	71 (4%)	1,750
2. Helpful	861 (49%)	520 (30%)	230 (13%)	70 (4%)	63 (4%)	1,744
3. Comfortable	998 (57%)	411 (23%)	180 (10%)	82 (5%)	89 (5%)	1,760
4. Recommend	966 (54%)	415 (23%)	207 (12%)	112 (6%)	86 (5%)	1,786
5. Communication	899 (52%)	493 (28%)	214 (12%)	86 (5%)	53 (3%)	1,745

* Cumulative responses from summer 2001 through summer 2004. Number of responses is followed by percentage of responses in parentheses.

Performance Report (MPR) specifically sought feedback on mentor behaviors in the performance areas outlined in the mentor job description. The form was available throughout the semester so that problems could be reported at any time. In addition to open response areas for comments, the students were asked to respond to five questions on the mentor support function of the program, with some items not receiving responses on every survey:

1. My mentor contacts me regularly and responds to my questions in a reasonable length of time.
2. My mentor is helpful when I have trouble understanding course materials or assignments.
3. I would be comfortable having the same mentor in a future course from FSU.
4. I would recommend my mentor to other students who are taking courses from FSU.
5. Communications from my mentor and lead instructor were consistent and did not confuse me.

The results from the first administration of the MPR in summer 2001 through the most recent administration of it in summer 2004 appear in Table 1. Responses by the students were very positive. Taking responses of "strongly agree" and "agree" together to indicate positive response to any individual item, the positive trend on each of the five items was 82 percent for Item 1, 79 percent for Item 2, 80 percent for Item 3, 77 percent for Item 4, and 80 percent for Item 5. Table 1 lists the number of responses to each question followed by the percentage of responses in parentheses.

A further measure of the mentor program's effectiveness came from student performance data. FSU's concerns in implementing online degree programs included student retention rates and student success rates. National reports placed the retention rate for online college courses as low as 68 percent.[19] Over the first four years of the FSU online program (fall 1999 through summer 2003) using the mentor model, undergraduate retention was 92 percent. Over that same period, student success, defined as students who persisted to the end of the online course and earned a grade of C-minus or better, was 89 percent. No attempt at comparison to face-to-face main campus rates was done—although it was discussed—as there were too many other variables (time of day, use of media, student demography) to isolate the mentoring function for a valid comparison.

The mentors themselves are also surveyed on their opinion of their own experience. Questions mostly focus on tasks performed and the amount of time spent on each. This validates that the time on task remains roughly equivalent to 10 hours per week for every 20 to 25 students mentored. The survey also collects mentor feedback on course organization and materials. The most recent survey, administered in spring 2004 by ODDL's internal research office, reported that 89 percent of the mentors responding felt they received sufficient guidance from their lead faculty to be consistent in course grading. This item

was of particular importance, as many online courses have multiple mentors—faculty guidance (often in the form of grading rubrics) is critical to grading consistency among mentors.

Conclusions

Among the conclusions drawn by FSU was that the mentor model permits scalability. By adding another mentor and section for every 20 to 25 students, course caps could be set at virtually any level desired by the faculty member. In one project, when course enrollment was projected to get as high as 400 students, an extra organizational layer of online support faculty was interposed between the lead professor and the mentors to maintain a reasonable span of management for lead instructors.

The students in the FSU online program tended to be nontraditional college students but quite traditional in terms of the expected audience for distance-learning degree programs. They typically were employed full time, place-bound and unable to attend face-to-face courses, with varying levels of computer skill. This made the mentoring function especially important, providing the high-touch element to balance the high-tech approach, as Naisbitt described.[20] He suggested that as the level of technology increased, so would the need for human contact in the technical environment. This was borne out by the student responses to the FSU mentor program.

Taken together, these two points—the need for technical support and the

need for human contact—suggest that online students behave like informed consumers. This, too, was demonstrated in the FSU program, where initial student inquiries resemble "degree shopping." As Seeheusen wrote, "Online students, dissatisfied with the student or instructional services they receive, can simply enroll in another college by logging onto its website."[21] This means that extra efforts to retain students and shepherd them to success, as the FSU mentor model strives to do, might be even more important in the virtual campus than on the physical one.

Mentor support played a dual role at FSU, supporting faculty as well as students. By providing an extra level of support to faculty in handling the increased message traffic usually associated with distance learning, the FSU mentors helped students understand the course Web site and its contents. Dealing with the medium was every bit as challenging as the coursework for new distance-learning students, and the mentors reported dealing with both issues in the early weeks of courses, sometimes between 10 and 15 hours per week. This level of individual attention might not have been possible for an instructor, especially an instructor having responsibilities for other face-to-face classes in the same term. A full-time faculty member simply could not provide 30 to 45 hours per week of online assistance to students, as can three online mentors assigned to the course.

Administratively, some personnel-management issues began to emerge in the FSU mentor program. At the beginning, mentors were paid a flat rate that compared favorably to typical Florida community college adjunct instructor pay (making it easier to recruit from that sector). Mentor pay often lagged behind pay offered by different academic departments to their in-house graduate and teaching assistants, however. FSU faculty felt the in-house group provided an important talent pool, so a pay plan was developed that pegged mentor pay to academic department assistantships. This made the recruitment of internal FSU mentor candidates easier, and departments found it a good way of funding

Figure 1

Mentor Employment Pattern
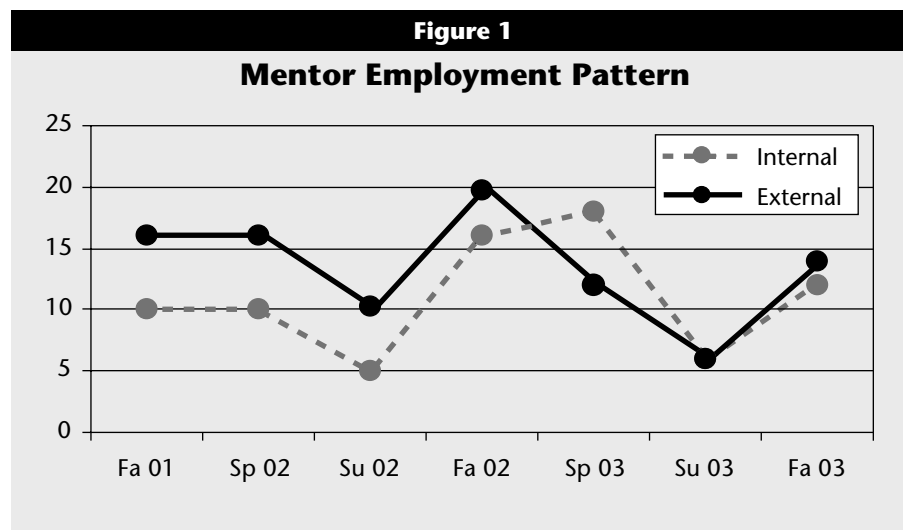
graduate students with funds from outside their own budgets. Over time, this led to a shift in the employment pattern, with internal FSU candidates employed at a similar rate as external mentor candidates (see Figure 1).

Several observations can be made about the impact of this trend. First, a typical "life cycle" emerged for some internal mentors. They might have taken the course in question themselves as undergraduates, then had assistantships where they helped the lead faculty member adapt the course materials for online delivery. Next, they served as mentors under that faculty member for the online course and eventually taught the class online themselves, once they became advanced doctoral students. This meant these mentors had great familiarity with the material at hand and a good working relationship with the faculty member, leading to higher faculty satisfaction with teaching online.

In addition to those positive aspects came some consequences. Because graduate students tend to graduate, that half of the mentor talent pool had to be continually replenished. Some graduates chose to continue mentoring after leaving FSU, but most did not. New graduate students were always coming into these departments, of course, but that meant the training program had to increase its cycle rate. Instead of offering the mentor workshop over three days once a year, it was decided to offer it three times a year, shortened to one day with more online activities. This allowed

faculty to select graduate students for mentor jobs semester by semester, giving them greater flexibility, and it also reduced travel impact on external candidates. The program time savings mostly resulted from dropping the second-day visit to the academic units, as the graduate students were already in the departments every day. External candidates were facilitated in making individual appointments to meet with faculty offering upcoming online courses that matched their qualifications.

A subtle difference that has emerged over time is the issue of "allegiance" to the mentor team that seems different between the external and internal mentors. External mentors viewed their appointments as a regular part-time job, and they wanted to be rehired from term to term. Internal mentors tended to view the appointment as just one more thing to do out of many in the course of their studies.

The online mentoring program at FSU will continue to grow as more graduate programs provide an online delivery format and use mentors to support their students. In addition, the established mentor skill set is being used as a training template for teaching assistants performing similar duties in a variety of situations, from special projects to hybrid delivery models (where courses are offered partially face-to-face and partially online). The next wave of training programs offered at FSU will be workshops to help faculty better utilize mentor resources and capabilities. *e*

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