MENTOR FUNDAMENTALS
A GUIDE TO MENTORING ONLINE LEARNERS

VERSION 3, FALL 2018

In partnership with

MICHIGAN™ VIRTUAL

MICHIGAN VIRTUAL LEARNING® RESEARCH INSTITUTE

WIsconsin
Digital Learning Collaborative
Innovate. Collaborate. Educate.

About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring Michigan Virtual™, formally Michigan Virtual University®, to establish a research center for online learning and innovation. Known as Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute® (MVLRI®), this center is a natural extension of the work of Michigan Virtual. Established in 1998, Michigan Virtual's mission is to advance K–12 digital learning and teaching through research, practice, and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of MVLRI are:

- **Research** — Expand the K–12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high quality, high impact research;
- **Policy** — Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K–12 community;
- **Innovation** — Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- **Networks** — Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K–12 online and blended learning best practices.

Michigan Virtual dedicates a small number of staff members to MVLRI projects as well as augments its capacity through a fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K–12 online learning from K–12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside Michigan Virtual staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

About the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative

As a statewide collaborative effort, WDLC shares knowledge and resources with K–12 schools, districts, and agencies who want to start or improve their online and blended learning practice. WDLC offers quality planning strategies, connections to implementation solutions, and peer-led learning opportunities that empower schools and districts to meet a wide array of learner needs for choice, flexibility, and instructional support.

WDLC has three focus areas: planning, implementation, and quality. In each of these areas we collectively work with local, state, and national experts to elevate quality. Strategies, resources, national experts, and events will evolve based on the needs and voice from the field.

WDLC consists of three collaborating organizations, the Wisconsin Virtual School (WVS), the Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN), and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) through an executed Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs). Together, WVS and WEN form the foundation of the WDLC with DPI as the state agency holding the MOUs. This partnership provides a single point for schools to access quality online and blended learning.

In addition to the founding entities, WDLC includes field experts, practitioners from K–12 schools, districts, and agencies who want to contribute to quality and practice, and other stakeholders who have interest or influence in the digital learning space.

Table of Contents

Mentors shared best practices in several sections; their contributions are indicated by .

Introduction

Mentors are critical partners in ensuring student success in navigating the virtual learning journey. The mentor (sometimes called a Local Education Guide (LEG), Coach, and even Counselor at times), student, parent, and online instructor form a team to help students become proficient online learners and successfully complete their courses.

This resource is intended to provide an understanding of the fundamental elements of mentoring or coaching students for success with online courses and has been prepared with the assistance and insight of experienced mentors, instructors, administrators, and customer service representatives from *other online learning staff common across programs and schools.* This guide describes the roles and responsibilities of the mentor and contains tools to prepare mentors for working with online learners. We hope you find this resource helpful and, if you are a mentor, that you enjoy mentoring. Thank you for your dedication.

Mentor Fundamentals

The first section of this guide is prepared specifically for those involved in supporting online learners. You will find descriptions of the following:

- Who mentors are
- What mentors do (roles and responsibilities)
- Where mentoring takes place
- How to prepare for mentoring online learners
- How to develop communication channels
- How to provide ongoing support
- How to monitor student progress
- What a learning management system (LMS) does
- Where to go for help
- What parents can do to support student success

The Mentor Role

Mentors serve as the liaison between the student, online instructor, parents, and administration. Throughout Wisconsin Mentors are commonly referred to as coaches, local education guides (LEG), and sometimes even simply counselors. Many people have the misconception that online learners don't have the benefit of the traditional human relationships established in the face-to-face classroom. In fact, the mentor provides that personal connection for students learning virtually: effective mentors work with the students every day, support them and build trusting relationships. Many students come to see their mentors as teachers, regardless of the mentor's educational preparation to teach.

In some schools, mentors are part of the school's multi-tiered system of support and do more than support online learning. They engage with others in the school, contributing to a vision of the whole student and his/her personalized learning. Mentors are one more adult who knows the student and provides perspective and support.

Common Mentor Responsibilities

- Assist with enrollment.
- Ensure the chosen course is approved by the school and meets the student's graduation requirements.
- Monitor student progress weekly and help the student stay on track to complete the course successfully and on time.
- Manage classroom/labs.
- Establish and communicate clear expectations and guidelines.
- Communicate with the online instructor, school administrators and parents using email, text messaging and phone.
- Establish rapport with students and encourage academic success.
- Meet with the student as needed (in person when possible or virtually if necessary) and keep records of the meetings.

- Assign final grade to the student transcript after the score is submitted by the online instructor.
- Respond to instructor email.
- Act as liaison between the course, the course instructor, and the student.
- Advocate for the student.
- Help interpret instructor feedback by reviewing the assignment and the rubric or grading standards with the student.
- Teach and encourage students to be self-directed, independent learners who are responsible for their coursework, but ensure resources are available to help them succeed.
- Create a learning environment that is welcoming, supportive and flexible enough to meet individual student needs.
- Connect students to teacher in the building with subject area knowledge when necessary.

The Benefits of Online Learning

Students take online courses for a variety of reasons. Many students use online courses to create flexibility in their schedules for elective interests. Some choose courses for credit recovery when they have failed a class that is required for their program or graduation. Many students take Advanced Placement (AP) courses because there are not enough students in their school to offer a face-to-face class. Still others use online courses for elective credit and personal enrichment or for a required course not offered at their local school. They may be full time online students, taking all their courses over the Internet, or they may be part time online students, that is, supplementing the courses they take at their school with online courses — including during summer.

Mentors are also known as online or on-site facilitators, learning coaches, local education guides (LEGs) and local supports.

Why Students Choose Online Learning

The Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA) shared the following evidence that state virtual schools meet the 10 attributes of Next Generation Learning (as established by Next Generation Learning Challenges). From the student's point of view, online learning is attractive because it is:

1. **Personalized to my needs and learning goals.** When students select their courses, they take greater ownership.
2. **Flexible so that I can try different ways to learn.** Online learning allows scheduling to accommodate health, athletic, job and family circumstances.
3. **Interactive and engaging to draw me in.** Students meet people outside their community in a safe environment, and multimedia used in online learning provides different ways of learning.
4. **Relevant to the life I'd like to lead.** Students gain more experience using the 21st century technology tools used in college and in the workplace.
5. **Paced by my own progress measured against goals I understand.** Students can move faster or slower through assignments and track their own progress toward their goals.
6. **Constantly informed by different ways of demonstrating and measuring my progress.** Educational technology can measure and share student progress quickly.
7. **Collaborative with faculty, peers, and others, unlimited by proximity.** Students can access learning materials and resources — including local, state, and national experts — using online communication tools.
8. **Responsive and supportive when I need extra help.** Communicating outside the typical school day is supported by the online learning culture. Many students — and teachers — report they spend more time interacting online than in the face-to-face classroom.
9. **Challenging but achievable, with opportunities to become an expert in an area of interest.** Online learning reinforces lifelong learning skills and promotes information literacy and communication skills as well as thinking and problem-solving skills.
10. **Available to me as much as it is to every other student.** Online learning can direct the talents of some of the most skilled educators to the most underserved populations. A zip code does not have to determine learning options any more.

However, not all students are well prepared for online learning. Students should work with the local personnel of online programs to best determine an appropriate placement and the skills needed for success.

Traits of Successful Online Learners

Assessing Student Readiness for Online Learning

The *Online Learner Readiness Rubric* can assist you and your students in understanding how prepared they are for this learning option. Online courses require hard work and are not "easier" than traditional classes. In fact, they may be more time consuming because students are using a new and unfamiliar method to access the course and materials and will experience different challenges than they have with face-to-face instruction. Using the *Readiness Rubric*, online learners can evaluate their basic skills and competencies in the following areas:

- Technology Skills
- Work & Study Habits
- Learning Style
- Technology/Connectivity
- Time Management
- Interest/Motivation
- Reading/Writing Skills
- Support Services

School processes differ in how the student gains access to online courses. Whether this discussion takes place when the counselor and student are engaged in academic planning or as a student is being enrolled in courses for the next semester, reviewing important school information such as attendance, grades, and test records is another important step in determining whether online learning is a good fit for each individual student — regardless of the reason for taking a course online.

Attention to a student's motivation for enrolling in an online course can go a long way toward eventual success. Students are most successful when there is a genuine desire to succeed; i.e., if I pass this course, I will reach my goal of graduation, acceptance to a particular college, a desired occupation, etc. Conversely, students are more likely to fail an online course when there is little motivation; i.e., my counselor made me take this course; I don't need this credit to graduate; it doesn't matter if I pass or fail, so who cares?

Profile of a Successful Online Learner

Instructors with years of online teaching experience agree that students who have successful, satisfying experiences learning online share several critical characteristics. Review these characteristics and answer these questions for and with potential online learners.

- ✔ **Good Time Management:** Can the student create and maintain a study schedule throughout the semester without face-to-face interaction with a teacher?
- ✔ **Effective Communication:** Can the student ask for help, make contact with other students and the instructor online, and describe any problems she/he has with learning materials using email, text messaging and/or the telephone?
- ✔ **Independent Study Habits:** Can the student study and complete assignments without direct supervision and maintain the self-discipline to stick to a schedule?
- ✔ **Self-Motivation:** Does the student have a strong desire to learn skills, acquire knowledge, and fulfill assignments in online courses because of an educational goal? Can she/he maintain focus on that goal?
- ✔ **Academic Readiness:** Does the student have the basic reading, writing, math and computer literacy skills to succeed in the class?
- ✔ **Technologically Prepared:** Does the student know how to open, create and/or save a document; use various technology tools (e.g., dictionary, thesaurus, grammar checker, calculator); and identify various file formats (e.g., doc, xls, pdf, jpg)?

One course or two?

Is this the student's first online course? If so, it may be wise to enroll in a single course to gain experience and be successful.

A Special Note About Time Commitment

Experienced mentors and online instructors agree that time management is one of the skills most critical to success. Students who cannot manage time and assignments without direct supervision usually struggle to be successful learners online. Students should expect and be able to spend five to 10 hours a week per course.

Mentor Preparation

Mentors must be knowledgeable about school policies and procedures, the courses each student is taking, and students' technology needs. They must also support students in managing their online learning experiences. The checklists below provide a starting place for getting ready to mentor.

Resources

- ✔ Review this mentor guide in its entirety.
- ✔ Review resources referenced in this document along with local policy, guidelines, student agreements, and program expectations.
- ✔ Review FERPA, acceptable use, security, anti-bullying, plagiarism, and other school policies.

Student Related

- ✔ Review academic records of students requesting to take online courses.
- ✔ Review all local expectations for online learning provided by local school and districts.
- ✔ Consider providing students with an orientation to better teach and model the experience.
- ✔ Discuss results and enrollment decision with the student (and parent(s) if the student is not yet 18 years of age or an emancipated minor).
- ✔ Determine whether students will be working in a designated space at school (classroom or lab, for instance) or outside class hours at home or another location.
- ✔ Consider scheduling students in the same course at the same time. Orient students to course in a group initially: read introductory email from instructor together, review syllabus, and pacing guide or assignment and assessment calendar.
- ✔ Review the email you may have received for each student/course that contains the course name, LMS web address, and student login information.
- ✔ Be aware when a student is entering a course that is already in progress and assist him or her in "catching up" if necessary.
- ✔ Prepare your own orientation resources (including check-in and reporting procedures, communications protocol, email and file management suggestions, mentor and student responsibilities, etc.).
- ✔ Plan your ongoing communication strategy.
  - Request students report weekly progress to you, or determine processes and expectations that work for your situation and individual students.
  - Consider steps for adjustments; i.e., communicate with parent; require students work at school until back on pace if students fall behind.

Parent Related

- ✔ Consider an orientation for students and parents to help them become aware of the time commitment for online courses and answer any questions. See Parent Guide to Online Learning (https://mvlri.org/resources/guides/parent-guide/) for information to share with parents.
- ✔ Encourage and remind parents to ask their students to log on weekly so they can view the grade book together and keep an eye on student progress.

Courses

- ✔ Become familiar with the LMS for each course.
- ✔ Determine how you can view student progress in each course. Providers may have different requirements.
- ✔ Find course instructor contact information and communicate to the instructor any student accommodations needed prior to the first day of class.
- ✔ Be prepared to proctor tests and exams. See course information from provider or contact course instructor.
- ✔ Know where to go for help before the course begins.
- ✔ Review course syllabi, assessment calendar, and pacing guide or assignment log as soon as possible or by the end of the first week at the latest.

Technical Requirements

- Check your school's technology policies to ensure that firewalls are open for course websites, and pop-up blockers and add-ins do not prevent a student's ability to progress in a course.
- Make sure computer equipment is up-to-date and easy for students to access.
- Review the course syllabus for any unique recommendations, such as web browser, headset for listening and recording, webcam capability, etc.
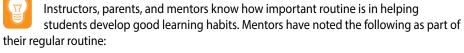- Determine if the student has access to a printer.

Day 1 of Course

A previous section provides detailed strategies about how to prepare to mentor online learners. Below you will find suggestions from experienced mentors that they present to students as a group or individually.

- I provide each student with the details for his/her course, including the course name, LMS web address and student login information so he/she can begin the course.
- I direct students to read the instructor guidelines and become acquainted with how to navigate within the LMS and how the course is organized. Encourage them to play around with the system. Start clicking away and find out what each tab does, then read through the syllabus and calendar.
- I hold a group meeting — if online learners meet in a lab, classroom, or media center — to complete paperwork and provide orientation to policies and protocols that may be different from their traditional classes (e.g., attendance, weekly or monthly report requirement, Netiquette, pacing guides, how to get help, etc.).
- I encourage students to carefully read instructions and contact the instructor if they have any questions.
- I sit down with them and ask what they need to be successful.
- I gather individualized information to help personalize the student's learning.

Day-to-Day Routine

Instructors, parents, and mentors know how important routine is in helping students develop good learning habits. Mentors have noted the following as part of their regular routine:

- As students come in, I greet them. After they log in, I give brief reminders — including to let me know what they need, what's important to their success. This provides a structural start to the day. They like that.
- I settle them in, get them working, give them quiet, and do a walk-around. If I have to have more of a conversation, I ask them up to my desk.
- I created a spreadsheet for attendance broken down by class and hour. Every day, they initial the sign-in sheet on my classroom door and go to the library to do their work. I talk with them before school, after school or look for them during lunch if I need to follow up on an issue.
- I seat students at assigned computers when using school resources to help with classroom management, emphasizing it is their space and their responsibility to maintain. Also makes it easier to locate keystrokes or assignments and address issues with assignments.
- I sit where I can see the computer screens and monitor computers, if possible, to block access to games, control the screen and, see key strokes, not only to see if they've been where they shouldn't have been, but also to recover lost assignments.

Some programs have dedicated space for online learners. In those settings, mentors take attendance every day. In other programs, students use the library, hallways, student commons, or cafeteria — anywhere they are comfortable — to do their coursework. Most schools have online learners who are allowed to work off campus, either because they are seat time waiver students, have met specific criteria for the privilege, or have arranged to work from home for health or other personal reasons.

Contact

Mentors, instructors and administrators who presented at a Virtual School Summit in June 2013 commented about the vital nature of the mentor's support, supervision, and encouragement and credited the mentor with creating and nurturing an environment that leads to course completion. First and foremost, participants recommended regular contact between mentors and students, administrators and mentors, instructors and mentors, instructors and students, and everyone and parents.

Mentors interviewed for *Supporting Online Learners: Michigan Mentor Program Case Studies* (https://mvlri.org/research/publications/michigan-mentor-program-cs/) agree about the importance of establishing contact and maintaining relationships.

Student contact

- Daily contact between students and mentors is best.
- Successful students receive consistent contact from mentors and instructors regarding feedback and progress.
- A face-to-face weekly meeting between student and mentor where the student discusses her/his progress helps students develop responsibility for their own learning and an understanding of accountability.

Administrator contact

- Administrators should check in with mentors on a monthly or weekly basis to ensure that mentors know their work and dedication is appreciated by the school.

Instructor contact

- The online instructor should contact both the student and the mentor at the beginning of the course — preferably via a phone call since email is so easily overlooked by students.
- Mentors suggest periodic contact with the instructor — not just because of a crisis.

Common Support Strategies

- ✔ If the students sign in for the mentoring period, they're more likely to do work on a daily basis. It provides a little more structure and accountability.
- ✔ On Day 1, show students how to log in, see what the rules in the class are, open tabs, access the discussion board, submit assignments — the things they haven't done before.
- ✔ Don't wait to see if a student needs assistance — whether it's tutoring or another student support service. Have something in place. Know the students and classes they have, be prepared for where you will direct them if they need something extra.
- ✔ Maintain policy that the mentor must be able to see the student's screen when he/she is taking a test.
- ✔ Meet with other mentors as a professional learning community, whenever possible, to support each other, establish norms, share best practices and successes, and get ideas about alternative strategies when something doesn't work.
- ✔ It's important that you establish communication guidelines with students at the start of the course.

Communication – How often will students report progress to you? If students' progress is not meeting expectations, what are the consequences? Will students need to report to school until courses are up-to-date? How will parents help in this matter? Please communicate often with instructors for assistance.

- ✔ Provide students assistance in learning to compose messages to other students and especially their instructors. This may be the first time a student has had to communicate in writing without the benefit of face-to-face opportunities for requesting or sharing information.
- ✔ Show students how to advocate for themselves. If they don't get a response to a message board entry, suggest the student add the comment to an email to the instructor and copy the mentor. This puts the student in direct contact with the instructor. When the instructor includes the mentor in the reply as well, it creates dialogue among all three parties. Everyone needs a reminder of the relationship element of learning, and the student learns how to send a good message, too.
- ✔ Add student and mentor notes to mid-semester report cards. The student note to parents should include how many weeks are left in the course, how many points they have and what they have to do to finish. Students take responsibility for action, and mentors have a chance to give parents positive feedback about their student and/or suggestions for support.

Time management – For many students, taking multiple online courses can be overwhelming. Students need guidance in managing their online courses. One strategy is to focus on two courses at a time in the first half of the term and spend the second half of the term on the other courses. To consider this arrangement, determine your school needs regarding verification of students in courses during the state-required time period for seat time waiver reporting. Communicate with instructors to inform them of the students' scheduling decisions. Instructors may have some ideas to assist you.

- ✔ Add due dates to pacing guide, syllabi, and assignment and assessment calendars.
- ✔ Help students set goals to keep current and stay on pace.
- ✔ Review pacing guide or assignment calendar with students during face-to-face updates to keep them on pace.

Earning the right to work off-site – If you work with students who need assistance in becoming self-directed in their learning, consider starting them in a structured school environment to monitor their engagement and understanding of online learning. They can earn the privilege of working outside the school setting through consistent performance and/or by achieving a certain level of successful completion.

Learning Management Systems

Most online courses have a Learning Management System — commonly referred to as an LMS — that contains the tools a student uses to take an online course. Students gain access to and turn in their assignments, communicate with the instructor and other students, and keep track of their progress and grades through the LMS. The instructor uses the LMS to post announcements, communicate with the students, provide access to graded assignments and more.

Course navigation menus vary from class to class or provider to provider, but they all contain similar features. The most important items are:

- ✔ **Announcements** – The instructor will post important announcements about the course here.
- ✔ **Course Information** – This area includes important elements, such as the course pacing guide, assignments, and the assignment and assessment calendar.
- ✔ **Instructor Information** – Look here for how to contact the instructor and other basic information about him/her.
- ✔ **Messages** – Students can communicate easily with the instructor and one another from this location.
- ✔ **Grades** – Information about grades, graded assignments with feedback, and rubrics can be found here.

Monitoring Student Progress

Parents and mentors can monitor student progress and grades by asking their student to log in and explain his/her grade book progress and points. You can also request permission from the course provider for viewing students' records. Below, several mentors shared their best practices for monitoring student progress:

- ✔ I check in with each student every week. I ask them to pull up their gradebook and go around and look at the feedback from their instructor with them at their seat. I can pull them up to my desk, but they like that I go around to them.
- ✔ Once a week I have an informal conversation about the progress report with each student. I seek out the ones who aren't making progress more often. Some students I have little contact with.
- ✔ I meet with students when necessary — in person when possible but virtually if need be. Face-to-face is preferable, although many students email weekly progress reports.
- ✔ I ask each student to log in to his/her course and review progress, percentage score and teacher comments in the grade book with him/her.
- ✔ I make sure they're on task: check with them daily, look at their grades, print out a progress report when available and hand it to them or ask them to print it out every week and turn it in every Friday. I give an extra percentage point for doing that throughout the semester.
- ✔ I remind them every week where we are in the semester, make sure they're keeping track on paper and in the computer, and encourage them to get ahead.

Protecting Student Assignments

- Students need access to saved files from any location. Help them establish a place to save work — a flash drive, web storage, etc. — and develop a regular habit of backing up their assignments. This safeguard may prevent loss of content and frustration if an LMS refreshes while students are working on assignments.
- Students are encouraged to develop assignments in a word processing program, save the document in rich text format, and copy/paste to the LMS to submit work.

Research on Mentoring in Schools

> **"** A mentor's ability to communicate with students face-to-face allows the creation of close personal relationships with students which can have a positive impact on course outcomes.

Student Needs

Although exact enrollment estimates vary, there is no doubt that K–12 online enrollments have grown dramatically in the last decade and show little signs of slowing.[1] However, online courses tend to have lower completion rates than their face-to-face counterparts.[2] Although the cause is not fully understood, some have suggested that the lower completion rates are due to students' lack of learning skills and the self-regulation abilities required for success in online learning environments.[3] Others have noted that online course reliance on text communication as well as physical separation from others can leave students feeling isolated and unmotivated.[4] As a result, researchers have suggested that students need an adult who takes interest in what they are doing and actively encourages and pushes them to succeed.[5] Although online teachers can support and motivate students,[6] their physical separation and high student loads make it difficult for them to provide each student with the level of personalized support that students require.[7] In contrast, mentors have a more manageable student load and can work with students face-to-face — making mentors a critical support for students.

Mentors' Responsibilities

Unlike teachers, mentors are typically not content experts and do not formally assess students' understanding or application of the course material. Nor should they make modifications to course assignments. Instead, a mentor's ability to communicate with students face-to-face allows the creation of close personal relationships with students which can have a positive impact on course outcomes.[8] In fact, some mentors, especially in rural settings, have close pre-existing relationships with students and their families.[9] As a result, mentors are in a better position than online teachers to understand students' needs in and beyond the course and can serve as a communication link between the teacher and students who are reluctant self-advocates. Mentors can also help students organize their physical space and adhere to a regular learning schedule. Similarly, mentors can help to ensure academic honesty and aid students in the development of learning skills needed to be successful.[10] In summary, a mentor is asked to build relationships with students and ensure that "everything is working smoothly and order is maintained . . . but does not teach the course."[11]

[1] Watson, J., Murin, A., Vashaw, L., Gemin, B., & Rapp, C. (2013). *Keeping pace with K-12 online & blended learning: An annual review of policy and practice.* Evergreen Education Group. Retrieved from http://kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/EEG_KP2013-lr.pdf

[2] Hawkins, A., & Barbour, M. K. (2010). U.S. virtual school trial period and course completion policy study. *American Journal of Distance Education, 24*(1), 5—20. doi:10.1080/08923640903529295

[3] Rice, K. L. (2006). A comprehensive look at distance education in the K-12 context. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education, 38*(4), 425—449.

[4] de la Varre, C., Keane, J., & Irvin, M. J. (2011). Dual perspectives on the contribution of on-site facilitators to teaching presence in a blended learning environment. *Journal of Distance Education, 25*(3). Retrieved from http://www.jofde.ca/index.php/jde/article/viewArticle/751/1285

[5] Murphy, E., & Rodríguez-Manzanares, M. A. (2009). Teachers' perspectives on motivation in high school distance education. *Journal of Distance Education, 23*(3), 1—24.

[6] Borup, J., Graham, C. R., & Drysdale, J. S. (2013). The nature of teacher engagement at an online high school. *British Journal of Educational Technology,* n/a—n/a. doi:10.1111/bjet.12089

[7] Hawkins, A., Barbour, M. K., & Graham, C. R. (2012). "Everybody is their own island": Teacher disconnection in a virtual school. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(2), 124—144.

[8] Murphy, E., & Rodríguez-Manzanares, M. A. (2009)

[9] de la Varre et al. (2011)

[10] Harms, C. M., Niederhauser, D. S., Davis, N. E., Roblyer, M. D., & Gilbert, S. B. (2006). Educating educators for virtual schooling: Communicating roles and responsibilities. *The Electronic Journal of Communication, 16*(1 & 2). Retrieved from http://www.cios.org/EJCPUBLIC/016/1/01611.HTML

[11] Hannum, W. H., Irvin, M. J., Lei, P., & Farmer, T. W. (2008). Effectiveness of using learner-centered principles on student retention in distance education courses in rural schools. *Distance Education, 29*(3), 211—229. doi:10.1080/0158791080237977763

> **"** One report summarized that mentors who understand and fulfill their roles by 'directly working with students day by day are key to the success of the program.'

Mentors' Impact

Although current research is limited, the emerging research indicates that mentors can improve course outcomes. For instance, one study examined 2,880 survey responses and found that online students who worked in a mentor-monitored classroom were nearly twice as likely to pass the course than those who did not.[12] Similar impacts have been shown in smaller case studies. For example, a case study examining 28 online middle school students found that mentors who were actively engaged in monitoring and organizing student work were "crucial to the degree to which [students] maintained engagement in activities."[13] However, the impact that mentors make is influenced by two factors. First, mentors' impact can depend on student characteristics. For instance, one researcher found that mentors had considerable impact on at-risk students who lacked motivation and parental support. She summarized, "There is an affective part of supporting at-risk students that cannot be minimized or ignored."[14] Second, mentors are more effective when they understand their responsibilities and have the skills to fulfill them. In fact, one study found that students who had trained mentors were significantly more likely to pass their online course than those students whose mentors received no professional development.[15] In other words, mentors "are made, not born."[16]

Although more research is needed, qualified mentors clearly have the potential to have an impact on student achievement. One report summarized that mentors who understand and fulfill their roles by "directly working with students day by day are key to the success of the program."[17]

"Research on Mentoring in Schools" was written by Jered Borup, assistant professor in the Division of Learning Technologies at George Mason University, who holds a Ph.D. in Instructional Psychology and Technology from Brigham Young University. Dr. Borup was a history teacher for six years and has taught online and blended courses since 2008. His research interests include developing online learning communities and identifying support systems that adolescent learners require to be successful in online environments.

[12]Roblyer, M. D., Davis, L., Mills, S. C., Marshall, J., & Pape, L. (2008). Toward practical procedures for predicting and promoting success in virtual school students. *American Journal of Distance Education, 22*(2), 90—109.

[13]Frid, S. (2001). Supporting primary students' on-line learning in a virtual enrichment program. *Research in Education, 66*, 9—27.

[14]Pettyjohn, T. J. (2012). *Stakeholders' perceptions of supplemental online learning for credit recovery* (Doctoral dissertation). Georgia Southern University. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1402&context=etd

[15]Hannum et al. (2008)

[16]Roblyer, M. D. (2006). Virtually successful: Defeating the dropout problem through online programs. The Phi Delta Kappan, 88(1), 31—36.

[17]Roblyer, M. D., Freeman, J., Stabler, M., & Schneidmiler, J. (2007). *External Evaluation of the Alabama ACCESS Initiative Phase 3 Report*. Eugene, OR: International Society for Technology in Education. Retrieved from http://accessdl.state.al.us/2006Evaluation.pdf

Additional Articles and Reports

The following reports and articles provide additional insights into mentor roles and the impact they can have on student learning. All of the resources are freely available online by following the provided links.

Harms, C. M., Niederhauser, D. S., Davis, N. E., Roblyer, M. D., & Gilbert, S. B. (2006). Educating educators for virtual schooling: Communicating roles and responsibilities. The Electronic Journal of Communication, 16(1 & 2). Retrieved from www.cios.org/EJCPUBLIC/016/1/01611.HTML

> These authors provide a conceptual framework for understanding mentors' roles and responsibilities. They explain that within an online learning environment, three individuals can perform the traditional roles of teachers: a designer, a teacher, and a mentor. The article also contains guidance on how designers, teachers, and mentors can coordinate their efforts and work to ensure online students are successful.

Borup, J., & Drysdale, J. (expected 2014). On-site and online facilitators in K-12 online and blended learning. In R. Ferdig & K. Kennedy's (Eds.) Handbook of K-12 Online and Blended Learning Research. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press. Chapter draft retrieved from: www.academia.edu/7982438/On-site_and_Online_Facilitators_Current_Practice_and_Future_Directions_for_Research

> This book chapter contains a review of the current literature on mentoring in K-12 online environments. The authors found that mentors' roles included fostering relationships with students, monitoring student engagement, and providing instructional support. The chapter concludes with implications for policy and practice including a call to provide mentors with professional development that helps them to understand their responsibilities and gain the skills necessary to fulfill them.

Ferdig, R. E. (2010). Understanding the role and applicability of K-12 online learning to support student dropout recovery efforts. Lansing, MI: Michigan Virtual University. Retrieved from http://www.mivu.org/Portals/0/RPT_RetentionFinal.pdf

> This case study describes a credit recovery program for at-risk students in Michigan. Students in the program were required to work with a mentor twice a week but had flexibility in when and where they worked at other times of the week. Although these students were at risk of expulsion or dropping out, they were all able to complete at least one online course. Students reported that the support they received from mentors was an important factor in their success.

Murphy, E., & Rodríguez-Manzanares, M. A. (2009). Teachers' perspectives on motivation in high school distance education. Journal of Distance Education, 23(3), 1—24. Retrieved from http://www.ijede.ca/index.php/jde/article/view/602/971

> These authors conducted 42 interviews with online teachers across Canada regarding their perceptions on student motivation. Teachers found that personal relationships, humor, personalized interaction, incentives, and face-to-face meetings increased student motivation. Teachers also explained that they relied on mentors to communicate on their behalf when students struggled or were disengaged in the course. Teachers also concluded that "It is important that there be somebody who is showing an interest in what [students] are doing . . . [and] is actively encouraging or pushing them" (p. 11).

Watson, J., Murin, A., Vashaw, L., Gemin, B., & Rapp, C. (2013). Keeping pace with K-12 online & blended learning: An annual review of policy and practice. Evergreen Education Group. Retrieved from http://kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/EEG_KP2013-lr.pdf

> This report provides an overview of online growth, programs, policy and practice. It also contains state-by-state profiles.

Resources

Characteristics of a Good Mentor

From Mentors of Online Learners

Among the characteristics of a good LEG/Coach/Mentor is their willingness to take the time, and make the effort, to dig deeply enough to understand what challenge(s) their student may be facing.

Alison Manwiller, Green Bay Area Public School District

A good LEG/Coach/Mentor is able to connect with students and guide them towards growth through online coursework.

Stacey Russell, School District of Nekoosa

A good LEG/Coach/Mentor is equal parts patience and insistence with the foresight to know which to apply when.

Jason Hollenberger, River Valley School District

A critical characteristic of a coach or local education guide is that they commit to supporting the student with the specific learning skills needed to be a successful independent online learner.

Dawn Nordine, Wisconsin Virtual School CESA 9

The most effective coaches are those who spend the time building relationships with students which allow students to get to know themselves better and access the supports they need as learners.

Jill Gurtner, Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District

The mentor provides the personal attention needed to guide students through a new experience of learning, and is vital to the overall success of the program.

James O'Hagan, Racine Unified School District

Good coaches know the students they are mentoring and develop their capabilities as independent learners with an ability to self-advocate, but are ready to gracefully step in when the students needs some extra support.

Tim Schell, Waunakee Community School District

A good mentor through building a relationship with a students helps that student succeed in achieving their goals.

David Parr, School District of Janesville

A characteristic of a good LEG/Coach/Mentor is one who is willing to listen to the concerns/needs of the learner and parent and work with the instructor to ensure those concerns/needs are met.

Danyell Franti, Triton Network

A coach/mentor/LEG sees each student as an opportunity.....An opportunity to teach a student how to succeed in a digital world while building their growth mindset.

Lisa Lieder, Oshkosh Area School District

Our best coaches are those who develop a positive relationship with their students and parents through regular communication of reminders, concerns and individual improvement plans.

Dana Breed, Stevens Point

One characteristic of a good coach is someone who can help a learner unlock and discover their grit.

Erik Hanson, Appleton eSchool

An effective mentor is someone who is dedicated to the success of his or her students and creates a learning environment that is welcoming and supportive and more importantly — flexible — to meet individual student needs.

Sample Online Learning Mentor Job Description

General Description

The Online Learning Mentor provides academic support to online learners while ensuring the mentoring location is functional and conducive to a positive learning environment. The mentor must have excellent listening and conversational skills, monitor students assigned to him or her, answer general questions, and ensure students are engaged in activities that promote their academic progress. The mentor may also assist students with online enrollment. The position requires an understanding of the school's history, vision, values, policies, and procedures.

Typical Duties and Responsibilities

✔ Determine student readiness based on online learning questionnaire/rubric and interview with student (and parent when appropriate), school records, and conversation with other school personnel
✔ Counsel students concerning the decision to enroll in an online course or courses
✔ Ensure the mentoring space is open and accessible during class hours
✔ Ensure that all computers are functioning properly and students have access to the academic resources needed to achieve their educational goals
✔ Maintain communication with parents, counselors and administration as necessary
✔ Monitor the mentoring space to ensure students are using the Internet for educational purposes and are not accessing inappropriate websites
✔ Establish contact with and maintain regular communication with online instructors
✔ Establish rapport with students and encourage students to succeed academically
✔ Advocate for online students in working with course providers and instructors
✔ Serve as the liaison in resolving issues between students and online instructors
✔ Assist students in developing an individualized work schedule for each online course
✔ Ensure students complete courses in a timely manner based on their ability
✔ Complete paperwork as required by the course provider, school and/or district
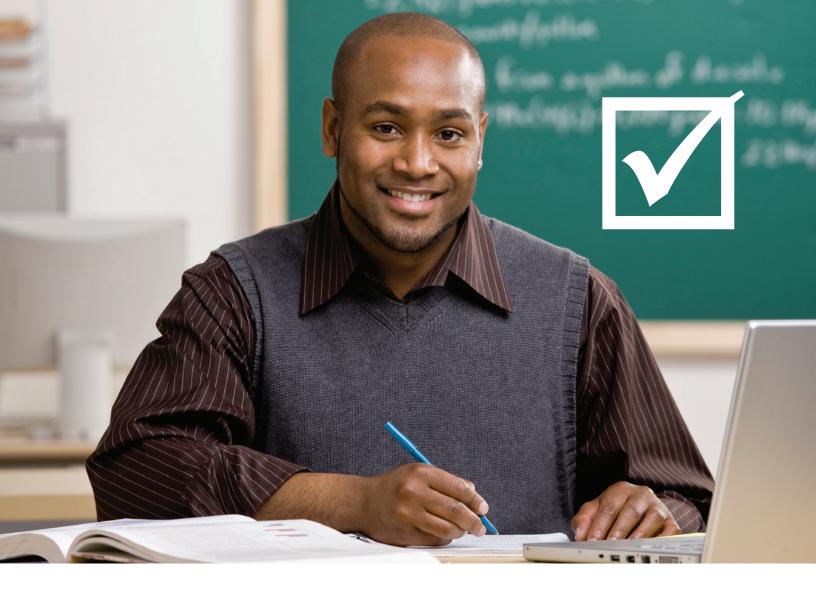✔ Process academic scores in online courses so the grade can be part of school transcript

Skills

✔ Excellent verbal and written interpersonal communication and conflict management skills
✔ Ability to inspire students to devote time to their online courses and actively participate
✔ Ability to organize work and handle multiple tasks simultaneously
✔ Ability to keep and maintain accurate and detailed reports and records
✔ Ability to work in a culturally diverse environment — face-to-face and online
✔ Proficient in trouble shooting lower level technology problems

Requirements

✔ Qualify for Wisconsin substitute teaching permit
  • Significant experience as a substitute teacher preferred
✔ Successful experience in a classroom setting
  • High school or secondary experience preferred
✔ Experience using technology in a classroom setting

Based on the job posting for the Online Learning Mentor at Three Rivers High School.

Mentor Self-Assessment

Ask yourself the following questions as you contemplate your role as mentor.

- ☐ Do you know or are you willing to learn the skills associated with online learning?
- ☐ Are you comfortable with computers and willing to help students that may not be?
- ☐ Are you able to participate in a mentor training course or program?
- ☐ Are you willing to participate in a mentor learning network?
- ☐ Are you able to use strategies that will help motivate students to stay focused?
- ☐ Are you a good manager of time? Can you teach that skill?
- ☐ Are you a goal-setter? Can you teach that skill?
- ☐ Do you know or are you willing to learn how to support and facilitate learning when you're not the teacher?
- ☐ Do you know how to assist students in a flexible learning environment?
- ☐ Are you ready to recruit and screen students for online learning?
- ☐ Do you have experience communicating regularly online?
- ☐ Do you have experience working with students to find solutions to potential problems?
- ☐ Are you prepared to advocate for online learning in your school?
- ☐ Are you willing to work with parents, instructors, counselors, the technology coordinator and administration to ensure program success?

Mentor Best Practices

On-site mentors have a significant influence on student success in online courses.

What does a mentor do?
- Serve as the local "eyes and ears" for the online instructor.
- Track student progress in online courses.
- Communicate with the online instructor, school administration and parents.
- Address any concerns to staff and the online course provider.
- Assign final grade to student after the score is submitted by the online provider.
- Help student stay on track and successfully progress through coursework.

How does a mentor prepare to mentor?
- Participate in mentor professional development if available.
- Review syllabi for online courses students will be taking and become acquainted with prerequisites, assessment timetable, the LMS used by the provider, technology requirements, and enrollment information.
- Know where the student will be working — at school or at home.

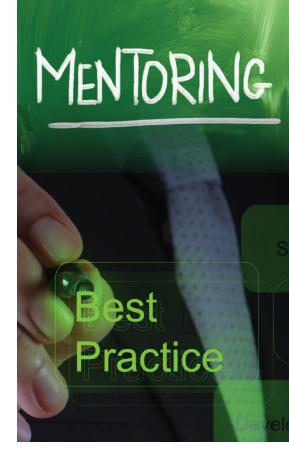### How does a mentor help prepare a student for online learning?
- Determine what the technology requirements are for the course.
- Verify that the student or school can meet those requirements.
- Review the Profile of a Successful Student on p. 6 of this guide.
- Review the results of the student's Online Learner Readiness Rubric.
- Orient the student to what learning online requires of him/her at your school.

Mentors have a significant impact on student success in online courses. Support includes:
- Providing a place for the student to log into his/her course when at school.
- Arranging access to the technology the school provides.
- Monitoring that the student has logged into his/her class regularly.
- Reviewing progress and teacher comments in the grade book regularly.
- Helping student set goals to keep current.
- Helping students develop clear messages to communicate questions to their instructor.
- Securing assistance immediately from the online course provider should the student experience any technical difficulties.

Questions a mentor may need to answer:
- How do students receive their grade?
- Who is the course provider contact person if there are questions or issues outside the instructor's responsibility?
- What are the withdrawal policies for the course?
- How does the student submit assignments?
- What are the beginning and end dates of the course?
- What is the expectation for student/instructor communication and interaction?

Online Learner Readiness Rubric

Name: _____

Student Readiness	Technology Skills	Work & Study Habits	Learning Style	Technology / Connectivity	Time Management	Interest/ Motivation	Reading/Writing Skills	Support Services
Less Ready	Student has little, if any, experience using a computer or the Internet, and has minimal desire to develop more skills in this area.	Student often needs reminders to complete routine assignments, often turns homework in late and is not able to spend 5-10 hours per week on each online course.	Student is not a self-directed learner and often requires real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support.	Student does not have consistent access to a computer and a reliable connection to the Internet at home or at school.	Student does not manage his or her time effectively in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has little or no interest in the content area of the online course offering and has a negative or unrealistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading below grade level and has experienced difficulty with routine writing assignments.	In general, parents and school personnel do not actively support online learning and are unable or unwilling to provide support assistance.
→	Student has limited experience using a computer and the Internet, and has expressed a strong interest in developing more skills in this area.	Student sometimes needs reminders and assistance in completing routine assignments and has pledged to spend 5-10 hours per week on each online course enrollment.	Student is beginning to demonstrate a behavior of self-directed learning and sometimes requires real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow up support.	Student has limited access to a computer with low-speed Internet service at school or at home.	Student is beginning to demonstrate effective time management skills in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has an interest in the content area of the online course offering, but has expressed concerns about enrolling in an online course or has an unrealistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading at grade level and has demonstrated limited proficiency with writing assignments.	Student support system is limited, parents and school personnel are somewhat supportive of enrollment in online courses.
→	Student has strong computer skills and more than adequate experience using a word processor, email application and web browser.	Student rarely needs reminders or assistance in completing routine assignments and has demonstrated good independent study habits.	In general, the student is self-directed and does not require real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support.	Student has consistent access to a computer with moderate-speed Internet service at home or at school.	Student has demonstrated effective time management skills in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has an interest in the content area of the online course offering, and has a positive and realistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading at or above grade level and has demonstrated success with a variety of writing assignments.	Student has open access to school-based mentoring/ counseling service and parental support.
More Ready	Student has excellent computer skills and significant experience using a word processor, email application and web browser, and is comfortable downloading information from the Internet and using other technology tools and applications.	Student does not need reminders or assistance in completing routine assignments, usually finishes homework ahead of time and has successfully completed an independent study experience or taken an online course.	Student is a self-directed learner and demonstrates a high level of comfort and skill in learning new material without requiring real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support, and deals well with ambiguity.	Student has daily access to a computer with high-speed Internet service at home and at a convenient location in the school building before, during and after regular school hours.	Student has demonstrated outstanding time management skills while participating in a variety of clubs, student organizations, sports and work activities.	Student has a strong interest in the content area of the online course offering, is highly motivated to enroll in an online course and has a positive and realistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading above grade level, has strong reading comprehension skills and has demonstrated success with complex writing assignments.	Student has regularly scheduled access to school-counseling services, parental support is strong and district has adopted policies and identified best practices to support students as online learners.

Note: This rubric was not designed to be used as a tool to determine eligibility for enrollment in online courses, but instead to be used as a resource to help identify specific areas where students may need additional support to better ensure success.

Student Interview for Online Learning

This student interview explores whether an online course is a good choice and how likely the student is to be successful.

Student:	Date of Birth:
Grade:	Phone:
Address:	Email:

Parent/Guardian:	Phone:
	Email:

Academic Advisor:	Phone:
	Email:

Courses: _____

_____

_____

Do you need the course(s) to graduate? ❑ Yes   ❑ No

Have you ever taken an online course? ❑ Yes   ❑ No

Do you think an online course is easier than a regular in-school course? ❑ Yes   ❑ No

Why do you want to take the course(s) online?

❑ Course(s) not available at school   ❑ Schedule Conflict   ❑ Credit Acceleration/Graduate Early

❑ Credit Recovery   ❑ Personal Enrichment   ❑ Personal Preference

❑ Online Learning Experience   ❑ Graduation Requirement

Do you have computer and internet access at home?   ❑ Yes   ❑ No

My computer skill level is: ❑ Good   ❑ Fair   ❑ Poor

How many hours a week do you spend on the computer? _____

Student Interview for Online Learning (cont.)

How do you spend your time on the computer?

%		%	
	School Assignments		Games or Recreation
	Communication with Friends/Family		Other

Instructors with years of online teaching experience agree that students who have a successful, satisfying experience learning online share several critical characteristics.

Think about your readiness by answering these questions:	Yes	No
Good Time Management: Can you create and maintain a study schedule throughout the semester without face-to-face interaction with a teacher?		
Effective Communication: Can you ask for help, make contact with other students and the instructor online, and describe any problems with learning materials using email, texting and/or the telephone?		
Independent Study Habits: Can you study and complete assignments without direct supervision and maintain the self-discipline to stick to a schedule?		
Self-Motivation: Do you have a strong desire to learn skills, acquire knowledge and fulfill assignments in online courses because of an educational goal? Can you maintain focus on that goal?		
Academic Readiness: Do you have the basic reading, writing, math and computer literacy skills to succeed in the class?		
Technologically Prepared: Do you know how to open, create and/or save a document; use various technology tools (e.g., dictionary, thesaurus, grammar checker, calculator); and identify various file formats (e.g., doc, xls, pdf, jpg)? (from Michigan Educational Technology Standards for Students 2009)		

Online Learner Readiness Rubric

I have reviewed the Online Learning Readiness Rubric.　　　Student Initial: _____　　　Parent Initial: _____

Time Commitment

Can you spend five to 10 hours a week per course?　❑ Yes　❑ No

When will you work on your online course(s)? _____

What extracurricular activities or employment do you balance with your education commitment? _____
_____
_____

Accommodation

Do you need an accommodation to successfully complete your course(s)?　❑ Yes　　❑ No

Describe: _____
_____
_____

Questions?

Do you have any questions or comments about taking an online course? _____
_____
_____
_____

Online Course Enrollment Request Form

Student Name _____ Grade _____

I would like to enroll in _____ for _____ semester/trimester 201_____.
<div align="center">(name of course as it appears in the statewide catalog)</div>

_____
<div align="center">(student signature)</div>

I consent to this request _____
<div align="center">(parent signature)</div>

OFFICIAL SCHOOL RESPONSE

_____'s request to enroll in _____ (title of course)

for the _____ semester/trimester 201_____ has been _____accepted _____ denied.

☐ The student already earned credits for the course (so the student would be repeating a course).

☐ The online course would not generate credits for the student's transcript.

☐ Enrollment in the online course is not consistent with the student's graduation requirements or with the student's career interests.

☐ The student has not completed the prerequiste coursework or has not demonstrated proficiency in the prerequisite course content.

☐ The student has failed a previous online course in the same subject during the two most recent academic years.

☐ The online course is of insufficient quality or rigor. We will make a reasonable effort to find an alternative online course that meets the school's requirements for quality and rigor.

☐ The cost of the course exceeds 6.67% of the minimum per pupil foundation allowance.

☐ The request to enroll was made outside the established time for enrollment and schedule changes.

☐ The request for a virtual course enrollment was not made in the academic term, semester, trimester, or summer preceding the enrollment. This does not apply to a request made by a pupil who is newly enrolled in the primary district.

Additional Comments _____

_____

Please direct questions related to this denial to _____ (name) at _____ (contact info).

Name of School Representative _____

<div align="center">Developed by Michigan Virtual™. This material may be copied, modified and distributed for non-commercial use.</div>

Online Learning Agreement

The purpose of this agreement is to acknowledge acceptance of the identified roles and responsibilities for students and parents that request to enroll in online courses.

Student Name_____ Grade _____

Parent/Guardian Name _____

The best way to reach me is ❑email _____❑phone _____

STUDENT

❑ I have completed the Online Learning Readiness Rubric. I need support in the following areas: _____

   _____

❑ I agree to maintain a study schedule and spend at least_____hours a week on each online course.

❑ I agree to keep up with assignments, tests and quizzes.

❑ I agree to communicate regularly with my instructor and whenever I have a problem.

❑ I agree to communicate regularly with my mentor and whenever I have a problem.

❑ Other _____

PARENT

❑ My child has access to a computer with Internet connection at home.

❑ I can arrange for my child to have regular access to a computer with Internet connection at the local library, community center or other location.

❑ I do not have access to a computer for my child to access online learning and request the school provide one or a place in the school to access the online learning as part of my child's school day.

❑ I agree to support my student's success in online learning by:

   ❑ Setting up a study space.

   ❑ Monitoring his/her progress.

   ❑ Helping maintain his/her study schedule.

   ❑ Encouraging him/her to communicate with the mentor and instructor whenever he/she has a question or a problem.

We acknowledge that we have reviewed this agreement together and understand our responsibilities.

Student _____ Date _____

Parent _____ Date _____

School Representative _____ Date _____

Instructor/Mentor Intervention and Action Plan

INSTRUCTOR SECTION

Student Name: _____

Course: _____

Current Score: _____

Instructor Observations & Recommendations: _____

STUDENT SECTION

How much time do you currently spend on class each week?_____

What time of day do you work on class? _____

What is your goal in this class, both grade-wise and skill-wise? In other words, what final score would you like to achieve, and what practical skills and knowledge (course-related or other, such as time management, communication, etc.) would you like to obtain in this class?

_____

_____

_____

What is preventing you from achieving these goals?_____

_____

How can _____help you achieve your goals?
<div align="center">[insert instructor's name]</div>

MENTOR SECTION

Mentor Observations & Recommendations _____

_____

_____

Other comments or questions for _____
<div align="center">[insert instructor's name]</div>

VERSION 2, FALL 2018

MENTOR FUNDAMENTALS
A GUIDE TO MENTORING ONLINE LEARNERS

WIsconsin
Digital Learning Collaborative
Innovate. Collaborate. Educate.

In partnership with   MICHIGAN VIRTUAL   MICHIGAN VIRTUAL LEARNING®
RESEARCH INSTITUTE