An E-mentoring Approach that promotes Doctoral persistence

Doctoral attrition rates in the United States range from 40 – 70% (Berelson, 1960; Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project, 2007); and the problem of attrition is even more grave in the online environment (Rovai, 2002a). This problem, both in traditional and online doctoral programs, is multi-faceted problem as researchers have identified numerous student and institutional factors as contributing to doctoral attrition. Institutional factors include economic integration, effective advising/mentoring, program type (e.g., online vs. face-to-face), and tools for supporting doctoral students. While all stages of the doctoral journey are demanding, students consistently report that the writing of the dissertation is the most demanding (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012); thus, it is a time when attrition frequently occurs. Thus, instructions need to be concerned with providing support for online doctoral students in the dissertation phase in order to decrease attrition rated. Within doctoral and graduate level attrition research, a consensus that the level of expertise, advising, mentoring, and supervision chairs provide is integral to persistence (Earl-Novell, 2006; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Furthermore, with the rapid development of information and communication technologies and online doctoral programs, technology is playing an increasingly important role in doctoral education, and technology has been recognized as important in supporting effective mentorship in higher education (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).
Thus, in this presentation, I provide an overview of the process developed for an online Ed.D. program that not only services and mentors over 500 students in the dissertation phase, but strives to ensure that these students’ dissertations are academically sound and methodologically correct. I will describe the human and technological resources needed to provide oversight of this process, including demonstrating a collaborative workspace hosted via the university intranet, called the Dissertation Portal. This portal was built using Microsoft’s SharePoint, was a focus of a Microsoft innovation case study, and was awarded one of the nine 2013 Campus Technology innovator awards as a creative solutions for online doctoral mentorship. Research has demonstrated that the implementation and use of this portal and the process increased doctoral candidates’ connectedness by 9% and satisfaction with the dissertation process significantly (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2011, 2012). Research supports the adoption of the Dissertation Portal to increase candidate’s connectedness and satisfaction; thus, persistence in the online dissertation process. It also has supported processes that have increased dissertation quality and increased the efficiency of manuscript reviews. This research will be reviewed and discussed in detail.