An Exploration of Mentoring Programs for Online Instructional Designers in Higher Education

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Abstract

This research explores programs designed to support the mentorship of online instructional designers in higher education. The study investigated the characteristics of mentorship within institutions as well as professional development opportunities offered through external providers. Mixed-methods data was collected from instructional design participants (n = 65) through a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, including survey questions and focus group interviews (n = 9). Findings indicated a high level of interest in mentorship among respondents that was not commensurate with the availability of programs at their institutions. Results also revealed a continuum of mentoring approaches ranging from self to group mentoring. Implications provide recommendations on structuring mentoring programs for design professionals within and across institutions of higher education.

Keywords: design professional**,** focus groups, higher education, instructional design, mentoring, programs, onboarding, professional development

Introduction

The field of instructional design (ID) has experienced significant growth over the past decade driven by increased student demand for online and hybrid programs. According to the CHLOE 9 report, nearly three-fourths of four-year institutions plan to launch new online degree initiatives this year (Simunich et. al, 2024). The expansion of quality online learning was partially fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, which elevated the role instructional designers (IDs) play in the course development process and the scaling of online programs. In response, institutions have made significant investments in ID staffing, aligning with the 12% projected increase in the ID labor market over the next decade (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). The reskilling of new design professionals into higher education, including K-12 teachers who transitioned into the field post-pandemic, requires foundational training and development. Ongoing training on emerging technologies and pedagogies (e.g., trauma-informed pedagogy, critical instructional design, inclusive design, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality) is also essential for upskilling the existing ID workforce. As the demand for ID expertise continues to grow, professional development will play a pivotal role in equipping designers to meet present and future needs.

Mentoring is “a professional development relationship in which a more experienced participant assists a less experienced one in developing a career” (Dennen, 2013, p. 817). Mentees who participate in training programs with a mentoring element benefit from enhanced cognitive abilities, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as job and career satisfaction (Pleschová & McAlpine, 2015). Tangible outcomes of mentoring also include promotions and increased

compensation (Allen et al., 2004). While mentoring is commonly employed as a development strategy for faculty and students in higher education (Pleschová & McAlpine, 2015), it has yet to be widely leveraged for IDs. A previous study on the mentorship of design professionals underscored the value of mentoring for designers at all career stages, with an emphasis on core competencies, such as communication and the course development process (Mancilla & Frey, 2024). Despite the abundant need for mentoring IDs, few institutions have embraced mentoring as a form of professional development.

The present study aims to address this gap in research by exploring the features of existing mentoring programs, such as the duration, resources, and personnel. It also seeks to build upon professional development methodologies by curating best practices associated with formal ID mentoring programs. The goal is to create sustainable and impactful professional development for IDs by leveraging internal and external institutional knowledge.

Literature Review

The following literature provides the context for the present study by reviewing existing scholarship on IDs in higher education with a focus on professional development and mentoring. This background identifies gaps in ID research, plus establishes the rationale and significance for this study on mentoring design professionals.

Instructional Designers in Higher Education

IDs working in academia serve important roles within centers for teaching excellence, academic libraries, information technology units, as well as individual schools, departments, and academic units (Ritzhaupt, Kumar, & Martin, 2021). In addition to “instructional designer,” jobs titles often include learning designer, learning engineer, learning scientist, e-learning developer, among others (Yalçın, Ursavaş, & Klein, 2021). While ID responsibilities continually

evolve, core functions entail applying ID theory, providing pedagogical guidance to faculty, offering technical support, managing projects, collaborating and communicating with stakeholders, and facilitating opportunities for faculty development (Pollard & Kumar, 2022). At most institutions, IDs work closely with faculty to guide them through the entire online/hybrid course development process using a concierge/white glove service model (Quinn, 2021; Mancilla & Frey, 2023).

For design professionals working in higher education, ongoing development is not a choice, but a necessity to stay abreast of the advancements in technology, shifts in educational paradigms, and changes in the higher education landscape (Stefaniak, 2024; Yanchar, 2023). Regardless of academic and certificate programs that prepare IDs, they often have difficulty applying what they have learned on the job (Stefaniak, 2017). "While some [instructional design] competencies are gained through academic programs, much more is learned on the job and through professional experiences" (Stefaniak, 2024, p. 442). IDs can participate in on-the-job professional development offered through a variety of formats, such as onboarding, formal training, and informal learning. *Onboarding* acclimates new employees to an organization as well as the responsibilities of their role. *Formal training* is a structured educational process that cultivates knowledge and skill development through a predetermined curriculum (e.g., courses, workshops, webinars). In contrast, *informal learning* provides a flexible and self-regulated approach to gain proficiency outside of a traditional instructional program.

Professional Development of Instructional Designers

Research on the professional development of IDs is limited. One example that documents an *onboarding* program for design professionals is the Developing Instructional Designers Apprenticeship (DIDA) model (Mancilla & Frey, 2020). This

structured onboarding approach partners experienced and novice IDs in a cognitive apprenticeship to build competency over a 6-month period. *Formal training* for IDs can include academic degrees and certificate programs conferred by an institution of higher education or professional organization. Professional organizations like the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) offer certifications for IDs upon completion of a four-course series. Other organizations such as EDUCAUSE, Quality Matters (QM), the Association of Educational Communications and Technology (ACET), and UPCEA host conferences and online professional development opportunities that grow ID expertise.

Most scholarship on ID professional development focuses on *informal learning*, which includes participation in self-regulated learning, networking, communities of practice (CoP), and social media platforms. IDs working within institutions of higher education can take ownership of their professional development by utilizing academic resources such as organizational memberships and the library databases to identify areas for enrichment (Ritzhaupt, Kumar, & Martin, 2021). Additionally, networking, or connecting with peers, enhances professional development through the informal exchange of knowledge, skills, and best practices. IDs may reach out to colleagues in their networks for guidance when they need to learn new software or tackle challenging design cases (Muljana et al., 2021; Ritzhaupt et al., 2020). Alternatively, a group of IDs with common interests may organize themselves as a CoP to learn together (Wenger et al., 2002). One documented example of a robust CoP is Professional Development for Instructional Designers (PD4IDs). This open, international group emerged from a Facebook community offering free, biannual asynchronous training events. In addition to enhancing participants' knowledge and skills, qualitative data revealed multiple benefits for founders, presenters, and attendees, including enhanced confidence in job performance and access to career advancement opportunities (Muljana et al., 2021).

Recently, scholars have investigated IDs' usage of social media, or internet-based tools that promote dynamic networking and communication (Dennen, 2018). Platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, X, and Discord allow design practitioners to share experiences, ideas, trends, and best practices (Stefaniak, 2024). IDs can also receive feedback, recognition, and support from a global design community. Finally, social media fosters flexible and multimodal self-regulated continuous learning for designers (Exter & Ashby, 2021; Muljana & Luo, 2023).

Mentorship of Instructional Designers

Mentoring is a promising professional development approach for the growth of IDs throughout their career journey. Mentorship offers "a mutually beneficial relationship, where both mentors and mentees learn and grow, contributing to the overall development and success of instructional designers in the ever-evolving field of educational technology and design" (Stefaniak, 2024, p. 447). An empirical study of IDs with varying levels of experience assessed their mentoring needs and categorized them into high, medium, and low priorities (Mancilla & Frey, 2024). The highest mentoring needs were communicating with colleagues, providing constructive feedback, setting clear expectations with stakeholders, building trust with colleagues, and modeling professional behavior. Other highly ranked needs were associated with the course development process, including managing projects and developing pedagogical or technological skills. Mentoring needs of mid-career IDs with between 3-7 years of experience differ significantly from novice or senior designers. Despite the need for ID mentorship, few programs exist.

A notable mentoring program for design professionals that emerged from a collaboration between Educause and Penn State University is ID2ID (DePaul, 2017). This free, international program partners IDs with mentors or colleagues across higher education institutions to focus on areas of mutual interest such as faculty development,

accessibility, assessment, open education, and learning spaces (Educause, n.d.). As ID2ID represents the premiere formal mentoring program for design professionals, it may not be able to fulfill the needs of this growing body of practitioners.

While the ID field offers many avenues for professional development, examples of internal and external mentoring programs are noticeably absent. Since mentoring programs are unique in their ability to offer holistic, customizable professional development experiences through the mentor-mentee relationship (Yu et al., 2024), this study seeks to identify existing mentoring programs for IDs and best practices for implementation in higher education settings.

Theoretical Framework

Mentoring programs are situated within a complex network that goes beyond the mentor-mentee dyad. The ecological systems theory of mentorship emphasizes how mentoring relationships can be impacted by five interrelated systems of influence: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Byars-Winston & Dahlberg, 2019). At the *microsystem* level, the focus is on the one-on-one relationship most commonly associated with mentorship. The *mesosystem* refers to the interaction among microsystems, such as peer exchanges between IDs or between IDs and faculty partners. Influences on mentorship that operate at the *exosystem* level include a mentee's institutional environment (e.g., resources/support for mentoring). *Macrosystem* refers to factors that affect the micro, meso, and exosystems at a cultural or global level (e.g., workforce trends, professional organizations). The *chronosystem* is indicative of changes over time, which is beyond the scope of this study. Together, the tenets of the ecological theory apply to the exploration of professional development, as IDs are embedded within higher institutions and departments or units.

Methodology

This study applied a primarily qualitative research design and utilized a mixed-methods survey complemented by focus group data collection. The use of focus groups is an established method for soliciting perspectives and experiences through group interaction (Kitzinger, 1995). Virtual focus groups were conducted both synchronously and asynchronously with Zoom and YellowDig platforms (Dos Santos Marques et al., 2021).

Research Questions

The research study aimed to address the following questions within the context of higher education:

1. What mentoring programs or opportunities are available to instructional design professionals for career development?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of mentoring programs for instructional design professionals?

Participants

Participants in this study were IDs at institutions of higher education. They were recruited using self-selection and snowball sampling techniques (Johnson, 2014). Recruitment announcements were shared through social media on common networks for design professionals, including Quality Matters, LinkedIn, Educause, and Facebook. The final question on the survey solicited voluntarily focus group participation.

In sum, the survey yielded 65 respondents and nine focus group participants who ranged in experience from junior to senior levels. Most survey respondents had over 7 years of career experience (53.8%), followed by 3-7 years (29.2%), and less than 3 years (16.9%) in the design field. Focus group demographics were reflective of the overall survey sample, yielding four senior designers (44%), two mid-career (22%), and three junior-level (33%).

Procedure

The survey on mentorship was electronically distributed via Qualtrics and remained open for six weeks. The nine focus group participants were invited to one of three synchronous sessions. Virtual focus group sessions were led by two facilitators and lasted 60 minutes. All sessions were recorded with permission from the participants, and the transcription file was exported. In addition, field notes were taken by the facilitators.

Instrumentation

The following section details the composition of the two data collection instruments used in the study: 1) mixed-methods survey and 2) qualitative focus group protocol.

Survey. The mentoring survey consisted of 30 quantitative and qualitative questions, nine of which focused on mentoring programs and institutional supports. Sample survey questions are noted in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample Survey Questions

Section	Sample Question
Mentoring programs	• Is there a mentoring program for instructional designers within your team, department, or institution? • In your previous experience with instructional design mentoring, who was the mentor?
Institutional supports	• Describe the mentoring process within your team, department, or institution (e.g., how mentors/mentees are paired, length of mentorship, meeting cadence, etc.). • Describe the resources available during the mentoring process for instructional designers (e.g., technology, funding, materials, etc.).

Focus group protocol. In general, a focus group protocol ensured consistency across facilitators, prioritized research questions, and guided group discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2002). The protocol in this study contained 10 open-ended questions elaborating on survey responses. Prompts were adapted from Allen, Finkelstein, and Poteet's (2009) evidence-based approach for assessing formal mentoring workplace programs. The prompts targeted professional development, mentoring programs, and institutional supports. See Table 2 for sample focus group prompts.

Table 2

Sample Focus Group Prompts

Section	Sample Question
Mentoring programs	• What professional development opportunities are available to IDs at your institution? • How is mentoring used at your institution as a strategy for professional development for IDs?
Institutional supports	• What are the strengths of your institution's current system and processes for ID professional development? • What are the weaknesses of your institution's current system and processes for ID professional development?

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data was exported from Qualtrics and cleaned using SPSS statistical analysis software (version 29.0.2.0). Post data cleaning, the dataset consisted of 65 complete surveys. Multiple select questions were re-coded using dummy codes (UCLA Institute for Digital Research and Education, 2020), and descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were calculated.

Qualitative data, including text-based survey questions, Zoom focus group transcripts, and facilitator notes were compiled into documents for coding. Researchers used a line-by-line analysis technique (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for the initial identification of codes and creation of a codebook. The initial round of coding yielded 68 emergent codes. Researchers further refined the codebook in two rounds by collapsing similar codes into broader categories. The final codebook consisted of 25 codes. Artificial intelligence technology (ChatGPT version 4) validated the researchers' manual identification of themes (Jalali & Akhavan, 2024).

Findings

The following section presents key findings from this research, offering insights from the ecological systems framework and scholarly literature.

Demographics

The demographic profiles of the survey and focus group participants were similar, indicating that focus group members were representative of the overall survey population. Most of the 65 survey respondents completed a degree in ID or a related educational field (78.5%), which was congruent with focus group members (66%). The majority of survey participants were senior IDs, with seven or more years of experience (54%), followed by mid-career IDs with three to seven years of experience (29%), and junior IDs with less than three years in the workplace (17%). In the focus group, all three levels of experience were represented. Most participants were senior IDs (44%) and junior IDs (33%), which aligned with traditional mentor-mentee dyads.

More than half the survey participants worked for 4-year public institutions (51%), followed by 4-year private non-profit institutions (20%). In addition, institutions represented 2-year (14%), technical (8%), or for-profit institutions (7%). Among the nine focus group

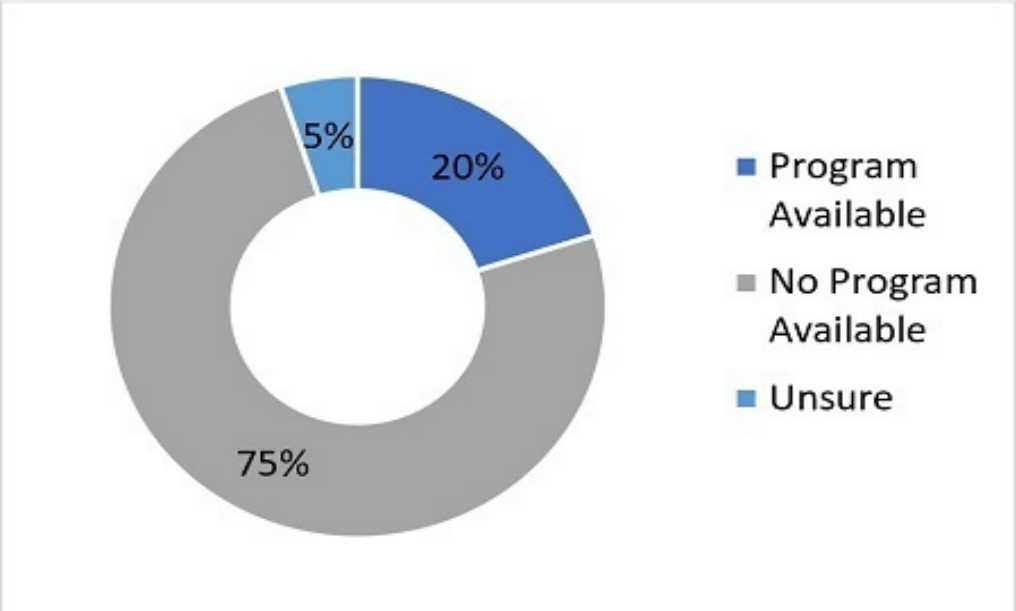
members, their institutions were primarily public (55%) and private non-profit (22%).

What mentoring programs or opportunities are available to instructional design professionals for career development?

Most institutions had structured short-term onboarding for IDs (i.e., one to two academic semesters) similar to DIDA (Mancilla & Frey, 2020), but few had long-term mentoring programs. ID professionals in this study expressed interest in career mentoring. Almost 70% indicated that they would participate in a formal ID mentoring program if one were available. Within their institutions, only 20% of IDs reported having access to internal mentoring opportunities (Figure 1). Most respondents (80%) sought mentoring through an external source (e.g., conferences, courses, webinars).

Figure 1

Availability of Institutional ID Mentoring Programs

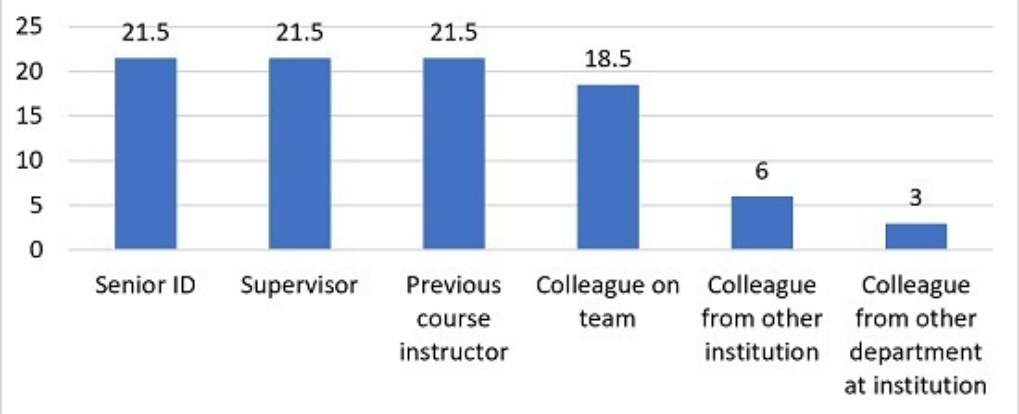


Many IDs had experience serving as a mentor (68%), while fewer had experience as a mentee (54%). Some individuals reported serving in both capacities throughout their careers (45%). IDs with experience as mentees identified their career mentors as senior IDs (21.5%), supervisors (21.5%), previous course instructors (21.5%), and colleagues on their teams (18.5%). Less common mentors were

colleagues from other institutions (6%) or from other departments within their institutions (3%); see Figure 2.

Figure 2

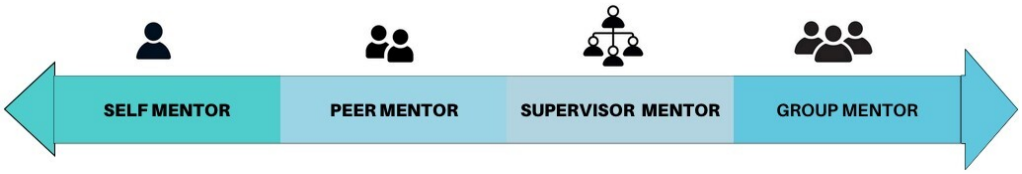
Instructional Design Mentors



Qualitative data from focus groups revealed a continuum of mentoring models ranging from self-mentoring to group mentoring (Figure 3). More than half of participants indicated that they were the only ID professional at their institution.

Figure 3

Continuum of Mentoring Models



As lone IDs, they tended to adopt a *self-mentoring* approach. This informal approach, consistent with self-regulated learning, included setting personal goals and curating resources to independently advance their performance. Self-mentoring seemed to evolve to address knowledge and skills gaps within their institutional or departmental *exosystems*. Participants described themselves as "lifelong learners" or "independent learners" seeking enrichment opportunities, which aligns with the heutagogical praxis reported by Exter and Ashby (2021). For example, one participant conducted Google searches to address gaps in their knowledge and skills.

Many participants also took advantage of professional development initiatives offered through organizations like QM, the OLC, and the State University of New York, among others. Common development activities entailed individual participation in tutorials, webinars, workshops, and podcasts, such as the Teaching Online Podcast from the University of South Florida. This finding correlates with IDs' growing reliance on social media platforms for continuous learning (Muljana & Luo, 2023). The following quotations from two different focus group participants demonstrated this reliance on external instruction:

Participant A

I've taken the Online Learning Consortium's Certificate for Instructional Design. Now I've just started their advanced certificate, and that has made a world of difference. I've been trying to find webinars and do independent learning. (Focus group transcript, February 29, 2024)

Participant B

I try to follow people I know and listen to their podcasts. I want to listen to their advice or the topics that they're exploring, or what they think is important in the field. Because it helps me keep a view on the horizon, which is sort of what a mentor does. So, I informally look for mentors through podcasts. I'm being mentored virtually through perfect strangers. (Focus group transcript, February 7, 2024)

At the *microsystem* level, ID professionals working within a team often benefited from *peer mentoring*. Internal peer mentors were typically assigned during the onboarding period, pairing new IDs with more experienced teammates, such as senior IDs. The intention of the peer mentoring approach was to introduce new IDs to design team processes, procedures, and workflows, plus facilitate collaboration among peers. This approach was akin to

peer networking reported in the ID professional development literature (Stefaniak, 2024), but involved internal team members rather than external colleagues. Several participants appreciated the equal power dynamic and collegiality of the peer relationship. One participant highlighted the potential stigma of long-term peer mentoring beyond the onboarding phase. Specifically, they expressed concerns that new IDs may have a prolonged reputation as novices. In addition, both IDs working as lone practitioners and those working on teams sought peer mentoring through the ID2ID program. The following quote underscored the value and limited access to peer mentoring for IDs:

Participant C

I signed up for the Educause [ID2ID] mentorship and then didn't get one. The buddy approach certainly resonates with me. That's essentially how I collaborate all day long. That would really be my expectation in terms of a mentor. That's the type of relationship I would want. I liked the idea of having an equal relationship where we've had a similar amount of experience, and we could do collaborative work. Where we're helping each other. (Focus Group Transcript, March 13, 2024)

IDs who were not part of a team often turned to their *supervisors* as more experienced professionals for mentorship. Similar to peer mentoring, this one-to-one relationship transpired at the *microsystem* level. Their supervisors were primarily senior administrators with broad backgrounds in higher education administration, though few were experts in online learning or design (e.g., provosts). Regardless of ID expertise, supervisors advocated for their career development through networking, promoting visibility, and supporting conference attendance. One participant described the function of their mentor as “opening doors” for them. Even IDs using a self-mentoring or peer-mentoring approach benefited from interacting with their supervisors as mentors.

Supervisors were resources for complex problem-solving. One participant differentiated the roles of peer and supervisor mentors as follows:

Participant D

I'm not their [ID's] supervisor. Any questions that they might have would be taken to their supervisor. I'm still available for design questions and extra follow-up. But any really tough situation would be directed towards their supervisor. (Focus group transcript, March 13, 2024)

At the *mesosystem* level, *group mentoring* was a collaborative approach involving a network of peers in a team environment. Group mentoring distributed the mentoring process across multiple team members or microsystems (e.g., design team interacting with multimedia team), allowing them to share their expertise with new colleagues. Participants familiar with this approach noted that IDs were assigned to at least two mentors, ideally more. Similar to a CoP, group mentoring fostered teamwork and ensured that IDs received comprehensive training in all facets of their job. This mentoring model yielded efficiencies in time and scale, while promoting exposure to diverse perspectives. One participant described the group mentoring process at their large, public institution:

Participant E

When a new person comes on board, we assign at least two mentors that manage their training to make sure that they are getting trained in everything they need to be trained in. There is a lead or senior instructional designer to manage a variety of topics, like our project management tool, accessibility, and work-life balance. Mentors on our team, like our videography and media specialists, get assigned topics or tools to introduce to the new instructional designers. They sprinkle 30 or 60-minute meetings

throughout the first month. (Focus group transcript, March 13, 2024)

What are the strengths and weaknesses of mentoring programs for instructional design professionals?

The availability of resources to support ID mentoring varied across institutions according to their *exosystems* (e.g., human and financial resources). Among the few participants with access to internal mentoring programs, funding was the most valuable resource. The benefits of mentorship tended to favor mentees, while limitations corresponded to mentors.

For mentees. The most frequently mentioned benefit among focus group participants was the value of the professional network they cultivated during the mentoring process, which was also mentioned in the ID literature (Stefaniak, 2024). Having access to a professional network countered feelings of isolation that emerged as a salient theme among all focus group respondents, especially those working within small institutions where they were the only ID professional. One participant stated "I'm kind of flying solo. I'm literally solo and I don't have anyone else" (Focus group transcript, February 7, 2024, Participant B). Another echoed the same sentiment, "I'm very aware that I am floating here all by myself" (Focus group transcript, February 7, 2024, Participant H). Even at institutions with a robust ID presence, participants reported feeling isolated. For example, an ID posted in the virtual focus group, "We have lots of instructional design talent spread out across our university, but we are definitely in silos. It takes deliberate action to reach out to each other" (YellowDig, March 6, 2024). A respondent summarized the relationship between isolation and networking in the following quotation:

Participant A

In terms of mentorship, what I'm personally looking for is connecting with other people. Sometimes when I'm designing or looking for a new idea, I don't have anyone else to ask, because literally, I'm the only person that is doing the job. By having more of a network, I can ask for more support. I'm still rather young compared to other people who've been in the field for 20 and 30 years since online learning has evolved. (Focus group transcript, February 29, 2024)

Another common strength of mentoring noted by ID mentees was the benefit of constructive feedback from experienced mentors. In multiple focus groups, several participants emphasized the importance of having “a sounding board” or “someone to bounce ideas off of.” IDs shared the need for feedback on templates, course building, design documents, and faculty consultation. This finding, emphasizing the importance of feedback on deliverables and complex design cases, was a recurrent theme in the ID literature (Exter & Ashby, 2021; Muljana & Luo, 2023). One participant stressed that constructive feedback on ID work products can be conveyed by design colleagues from other institutions or perhaps from other fields adjacent to education. For mentors, this feedback process was described as follows:

Participant E

A lot of the content needs feedback before it's put into Canvas. So, I may go through the course and leave some feedback. I also review the documents and add my comments. Then, they'll [mentees] read through my comments and add their thoughts or questions. In our once-a-week meeting, we’ll talk about questions that come up. (Focus group transcript, March 13, 2024)

In addition, mentoring programs offered mentees other affordances, including career advancement. Several focus group respondents indicated the importance of a mentor for “climbing the ladder” and “rising up in the hierarchy” of higher education, which was also

reported by participants in the PD4IDs program (Mujilana et al., 2021). For example, one participant attributed their new job title to the guidance received through mentoring. Mentoring also yielded some affective benefits for mentees, including increased confidence in job performance as well as metacognitive awareness through “mentorship career advising”. Furthermore, IDs who had participated in a mentoring program valued the “wealth of resources” procured by their mentors, such as digital accessibility guidelines and training opportunities.

For mentors. Finally, the data revealed a few mentorship advantages for mentors. These included opportunities for experienced mentors to acquire new knowledge or skills from their novice proteges, particularly concerning emerging technologies. One mentor explained the benefits they received in the following quote:

Participant G

I have a lot of experience in project management and accreditation, but the IDs that I work with are more technically comfortable than me. A lot of my mentoring is on soft skills because I'm not gonna teach them a better way to do the HTML they're showing me. There’s give and take, which I think is great, because I'm not walking in with all the answers. I'm also going to them and asking, what do you think about this? Can I make this look better? Can I tighten this up? And I think that goes a long way in creating a comfortable environment, which ultimately makes our team more effective. (Focus group transcript, March 13, 2024)

In general, findings did not reveal any challenges for mentee participation in mentoring programs. This result directly contrasts previous literature on ID professional development which noted temporal, geographical, and budgetary constraints for mentees (Muljana et al., 2020, 2021). However, respondents reported several limitations for mentors. Within the focus group interviews, mentors expressed the need for dedicated time to mentor IDs, as this

responsibility exceeded their job requirements. As stated by one participant, “mentors are people who volunteer and really like teaching and supporting others, but they’ve got their own jobs to do” (Focus group transcript, February 7, 2024, Participant H). One mentor mentioned having a reduced courseload to offset the time needed to support their protege:

Participant E

When I'm working as a mentor, that's taken into account when assigning courses to me. I'll get courses that I'm being shadowed on as part of my courseload. So, my courseload itself is reduced because I'm assisting a new hire. That's accounted for in terms of my workload. It takes time, you know, to meet weekly with a new hire and coach them along the way. (Focus group transcript, March 13, 2024)

Another salient theme was the variation between mentoring needs in large and small institutions potentially attributed to differences in course development models (e.g., 1-1 versus consultative), resource allocation, and organizational structure. As most mentoring occurred during the onboarding process for new IDs, a mentor raised concerns regarding the lack of opportunities for mid and senior-level practitioners. This finding is consistent with the differing mentoring needs of IDs across career stages (Mancilla & Frey, 2024).

Participant D

Personally, I would like to see more guided one on one mentoring, or even small group mentoring for those at advanced levels like myself. There's only support for new people, new hires. What about those of us who are experienced and still might benefit from having a mentor to help us advance in our skill set or move to the next level? (Focus group transcript, March 13, 2024)

Discussion & Conclusion

This study investigated the characteristics of mentorship programs available to ID professionals working in U.S. institutions of higher education. Specifically, it explored the structure, processes, and resourcing of institutionally-based programs as well as those offered through external providers by applying an ecological systems lens. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather data from ID participants, including a survey and focus group interviews. Findings revealed a paucity of internal mentorship programs beyond new employee onboarding. This lack of programs contrasted with the need for workforce upskilling driven by *macrosystem* trends and the high level of interest expressed by participants.

Focus groups uncovered a continuum of mentoring models encompassing self, peer, supervisor, and group mentoring. Survey results suggested the potential for concurrent or overlapping mentoring approaches, as senior IDs and supervisors were the most common mentors. Self-mentoring was most utilized by IDs working in isolation or within small institutions. Advantages of mentoring programs tended toward mentees and included networking opportunities, constructive feedback, and career advancement. For mentors, mentoring facilitated reverse mentoring on innovative technologies. Most programmatic weaknesses disproportionately impacted mentors, ranging from lack of time, resources, and advanced mentoring opportunities.

Implications of this research pertain to ID mentees, mentors, and institutions. Mentees with access to internal mentoring programs within their departments or institutions are encouraged to take advantage of these unique opportunities for career development and lifelong learning. For mentees without access to institutional mentors, options exist for self-mentoring or seeking development through external organizations.

It is important to note that all forms of mentorship require commitment, as mentors likely volunteer their time and knowledge

with proteges. Participation in mentoring can yield multiple psychosocial benefits for ID mentees, such as affective gains in confidence and reduced feelings of isolation. Working with an institutional mentor can also promote greater understanding of the institutional culture and milieu. Given that IDs are typically the sounding board for faculty, interaction with mentors can provide psychosocial support and a safe space to test ideas or problem-solve.

Although mid and senior-career IDs seldom have formal mentoring training, they have much to offer as mentors for their junior colleagues. Mentoring embodies altruism, as mentors support the growth and success of their proteges, often without personal gain. For mentors, this study highlighted the opportunity for mutual growth, as mentors could benefit from the skillset of their mentees, especially in emerging technology. Recognizing the time-intensive nature of mentoring, IDs interested in serving as mentors might propose release time or courseload reductions to their leadership. To hone their skills, mentors can consider enrolling in mentoring institutes, leadership programs, or other professional development initiatives with the support of their administration.

Findings from this study underscored the overall scarcity of mentoring programs for design professionals, despite a high level of interest. Institutions can bridge this professional development gap by leveraging the existing internal knowledge base of experienced design professionals as mentors. This budget-efficient approach to junior talent development requires investment in mentors. Results from the study pointed to the need for advanced mentoring programs for mid and senior career IDs. For example, institutional subscriptions to prominent organizations in online learning and higher education (e.g., QM, OLC, Educause, UPCEA) were instrumental to the growth of IDs. While IDs were savvy in seeking open educational resources (e.g., SUNY, University of Florida), they could not replace the immersive value of professional conferences

with networking opportunities and exposure to new resources. Institutions interested in catalyzing an internal ID mentoring program might consider the following recommendations presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Actionable Recommendations for Mentor Program Development

Strategy	Implementation
Conduct a needs assessment	Administer a needs assessment to identify mentoring gaps and priorities.
Design a mentoring framework	Define mentoring program goals, structure, roles, and timelines.
Recruit and train mentors	Identify experienced IDs and offer training in mentoring best practices.
Leverage technology to facilitate mentoring	Use synchronous and asynchronous tools to promote communication and document progress (e.g., Zoom, Slack, discussion boards).
Invest in external mentoring resources	Offer institutional memberships to organizations such as the OLC and QM to enable participation in external mentoring.
Support mid-level and senior-level IDs	Create mentoring opportunities on emerging technologies, advanced pedagogies, or peer learning groups focused on career progression.
Implement feedback and evaluation loops	Collect ongoing feedback from mentors and mentees to

	measure impact and refine the program.

Despite the valuable insights yielded from this study, there were several limitations related to the scarce literature on ID mentoring and recruitment methods. As an emergent area of research for online learning, it was challenging to locate research articles on ID mentoring. This provided a limited context for interpreting the findings. Furthermore, while every attempt was made to obtain a large and representative sample of IDs across higher education, the total number of respondents was 65. Therefore, the sample may not fully capture the diverse mentoring experiences and needs of all IDs. Due to reliance on self-selection and snowball sampling, it is also possible that respondents were primarily those already engaged in ID mentoring or most interested in the topic. As such, findings should be interpreted with caution, in terms of the generalizability to the broader ID population (e.g., IDs working outside of higher education). Furthermore, while this study utilized a mixed-methods research design, the sample size did not support disaggregated group comparisons or inferential statistics, which would enrich the depth of analysis and enable more comprehensive conclusions by capturing nuances among IDs from differing backgrounds.

Future research can broaden the scope of the current study by prioritizing recruitment strategies that attract a more diverse range of design practitioners. These might include underrepresented groups of design professionals from minority-serving institutions, niche disciplines (e.g., clinical education), international settings, or specialists in adjacent fields, such as instructional technologists or multimedia developers, whose mentoring needs may vary. Considering the lack of formal ID mentoring programs, an in-depth, longitudinal investigation of an existing program is also warranted to understand the lifecycle of mentoring relationships. Case study methodology and cross-case comparisons might also be useful in

documenting various models of mentorship and data highlighting their respective levels of effectiveness.

In sum, this study yields valuable insights emphasizing the potential of mentoring programs to foster cost-effective professional growth that strengthens collaboration and drives innovation in the dynamic field of instructional design.

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