Virtual Mentoring for Volunteer Leadership Development
Sheryl Guloy, PhD candidate, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University

Abstract
Calls to investigate leadership development in the nonprofit and voluntary sector (Bugg & Dalhoff, 2006; Hall et al., 2005) have been put forth as concerns about leadership succession have increased. This design-based research study responded to these calls by designing and examining a virtual mentoring environment for volunteer leadership development within a Catholic nonprofit organization. The Catholic Leadership Mentoring (CLM) program aimed to facilitate mentoring between experienced volunteer leaders and potential or new volunteer leaders. The design of the program was informed by leader-member exchange theory (LMX), as well as research on mentoring, voluntary organizations, and leadership development.

LMX theorizes how high-quality relationships between a leader-follower dyad contribute to leadership-making among paid workers. The present study is unique in that it investigated the ways in which high-quality mentoring relationships could be experienced by volunteer workers within an asynchronous, virtual mentoring environment. I sought to explore how participants’ perceptions of their online interactions shaped their experiences and the development of their mentoring relationships, while examining the extent to which mentoring contributed to a greater willingness on the part of mentees to accept volunteer leadership opportunities.

The experiences of seven mentor-mentee case pairs were examined to explore the development of their mentoring relationships. Each pair’s online interactions were observed over six months, from the initial orientation session until the final note was posted. Participants were interviewed at intervals of two months, four months, and six months into their participation. Online communications, weekly logs, and questionnaires were triangulated against mentor and mentee perceptions that emerged within the context of virtual mentoring for volunteer leadership.

The compatibility between mentor and mentee expectations, with respect to the mentoring approach and the mentoring environment, contributed to perceptions about the quality of the mentoring relationship between a mentor and mentee. The CLM was generally perceived by mentees to contribute to leader development, though relationships in which the mentor used a sharing rather than a guidance-oriented approach were found to be more complementary to the supports offered by the program. I discuss the implications of the study for those implementing online mentoring environments with volunteer workers. Design issues considered include how to mitigate the impact of communication delays, and whether social media and mobile platforms, which were found to contribute to positive perceptions about the mentoring experience, can ultimately further program goals. The findings have implications for the study of leadership, based on notions of social participation, in which the meaning of willingness to lead shifts from that of formal acceptance of a leadership position to greater participation in leadership activities.