Virtual Mentors—Helping You Navigate Your Online Education

KAITLIN HENNESSY: Welcome to virtual mentors, helping you navigate your online education. My name is Kaitlin Hennessy, and I am the Program Coordinator for Global Connections. Tonight, we have two current virtual mentors joining us, Stacie and Mary. They're going to explain the virtual mentor program, and how it can help WSU Global online students.

Stacie, would you like to begin?

STACIE MORAN: Thank you. Hi, there, and welcome to the virtual mentor webinar. My name is Stacie Moran. And I will be one of your presenters today. I became a virtual mentor in 2014 while earning my bachelor's degree in humanities with an emphasis in anthropology at the WSU Global Campus.

The majority of my classes for anthropology and psychology, and they had virtual mentors in them. I was very grateful for their support as I was trying to balance a full time job, raising a young family, and trying to take two to three classes per semester.

I joined the virtual mentor program because I wanted to be an integral part of the Global Campus community, and I wanted to pass on my passion for online learning to all my fellow students. And now, I'll give it over to Mary.

MARY BURT: Hello. I would like to extend my warm welcome to you all, as well. Thank you for attending our virtual mentor webinar. My name is Mary Burt. And my education experience started with Washington State University back in January of 2005. My husband and I moved down to Pullman to the Pullman campus to finish our degrees. And during the course of our time there, I had our first son, and my husband graduated, and then moved our family away. So I had to consider other options for finishing my degree at that time. And the answer for me, like many of you, was the Washington State University's Global Campus.

So after six semesters online, I was able to graduate with my bachelor of arts in social sciences in December of 2009. And I enjoyed my experience so much and the support that I received as being an online student that I wasn't ready to be finished with Washington State University. And I was able to connect with the virtual mentor program, and have been lucky enough to work as a virtual mentor since June of 2010. So that's a little bit about me, and we will get started on our presentation.

So to begin, we'd like to tell you a little bit about the history of our program. Our program

began back in 2003, and at that time, it was very much in its infancy. And we only had the capacity to cover nine courses. Since that time, our program has grown to include 26 mentors who are able to cover 115 courses. So this is very exciting to all of us who are involved in the virtual mentor program because our growth confirms the value of our program, as well as how dedicated WSU is to helping their students succeed.

WSU was the first online degree program to offer its students the support of virtual mentors, and other institutions have noticed the value of our program, and have expressed interest in developing their own virtual mentoring programs as well. So that's very exciting.

So who are virtual mentors? Virtual mentors are current WSU online students or those who have graduated from WSU's online Global Campus. We've been exactly where you are before. We have faced the challenges of balancing life, and family, and work, and multiple courses. We were able to figure out how to succeed and balance it all, and now we're here to help cheer you on so that you can also reach your academic goals that will get you where you want to go in your personal and professional lives.

So not only are VMs qualified based on personal experience and accomplishment, but they also participate in a lot of training. Virtual mentors are required to participate in a workshop before we even become hired by WSU. And after being hired and passing that workshop, we are put through FERPA training, which is Family Education Rights and Privacy Act.

And we are paired up with an existing virtual mentor in the beginning so that as we get our feet wet, we can learn under the support of our own mentor as well. So the virtual mentor program is another tool that WSU offers in order to create a high quality learning experience for their students. So Stacie will now tell you about the mission of virtual mentors.

STACIE MORAN: Thank you, Mary. The mission of the virtual mentor is to promote learning in the online community, and to support student success. It is, with cougar pride, every virtual mentor wants to help each student succeed and reach their academic goals.

Did you know that WSU is the leader in student involvement in distance education? Its true. In 2010, the virtual mentor program won first place innovation award from the Center for Transforming Student Services. The center praised WSU for using creative strategies and fresh thinking to design, develop, implement, and maintain online student services that have produced measurable results.

The mission of Global Campus is simple, to expand access to WSU education. In 2015, WSU Global Campus was listed among the nation's top 20 online degree programs by US News. And was ranked the best in Washington state by UDEMIC. The basis of the rating is on four categories, student engagement, faculty credentials and training, peer reputation, and student services and technology.

The virtual mentor program has been a large and positive impact on three of these categories. Word about WSU's Global Campus virtual mentor program is spreading, and other colleges are starting their own programs. Margy Fotopoulos reported that an academic institution attending one of our virtual mentors webinars, like today's, I was inspired to create its own virtual mentoring program. And WSU was excited to share its knowledge and the program outline.

So what does this mean to you? This means the virtual mentors are an added resource to your online learning experience. Mary?

MARY BURT: Thank you. So the rule of the virtual mentor. Virtual mentors are a part of the students online support system. We encourage students through our interactions with them. And when we begin doing this from the very beginning of the semester. We learn each course that we are assigned to so that we can know how to encourage students to participate. We notice when students seem frustrated and reach out to them when they seem to disengage or go missing. We take time to get to know the students and build a relationship with them so that we can cheer them on better through the course.

A vibrant learning community full of support is important to virtual mentors. We attempt to help build this type of community in each course we are present in. We actively start doing this from the very beginning of the semester. We pay special attention to students that mention that they're new to WSU and new to online learning. And we pay attention to students that say they have concerns of any kind so that we can know how to support and address those concerns.

We model communication that observes the netiquette standards that Washington State University observes so that students can feel safe and secure participating in their online course. We like to draw connections between students who may have similar interests, lifestyles, or live in the same area. We recognize that as students are participating in online-based learning that they lose the face-to-face interaction, and that can contribute to feelings of isolation. And we really want to overcome those and so creating that tight knit community is really important to us.

We've spent hours navigating and learning Blackboard so that we can attempt to make the technology transparent for students. VMs are here to help bridge any gap between a students technology knowledge base and what the course requires of them.

You've probably noticed that the course spaces are pretty vast, and each course can differ slightly. So some courses will utilize different aspects of Blackboard as well, and so while you may have been a student for quite some time, you might find yourself in a class that is requiring you to use new technology that you've never used before. And so we're here to help support in those situations as well.

We're here to help students navigate, and learn to work in the learning management system so that the technology doesn't hinder their progress. Or prevent them from reaching their academic goals. We're here to help shoulder that burden of finding answers so that students can focus more of their time on their academics rather than stressing about what they do know how to do and what they don't know how to do.

As virtual mentors, we help empower students, and show the pathways necessary for students to reach their goals. When problems arise, we help encourage and support students as they solve them themselves. Experience creates knowledge and self-reliance and so as the semester goes on, students rely less on the assistance of their virtual mentor. So it may seem that a virtual mentor is much more present at the start of the semester, and that they kind of fade away, and that they're no longer there, but we are always present in the course. We're always checking in. We are always there to help. And we're always only just a post or an email away.

We recognize what a privilege it is to work in any online course. We respect that course space as the professor's classroom, and develop a relationship with them before the semester even starts. VMs respect that each professor's preference regarding VM involvement in the course as well so that we can have a strong working relationship with the professors to better support the students.

So I'll turn the time back over to Stacie now to finish telling about our roles.

STACIE MORAN: Thank you, Mary. Virtual mentors model and encourage positive communication to build and support community, and for all students to feel involved and truly part of the classroom. We begin this communication before the semester begins by reaching out to the professor that we've been assigned to with an email that introduces ourselves and our role in the class. We

also go through the course and check the functionality of each link and video to be sure that the course space is ready for student use.

We also post our introduction and explain our role in the discussion board and the virtual mentor forum. This allows students to learn more about us, our background in online learning, and to understand our role in the course.

The virtual mentor forum is our space to communicate directly with the class as a whole. It is here that we post our tips and tricks for navigating Blackboard, and how to access other Global Campus resources. We encourage students to subscribe to our forums so they stay on top of topics. It could save them time and frustration later.

Other online resources that we help students connect with are the massive online library that WSU participates in. We also help students connect with the registration staff. Help find a test proctor near them. Also, how to set up your online testing, how to contact technical support, and much more.

Recently, we added training opportunities for virtual mentors to learn more about the online tools that professors are using. Some of these tools are VoiceThread, Tegrity, and Collaborate. These tools help students use the online resources more, and as we learn them, we're able to help students figure out how to use those tools as well.

We also have our own resources. We share a virtual mentor course space where we can collaborate to support one another. Solve issues occurring in Blackboard and other online tools. And to find better ways to support our students and our faculty.

And now, Mary will discuss slide six.

MARY BURT: Thank you, Stacie. As Stacie mentioned, part of our job includes explaining our role, but to really understand a virtual mentors role, it's important to note what they do as well as what they do not do. So this slide is a presentation to help clarify a little bit of what we don't do.

WSU offers teaching assistants in many courses. And TAs are different from virtual mentors. Virtual mentors are an added bonus to your course. TAs are highly involved in your academic learning, while VMs are present in a non-instructional capacity only. So VMs cannot answer questions that are related to what the teaching assistants do. So we will be sure to redirect students in those instances where they ask us questions that are more appropriate for their

teaching assistants or for their professors.

WSU has highly trained contact people for their professors that they utilize. So VMs do not act as a liaison between the professor and the universities. They have special people for that.

As mentioned previously, VMs differ from TAs. We have the ability to cover so many courses because we are not required to be trained in the course content. And since that's the case, we are not an authority on course content, and we can't answer academic questions.

New observance of your FERPA rights, which we are trained in, only your professor or your TA have access, and can view your grading information. Virtual mentor's don't even have access to your grades. We don't look at that. That is kept very private. WSU really respects its students' privacy in that way.

We can help, however, in instances where students need help knowing how to locate their grade. Or how to view feedback from their professors. So we can support on that end of the grading, but not the specific grade information itself.

While virtual mentors are very present in courses, we aren't backup instructors. We respect the training which your professors have that qualify them to be your educators. So we will always support the student-instructor relationship.

We encourage students to develop open communication with their professors so that as students meet challenges or trials along the way in the course of the semester, that their professors will be better able to support them. And make accommodations when necessary. So having a good open communication relationship with your professor is really important, and we really try to support that. We're just another support put in place to help students succeed.

Virtual mentors are not able to fix major technical issues. We can help students figure out minor technical problems that originate on their side of the technology, but those larger issues that are the result of something on Washington State University side of the technology, those will require the assistance of tech support. And WSU has excellent tech support in place for online students to utilize when the need arises.

Virtual mentors are always here to help with non-content inquiries, and help direct students to the right resources for each situation. So Stacie will now give you some tips on how to utilize your virtual mentor better in your courses.

STACIE MORAN: Thank you, Mary. Another task we do at the beginning of the semester is to post a plethora of tips about how to have a successful semester. How to participate in discussion boards. And how to submit assignments, just to name a few. This sets up a model of communication, and opens up dialogue with the students.

Do you have a question about how to view a video? Does group work worry you? Post these questions and more to your virtual mentor. The best way to communicate with a virtual mentor is to subscribe to their forum in the course space. This is easily done within the Blackboard page of the class that hosts a mentor. If you need help subscribing, post this question as well.

Depending on the professor's preferences, some virtual mentors will post weekly reminders of assignment due dates, and make sure students remember to schedule their proctored exams. Remember, we are always here and eager to assist with navigating the course space and to cheer each of our students on.

MARY BURT: It is our privilege and our honor to work in your courses. We're always excited to help because we've been exactly where you are before, and we appreciated the help that we were able to receive. We love seeing you succeed and reach your goals. Thank you so much for allowing us here to be a part of your journey.

Here are a few things that actual WSU online students have said that we have been able to help. So what questions do you have now that we can try and answer for you?

KAITLIN HENNESSY: Thank you, Mary and Stacie. Our first question is, how do I review exam answers?

STACIE MORAN: The best way to review course exam answers-- well, the first thing, you have to wait until the course exam actually closes. Typically this will be unviewable until everyone has had a chance to take the exam, the exam is closed, and then the test scores will be listed in the my grades area. And what you could do is go to the Blackboard page, it's down towards the lower left and it says my grades. Click that link. And then click on the link for the exam, and then you can open that up, and view your grades.

If it is a written exam, often times the instructor will post responses inside the tests, and you can review those answers there as well. Mary, is there anything I've missed on that?

MARY BURT: No, I think that's great. I think checking on your grades definitely depends on-- sorry, checking on the questions you missed on your exam, definitely depends on the type of exam that it is.

So sometimes those tests that are of a multiple choice nature, those are easier once the exam closes. After they're opened, you can go back into the exam and pull it up, and see those answers. But as Stacie mentioned, when they're more of a written nature, you'll have to wait on the professor to grade those essay type questions. And you can go in and view feedback when those are made available.

KAITLIN HENNESSY: Thank you. Our next question is, how do I take a proctored exam?

MARY BURT: So if you are in a course that requires a proctored exam, there's a couple different ways to go about a proctored exam. WSU is moving a lot towards their own proctoring service that is done just in your home via your computer and your webcam and some other tools that they use to make sure that academic integrity is being observed.

If they are paper-based type exams, you'll have to set up a proctor with a proctoring service. Proctoring services that are approved by WSU are listed, but if you're using the WSU proctoring service, each course will have a link within your course space. And it's often in multiple places.

I've seen professors put it on the course schedule. I've seen them put it on the syllabus. I've seen them put it within the lesson sections. So there's a lot of different ways that you can navigate, and use that link.

And once on that page, the WSU proctoring service tells you all the steps that you need to go about with setting up with them. And they are fantastic to work with. They're very patient and very helpful. And you want to allow two weeks-- you want to schedule your exam two weeks prior to the time that you are wanting to take it because you're competing with a bunch of other students to be able to use their proctoring service.

So if you have any questions once you navigate to their site, you can definitely ask your virtual mentor those specifically. But you can even test your computer for speed and other things so that you can help prevent problems while you're in the midst of your exam. Because that is pretty stressful when things start to go wrong when you're on a timed exam. But again, the people at the proctoring services, I've interacted with them a little bit, and they are fantastic. So anything you'd like to add to that, Stacey, that I forgot?

STACIE MORAN: The only thing I like to stress when I'm in a class that does online proctored exams, is I like to

remind students to check the syllabus thoroughly for any type of particular directions that the instructor might be giving them. Sometimes you can't go forwards. Sometimes you only get one at a time. You have to hit Submit after every question. But usually those directions are laid out in the syllabus. So I try to point students to that resource, and then reiterate it in a tip just to help ease their nerves. Because I know I've been there, and I have been incredibly nervous, and was very thankful for just spelling it out for me, what exactly to expect.

MARY BURT: Perfect. And that brought up another thought, too, is to keep a close eye-- I've noticed a lot of courses, there might be four exams required in the course of the semester, and only one of them will be a proctored exam. And oftentimes, students might miss that little tidbit. And it gets time to take the exam, and oops. So keep a close eye when you're in a course that requires exams. Make sure you look at what type of exam it is. And if you require a proctor or not. So I think that's it.

KAITLIN HENNESSY: Thank you. Our last question is, I have a lot of spam and phishing in my email, what can I do about that?

STACIE MORAN: Currently, this has been an ongoing issue, I think, with the virtual mentor course space. We've been discussing how to get these under control. A lot of times, our go to has been to report the phishing e-mails. Basically, just right clicking and you'll have a drop down menu that says report this as junk. And we're hoping that as we do this more and more often, that it will become less and less phishing.

Another source of the large emails is from subscribing to forms within Blackboard. It's always a great option to subscribe, but then we need to remember to go in and unsubscribe once we're past that discussion or once a discussion just becomes obsolete.

Mary, do you have anything else for that?

MARY BURT: That's great. You can also forward those emails that you know for sure are phishing. The ones that I seem to receive a lot to say your WSU email is full. Your account is expiring. You need to send us your log in information.

And we always like to remind students that Washington State University will never send you an email telling you that your email is full or asking for your private log in information. So when you can be aware of that, you can spot those phishing emails a little bit quicker. And just keep yourself safe because it seems if someone opens one, it kind of creates a domino effect. And

we see a surge of the spam and phishing across the board.

So I like to forward mine often to the email address, the abuse@wsu. And so that's a good way to help keep them down because then they can flag those e-mails, and trace them back somehow, and then start alerting them. So I think that's it.

KAITLIN HENNESSY: Thank you so much for sharing that information tonight. For future Global Connections programming, please go to connections.wsu.edu.