**SEARCHING FOR MY CLASSROOM: THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMANIZING DISTRIBUTED LEARNING FOR ADULTS**

A dissertation submitted

by

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Searching for my Classroom: Understanding the Importance of Humanizing Distributed
Learning for Adults

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Abstract

This autoethnography uses the personal journey of the author through Fielding Graduate
University's doctoral program in Educational Leadership for Change to study the influence of
peer advising and peer relationships in distributed learning environments on student success and
program satisfaction. The study reveals that peer relationships and peer advisement opportunities
may be needed to counter the high risks for dropping out, extra time in the program, or
discontentment.

Key Words: autoethnography, community, humanizing, peer relationships, peer advising

Acknowledgements

"If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.  Or, if proper usage gets in the way, it may have to go.  I can't allow what we learned in English composition to disrupt the sound and rhythm of the narrative."

Elmore Leonard

Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family for it would not have happened without their support.  My mother and late father (the original Dr. Kurita), and my Aunt Alice have loved and guided me my entire life.  I also dedicate my study to my wife Sabrina.  Without the support of everyone else, this study would not have happened, but without Sabrina in my life, nothing matters at all.

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**CHAPTER ONE**

**INTRODUCTION**

*Searching for my classroom* is a metaphor for searching for my learning community, while attending Fielding Graduate University, a distributed learning graduate school. The lost "classroom" represents a common meeting area on a brick-and-mortar campus where students gather to formally and informally share experiences and build relationships. These collegial relationships are not limited to academic issues but have broader boundaries to include personal and emotional issues (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Through sharing common experiences, students build peer relationships that provide a framework of mutual support and guidance. However, in distance and distributed learning educational models, even though both models increase access to higher education for many (Mariani, 2001, Parsad & Lewis, 2008), this framework is not as likely to exist. As technology replaces the classroom, the education experience is dehumanized. Computers and the internet replace the learning community built by peer interactions. These learning communities are important because they provide students with more than academic support; they support the soul of the individual. This study will share the story of how my transition into a distributed learning graduate program made me realize the importance of peer relationships and humanizing distance learning.

My initial experience with Fielding's distributed learning format left me feeling lost and searching for direction. In the description of their distributed learning model, Fielding's website asks potential students if they are self-directed learners (http://www.fielding.edu/). My experience with Fielding's distributed learning environment, demonstrated the importance of that question. Prior to enrolling in Fielding, my academic experience was with traditional brick-and-mortar institutions. The inherent classroom structure provides the opportunity for interpersonal

relationships which is missing, or at the least more difficult to develop, in Fielding's distributed learning environment. Fielding students are physically separated from their peers. The opportunity to develop peer relationships is limited to face-to-face events that include New Student Orientation (NSO), National Session[1], group knowledge areas, and local cluster meetings. Group knowledge areas and cluster meetings are unique to Fielding and as a new student; I was unaware of how to optimize these opportunities to my advantage. I felt sure I was the exception to the rule and my peers were thriving in this new environment. I was also uncomfortable turning to my faculty mentor for fundamental support. I believed a mentor is there to provide academic support, not to address feelings of isolation and disconnection from Fielding and my peers. I felt alone, like a tiny cog in the Fielding academic machine.

Two events occurred early in my Fielding tenure that provided the insight to continue my academic journey. During my first six months in the program, I attended the Final Oral Review (FOR) of a local Fielding student. At that FOR, I met and formed a bond with a small group of local Fielding students. They also had difficulties adjusting to the self-directed rigors of Fielding's distributed learning format. Recognizing our common concerns, we revived the dormant local Fielding cluster. This cluster became our classroom and we began to meet on a regular basis. The second event took place during my third year, when Fielding launched the peer-advising program. I applied and was selected as one of three peer-advisors. I recognized my struggles with the transition to self-directed learning and believed sharing my experiences could help my peers find stable ground. My goal as a peer advisor was to share my Fielding experience with fellow peers. To take the classroom I found with my cluster and create classrooms for any Fielding student who needs one.

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[1] National Session is the annual gathering of students and faculty from all three Fielding doctoral schools (Educational Leadership & Change, Human & Organizational Development, and Clinical and Media Psychology).

The obstacles Fielding students encounter are not always academic in nature. Often, functioning in the unfamiliar world of distributed learning is the most difficult barrier Fielding students face. To thrive in this learning environment, sometimes all it takes is the support and guidance of an experienced student. Peer-advisors are experienced students who can serve as guides, the Sherpa's of Fielding's distributed learning environment. Rather than providing expertise in reaching the peak of a Himalayan mountaintop, peer-advisors can help their peers reach the pinnacle of their academic journey.

My goal was to become a point of human contact for my peers, a face and a voice in place of e-mails and on-line forums. Instead of traveling alone, my peers will have a partner on their journey, an experienced companion who can provide insight to help address their fears and concerns. The role of peer-advisor expanded my scope of contact from my local cluster to the entire student body. All of my peers needed to know they are an important and valued part of Fielding. They are not a faceless cog in the machine but they are valued both as a student, and as an individual.

My role as a peer-advisor brought a holistic view to the educational process. Humanizing distributed learning requires a holistic approach to bridge the gap between the technology inherent in distance learning and the distance learner. A holistic approach seeks a balance between the part and the whole and can provide a bridge from knowledge to a better world (Miller, 1996). My professional background is healthcare delivery and I can best describe this through the lens of holistic medicine. Unlike traditional medicine that attempts to address health issues by managing or suppressing the symptoms of a disease with medication or invasive strategies, holistic medicine looks beyond the obvious symptoms and attempts to treat the patient as a whole (Lachney, 2010). The patient is seen as part of the larger environment where

anything can influence their condition. To resolve an issue, holistic medicine takes both the individual and the environment into account when providing treatment. Under the approach of traditional medicine, the symptoms may disappear but the underlying disease remains unchecked.

Holistic education humanizes the educational experience; it does not focus on students regurgitating facts and knowledge fed to them through a structured curriculum. Holistic education brings awareness to the deep interconnectedness of life and encourages students to recognize these relationships and connections (Jacobs & Miller, 2012). Students may not take the time to develop personal values and learn to work collaboratively with others if the focus is on teaching subjects and not teaching students (Fines, 2008). Education, when seen through a holistic/humanizing lens, recognizes there is more to the individual then their role as a student. Being a student is merely one of the roles a person holds in life. Acknowledging the existence of these multiple roles enables students to reach their full potential as the focus is not exclusively on academic performance but on learning. Humanizing distributed learning by providing access to support, guidance, and understanding provides students the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Holistic education aims to open a student's mind not only to knowledge, but also to life. Instead of limiting the scope of education, students must be prepared to live and work in a complex and dynamic world (Kim, 2010). Students must learn to use the knowledge gained from their academic journeys to make a positive impact on the world. A connection to the real world cannot be obtained through a fragmented reductionist view. Students must experience views from different social, economic, and ethnic perspectives. Only then, will students receive a well-rounded education and gain new perspectives necessary to change the world. To meet the

needs of their students and society, all educational programs need to adopt a holistic approach and humanize the educational experience. This is especially true for any form of distance learning. I share this holistic perspective in this introduction because it was through this perspective that my work in humanizing Fielding's distributed learning program kept me in it.

My study is a reflective self-examination based on my experiences as a student and peer-advisor in Fielding's distributed learning Educational Leadership and Change program. I tell the story of my personal journey from placing little value on peer relationships to realizing such relationships should be the center of any educational experience. I chose to use autoethnography as my research method. Autoethnography is a self-narrative study of a group from the inside (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Unlike traditional scientific approaches, I do not have to deny my identity or distance myself from the group (Wall, 2006). My experience plays a valid role as autoethnography includes the researcher as a participant (Smith, 2005). There are various genres of autoethnography and I will focus on two for my study. One is *evocative autoethnography*, which incorporates a descriptive literary approach and utilizes narrative and expressive writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). The second is *analytical autoethnography*, which is committed to analytic research focused on improving theoretical understanding of social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). My research question for this dissertation is: <u>In what ways can my personal experience as a Fielding graduate student and peer-advisor offer insights about the connection between peer relationships and student success in a distributed learning environment?</u> I use my personal journey to explore and expose the value of peer relationships in Fielding's distributed learning environment. The impact is not only on the success of students completing their educational journey, but also on the knowledge they obtain and what they can provide to society with their new knowledge.

**Significance of the Problem**

Globalization has changed the way we live, do business, and learn. We live in a world accustom to instant access to news, shopping, and entertainment. As 'on demand' becomes part of our daily life experience, it naturally becomes a requirement of higher education. The pace at which knowledge changes is accelerating and the life cycle for new information and knowledge is getting shorter (Kim, 2010, p. 77). Students are no longer willing to wait for the next edition of a book or journal, new information is only a mouse click away. To serve students, education based on memorization and knowledge acquisition must transition to providing students with the ability to create new knowledge through problem solving, analysis, and critical thinking. Traditionally, colleges and universities divide knowledge into silos and present it in separate classes and lessons (Miller, 1996). Each subject is presented independently instead of part of a larger system. Under this structure, many students struggle to identify the relationship of one subject to another or to their own lives (Miller, 1996). This fragmentation isolates learning into predetermined boundaries, which limits the student's scope of knowledge. The problems and challenges students face in today's world do not remain within the lines of predetermined academic fields (Kim, 2010). The fragmentation of the educational system is heightened by the popularity of distance learning. This is especially true in a distributed learning environment.

Distance learning is a growing trend in higher education (Levine & Sun, 2002; Dede, 1995; Cetron & Davies, 2003). Without the constraints of time and place, distance learners have nearly unlimited access to the academic world. This level of access meets student needs for flexible schedules, increases availability of courses, and provides access to students who would otherwise not have access (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Unlike traditional brick-and-mortar institutions, distance learning is presented primarily in an asynchronous environment where both

time and distance separate students from their instructor and from each other (Mariani, 2001). This format provides the desired levels of access and flexibility, but it can lead to a sense of social isolation and de-motivation, causing students to lose focus on their studies (Dede, 1996; Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009). Distance learning can also create feelings of isolation for students beyond what is typical in traditional colleges and universities (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Although advancements in technology have made great strides in humanizing the distance learning experience, these advancements only mimic real life interactions. Regardless of how life-like technology becomes, it remains a substitution for face-to-face interactions where non-verbal communication accounts for 2/3's of all communication (Matsumoto, Frank, & Hwang, 2012).

To counter act the isolating effects of distance learning, experienced distance learning instructors look for ways to increase peer interactions in order to increase student engagement and create a positive learning environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Recognition of the value of personal interaction by leaders of distance education validates the need for humanizing the distance learning experience. The instructor plays an important role in the development of a learning community (Palloff & Pratt, 2005) but this role is not the focus of this study. The focus of this study is recognizing the value of peer relationships and incorporating them into Fielding's distributed learning environment to support the distance learner.

On a traditional campus, students are given specific times and places to meet for each of their courses. Through selecting and enrolling in each course, they essentially sign a contract requiring their presence and participation (Worley & Dyrud, 2000). Students meet and share these pre-determined locations with their peers. Students in the classroom share a common interest (the course) which is a link to their peers. The common time and location provides the

classroom, which in turn provides the environment for students to build peer relationships. Interacting with their peers allows students to share personal experiences and broaden their worldview. The classroom provides the opportunity for these relationships to transition from academic based to friendships.

Fielding Distributed learning students are not bound by the requirements of time and place. Any location with internet access replaces the classroom. The benefit of limitless access is offset by limited access to their peers. This lack of interaction inhibits peer relationships and the development of both academic and personal support systems. The lack of interpersonal interactions inherent in distributed learning can contribute to high attrition rates (Lovitts, 2001) and may result in a loss of humanistic, caring, and helping values for those who do "succeed" in a distributed learning environment (Miller, 1996).

Even with its inadequacies, distributed learning is the form of distance learning that provides students with the best opportunity to develop peer relationships. Distributed learning is a general term used to describe a multi-media method of instructional delivery that includes a mix of web-based instruction, streaming video conferencing, face-to-face classroom time, distance learning through television or video, or other combinations of electronic and traditional educational models. Although distributed learning can be executed in a variety of ways, it is consistent in that it always accommodates a separation of geographical locations for part (or all) of the instruction, and focuses on learner-to-learner as well as instructor-to-learner interaction" (What Is Website, 2010). Distributed learning supports the self-directed learner while recognizing the need for social interaction. This format augments the typical asynchronous environment of distance learning with face-to-face interactions (Vrasidas & Glass, 2002). The evolution of distributed learning validates the need for human contact in education. Distributed

learning enhances the distance learner's experience through support and peer networks developed through increased social interaction (Tresman, 2002).

**Fielding's Distributed Learning Environment**

In Fielding's distributed learning programs, incoming students are required to attend a New Student Orientation. This orientation is Fielding's single face-to-face residency requirement. New students assemble at a pre-determined location for a five-day session where they receive an overview of Fielding Graduate University, the Educational Leadership and Change program, and the academic and administrative requirements necessary to complete the program. A team of Fielding faculty and administrative staff present material through a series of lectures and interactive sessions. A vital piece, and requirement, of the orientation is the selection of a faculty mentor. Each student must select a faculty mentor by the end of the session. A mentor is the student's point of contact with Fielding and acts as the chair of the student's dissertation committee. Upon completion of the orientation, students return home and, utilizing information from the sessions, begin their Fielding academic journey.

Fielding has revised its curriculum since the time of my enrollment, but at that time, the curriculum required the completion of eight courses, two comprehensive assessment essays, and a dissertation. Fielding courses are knowledge areas, or KA's, and are divided into four core and four elective courses. Each knowledge area has a general theory or topic designed to guide the student through the program and the completion of their dissertation. Students select a knowledge area and review the study guide of the faculty member they want to have as a faculty assessor. Each knowledge area has a theoretical framework, but students and faculty can work together to structure the course to meet the needs of the student's personal interests. Students have the option of attempting a knowledge area individually or in a group. Some faculty offer

group KA's but it is primarily the responsibility of the student to form a group and present the idea of a group KA to a faculty member.

When a student has completed a minimum of six knowledge areas, they are eligible to attempt the comprehensive assessments. Through the comprehensive assessments, the student must demonstrate the extent to which he or she has developed the doctoral level competencies necessary to successfully complete their program (http://www.fielding.edu/). Students must develop two topic questions to address in their comprehensive essays. Each essay must incorporate work from three completed knowledge areas. Two faculty members randomly selected by Fielding's Registrars Office read the comprehensive assessments. The comprehensive assessments may be attempted any time after the completion of six knowledge areas and must be successfully completed to meet program completion requirements.

The final step in Fielding's doctoral programs is the dissertation. The process starts with the development of a concept paper. In the concept paper, the student presents broad ideas about the dissertation topic and the methodology to be used. Each student works with their faculty mentor, who will act as his or her Faculty Chair, in writing their concept paper. When approved, the Faculty Chair notifies the Registrar's Office. The student then begins the process of selecting and forming their dissertation committee and writing their dissertation proposal. The dissertation proposal ensures the structure and content of the study are congruent with the specific research project undertaken and the methodology employed (http://www.fielding.edu/). When the student's committee is complete and they approve the dissertation proposal, the student begins the research and writing of their study.

When the student's Chair and committee members agree the requirements for a complete dissertation are met, a Final Oral Review (FOR) is scheduled. The FOR is the platform for the

student to present his or her research.  In the Final Oral Review, the student presents a scholarly account of their study, why they chose the topic, what they learned from the process, and what knowledge they have added to the literature (http://www.fielding.edu/).  After the FOR, the student may be asked to make recommended revisions to their study.  Once the study receives final approval from the Chair and all committee members, the dissertation is submitted for a final proofreading and final binding.  The completed study is submitted to the Registrar's Office and recorded and the journey is complete.

**Problems Related to Fielding's Distributed Learning Environment**.

Fielding distributed learning programs supports independent study through online seminars, meetings with students, faculty, and alumni, and face-to-face regional research and national sessions (Fielding Graduate University website, n.d.).  While Fielding offers these services to its student body, this statement is misleading.  Face-to-face interactions are minimally supported and participation in cluster groups and National Session is encouraged but not required.  National Session is an annual event held at a rotating location.  National Session does provide the opportunity for students to interact and develop peer relationships, but not all students participate in this event.  Many students are unable to attend due to financial or other personal obligations.  Unless National Session is held in your local area, travel, lodging, and incidental costs can be prohibitive.  Many Fielding students are adult learners (http://www.fielding.edu/) who have responsibilities outside their role as students.  These responsibilities can affect their ability to participate in National Session.  The benefits of attending National Session start out high but then decline as students progress through the program.  If they can afford to attend, new students can use this event to meet and interact with their peers.  They can build the peer relationships that form the foundation of their Fielding

learning community.  The value of participating in National Session diminishes for advanced students.  More advanced students have either developed their learning community or successfully navigated the journey on their own.  Much of the content does not apply to advanced students who are writing their dissertations and the benefit of attending is limited to dissertation committee meetings.  While valuable, it is cost prohibitive to attend National Session solely for a committee meeting.

It is possible to complete Fielding's curriculum independent of any peer interactions. Many students have done this successfully.  Under this construct, students remain in their personal silos, learning from books, journals and on-line research.  Their education is stunted, as they remain unexposed to the views and perspectives of their peers.  These students may successfully complete their program but do so with a homogenized view of the world.  Exposure to diverse views and perspectives help students form their own views and support their future academic and professional endeavors (Furlong, 2009).  The benefit of humanizing distributed learning is not limited to sharing and addressing personal and/or academic issues.  Interpersonal relationships provide the student the opportunity to see and experience the world through the lens of their peers who may not share the same social, ethnic, or professional status.

In Fielding's distributed learning environment, students follow a rigorous curriculum to earn the terminal degree.  While the curriculum appears typical of post secondary education, the focus on self-directed learning adds to its rigor.  Students are largely responsible for the direction of their studies.  Outside of creating course guidelines, faculty and student may have minimal interaction.  The shift from directed to self-directed learner can be a major barrier faced by students in any distributed learning program.  Self-directed scholars must be highly motivated as the lack of supervision makes it easy to lose focus on their studies (Mariani, 2001).  Students

with years of traditional academic experience may subconsciously search for their lost "classroom" as the lack of interpersonal relationships becomes apparent. Fielding's efforts to increase student contact through forums, group knowledge areas, and participation in National Session is insufficient. Due to the absence of face-to-face interactions, new students adjusting to self-directed learning and even seasoned distributed learning students can become negatively affected and lose motivation. The problems of isolation and fragmentation require a more fully developed approach to humanizing instruction and in this dissertation; I offer recommendations for such an approach.

High attrition rates are the Achilles heel of distance learning. Distance learning has an attrition rate 10 to 20 percent higher than traditional brick-and-mortar institutions (Frankola, 2001). The benefits of meeting student needs for flexible, accessible education are in vain if distance learners fail to complete their studies. On a traditional campus, guidance and support is available through formal resources (counselors and advisors), or informal resources (classmates and peers) (Worley & Dyrud, 2000). Distance learners often realize the benefit of receiving their education "When they want it, where they want it" comes with the price of navigating their educational journey on their own. As distributed learning increases in popularity, schools like and including Fielding will find it vital to identify ways to help students survive and thrive by enhancing humanizing opportunities.

Changes to increase interpersonal interactions in Fielding are important because of distance learning's high attrition rates (Lovitts, 2001). Students lose motivation without human interaction and unmotivated distance learners may withdraw from a course or from school entirely. The combination of a high attrition rate for doctoral students in general (Lovitts, 2001) plus the problems related to distance learning emphasizes the need for humanizing Fielding's

distributed learning programs.  The isolation felt by distance learners may also result in negative

impacts on the university (Dede, 1996; Hiltz, 1997; Owens et al., 2009).  High attrition rates

affect a schools budget and as a result, student services may be impacted.  As student services

are reduced, less support is available for students, which leads to more isolated students, which

leads to more student withdrawals.  As a result, the student body decreases and it becomes a

vicious cycle where both the school and the students lose.

**Organization of this Dissertation**

This dissertation unfolds, in autoethnographic form, what might seem to be a surprising

story, one that is more about the importance of understanding what it means to do what I have

been doing in Fielding's doctoral program rather than what I might do when I graduate.  It is a

story of how my experiences as a Fielding student and peer-advisor I came to understand the

importance of humanizing distributed learning.  This dissertation is comprised of six chapters.

Chapter one introduces my personal journey in Fielding and the development of my study

topic.  I begin to address concerns with the structure of the current educational system focusing

on humanizing distributed learning and I introduce the concept of holistic/humanized education.

I discuss Fielding's distributed learning environment and problems associated with this learning

environment culminating with the definition of my problem statement and research question.

Chapter two describes my research method, autoethnography.  This form of self-narrative

study allows the researcher to study a group to which they belong.  I present the benefits and

limitations of autoethnography as my method of research.

Chapters three, four and five are comprised of sections.  Each section focuses on a

different issue or aspect I encountered during my Fielding journey.  The data in each section is

presented in the form of vignettes.  The vignettes explore my journey from a disconnected and

disenfranchised Fielding doctoral student to an advocate of humanizing Fielding's distributed learning environment through the development and support of peer relationships. Chapter three is titled The Beginning and includes the following sections: Realizing the Perils of Distributed Learning, Early Loss of Peer Relationships, Faculty Relationships are Different, and Peer Relationships and Holistic Education. Chapter four is titled The Middle and includes the following sections: Benefits of Cluster Groups, Becoming a Peer-Advisor, Second Chance at an New Student Orientation. Chapter five is titled The End and includes the following sections: Humanizing Fielding and Social Justice, A Sense of Family, and Humanizing Fielding through Peer-Advising.

Chapter six is titled A New Beginning and contains the section Too Much Relationships, Not Enough Progress and is where I present my self reflection and recommendations.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**AUTOETHNOGRAPHY RESEARCH METHOD**

I would say I chose autoethnography as my research method, but it is closer to the truth to say it chose me. Due to feeling like an outsider in the world of academics, I was uncomfortable with the traditional quantitative and qualitative research methods. Gathering data and presenting it on graphs and charts does not represent how I communicate with the world. I have the ability to perform traditional research, but my passion is presenting knowledge through events and experiences. I learned about autoethnography from my Fielding mentor and gained greater insight during a peer retreat with a member of the Fielding faculty and three of my peers. During this retreat, we spent three days discussing the pros and cons of autoethnography as a research method. The highlight of the retreat was a conference call with Heewon Chang, Ph. D. Dr. Chang is a leading expert in autoethnography and the author of numerous books and articles on the subject. She led a discussion and offered her insight on autoethnography. When I realized autoethnography empowers me to use my personal experiences as data and write in a narrative voice (H. Chang, personal communication, September 22, 2010), my decision to use autoethnography as my research method was solidified.

Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context and incorporates personal experience as data (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Through autoethnography, the researcher studies a group or culture to which they belong (Anderson, 2006). As a Fielding student, I am both member and researcher of Fielding's student body and my observations remain true to the natural interactions of the group. The value of the member/researcher role is described in Heisenberg's (1927) principle of indeterminacy. His principle states precise measurements are impossible because of the interference of the measuring instrument to the

quantity being measured. Obtaining a true temperature is unattainable because when a thermometer is introduced to the fluid, it influences the temperature of the fluid. Instead of a true measurement, we accept the variation as an inherent flaw to the process. The data, while generalized as accurate, is not a true measurement. In other qualitative or quantitative research methods, the researcher is the instrument artificially introduced into the environment. The introduction of a researcher will affect the group under study. This can result in altering the members' natural social interactions and subsequent results may not be a true reflection of the group.

The phenomenon of altering a group's true response is known as the Hawthorne Effect. The Hawthorne Effect suggests that a study subject's behavior or study results are altered by the subjects' awareness that they are being studied or that they receive additional attention (Fernald, Coombs, DeAlleaume, West, & Parnes, 2012, p. 83). If the members of a group are aware they are under observation, this may alter their behavior and actions. When the researcher is a member of the group under study, this reduces the feeling of observation and the results will reflect the true interactions of the group.

**Benefits and Disadvantages**

Autoethnography is a qualitative method with roots in anthropology (Muncey, 2010; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Anthropologists observe and study social worlds in their natural setting utilizing an ethnographic mode of inquiry. Data is obtained through observations or interviews of the group. An anthropologist remains an observer and does not become part of the group or culture under study. The research data obtained should be free of personal views or bias of the researcher. A disadvantage of this type of research is, as an observer, group members may consider the researcher an outsider. This outsider status can influence the dynamics of the group

and the data obtained.  To address this issue, researchers can assume the role of an active

participant by becoming involved in group activities (Creswell, 2005, Mills, 2007).  In essence,

the researcher is attempting to gain group acceptance by becoming a member of the group.

Autoethnographers are members of the group under study and accepted by the group.  In place of

external observations and interviews, data come from notes, messages, and recollection of

personal experiences.  Autoethnography presents the story of a group member, not an

interpretation of an observer.  Under this research method, autoethnographers do not have to

deny their identity.  This feature of autoethnography sets it apart from other traditional

quantitative and qualitative research methods in social/behavioral research as it provides a true

interpretation of the group and its members.

Autoethnography allows me to use my membership and experience in a group to present

the interactions of the group in a natural setting.  The Hawthorn effect states when members of a

group know they are being studied, the tendency of some individuals is to work harder, perform

better, or change their behavior because they are being observed (Harvard Business School, n.d.).

In my study, I want to present unbiased data that are not skewed due to the distraction or

influence of an outside observer.  As previously stated, if a measurement instrument is used, it

interferes with the measurement results.  As an autoethnographer, I am the measurement

instrument and my membership and acceptance allows for an accurate interpretation of the

group.

An additional benefit of autoethnography is the ability to write a reader-friendly study

(Chang, 2008).  College and university libraries are full of studies written by academics for

academics.  While vital for future research, the terminology, structure, and format limits their

audience and may reduce the impact of the work.  When a reader outside the world of academics

opens a study, it should be readable and capture his or her interest. If the study bombards the reader with academic jargon and obscure references, the reader is likely to put it down. At best, he or she may continue on to other works, searching for a study he or she feels comfortable reading. At worst, the reader may feel unprepared and give up. The key is readability. The writing should not intimidate but entice the reader to want more. Creating a reader-friendly study may increase the number of readers and subsequently increase the influence of the work. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, to do something, to act (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). If the work produced by higher education appeals to more than academics, the power and scope increases and the work could change the world. The goal of a dissertation is to add to the literature on the topic (http://www.fielding.edu/) and new literature should not be written solely for consumption by academics.

Holistic education encourages students to recognize the interconnectedness of life (Jacobs & Miller, 2012) and my goal is to write a study that will appeal to a broad scope of readers. The desire to create a reader-friendly study is due to personal experience. While I am enrolled in a doctoral program, I do not consider myself an academic. I consider myself a student. The difference between an academic and student is a student visits the world of higher education, while an academic lives within its borders. A student wants and strives to learn, but has a life outside the world of higher education. A student can make his or her living in any field or profession; what drives him or her to be a student is the desire for life-long learning. Academics make their living in the world of education. They are the faculty, principals, professors, and all other positions that strive to learn and then share their knowledge with others. As academics move higher up the hierarchy of higher education, the beneficiaries of their knowledge transition

from students to fellow academics. At the highest level, where theories that can change the world are created, the audience for these theories represents a limited subset of society.

Academics have their own terminology and use it to express views and theories in their writing. This is evident from my research for this study. Articles in academic journals are filled with academic jargon where a less complicated term would serve the same purpose. One article I read used the word "inchoate" in its title. Unfamiliar with this word, I had to look up the definition. Inchoate is defined as "just begun and so not fully formed or developed; rudimentary" (https://www.google.com). The author chose to use inchoate instead of an ordinary word that has the same meaning. There are many reasons why the author would choose to use inchoate over less academic terms, but one reason is the author could. While the term is foreign to many, it is part of academic terminology used on a daily basis. It may have served the purpose of the author but it placed a barrier between a student (myself) and the content of his or her academic work.

The use of terminology specific to a group is not limited to higher education. An example is the use of medical terminology in health care. Health care practitioners use terms such as fracture and inflammation in place of broken bone and swelling. When speaking to a patient, health care providers must be careful and use laymen terms in place of medical terminology. Using common terms helps patients understand their condition and learn from the interaction. If a practitioner uses medical terms when informing patients about their care, patients frequently nod their heads in understanding, even if they do not understand what they hear. Similar to the non-academic putting down a study due to unfamiliar terminology, the patient does not want to appear uninformed in front of his or her provider. Both cases have negative impacts due to the use of terminology that could be avoided. Autoethnography avoids

this issue by empowering me to write in my voice, to use terminology and words that I and other students understand.

Autoethnography is not without pitfalls. The benefits gained from the member/researcher role also lead to criticism. One criticism compares autoethnography to storytelling. Critics believe autoethnography is simply the retelling of personal experiences. Autoethnographers must be careful not to be swept away in telling a story; they must not neglect to provide a cultural interpretation and analysis of their narrative. The autoethnographic narrative is a snapshot in time, changing according to the context in which it is told (Muncey, 2010). Autoethnographers do not tell a story but describe their relationship to others in a social world. Autoethnography is not an autobiographical account of the researcher's experience; an autobiography presents a chronological and complete account of a life story (Chang, 2008).

Autoethnography helps transform both the researcher and reader (Chang, 2008). Through self-reflection, one sees things one never before realized. Part of my original desire to complete my academic journey alone was my belief I did not belong in a doctoral program. As stated earlier, I never considered myself an academic. My perception was academics could quote authors and compare/contrast theories on command. Academics have a passion for learning and sharing this knowledge through teaching. While I share this passion, it is on a basic level. My desire to know more about the world I live in is to help find my place. I never want to limit my learning to simply reading and reciting authors and theories. This type of academic work has a place, but my passion is learning through others. I learn more seeing the world through the lens of another than from reading a book or journal. This process is summed up in the theory of experiential learning. Experiential learning is learning from the experience of others: "The

process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41).

Through sharing my experience, I hope to validate the need for humanizing Fielding's as well as other distributed learning programs. I encountered peers who, due to fear or being unaware of their options, chose to remain isolated within their personal silos. Knowledge and experience varies among Fielding students. Acknowledging these differences and breaking down the silos helps others realize they are not alone. Autoethnography empowers the underrepresented to share their stories with others who may see elements of their experience reflected in it (Muncey, 2010). Autoethnography allows me to share my personal journey and the journey of others with all my distributed learning peers. Using this method, I hope to demonstrate the value of humanizing Fielding's distributed learning experience.

**Data Collection**

Data collection for my study comes from personal memory and notes as a Fielding student and peer-advisor. My notes are anonymous and captured aspects of discussions or personal impressions of events I experienced as a peer-advisor. In my tenure as a peer-advisor, my study question was not developed and my focus was on working with my peers, not collecting data for my study. As a distributed learning student, I am familiar with the learning curve of becoming a self-directed learner. As part of this culture, I shared this experience with my peers. I understand the isolation of distributed learning and the impact peer relationships can have on addressing those feelings by connecting students to their peers. Additionally, as one of the original Educational Leadership and Change peer-advisors, I experienced the transition, growth, and ultimate demise of the peer-advising program. This program was a modification to Fielding's basic structure. I vividly recall my first New Student Orientation as a peer-advisor and

the gradual transition with faculty from outsider to ally.  Prior to this program, Fielding faculty had no experience with peer-advisors and were wary of our role.  Once they realized peer-advisors were student liaisons, sharing our Fielding experiences to help our peers, the faculty accepted us as valuable assets.

Through autoethnography, I use my experiences as data.  In my experience as a student and peer-advisor, I worked with numerous students at various points in their Fielding journey in a variety of settings.  Each interaction is important, but some stand out among the rest.  I will share what I see as the most significant experiences through vignettes.  These vignettes or epiphanies (Ellis & Bochner, 2006) support the reader-friendly writing associated with autoethnography.  Presenting my data in this format allows the use of expressive literary writing to provide the true meaning and depth of these events.  Intermixed with expressive writing I present theories, concepts, and ideas to provide a greater understanding of the impact of a distributed learning environment.

Vignettes present a personal account of the participants, encounters, and outcomes of an event.  The use of vignettes allows the reader to gain a sense of the academic, social, and emotional needs of Fielding students.  My experiences include peer-to-peer, peer-advisor to peer, peer-advisor in an NSO, and cluster meeting interactions.  Each vignette presents a snapshot of that moment in time and demonstrates the value of developing interpersonal relationships.  To ensure the privacy of all involved parties, actual names are not used in any vignette.  Through this study, I intend to demonstrate the value of humanizing Fielding's distributed learning environment through peer relationships and the positive benefits they have on students.

# CHAPTER THREE:  THE BEGINNING

## Section 1:  Realizing the Perils of Distributed Learning

*The tuition notice I received snapped me back to reality.  This routine request for payment forced me to reevaluate my status as a student in Fielding Graduate University's Educational Leadership and Change program.  After 4 months in this distributed learning program, I had made minimal progress and felt isolated from faculty and peers.  My goal of completing the program in 2 years was hopeless as my progress was at a standstill.  All I had to show for my enrollment were a few new books.  During my short time in Fielding, I came to the realization that distributed learning was far different from any of my previous academic experiences.  I was drowning in isolation and unsure of where or who to turn to for help.  With no other recourse, I paid the tuition, rationalizing it would provide the motivation needed to resurrect my studies.  Three weeks later, I found myself in the same place and I knew something had to change.*

The structure found in a classroom-learning environment is missing or, at the least, redefined in Fielding's distributed learning programs.  A classroom provides students with the structure of an assigned place and time to meet.  Students also receive a comprehensive guide for the course that includes learning objectives, course requirements, and discussion topics for each class session.  This structure is typical for brick-and-mortar institutions of higher education.  Over the course of their academic career, adult learners have acclimated to this learning environment.  The transition to distributed learning from a classroom-centric learning environment can be challenging.  Past experience can lead an adult learner to feel confident in his or her academic abilities.  Adult learners feel autonomous, self-directed, goal-oriented, and sure of their capability to thrive in any learning environment (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay,

2003).  This can instill false confidence that Fielding's distributed learning environment is the right choice.  After years of academic success, students who have received the majority, if not all, of their education utilizing a classroom format may not realize they need the direction and support that is taken for granted in this traditional environment.

The self-directed aspect of Fielding's distributed learning environment requires a high level of dedication and self-discipline.  Some Fielding students will complete their studies independently, but many experience obstacles that make the transition to self-directed learning a complicated journey.  Functioning in a distributed learning program can create feelings of isolation for Fielding students (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).  Feeling isolated can demotivate students and they may lose focus on their studies.  Some students may enroll in Fielding for the wrong reasons.  Students may misperceive the flexibility of distributed learning as an easier method of study.  Students may believe Fielding's programs will not have the same impact on their lives as attending courses with date and time requirements.  What these students fail to recognize is distributed learning does not have the physical or interpersonal structure of traditional education and often requires more time dedicated than face-to-face instruction (Murray, 2001).

Past academic success does not translate into success in distance learning.  The flexibility of Fielding programs can be attractive to students who have successfully completed traditional programs in higher education.  These adult learners have high levels of academic success and are comfortable with their scholastic capabilities.  This sense of accomplishment can lead to false feelings of preparedness for Fielding's independent, self-directed learning environment.  The self-directed aspect of distributed learning requires a high level of dedication and self-discipline that students may falsely assume they possess.

*In contemplating my future in Fielding, I reflected on my recent New Student Orientation. The 5-day session consisted of activities, presentations, work groups, and discussions designed to introduce incoming students to Fielding, the faculty, and their peers.  The faculty and staff presented a basic introduction to Fielding's academic and operational architecture and the tools available to help students navigate the system.  The presentations provided information on Fielding's distributed learning model but, in retrospect, missing from the orientation was an introduction to distributed learning.  There was no mention of the isolation new students may experience as they transition into this learning environment.  I applied and enrolled in Fielding specifically due to their distributed learning format.  My limited knowledge of distance learning led me to believe that distributed learning was simply a hybrid of distance learning and my self-perceived abilities would enable me to thrive in this environment.  As the NSO did not address the pitfalls associated with distributed learning, nothing led me to believe my academic and professional experience had not prepared me for what was in store.*

*I was drawn to Fielding because I felt I did my best work on my own.  By limiting or eliminating interactions with faculty and peers, I assumed I would quickly complete my studies. Prior to enrolling in Fielding, my experience in higher education was through the California State University system.  At the time, my distance learning experience was limited to professional development and online credentialing courses.  Based on my successful experiences, I was confident I would thrive in Fielding's distributed learning environment.  I quickly learned I was naïve to relate past academic achievements in a traditional classroom environment with future success in a distributed learning environment.*

In a traditional classroom environment, students receive specific direction and outlines of what and when to study.  Faculty structure the course, classes meet at pre-determined times, and

faculty are readily accessible.  Educational success relies on the student's ability to regurgitate course content back to the instructor.  Fielding provides students with program requirements and basic directions, but the path each student selects is an individual decision.  There are no mandated place, time, or syllabi associated with each course.  The knowledge area begins with a general theory or topic.  Adhering to Fielding guidelines, students must remain within the theoretical framework of the knowledge area, but each course can be structured to the student's personal interests or study topic (http://www.fielding.edu/).  Content is developed through a contract negotiated between the student and Fielding faculty member.  As the student is responsible for developing his or her course of study, faculty and student may have minimal interaction.

Fielding's distributed learning environment eliminates the classroom and the inherent support associated with a traditional academic environment.  Fielding programs have rigorous academic requirements, but unlike traditional forms of education, the student charts his or her academic journey.  To succeed in Fielding, students must learn to become self-directed scholars. The shift from directed to self-directed can be one of the largest barriers faced by Fielding students.

*I soon realized the freedom associated with distributed learning comes with the unexpected consequence of an overwhelming sense of isolation.  My home became my classroom, a computer replaced my instructor, and my peers were nonexistent.  Without the classroom structure, there was no one to turn to for help, support, or even a kind word.  I began to realize the inherent value of a classroom.  I missed the peer interactions and relationships that I previously felt were at best, unimportant.  In a classroom, I knew when I would have the*

*opportunity to ask for help or support from my peers. Even if I never use this resource, I knew it was available and how to find it.*

*My experience with distance learning also had no application in a distributed learning environment. The distance learning courses I completed were vastly different from Fielding courses. Distance learning courses for professional development are designed for student success. The goal is the successful completion of a course. With a pay-by-course format, more student success equals more income for the on-line organization. I successfully completed these courses independently with no interaction with others. Fielding courses are another story. The rigorous curriculum was well beyond my current scope of knowledge and required study and research in each topic. The lack of access to my peers and the limited interactions with faculty, even if these missing interactions were self-imposed, affected my ability to make progress in my studies.*

The self-dedication necessary for success in Fielding programs requires students to filter out life's distractions and focus on their studies. However, there are no instructors or peers imposing deadlines and no one there to support you if life gets in the way of your studies. The self-directed requirements of Fielding's distributed learning environment place the responsibilities of academic success on each individual student. Fielding students must be self-dedicated and impose their own deadlines for completing work. A Fielding student is not only the pupil, but also the instructor and his or her only peer as well. Without a classroom, students are limited to peer and faculty interactions provided through Fielding's technological services. Students in distance learning programs often feel something important is missing in their learning experience when all their interactions are technologically based (Dede, 2004).

Utilizing technology to replace a classroom environment may have positive financial advantages, but Fielding must take into account the potential impact it can have on students. Through the lens of systems thinking, the isolation associated with distributed learning is not the only issue challenging Fielding students. Isolated Fielding students may withdraw from their program which results in a loss of tuition. This loss can influence the number of faculty and operations of the school. These are not isolated issues, they are problems within a system that cannot be dissected, addressed, and resolved individually (Capra, 1996). The properties of the parts cannot be understood until they are seen in the context of the larger whole. Much like a puzzle, if you look at the individual pieces, all you see is a collection of shapes and colors. Once you begin to organize these pieces, you begin to see the bigger picture. The value is not in trying to understand each piece of the puzzle, but the organization of the pieces to create the larger picture. There is a place for technology in Fielding, but it cannot be seen as the replacement for face-to-face interactions among peers and faculty.

*In an attempt to jump-start my studies, I returned to the information I received at my New Student Orientation. There had to be something in the papers that would point me in the right direction. In my search, I found information on FELIX, Fielding's online student service directory. This directory contains information and links to Fielding curriculum, library services, student forums, and much more. This had to be the answer. I spent hours searching FELIX, reading section after section after section. The amount of available information overwhelmed me. Instead of finding my direction, I felt I was standing in front of a map that did not have a "you are here" indicator. All the routes were clearly marked, but without a point of reference, I did not know which way to go. In the back of my mind, I knew I could turn to my mentor, but I*

*equated that to academic failure. In my eyes, an official request for help would tarnish my*

*reputation as a student. I needed a less formal way to get help but I had nowhere to turn.*

The difficulties associated with the transition to graduate school are not limited to Fielding students. Even in traditional classroom environments, many students find this transition a difficult process. Students admitted into doctoral programs have demonstrated their ability to be good course-takers yet doctoral degrees are awarded for performing independent research and making an original contribution to knowledge (Lovitts, 2005). Doctoral students frequently feel unprepared to make the shift from consumer of knowledge to producer of knowledge (Lovitts, 2001). Fielding students have the additional variable of a distributed learning environment. Doctoral students who have access to informal sources of information and social resources available in classroom environments should be able to undergo this transition better than students should with weaker resources associated with distributed learning (Lovitts, 2005). Fielding's distributed learning programs must provide opportunities for the personal and social resources many students require in a learning environment. Without these resources, the isolation associated with distributed learning may be the reason students fail to complete their academic journey with Fielding.

**Section 2: Early Loss of Peer Relationships**

*As I left my New Student Orientation, I was confident I would complete my program quickly with minimal interactions with faculty and peers. I thought I had a good understanding of the curriculum, a friendly mentor, and high expectations for my studies. Based on my previous academic experience, I felt distributed learning would provide the perfect environment to highlight my skills as a self-directed learner. After returning home, where the initial excitement of my new academic journey quickly wore off, I found myself unclear on direction. There was no one to turn to for guidance or to reassure me that I was on the right track. I had no one to confide my concerns and fears and I felt these feelings were unique to my situation. I assumed my peers from orientation were well on their way and not experiencing self-doubt and stagnation in their studies. After all, Fielding is a well-respected university, they know what they are doing, and it had to be my personal issue. It felt like I was the only student showing up for class, sitting alone in an empty classroom.*

The community and social interactions that occur naturally in traditional classroom education are challenges facing students in Fielding's distributed learning environment (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2010; Dede, 1996; Menchaca, 2002). Fielding's structure limits the social interactions that provide students the opportunity to develop peer relationships. Developing peer relationships in a distributed learning environment is challenged by the way humans interact. Prior to advancements in technology, face-to-face communication was the norm in education. Today's world of new technology has led to alternative methods of communication, which has made its way into higher education. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) for both personal and professional purposes has become commonplace (Kock, 2004). Technological advancements have changed the ways we interact with each other.

E-mail, texting, has become a primary mode of communicating. The internet and the social media have made computer-mediated communication an integral part of our personal and professional lives (Kock, 2004). While technology makes it easier to communicate over time and distance, it comes at a cost. Similar to losing the classroom and the opportunity to interact with peers, computer-mediated communication replaces face-to-face communication with technology and removes the interpersonal aspect from the process.

Computer-mediated communications' impact on the value of communication is demonstrated in Kock's (2004) theory of social presence, Daft and Lengel's (1986) theory of media richness, and Short et al.'s (1976) theory of media naturalness. Each theory describes a cues-filtered-out (CFO) approach to communication wherein the value of the interaction is reduced by the absence of communication cues. Cues are a part of interactive communication and can be either verbal (tone of voice) or nonverbal (hand gestures) determined by what the communication media allows (Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Parks, & Siegel, 2011). This CFO approach suggests the medium through which individuals communicate affects the quality of interaction (Lewandowski et al., 2011, p. 1808). Face-to-face communication supports the highest number of cues while many forms of computer-mediated communication lack auditory and visual cues. The cues inherent in face-to-face communication provide content, non-verbal signals, synchronicity, and require less cognitive effort in interpreting messages (Lewandowski et al., 2011, p. 1808). Advancements in computer-mediated communication continue to broaden and enhance virtual interactions, yet it will likely never become a complete substitute for direct personal contact (Dede, 1996). Fielding must recognize and acknowledge the limitations of CMC when designing their curriculum and identify methods that support face-to-face student interactions.

Due to the inherent issues with computer-mediated communication, distance learning lacks the environment to support the development of peer relationships. Distance learning students learn in isolation with limited access to faculty or peers to help with any learning problems (Hall, 1996). In Fielding's distributed learning model, the sole residency requirement is participation in the New Student Orientation (http://www.fielding.edu/). After the orientation, students are on their own to determine how and when to complete the curriculum. Struggling students do not have the luxury of a classroom of their peers to turn to for support or advice. The available forms of computer-mediated communication may fall short in providing struggling students with the necessary support to continue with their studies.

*Prior to my enrollment in Fielding, I was unaware of the risks associated with a distributed learning environment and self-directed learning. My academic and professional experiences led me to believe I was a self-directed learner and I would thrive in Fielding's distributed learning environment. While I always had positive, although very casual, relationships with my co-workers and classmates, I preferred to work on my own. I got along well with others but I choose not to rely on them. Relying on others always seemed to slow me down. Working on my own, I knew I could meet my deadline and felt confident with my results. In retrospect, I now recognize what I thought was self-direction was really working independently. Without realizing it was there, I still had the support and guidance of my peers. The casual conversations in the classroom, meeting, or hallway were in reality opportunities for reassurance that I was on the right track. Until my progress in Fielding stagnated, I did not realize the major difference in distributed learning was the loss of peer relationships.*

Face-to-face interaction in Fielding is limited to participation in cluster groups or attending National Session. Unfortunately, these two social opportunities come with additional

limitations.  Fielding students come from across the nation and around the world

(http://www.fielding.edu/).  Students in highly populated metropolitan areas will likely have

access to at least one cluster group.  Those in more rural areas may not have access to any.

Fielding lists 18 cluster groups with 6 of the 18 listed as not active (http://www.fielding.edu/).

All but one of the listed clusters are in the greater United States with the lone international

cluster found in Cuatro Rincones, Puerto Rico, which is listed as not active

(http://www.fielding.edu/).  If a Fielding student is not located near one of the 12 active cluster

groups or lives outside of the United States, he or she will not have face-to-face access to a

cluster.

Fielding's answer for students without access to a cluster is the virtual cluster.  This

technology-based cluster is open to all Fielding students.  Cluster meetings are held via

conference calls and membership in this cluster waxes and wanes as students progress or

withdraw from the program.  The virtual cluster does provide remote students with the

opportunity to talk with their peers, but this option does not appear to resolve the issues related to

isolation.  Virtual cluster meetings do not provide the same level of support for the development

of peer relationships.  A conference call cannot support the usual etiquette of a face-to-face

gathering.  Students frequently speak over each other and it is difficult to follow the topic of the

conversation.  Attention spans diminish when you are not looking at the speaker and the meeting

can quickly lose value.  No faces are associated with the distant voices on the call.  The simple

gesture of a smile is removed and even with these computer-mediated interactions, the student

can still feel isolated, even on the call.  Outside of the limited options for face-to-face gatherings,

student interaction with faculty or peers is usually limited to computer-mediated communication.

*Searching for the support I needed, I participated in a meeting of Fielding's virtual cluster. This meeting was a conference call, led by Fielding faculty, and was open to all Fielding students. The call began with introductions from faculty and students participating and quickly moved into the agenda. Outside of the faculty leader, I was not familiar with anyone on the call and as the call progressed, I quickly lost interest. I was searching for a connection, a point of contact that could lift the veil of isolation from my shoulders. Instead, all I found was a group of friendly, but faceless, voices on the phone. At this point, I could have shared my situation and feelings with the group, but I assumed I was the only one with this problem and I did not want to admit my inabilities to unfamiliar peers. Everyone on the call appeared to be doing fine; there was no talk of feeling lost and alone. Admitting my lack of progress and fear of failure to a group of strangers was more than I could handle. I remained on the call, feeling like a failure but too afraid to admit it to the group. When the call ended, I was sure my time in Fielding was quickly ending and I was on my way to becoming just another attrition statistic.*

A demotivated student who stops participating in his or her coursework is prone to withdraw from the course and even from the school. While persistence rates in postsecondary distance learning courses vary from school to school, some schools report completion rates of greater than 80%, while others report a lower than 50% rate of completion (Rovai, 2002). Regardless of the attrition rate for distance learners, schools need to provide support systems similar to those inherent on a traditional campus. Traditional students also stop attending classes, but they have the advantage of a learning community with their peers. Learning communities develop through social interactions before, during, and after class. Students with traditional brick-and-mortar experiences may take this community for granted. The learning community provides opportunities to interact with peers through which students learn how to

survive and thrive in their academic environment (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Thomas, 2000).

Having the opportunity to develop a learning community does not mean all students take

advantage of it. Even with classrooms and informal meeting places found in brick-and-mortar

institutions, some students will feel separated from their school and peers. If creating

community among students in a traditional classroom setting cannot be assumed, distance

learning programs such as Fielding must acknowledge this and take steps to develop and provide

these opportunities among its student body.

The theory of social capital describes the value of community. "Social capital consists of

personal connections and interpersonal interaction, together with the shared set of values that are

associated with these contacts" (Field, 2008, p. 16). From this, one can understand a sense of

community is vital for the success of both traditional and distance learning students. With

limited social options, the opportunity for Fielding students to build peer relationships is lacking.

The lack of social interactions may result in Fielding students losing motivation for their studies

(Frankola, 2001). FELIX attempts to provide students with access to available support systems

(http://www.fielding.edu/) but cannot replace interpersonal support. Computer forums and

online chats attempt to replace interpersonal relationships, but for some students, high-tech

communication cannot replace high-touch communication. In other words, technological

advances may mimic true-life interactions, but cannot replace face-to-face interactions.

Ironically, Fielding's New Student Orientation, a new student's first Fielding experience,

utilizes a brick-and-mortar classroom format. New students are given instruction on when and

where to meet and attendance is mandatory. This pseudo classroom experience may provide

incoming Fielding students with a false sense of preparedness for distributed learning. Sitting in

a "classroom" with their new peers may feel comfortable and routine. Unfortunately, students

inexperienced with distributed learning may not be aware of its more difficult aspects.

Distributed learning does not have the structure of traditional education and often requires more

time dedicated to the course than face-to-face instruction (Murray, 2001). As Fielding's only

residency requirement (http://www.fielding.edu/), new students may not recognize the value of

this gathering. The New Student Orientation provides the opportunity for new students to

develop peer relationships. This orientation is the only occasion where students, all at the same

place in their Fielding studies, come together as a group. National Session provides a similar

opportunity, but students at all stages of their studies participate in National Session.

*If at my New Student Orientation I understood the issues related to the transition to*

*distributed learning, I would have focused on building relationships with my peers. I saw the*

*orientation as a Fielding admission requirement that had to be completed. It was 5 days of my*

*life, listening to formal presentations with a group of strangers. Like the first day of class, I*

*wanted to make a good impression so I was on my best behavior. I was friendly and cordial, but*

*as these people were strangers, I maintained my distance. While I participated in the after hours*

*gatherings, I was anxious for the orientation to end so I could return home and start working.*

*As the orientation progressed into the final days, I began to connect with some of my peers, but*

*those peer relationships were never realized as the orientation came to an end and we all went*

*our separate ways.*

Many distance learning students perceive the lack of social interaction as a major barrier

in their studies and feel increased interaction among peers would make the experience more

enjoyable (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). My experience as a Fielding student made me aware of

the impact distributed learning can have on students. Many adult learners, including myself, are

attracted to the self-directed aspect of Fielding's programs. After years of working and success,

adult learners may believe they no longer need the direction and support found in traditional education.  This experience coupled with previous academic success can make the adult learner feel confident distributed learning is the right choice.  Some may complete their studies independently, but many experience barriers that make the transition to self-directed learning difficult to achieve.

In reality, classrooms are much more than a predetermined place and time where faculty and students meet.  The classroom provides an environment and a common interest (the course) where students engage and interact with their peers.  This closed environment supports interaction among peers on both academic and personal levels.  Through these interactions, peer relationships can develop.  These relationships form bonds among peers, which creates a learning community and network of support.  Peer relationships may not develop between all students but the classroom provides the environment for these relationships to emerge.  Without the advantage of a classroom, students in Fielding are missing the benefits of peer relationships. Fielding students' academic experience can be enhanced by the support developed through increased social interactions provided by peer networks (Tresman, 2002).  Fielding must take the steps necessary to provide their students with the opportunities to interact with their peers and cultivate these positive and supportive relationships.

**Section 3:  Faculty Relationships are Different**

*The only relationship I developed at my New Student Orientation was with my faculty mentor.  My peer interactions were friendly, but I kept them superficial as my goal was to complete the program independently.  The only reason I left the orientation with a faculty mentor is because it is a mandatory requirement.  A faculty mentor acts as a student "guide" on the Fielding academic journey.  In my perspective, if the selection of a mentor is such a major part of academic success, Fielding would provide more time for students to familiarize themselves with faculty before making such an important decision.  Based on the limited timeframe and with no means of learning about Fielding faculty not participating in the orientation, to me, the role of a mentor appeared similar to a counselor or department chair.  I selected my mentor based on personal interactions during the 5-day orientation.  During my undergraduate studies, I rarely, if ever, met with a counselor.  I did not anticipate it would be different with Fielding.  At the time, I was unaware of the impact this decision would have on my success or failure in Fielding.*

Starting a program in a new school places the student in an unfamiliar environment and many students need support and guidance during this transition.  Student-faculty interactions can be crucial in this process.  These relationships help develop students' academic self-concept and enhance their motivation and achievement (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010).  When students feel connected to their program, they are more likely to remain enrolled and excel academically (Duberstein, 2009).  Fielding's distributed learning environment provides only limited opportunities for developing these connections.

While student-faculty interactions are important and have a far-reaching influence on student success (Komarraju et al., 2010), these relationships are not the same as peer relationships.  Peer relationships are between equals where one party does not hold power or

influence over the other (Kram & Isabella, 1985).  Peers may be at different points in their studies, but this standing does not affect the relationship.  In contrast, student-faculty relationships differ due to the disparity in their roles.  Regardless of how friendly, accepting, or nurturing faculty may be, the hierarchical difference between faculty and student remains intact.  Faculty has the authority to influence a student's academic position and standing.  In fact, Fielding faculty input plays a role in ensuring students perform at an acceptable level to remain in satisfactory academic standing (http://www.fielding.edu/).  While academic performance and standing may not be the center of the student/faculty relationship, this difference in status can affect the way students respond and interact with faculty.

*As a member of Fielding Student Leadership, I had the opportunity to participate in a Fielding faculty retreat.  My mentor and I took this opportunity of being in the same place to have a face-to-face meeting.  I settled into the large cushioned chair as I waited for my mentor to arrive.  I was both happy and nervous to see my mentor again.  We typically stay in contact through e-mails and the occasional phone call.  This meeting was a way to re-establish the relationship we built at my New Student Orientation and discuss my academic status.  I knew I should be farther along with my studies, but I had immersed myself in my role as peer-advisor and, as a result, had made minimal progress.  Immediately after scheduling our meeting, I prepared for our conversation.  I like and respect my mentor, as a person and as an academic and I did not want to disappoint him.  I carefully constructed my notes to highlight my achievements as a peer-advisor in an attempt to divert his focus from my lack of progress.*

*I looked up from my notes and saw my mentor walking towards me.  He was smiling, as always, and I was happy to see him.  We shook hands, hugged, and settled in.  As we sat down to talk, I was immediately nervous.  My mentor is a respected academic and author.  His ability to*

*comprehend, dissect, and discuss any topic is almost overwhelming. After our initial*

*pleasantries, he asked how I was doing with my studies. My mind quickly returned to my notes*

*and I responded with what I thought he wanted to hear. I told him things were going well and I*

*was making progress. I spoke of my role as a peer-advisor and how it was a positive influence*

*on my academic progress. Part of this was true, I was able to navigate the directed aspect of*

*completing my course work, but I did not mention my growing concern with my dissertation. I*

*desperately needed help finding direction for my study topic. Instead of being honest and*

*sharing my concerns, I avoided the subject and focused on the positive aspects of my work as a*

*peer-advisor. When we did discuss my dissertation, I nodded and agreed with everything he*

*said. I did not share my concerns because I did not want to disappoint him or have him see me*

*in a negative light. When we concluded our discussion, we smiled, hugged, and said we would*

*keep in touch. I walked away wishing I had the courage to tell him I really needed his help.*

Due to the difference in social status, many people feel anxious when interacting with

someone in a position of authority. To reduce this anxiety, some individuals will conform to

authority to gain their approval (Presthus, 1960). Deference to authority is not limited to

academic settings; it can occur in any situation where a hierarchical relationship exists between

parties. In health care, where the stakes are much higher, patients frequently defer to their health

care provider. When a physician shares his or her diagnosis with a patient, the physician may

use medical terminology unfamiliar to the patient. Often patients are unfamiliar with medical

nomenclature, but instead of asking for clarification, they pretend to understand. Instead, they

nod their heads in agreement and leave the visit uncertain of any, possibly serious, health issues.

The physician remains oblivious to the lack of communication because he or she is familiar with

and uses medical terminology on a daily basis. The physician believes he or she has done his or

her job by diagnosing the issue and sharing the results with the patient. Because the patient did not want to appear ignorant or waste the time of the physician, he or she leaves with no better understanding of his or her situation than when the patient came in for help.

Faculty/student relationships are similar to physician/patient relationships. Physicians are seen as the authority in health care, faculty is the authority in higher education. Similar to the use of medical terminology in health care, faculty use academic "terminology" which can be intimidating for students. Faculty may not realize their students may not share the same knowledge base. As stated in Chapter 2, I believe there are two types of individuals enrolled in higher education: students and academics. As academics, faculty may not realize their students do not possess the same educational background and experience as they do. When they share their thoughts and ideas using authors and theories, this may fall outside the students' scope of knowledge. Instead of speaking up and risk appearing uninformed, a student may simply agree with what is being said, all the while gaining nothing from the discussion.

Even with these issues, faculty/student relationships can have a positive impact on a student's academic performance. Students who see faculty as approachable and available for interactions outside of an academic setting are more likely to be motivated and confident of their academic skills (Komarraju et al., 2010). Students who feel comfortable approaching faculty may be willing to admit their educational limitations and ask for the support they need. If faculty learn to identify the needs of their students beyond providing academic guidance, faculty can be the connection a Fielding student needs to be successful.

**Section 4:  Peer Relationships and Holistic Education**

*I picked up the phone and dialed the number from the list on my desk. Listening to the sound of a distant phone ringing in my ear, I thought about why I was making this call.  Earlier in the year, a major hurricane devastated the Atlantic Coast.  Living on the West Coast, I was not impacted by the hurricane.  I only knew what I read and saw on the local news.  As a group, the peer-advisors made the decision to reach out to our peers to let them know we are concerned.  Our Fielding sponsor provided the name and phone number of Fielding students in the disaster zone and each peer-advisor would contact and comfort as many students as possible. More often than not, the calls went unanswered or the number was not in service.  I held the phone to my ear, hoping to hear a voice answer on the other end of the line.  Then the ringing stopped and I heard a male voice say, "hello"?*

Humanizing Fielding's distributed learning structure requires utilizing a holistic approach to bridge the gap between technology and the student.  Holistic education seeks a balance between the part and the whole, and can provide the bridge from knowledge to a better world (Miller, 1996).  Fielding students cannot be seen only in their role as a student.  Each student comes to Fielding with a life outside of academics that influences their academic performance. This can be described through a comparison of traditional and holistic medicine.  At a basic level, traditional medicine attempts to resolve health issues by using medication and/or invasive strategies to manage or suppress the symptoms of a disease.  The patient may feel and appear better with his or her symptoms suppressed but the underlying cause of the disease may remain unidentified and unresolved.  Holistic medicine looks beyond the symptoms and attempts to treat the patient as a whole (Lachney, 2010).  Holistic medicine acknowledges the patient is part of a larger system where various interactions can affect the body's natural functions.  The symptoms

presented by the patient are clues that may lead to the root cause of an illness. The goal of holistic medicine is to treat the patient and address the underlying disease, not just treat the symptoms.

Similarly, holistic education does not focus solely on a student's academic performance and scholastic responsibilities. Education, when seen through this holistic/humanizing prism, recognizes there is more to the person than his or her role as a student. Through acknowledging the multiple roles students hold in their lives, Fielding can help students reach their full potential. Humanizing Fielding's distributed learning programs by providing support, guidance, and understanding on all levels will provide the opportunities for students to reach their full potential.

*Hearing a voice on the line caught me by surprise. I suppressed my surprise and said I was a Fielding Graduate University peer-advisor and I was calling to see how he was doing. I told him the university provided the peer-advisors with the names and numbers of Fielding students who may have been impacted by the recent hurricane. I was calling to check in and to let him know that we are concerned about him. After a brief silence, he responded by saying "From Fielding? I didn't expect this."*

Holistic education aims to open students' minds not only to knowledge, but also to life. Instead of limiting the scope of education, students must be prepared to live and work in a complex and dynamic world (Kim, 2010). Students must learn how to use the knowledge gained from their academic journey to make a positive impact on the world. Students need a connection to the real world and this cannot be obtained through a fragmented, reductionist view. Students must broaden their scope and experience views from different social, economic, and ethnic perspectives. Only then, will students receive a well-rounded education and gain new perspectives for changing the world. Fielding and all educational programs, especially any form

of distance learning, need to adopt a holistic approach to humanize the educational experience to meet the needs of their students and society.

This perspective is also central to the indigenous and holistic theories of education. Indigenous and holistic education encourages relationships and connections not only between peers but also between the student and the world (Jacobs & Miller, 2012). Education should not be limited to learning facts without also learning how to use new knowledge to help improve the world. Improving the world is not limited to large-scale actions or projects. Helping an individual, or in this case a fellow student, overcome an obstacle in his or her journey improves the world. Traditional education fragments education into convenient unconnected groups that may meet the needs of the institution, but does an injustice to the student (Miller, 1996). Developing relationships supports students learning from each other and reconnects the disconnected student.

*Our conversation lasted only a few minutes. He told me his family was OK, they were not in the area directly impacted by the hurricane. He said it was a difficult and frightening experience and something that made him understand the importance and value of family. As the conversation came to a close, he thanked me for calling. He never thought that someone from Fielding would call and check up on him. In his mind, he was just one of thousands of students and why would he matter? I told him that even though we do not know each other personally, we are peers and peers care about each other. I let him know that he is much more than a student; he is an individual who has thousands of friends in Fielding. He is part of the Fielding family. We said good-bye and ended the call. I stood there with the phone to my ear for a few minutes, attempting to grasp the importance of that short conversation. That one phone call reconnected a student with Fielding, and reconnected Fielding with me as well.*

Students need to know they mean more to Fielding than a statistic and tuition check. Connecting the student to Fielding on a holistic level can create this link. A peer-advisor can be the bridge to connect a student with Fielding. Peer-advisors offer support, build community, and create the social interactions required for learning (Mariani, 2001). Through outreach activities, peer-advisors reconnect them with their program and their peers. Outreach should not be limited to the individual's role as a Fielding student. A simple phone call can to check on the person, not the student, can reduce the student's feelings of isolation and create, or renew, a connection to Fielding. Recognizing the role of a student is only a part of the individual and providing the support and knowledge to provide a holistic education is vital for Fielding students.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE MIDDLE

**Section 1: Benefits of Cluster Groups**

*I sat staring out my car window contemplating my next move. I was parked in front of the address of a local Fielding faculty member. At the lowest point of my Fielding journey, I received an invitation to attend the Final Oral Review of a local Fielding student. Feeling disassociated from faculty and peers with little to show for my 4 months in Fielding, I made the decision to attend the FOR in hopes of reconnecting with my studies. Prior to starting with Fielding, I believed distance learning was my best option in achieving my goal of a doctoral degree. My self-perceived ability to work independently made me believe I would thrive in Fielding's distributed learning format. In truth, the benefits of distributed learning that drew me to Fielding were a double-edged sword. I soon realized distributed learning was unlike any of my previous academic experiences. The lack of interactions with faculty and peers that I perceived as a benefit quickly transitioned into a disadvantage. The independence associated with distributed learning is accompanied by a sense of isolation due to the lack of peer interactions. Without these interactions, I was drowning in isolation and searching for a way to stay afloat. My resources for remaining enrolled were almost exhausted. I was ready to concede failure when the invitation arrived. This FOR would either be a lifeline of hope, or the end of my Fielding journey.*

Fielding's distributed learning environment redefines the classroom and structured environment associated with traditional education. The freedom associated with this type of academic environment may be attractive to adult learners at this point in their academic journey. Many adult learners' life experiences make them feel autonomous, self-directed, and goal oriented (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). This sense of accomplishment can lead to the

misperception of feeling prepared for Fielding's independent, self-directed system. Some students misperceive the independence of distributed learning as an easier option over brick-and-mortar courses. Fielding's autonomous, self-paced environment requires students to have a high level of dedication and self-discipline in regards to their studies. In Fielding, there are no imposed deadlines and limited opportunities to share thoughts or ideas with peers. To succeed, Fielding students must impose their own deadlines and hold themselves accountable for completing their work. As self-directed learners, a successful Fielding student must filter out all of life's distractions, find his or her direction, and focus on his or her studies.

*Leaving the safety of my car, I took a deep breath as I walked toward the apartment building. I became anxious when I realized the next few hours would determine my fate as a doctoral student. Would this FOR be the motivation I need to remain in Fielding? I resigned myself to accept whatever happens. I knocked on the door and the Fielding faculty host greeted me with a big smile and a warm welcome. I kept my guard up as I entered the apartment, trying to keep my personal dilemma to myself. I smiled and shook hands as I introduced myself to those already present in the apartment. I tried to appear self-confident to conceal my true reason for being there. My body was telling me to run but my mind told me to see it through. I kept my body in check as I found a place to sit.*

*The room was full of what appeared to be confident and content people. No one looked like they were coping with an academic dilemma. At that point, I was sure it was just me. Feeling isolated and lost must be a result of my inability to work independently. Prior to the start of the presentation, casual conversation filled the room. During these interactions, I began to feel a connection with everyone there. Similar to being in a classroom, we all shared a common reason for being there. Regardless of where we were in our studies, we are all Fielding*

*students and that connection brought us together. We settled back into our seats as our host welcomed and thanked us for attending. After a brief introduction, we turned our attention to the student about to present his FOR and complete his Fielding journey. He introduced himself, his topic, and began his presentation.*

On a brick-and-mortar campus, students are given specific times and places to meet for each course. They essentially sign a contract requiring their presence and participation (Worley & Dyrud, 2000). The common time and location provides the social environment to develop personal relationships. The physical location and shared common interests of attending the same class in the same school provides a connection among students. Sharing classes or meeting at informal campus gathering spots provides the opportunity for casual conversations and interactions. Fielding's learning environment removes the physical location which limits the opportunity for social interaction among students. Without these interactions, students can feel disconnected from their peers and their school. The lack of social interactions may result in students losing motivation for their studies (Frankola, 2001). Fielding and other distance learning programs attempt to recreate personal interactions through computer forums, group conference calls, and interactive computer chats. These may be valid attempts but for some students, high-tech cannot replace high-touch. Technology may mimic true-life interactions, but it is not a replacement for personal interactions.

*The only sound in the room was the voice of the student presenter. As he gave his presentation, it became apparent he was nervous and searching for his words. He appeared apprehensive and indecisive as he focused on the paper in his hands, not looking up as he spoke. As he continued to struggle, the energy in the room began to change. Sensing his need, this gathering of strangers quickly became a community to support our peer. With renewed interest,*

*the group began to provide positive verbal and non-verbal feedback. He was no longer an individual presenting to a group of strangers, he was a Fielding student presenting to a group of his peers. Feeling this support, his confidence grew and he began to speak with the authority of an expert. He knew his topic and he began to own it. He presented his findings and upon conclusion, he stood tall in front of his new community and accepted our applause. He reveled in our congratulations as we began to mingle. I realized there was a different feel to the room. For a brief moment, this gathering gave us back our classroom, an environment that supports personal interactions and relationships among peers.*

*This experience made me realize what I was missing in my Fielding education. I need the peer interactions that I found in a classroom environment. I had to know if anyone else felt the same way. I dropped my guard and shared my personal dilemma with the group. I was still afraid I was the only one so I spoke fast and braced myself for the response. One by one, every person there said they felt the same way. In some manner, each one felt isolated and disconnected from Fielding. We were there for the same reason, to try to find a connection to Fielding and our studies. Realizing we all felt the same way, the question quickly became how this learning community could be maintained. At that point, our Fielding host spoke up and asked if we wanted to form a Fielding cluster. She explained many Fielding students require more support than Fielding's distributed learning environment can provide. A cluster would provide the "classroom" where we could work together, share experiences, and support each other. Everyone agreed a cluster would provide the community we need to achieve our academic goals. As the discussion continued, I felt the shadow of failure lifting from my shoulders; it was the dawn of a new day, a renewed direction, and the birth of our local cluster.*

A Fielding Cluster is a group of students and faculty who live geographically close enough to make a group meeting feasible. A member of the Educational Leadership for Change faculty and a local Fielding student lead each cluster (http://www.fielding.edu/). While Fielding provides an official definition of a cluster, there is no associated pre-determined structure or function. Cluster leadership and participating students define the cluster to meet the needs of its members. Some clusters focus on academic issues, others have a larger social aspect, and finding the balance between the two is what makes each cluster unique.

*Walking back to my car, I had a renewed sense of purpose. A sense of community and belonging replaced my feelings of isolation and fear. I walked into the Final Oral Review an individual and left a member of a community. I became part of a group of Fielding students with common goals. My feeling of self-doubt was replaced with a new level of confidence. What I needed to do was still a mystery but where to find help had been resolved. The cluster was my new classroom and the peer relationships developed at the FOR were my lifelines. The search was over; I found my distributed learning classroom.*

The Final Oral Review became a classroom, a gathering place of individuals with shared goals and common needs. Fielding's distributed learning format has many advantages, but one disadvantage is the loss of community that accompanies self-directed learning. Distributed learning, or any form of distance learning, gives students access to their education anytime and anywhere but there is more to education than unlimited access. The heart of education is the student and his or her desire to learn and make an impact on the world. Fielding's distributed learning format brings together a diverse faculty and student body, but it also keeps them apart. Limited personal interactions inhibit the opportunity for interpersonal relationships between Fielding peers. Each individual brings his or her unique life experiences and background with

him or her to Fielding.  Providing a format that supports interpersonal interactions, where peers

can learn and support each other is critical for the success of Fielding and its student body.

**Section 2: Becoming a Peer-Advisor**

*During my third year in Fielding, I read an announcement about a new peer-advisor program. The School of Educational Leadership for Change (ELC) was launching this new program and soliciting applicants for three new positions. The announcement stated the role of a peer-advisor is to provide support and guidance to Fielding students. After reading the announcement, I knew becoming a peer-advisor was a great opportunity that I could not pass up. I still vividly recall feeling isolated and disconnected during my first few months of enrollment. I was accustomed to peer interactions associated with classrooms and informal gathering spots on campus. Fielding only provides limited "classroom" opportunities to interact with peers. Without a classroom or obvious resources to provide support, Fielding students are left to face their fears and concerns on their own. A peer-advisor can bridge the gap between student and Fielding and provide the support necessary to help students refocus on their studies.*

*I reviewed the peer-advisor application requirements. While I met the qualifications, I was hesitant to apply. Even at my 3-year mark in the program, I continued to struggle with my studies. Completing the structured work of knowledge areas and comprehensive papers was not the issue. My struggles lay in identifying my study topic and beginning my dissertation. In addition, I had limited experience working in higher education and zero experience as a peer-advisor. All I could offer is my passion for peer relationships. Without peer interactions, I would be a Fielding attrition statistic. As a peer-advisor I could help my peers by sharing my experiences and let them learn from my mistakes. My cluster helped me realize I was not the only one who could benefit from this support. I made the decision to apply to the peer-advisor program.*

Peer-advising, also called peer tutoring or peer mentoring, provides students with the opportunity to talk with someone in a similar position about their academic journey. A conversation or discussion among students about issues at school is not peer advising. There are certain criteria that must be met to qualify as peer advising. Peer advising requires a difference in knowledge between the student peers so the more knowledgeable peer can provide direction to the less knowledgeable peer (Falchikov, 2001). The experienced student shares his or her learned wisdom with less experienced students to support their academic progress. An advantage of peer advising over traditional faculty counseling or mentoring is the relationship between the two parties. Regardless of the level of trust, the hierarchical relationship between academic staff/instructor and student is always present. Peer-to-peer mentoring has a different social dimension. The peer-advisor is more of a friend than member of faculty or staff. This relationship empowers the student to ask questions he or she would feel less comfortable asking an instructor (Falchikov, 2001). There is no fear of retribution for asking a "dumb" question. Peers share common experiences and a peer-advisor might not only have the answer to the question, he or she may have asked it before.

Peer advising is a successful addition to support systems available to students. Whereas peer advising is not a recent phenomenon, in recent years the development and implementation of peer advising programs has increased (Smith, 2007). Peer-advisors provide complementary and often required support to students unable or unwilling to use traditional faculty or counseling support services. A pilot peer-mentoring program in a large Canadian research university supports the value of peer-advisors (Smith, 2007). In this pilot, students that successfully completed a course supported students just beginning the same course. The peer mentors worked with the course instructor and gave class presentations, facilitated small group

discussion, and organized study groups. Outside of their involvement with the course, the student mentors were provided no formal mentoring structure. How they interacted with their mentees was at their discretion. Students in the course had the option of requesting mentoring activities or forgoing the opportunity. When surveyed at the completion of the course, 70% of the students who utilized a peer mentor stated they perceived enhancement in their learning experience (Smith, 2007). Even students who did not consult with the peer mentors felt the benefit of their presence. Students "felt encouraged that the instructor and peer mentor cared enough for their learning to set up such a safety-net" (Smith, 2007, p. 55). Peer mentoring has positive effects for students even if they never use one. Knowing the services exist provides students with the security that peer support exists if they need it.

*I was surprised when I opened my letter of acceptance from the peer-advisor program. I was selected for one of the three new peer-advisor positions. Shortly after my initial celebration, I experienced a surge of anxiety. Was I doing the right thing? Could I be the safety net for my peers? Do I have the time necessary to do a good job? Even with the support of my cluster, I was making only moderate progress and there was so much more to complete. My role as a peer-advisor would add to an already full, personal, professional, and academic workload. Was I willing to risk my academic progress, not to mention possible additional tuition costs, for the sake of helping my peers? After a moment of consideration, the decision was simple. I would accept this exciting new role as a Fielding peer-advisor. Even if it has a negative impact on my academic progress, the benefits I gain from working with my peers is immeasurable. Sharing experiences is a bi-directional event and with the diverse Fielding student body, I could only imagine the worlds of experience and adventure that would open before me. Secure with my decision, I read about the mandatory 3-day peer-advisor orientation held at Fielding's home*

*campus in Santa Barbara. At the orientation, I would meet my peer-advisor counterparts and learn the responsibilities of a peer-advisor.*

The literature identifies isolation and the lack of adequate social interaction as challenges for distance learners (Hall, 1996; Howell et al., 2003; Worley & Dyrud, 2000). Peer advising can provide the social links and support to reduce the isolation distance learners may experience. Distance learning programs have high attrition rates which may be associated with social isolation. Couple this with the high attrition rate for doctoral students and the need for further research in this area is obvious (Lovitts, 2001). Peer-advisors provide the support, guidance, and social link for students who struggle to stay on track. An experienced peer-advisor understands the fear and anxiety students feel and can provide guidance to ease their stress. The isolation of adapting to a new learning environment, while keeping up with academic requirements is demanding. In addition to academic support, peer-advisors provide emotional support while students transition to a new way of learning.

*The drive to Santa Barbara provided an opportunity to again reflect upon my decision to accept the position as peer-advisor. I was excited and anxious at this opportunity, similar to the feelings I had when I drove to the same city for my New Student Orientation. Both times, I had mixed emotions on my decision to add a new role to my life. The closer I got to Santa Barbara, the more I had to convince myself I made the right choice. I learned so much about surviving in Fielding's distributed learning environment during my time in the program. I recalled learning at the FOR that other Fielding students were also searching for support. If that was true in the small gathering of local students, how large was the need in the entire Educational Leadership for Change student body? Every student deserves the support necessary to complete his or her*

*studies.  All they need is someone to talk to, a bridge to reconnect them with their peers and with*

*Fielding.  As a peer-advisor, I was going to be that bridge.*

Peer-advisors are students who have traveled the same journey and can relate to another

student in ways out of reach of counselors or faculty.  Isolation and the lack of a peer network is

not an issue to all Fielding students, but it can have a negative impact on students who require

higher levels of interaction.  Building interpersonal peer relationships can be the difference

between thriving and withdrawing from Fielding.  Peer-advisors and students connected to their

peers perform better academically and are more likely to persist in school due to these networks

(Thomas, 2000).

*The peer-advisor orientation was similar to the New Student Orientation.  The associate*

*dean of the school of Educational Leadership for Change led the 3-day agenda.  Many of the*

*sessions were identical to those used for the NSO but the focus was on becoming peer-advisors,*

*not an introduction to Fielding.  With only three participants, the activities were interactive and*

*lively.  The activities, while useful, were not as important as the time we spent interacting.  As in*

*many conferences, the strongest connections are made outside of the formal presentations.  We*

*took advantage of the breaks to learn about each other and build the core of Fielding's peer-*

*advisor team.*

*We shared why we applied to become peer-advisors.  I shared my story of feeling lost and*

*disconnected until I found my cluster at a Final Oral Review.  I recounted how that single event*

*resurrected my Fielding journey.  My colleagues shared similar stories of longing for support*

*and guidance early in their Fielding journey.  They found their support in their local cluster*

*groups.  My counterparts were lucky to have active clusters in their areas.  After trying to*

*survive on their own, they found their classroom in their cluster.  In one form or another, peer*

*relationships kept each of us enrolled in Fielding. This shared value strengthened our relationships and built the foundation of our peer-advisor community. As Fielding students, we shared the value of peer relationships with each other. As Fielding peer-advisors, we would share this value with all of our Fielding peers.*

*This peer-advisor orientation became our classroom, a place where three strangers, with a common interest, became a community. Even though it was a temporary classroom, it provided the environment necessary to build the foundation for our peer relationships. During our subsequent conference calls and at National Session, the peer relationships initiated at the peer-advisor orientation continued to develop and thrive. As a pilot program, if Fielding faculty and the student body did not feel we brought added value, the peer-advisor program would be discontinued. With this realization, we knew we had to use our newfound peer-advisor community to promote peer relationships within Fielding's student body.*

Peer advising not only provides benefits to Fielding students, but also for Fielding peer-advisors and Fielding itself (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Interactions between a peer-advisor and student not only connect them to each other, it can become the bridge that connects students with Fielding. The peer relationships that develop between peer-advisors and their peers helped expand our networks and connections (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Interaction with our peers helped improve our interpersonal and communication skills, time management, and expand other qualities such as patience and compassion (McLean, 2004). As students have various learning styles, people communicate differently and each interaction must be taken at an individual level. What works for one does not work for all and as peer-advisors, we have to interact effectively with a wide audience of peers. The role of peer-advisor not only made us better students, it made us better people. An additional benefit for peer-advisors is "Learning by Teaching." As peer-

advisors, we had to have a firm grasp of the curriculum, concepts, and Fielding policies before providing support or guidance to our peers. "Just preparing to be a peer tutor has been proposed to enhance cognitive processing in the tutor – by increasing attention to and motivation for the task, and necessitating review of existing knowledge and skills" (Topping, 1996, p. 324). Through providing academic guidance and support, we enhanced our academic and social skills.

Students are not the only ones to benefit from a peer-advising program. In an era when post-secondary institutions face the duality of increased enrollment and decreased funding, peer-advising programs can supplement traditional student support services at minimal cost (Smith, 2007). Fielding could receive operational benefits from a peer-advising program. The use of peer-advisors can reduce the costs of traditional counseling and support services. Fielding's use of peer-advisors expands the reach of student services with a negligible impact on the budget. If budgetary issues are not a concern, the additional support of peer-advisors can help meet the needs of Fielding's student body. If counseling services fail to provide Fielding students with the necessary level of support, they may withdraw from school. A high attrition rate affects Fielding's budget and student services may be impacted. With reduced student services, more students may withdraw and it becomes a vicious cycle where both Fielding and its student body lose.

Returning to my experience in health care delivery, I refer to a medical imaging risk-benefit statement as an analogy. The statement is "the benefits outweigh the risks" (Bushong, 2004). Prescribed ionizing radiation is applied to patients to obtain diagnostic images. The use of radiation provides clinicians with information that would otherwise require invasive procedures or simply be unavailable. There is an inherent, although minimal, risk associated with the application of medical radiation and the risks of not performing the imaging study are

usually much greater than the risks of the associated exposure.  For Fielding, the benefits of a

peer-advising program outweigh the risks.  The positive impact on students, peer-advisors,

Fielding counselors, and potentially attrition and associated tuition makes having a peer-advising

program a benefit to all aspects of Fielding.

**Section 3: Second Chance at a New Student Orientation**

*From the rear of the hotel conference room, I sat and listened as Fielding faculty welcomed the gathering students to the New Student Orientation.  My newest peers were seated at their tables, attentively listening to every word.  Each one had a new binder filled with reams of vital Fielding information open before them.  Only a few years removed from my own orientation, I could imagine the range of emotions running through the room.  I remember feeling excited, anxious, intimidated, and a bit scared as I attempted to capture every piece of information.  New Student Orientation is Fielding's single residency requirement and one of the few opportunities students have for face-to-face interactions with their peers.  Participation is ordinarily limited to new students, faculty, and staff but this time things were different.  In my new role of peer-advisor, I was participating as the student/faculty liaison.*

*Not only was this orientation a first for Fielding, it is also a major first step for each new student.  Every one of the students in attendance was on the precipice of a life-changing event.  The decision to enroll in a doctoral program is a major commitment of time and money.  To arrive at this point requires the confidence and ability that comes from prior academic success.  What my new peers may not be ready for is the culture shock of Fielding's distributed learning environment.  My personal experience taught me that many in this group would require the support of their peers to survive and thrive in this environment.  As my attention returned to the faculty speaker, a smile crossed my lips.  I smiled because I was confident this orientation would be the start of a new learning community.*

New Student Orientation is Fielding's single residency requirement.  A student can successfully complete the rest of his or her Fielding journey without interacting with one of his or her peers.  The purpose of the orientation is to provide incoming students with an introduction

to processes related to Fielding and to build the foundation for the rest of their academic journey. Due to the structure of Fielding's program, the majority of students obtain program information through internet searches and the school's website. Few students are located in the same city as the school's brick-and-mortar facilities and many students earn their degree without ever seeing the school's staff and administrative offices. New Student Orientation is Fielding's way of bringing the school to the student and introducing Fielding.

At the orientation, students meet faculty, learn about the Fielding educational model, select a faculty mentor, write a Learning Plan, register for their first knowledge area, meet the Fielding support staff, and connect with fellow students (http://www.fielding.edu/). Four to six faculty members and staff run a typical NSO. Faculty present a set agenda of program information to new students over a period of approximately 5 days. While there is flexibility in how this material is presented, typically the information is presented in a classroom lecture format. Students sit at tables, taking notes while listening and interacting with the presenter. The orientation provides the opportunity for new students to meet their peers in the closest thing to a classroom setting Fielding can offer. This gathering transitions new students from a virtual Fielding experience to a face-to-face Fielding experience, even if for only a short time.

New Student Orientation provides the first opportunity for students to meet and interact with faculty, staff, and peers. These students are already alone in a strange environment, attempting to adapt to a new set of requirements. They need a resource to turn to for advice, someone who has experience with Fielding and distributed learning. These students need a knowledgeable guide who can help them navigate the challenges of this new environment. These students need a peer-advisor. Peer advising requires a difference in knowledge between the student peers so the more knowledgeable peer can provide direction to the less

knowledgeable peer (Falchikov, 2001). The knowledge and guidance provided by a peer-advisor is not limited to the scope of their personal experience. Through a network of peer relationships, their scope of knowledge includes the experiences of their peers. A peer-advisor is not only a source of knowledge but also a vehicle to develop peer relationships.

*I recognized the limitations of my own Fielding orientation and I wanted to ensure the students participating in this orientation did not experience the same disconnection I felt after my orientation. I was one of the less engaged students at my NSO. I participated enough to get by while maintaining a safe distance from my peers. Not only did I not want to form any peer relationships, I did not feel I qualified as a peer to the group. The orientation was comprised of primary and post-secondary instructors, school principals, and administrators, what I refer to as academics. Each one had experience with higher education and the educational policies that affect their profession. My background in education was with a vocational health care program. I never felt equal to my peers which supported my decision to go it alone.*

*There was no one at my orientation to offer support and guidance from a student perspective. When the orientation was over and I returned home, the names and faces of my peers faded away. Without a peer network, I had no one to turn to as I struggled to find my way. The epiphany of discovering many of my peers also felt isolated and disconnected was the turning point in my Fielding journey. The evolution from loner student, to cluster leader, to peer-advisor felt right. My role as a peer-advisor provided the vehicle I needed to share this journey with Fielding peers outside of my local area. I became a peer-advisor to help all Fielding students learn from my mistakes and misconceptions. This group of new Fielding students would leave their orientation with the support of a peer-advisor and more importantly, the support of their peers.*

Fielding emphasizes self-directed learning and to succeed in this environment, students must develop a specific set of skills (http://www.fielding.edu/). The transition from directed to self-directed learning can be one of the greatest barriers to academic success (Merriam, 2002). Attempting to navigate this journey alone, while possible, can result in disconnection between the student and Fielding. Student attrition from distance and limited-residency doctoral programs is significantly higher than that from traditional programs (Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009, p. 112). Peer relationships may reduce the isolation experienced by many Fielding students. The New Student Orientation provides students with the opportunity to develop peer relationships, but the focus of orientation is preparing students for the academic rigor of their coursework, not building these relationships. Peer relationships increase the level of interaction among peers. Students with higher levels of peer contact demonstrate higher levels of learning gain over the course of their academic journey (Endo & Harpel, 1982).

There are other opportunities for peers to interact during their Fielding journey. National Session, group knowledge areas, and cluster groups are events and activities that support peer relationships. Student participation in these activities helps students develop a support network that bonds students to the social communities of the school and increases their engagement in academic studies (Tinto, 1997). These events temporarily provide Fielding students with their missing classroom. Even if students participate in these events, it cannot be assumed students will feel a part of the learning community (Picciano, 2002). It requires more than a temporary classroom to create a supportive learning community.

*The evening prior to the orientation, students and faculty attend an introductory dinner. This gathering provides the opportunity for students and faculty to meet and mingle in an informal setting. The evening begins with introductions of faculty, staff, and students. During*

*the student introductions, each new student gives a brief self-introduction, shares a personal insight, and states why they came to Fielding. Faculty, staff, and others participating in the NSO are introduced by the associate dean leading the orientation. During the introductions, the associate dean introduced me in my role as peer-advisor. He explained this was a new program and this was the first time for this type of participation. When I stood to give my statement, I started it off by saying, "I'm just Gregg." My goal was to let the new students know I was simply one of their peers. The role of a peer-advisor could carry the aura of authority and I wanted to avoid that perception. The new students needed to know I was just another student, albeit one with some Fielding experiences to share. As it happened, that small statement was a turning point in my relationship with both faculty and my peers. From that point forward everyone called me "Just Gregg" and it became an inside joke. This small spontaneous statement became the foundation for developing or enhancing relationships with faculty and, more importantly, developing relationships with my new peers.*

*During the opening dinner and the NSO, I was mentally matching students with their peers or cluster. I already knew where most of the students were from and what clusters were available in their local areas. A few of the new students were local and while they would hear about our local cluster, they were in for a bigger surprise. Some new students enrolled together and came with a built-in support group. These students were ahead of the rest as they arrived with a pre-packaged learning community. As I continued to take mental notes, I was less apprehensive with students who actively participated in every discussion and event. These students appeared to understand the value of peer relationships. My focus drifted towards the less engaged students. These students participated but kept one eye on the clock, waiting for the*

*end of the day.  I knew this group would benefit the most from peer relationships.  This group of students was the reason I became a peer-advisor.*

Developing peer relationships empowers new students to draw from the experiences of their Fielding peers.  The indigenous methodology of "tin-can bear fat" expresses the value of community and understanding your environment through those with experience.  The premise behind this concept is "participants understand their environment and function together to disseminate knowledge and build group cohesion through shared stories, narratives, and actions" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 30).  In simplistic terms, to be successful at a task, you first must understand the environment, or community, in which you undertake that task.  The analogy for this concept is the task of learning how to fish.

To be successful at fishing, you must first understand the environment where the fish live.  To learn about this veiled environment, you must sample it.  You "see" below the surface by attaching a tin can lined with bear fat to a string and dropping it into the water.  As the can descends into the cool water, the bear fat congeals and captures pieces of the underwater environment.  Once the can has traveled through the fish's habitat, you retrieve the can with the string.  Studying the captured materials sheds light on this hidden environment.  The information revealed by the underwater material provides insight on how to be a successful angler (Jacobs, 2008).  At the NSO, the experienced student is the tin can that captures pieces of Fielding and shares it with the new student.

*In addition to my role as a peer-advisor, I was also student leader for the Oakland cluster.  The Oakland cluster is an academic and emotional support group for our members and our learning community.  We came together as individuals and through peer relationships; we formed a community that provides every cluster member with support, guidance, and direction.*

*Our focus is the pursuit of our doctoral degrees through Fielding, but the community we developed has exceeded the confines of academics. We are colleagues, peers, and friends who support each other with any issue academic, personal, or otherwise, that gets in the way of achieving our goals.*

*To demonstrate the value of peer relationships to my new peers, I turned to my cluster. Prior to the NSO, I shared my plan at a cluster meeting. Instead of reviewing our writing or other academic pursuits, we brainstormed for the best method to demonstrating the power of peer relationships to the new students. We quickly determined the best way to demonstrate the power of a learning community is to bring it to the orientation. Fortunately, the orientation was local and in easy driving distance for cluster members. The cluster agreed to come to the orientation and participate in the peer-advisor-led Student Rap Session. This session is held on the last day of orientation and is for students only. Faculty and staff are not able to participate. This would be the opportunity to provide my new Fielding peers with a first-hand demonstration of the value of peer relationships.*

*As the day neared completion, I prepared for my time with the new students. This was my platform for demonstrating the importance of building peer relationships. The session was open to any topic and we could discuss anything and everything on the minds of the incoming class. In preparation for this session, I informed the new students that my cluster would participate in this session. Throughout the orientation, in both formal and informal settings, I stressed the importance of building peer relationships. Until this incoming group of Fielding students saw first hand the value of these relationships, it was merely a theory. Participation and interaction of my cluster in the rap session would change this theory into reality.*

*The session opened with a general discussion of topics discussed during the NSO. Even after spending 5 days together, the group was still getting to know each other. Their relationships were still evolving and some students were hesitant to venture into topics outside of Fielding. They asked all the basic, and safe, questions about cluster groups, knowledge areas, comprehensive papers, and an assortment of other Fielding-related topics. I shared my thoughts on faculty mentors and empowered the new students with the knowledge that lesson plans and even mentors can be changed if their needs alter. I invited all local new students to visit the Oakland cluster. To provide the same support for students outside of the local area, we went on FELIX to find information on Fielding clusters in their areas. Slowly the discussion transitioned to my experience as a Fielding student.*

Every student has his or her own learning style. Some want to work alone, while others require more guidance and support. Fielding's distributed learning structure supports self-directed learners (http://www.fielding.edu/). Many adult learners believe they can thrive as independent students and this belief can reduce the value students see in peer relationships. Students who have successfully completed traditional academic studies may not recognize the support peer relationships provided in those prior academic journeys. The desire to build peer relationships develops from Fielding students recognizing the positive impact these relationships can have on their studies. All Fielding students share the common goal of completing their program and earning a degree. Common goals and a shared vision of earning doctoral degrees provide the foundation to build these relationships. Through this shared vision, each student gains the sense of commitment to the group necessary to achieve their goal (Senge, 1990).

Some students at the orientation already knew the value of peer relationships and staying connected with their peers. Those who elect to build these relationships will benefit from their

learning community. These students will take the opportunity, made available by the orientation, to connect with their peers. They are taking advantage of the classroom setting. Other students will complete the orientation and leave to begin their studies on their own. There will always be a place for students who prefer to complete the program independently. Many students successfully complete their Fielding journey independently, without the need for peer relationships. Some start out believing they can do it on their own only to learn the difficult realities of distributed learning. By exposing new students to the benefits and value of peer relationships, either peer-to-peer or through a cluster, those who need this type of support will know where to turn.

*As the tenor of the session transitioned to the student experience in Fielding, members of my cluster began to filter into the room. I took that opportunity to pause the discussion and asked my cluster members to introduce themselves to the group. At the completion of the introductions, I refocused the discussion back to student experiences and asked if anyone had anything to add to the discussion. One by one, my cluster members began to share their personal experiences on the support the cluster provides in their Fielding journey.*

*One cluster member shared his story of being in another distance learning doctoral program. He had an extensive background in education and public policy and approached that program as another goal to achieve. After some time in the program, he withdrew because he felt disconnected. His social interactions with faculty and peers were limited to phone calls and on-line courses. With his goal of earning his doctoral degree unfulfilled, he began to search for other options. After researching available doctoral programs, he selected Fielding based on its distributed learning format. He breezed through his Fielding orientation, understood the academic requirements, and settled in to complete his journey. He soon realized he was back*

*where he started. Although he was in a distributed learning program, he was again isolated*

*from his peers and disconnected from his program. He was on the verge of withdrawing when*

*he attended the Final Oral Review where the Oakland cluster was born. The peer relationships*

*and community he found at that FOR kept him in the program.*

*As the discussion continued, other students recounted their original intentions of limiting*

*social interactions and completing the program. The common theme was saving time and*

*money. The less time it takes to complete their studies, the less tuition they pay. Interactions*

*with their peers would only slow progress and not add value to their Fielding experience. Every*

*one of them believed that their previous academic experience had prepared them for success in*

*Fielding's distributed learning environment. Cluster members recounted how upon returning*

*home from their NSO, they felt lost and alone. Without peer relationships, they felt disconnected*

*from Fielding. Joining a cluster and developing peer relationships within the cluster provided*

*the gateway to the support and guidance they needed to remain in Fielding. Regardless of the*

*path, each one acknowledged the value of peer relationships and emphasized it was a connection*

*to their peers that kept them in Fielding.*

*The new students heard the various ways to develop these relationships. We discussed*

*joining a cluster, participating in group knowledge areas, attending National Session, or simply*

*remaining in touch with your NSO peers. As the session ended, it was apparent the discussion*

*reached some of the new students. Not all of the new students shared this new found belief; some*

*remained steadfast with the idea of academic independence. When the session concluded, a few*

*of the new students gathered their belongings and left the room. The majority stayed in the room*

*and began to talk with their new peers. New and experienced students gathered in small groups*

*and continued their discussions. With each passing moment, the Fielding peer community*

*continued to expand. For this group, the value of peer relationships had transitioned from theory to reality.*

At this NSO, the goal was to demonstrate the value of peer relationships to success in Fielding. To achieve this goal, the positive impact of peer relationships was the focus of my interactions with the NSO students. To emphasize this point, members of my cluster and other experienced Fielding students spoke to the value of these relationships. Similar to the pretense of tin-can bear fat, students can learn about the Fielding environment from the "stories" of an experienced student. This knowledge is shared with one peer, then another, and another which disseminates this knowledge throughout the learning community. With each step, the student transitions from a new student to an experienced student and shares his or her knowledge with his or her peers. Sharing information strengthens the community, as members of the community better understand their environment. Through peer relationships, Fielding students can work together to disseminate knowledge and build group cohesion through shared stories, narratives, and actions.

**CHAPTER FIVE:  THE ENDING**

**Section 1: Humanizing Fielding and Social Justice**

*My peer on the conference line continued to share his recent experience "Something felt different but I could not figure out what it was."  The discussion was part of a group knowledge area for Structural Inequality and Diversity, a core requirement of Fielding's Educational Leadership for Change program.  I was sharing a room with cluster members and our faculty leader, listening to the group discussion related to our assigned readings.  Our focus was on social inequalities experienced by members on the call.  Our peer was talking about a recent shopping experience during a European vacation.  During his trip, while shopping for souvenirs in a major department store, something felt different.  As an experienced traveler, it was not a problem with the language or exchange rate.  Something felt out of the ordinary and he could not place his finger on it.  He shrugged it off and completed his shopping, paid for his purchases, and left the store.*

*As he stood outside of the store, still unclear on why he felt different, he realized why this was unlike other shopping experiences.  The entire time he was shopping in the store, he was alone.  Not in the sense of shopping without friends, but in the sense that he was not followed.  In the United States, he was accustomed to "company" as he shopped.  Through the lens of a store employee, an African American man was automatically a suspect and warranted a higher level of suspicion and subsequent surveillance.  This unjustified status was based on the color of his skin and overshadows all of his personal and professional accomplishments.  His work as a health care professional, respected educator or doctoral student has no bearing on this perception.  It took a European vacation to make him feel like an accepted member of society.*

*Listening to his story made me realize how my interactions with my Fielding peers changed my view of the world.*

Hearing my peer's account of his shopping experience helped me realize the world is comprised of many different realities. My reality and how I am treated is specific to only me, it is my lens to the world. Growing up and living in a diverse and progressive city, I felt my reality was the norm. I am not naive enough to believe that prejudice and injustice does not exist, but my reality placed that as the exception and not the rule. As the child of an interracial marriage, my parents faced prejudice in the 1950s and had to travel from state to state until they found one that would allow them to marry. Growing up, my father told me stories of the American internment camps where he and my grandparents were sent for the crime of being Japanese. I heard the stories of the difficulties my parents faced as they started their life together but that was then and I thought we lived in a much different world. In addition, my close friends come from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. From an early age, we did not segregate ourselves by the color of our skin. We became friends because we shared common interests and goals in life. What brought us together was the quality of the person. There were cliques of kids based on racial lines, but we never understood that logic. We each brought a unique aspect to the group and the blending of cultures exposed us to events and experiences we could not get at home. With this upbringing, I thought I had a better grasp of society but my reality limited my perspective of the world.

Listening to my peer's discussion, I had an epiphany of my personal silo. As discussed earlier in this study, colleges traditionally divide knowledge into silos and present it to students in separate courses (Miller, 1996). This limits learning opportunities and the connection to the real world as content is compartmentalized. Until this awakening, I did not realize I had

surrounded myself in my own silo.  My perspective of the world was limited to my reality.  My experiences in social locations and social interactions shaped my personal perspectives (Edwards, 2014).  Similar to students unexposed to the views and perspectives of their peers, my perspective of the world was limited to those in my immediate social group.  Remaining within my personal silo narrowed my scope of learning and personal growth.  Building new relationships with those outside my personal silo provides the opportunity to experience and see the world through another lens.

Experiential learning is a holistic learning model that emphasizes the role experience plays in the learning model (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).  Fielding programs promote independent learning through which a student can successfully complete his or her studies using books, journals, and the internet.  While this meets the educational requirements to complete a program, does it result in an education that connects the student with the rest of the world?  Students who remain within their personal silos do not benefit from the experience of their peers.  This not only limits the scope of their education, it also limits what they can do with their education after graduation.  To achieve the goal of their graduates becoming leaders in their fields, Fielding needs to increase the level of personal interactions among students (http://www.fielding.edu/).  Through a humanizing approach, Fielding students can experience views from different social, economic, and ethnic perspectives.  Only then will these students see the entire picture.  Learning from others and expanding the scope of a student's reality will help prepare them to live and have a positive impact on our complex and diverse world (Kim, 2010).

Fielding provides a few opportunities for students to break free of their personal silos.  Even with the emphasis on independent learning, there are opportunities for students to interact with their peers.  New Student Orientation and National Session are group gatherings where

students meet in a structured environment.  Each event offers Fielding students the opportunity to interact and learn from their peers but both have their limitations.  New Student Orientation is a one-time event at the start of the Fielding journey.  Students attending their NSO may not recognize the value of this face-to-face opportunity.  National Session is an annual event but it can be cost prohibitive.  It generally requires travel and lodging expenses that may limit student participation.

Fielding provides an interactive option that provides the opportunity for peer-to-peer interactions.  Group knowledge areas provide a more student-friendly platform to develop peer relationships.  Similar to individual knowledge areas, group knowledge areas can be arranged on an as-needed basis.  Groups of students work with faculty to set up a group knowledge area to complete a core course or an elective for a group of students with similar interests.  These courses are typically held via conference calls but can include face-to-face meetings if logistically possible.  This "classroom" like environment creates familiarity among participants and the opportunity to develop peer relationships.  Participating in a group knowledge area connects peers and builds the support network necessary to navigate the Fielding academic journey.  Interactions with peers whose experiences reflect a different reality than your own provide an opportunity for a broader learning experience.  Completing this program without participating in a group knowledge area not only limits opportunities to build peer relationships, but also limits learning opportunities.

Distributed learning is the one form of distance learning that recognizes the need for face-to-face interactions (Vrasidas & Glass, 2002).  While Fielding provides students with opportunities for peer interactions, these opportunities are limited by their timing, cost, and (outside of New Student Orientation) they are optional.  New Fielding students may not

recognize the impact a distributed learning environment can have on their studies and they may not take advantage at orientation to build connections with their peers. National Session and group KAs are optional and students can choose to attend or participate. National Session is an annual event and can be cost prohibitive. Group knowledge areas are available at any time for no additional cost, but how does an isolated student gather a group of peers to discuss and set one up?

The Structural Inequality and Diversity KA was my first group knowledge area and my introduction to peers outside of my cluster. Even without any prior interaction, each student on the call connected with some, if not all, of the other students in the group. As Fielding students, we share common goals that led us to Fielding, to this course, and to this conference call. Unlike the faceless author of a journal article, we are connected and share a part of each other's world. By humanizing Fielding's educational experience, we learn from each other and open our minds to knowledge and life. I have a greater respect and understanding for social justice due to hearing the experiences of my peers. While I may continue to view the world from my reality, the content of my silo has grown to contain the experience and knowledge of my Fielding peers. If all Fielding students benefit from collaborative learning, our silos may overflow and crumble with the knowledge of others.

**Section 2: A Sense of Family**

*The monthly Oakland cluster meeting started with the typical routine. One-by-one, cluster members arrived and the room filled with conversation. The only interruption was the arrival of another cluster member being welcomed by those already in attendance. At the scheduled starting time, our faculty leader brought the meeting to order and we settled into our seats. After a brief welcome, the meeting started and transitioned into a round-robin discussion. These gatherings start with a round-robin discussion so members can share news, provide updates, or talk about a current topic of interest. Due to the close relationships between our members, the round robin discussions are open and lively. No topic is off limits, as we trust each other to maintain an appropriate level of confidentiality. Each member took their turn sharing as the conversation worked its way around the table. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary until it was Anthony's[2] time to share.*

The Oakland cluster is a relatively small group of approximately 10 to 12 Fielding students who meet on a monthly basis. The founding members of the cluster had the common need for a higher level of social interaction with their peers, which resulted in the revival of the Oakland cluster. Our cluster provides the "classroom" missing from Fielding's distributed learning environment. Our meetings provide the opportunity to obtain support and companionship necessary for success. Over time, the social interactions of the group have grown into strong interpersonal relationships. As new members join, they benefit from these relationships and the wealth of both academic and professional experience of our members. The Oakland cluster is truly a family of peers.

Fielding's website states, "A Cluster is a group of students and faculty who live geographically close enough to make a group meeting feasible at least every other month. Most

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[2] This name has been changed for confidentiality purposes.

students belong to, and are active in a cluster". The last sentence of that statement appears to be more optimism than reality. During my 2 years as a Fielding peer-advisor, I interacted with hundreds of ELC students. Many of my peers were not part of a cluster because they were either unaware of a local cluster or there was no cluster in their area. Fielding only provides a clinical description of the structure and format of a cluster; the content is up to the individual cluster. "The content of the meetings is determined by the needs of the group. Personal growth activities, academic discussion within a particular study area, informal exchanges of experiences with the Fielding process, feedback on individual research plans, etc., may be part of the content of a cluster meeting" (http://www.fielding.edu/). This allows each cluster to provide the type of support, academic or social, that its members need.

*Seated in his customary place, Anthony did not raise his eyes from the table as he began to speak. Though slight in stature, Anthony has a powerful personality and is not afraid to share his opinion on any topic. Due to his insight and depth of knowledge, he can present a compelling discussion on almost any topic. He also has a dry sense of humor and can lighten the mood with just his smile. Instead of his typical easygoing manner, he appeared timid and withdrawn. He appeared defeated and searching for his words. His eyes filled with tears as he tried to speak. When he began to speak, the tenor of his voice let us know something was different. The room fell silent as the cluster recognized his struggles and quickly focused on our friend.*

*Summoning all of his composure, Anthony began to speak. He said this would be his last meeting, he was withdrawing from Fielding. He came to let us know and to say good-bye to his friends. Being a close group, Anthony had previously shared some of his personal struggles. He recently had to deal with his partner's failing health and ultimate passing. Anthony and his*

*partner had endured numerous hardships during their time together and this loss had taken its toll. Through it all, Anthony did his best to maintain a positive outlook. He took care of his personal obligations and continued to make progress with his studies. He was a friend, confidant, and inspiration to all of us. Anthony said he was tired and needed to lighten his load. Fielding was the one obligation in his life he could give up.*

*His voice cracked and tears ran down his face as he spoke. The room was silent as he shared with us that his Fielding journey was no longer worth it. We were in a state of shock, our eyes darting back and forth to each other, searching for an answer. His spirit was broken and he had given up. Anthony sat down as he finished speaking and stared down at the table. He appeared embarrassed and did not want to look into the faces of his friends. At that point, the initial shock of his statement had passed and the vibe in the room changed. The entire group gathered in closer to Anthony to comfort our friend. Without a word, we pushed our books and laptops aside and a box of tissue appeared on the table. The focus transitioned from Anthony our peer to Anthony our friend.*

What Anthony may not have expected was the reaction of his cluster. Through expressing his feelings to the cluster, he was able to release some of his burden. As adult learners, we have all experienced (to one degree or another) the barriers that life can put in the way of achieving academic goals. Personal and professional responsibilities are in constant competition with educational demands. The stress of the world does not stop when you enroll in an educational program and at times, it feels as if it intensifies. The dynamic aspects of life do not stop because you are paying tuition. A new job, a new relationship, an unforeseen obligation or responsibility may be lurking just around the corner. The question is not if something will happen but when. Peer relationships developed and nurtured through a cluster are not limited to

academics. These relationships can also provide personal and emotional support. The cluster becomes a distributed learning environment's classroom, a place where the members share common interests and goals. These shared interests provide the foundation for not only developing peer relationships, but personal friendships as well.

*As the cluster rallied around him, Anthony continued to express his feelings. The comfort and security he felt from the cluster provided the environment necessary to express his true feelings. He spoke of the emotional pain he felt when he lost his partner, the stress he was under to ensure all their affairs were in order, and the lack of focus he had towards his studies. He was searching for a way to ease his burden. In his mind, the one thing he could let go of was his quest for a doctoral degree. Earning his degree is not a goal he had to achieve; it is a goal he wanted to achieve. Giving up this goal would reduce his stress and enable him to focus on healing from his personal hardships. He felt this was the right decision and he was at the cluster meeting to give us this message in person.*

*Our immediate concern was to provide the support he needs. Some members reached out and provided the reassurance of a physical touch, while others offered words of encouragement. The reassurance of the group appeared to help Anthony regain his composure. He was in a secure and trusting environment and he could express his emotions without fear. This is his group, his cluster, his friends, and he did not have to conceal his emotions. Some cluster members were brought to tears; it is agonizing to see someone you care about in pain. After a few minutes, things settled down but we did not return to our seats. We stayed within arm's reach of Anthony so he knew we were there for him.*

*After taking a collective deep breath, we began to respond to what Anthony had shared. Unlike the typical response from a group of acquaintances, there were no questions of "why" or*

*"what are you thinking?"  If withdrawing from this program was the answer, we supported him*

*100%.  The advantage we have is our personal history with Anthony.  We knew beneath his*

*sorrow beat the heart of a lion.  He did not arrive at this choice lightly; it was a decision of last*

*resort.  The collective goal of the cluster was to give Anthony the opportunity for one more*

*discussion before he made his decision final.  One last time to hear how close he is to achieving*

*his goal.*

Without prompting, the cluster rallied to support our friend.  Each member shared in their

own words their support and feelings for Anthony.  Each member had a personal story of how

Anthony had touched them though his words or actions.  We all share the common burden of

attempting to complete our Fielding journey while continuing to deal with our personal and

professional lives.  The resounding theme was the cluster believed in Anthony and no matter

what adversity he faced, he could overcome it and achieve his academic goal.  He was not alone

in this journey, the cluster was there to support him every step of the way.  What he saw as an

impassable mountain became a manageable climb with the support of his cluster.  You could see

the change in his demeanor as he listened to these personal accounts.  He may have seen himself

as merely another member of this cluster but in reality, he is a vital piece.  Each member brings

knowledge and life experiences unique to that individual.  Sharing these experiences provides

others with an invaluable learning opportunity.  When Anthony shared with the cluster his views,

ideas, and opinions he opened a door to learning to which only he had the key.   Each member

expressed how important he is to our group, how close he is to earning his degree, and how much

it would mean to the memory of his partner when he walked across the stage at graduation.

As much as we all wanted Anthony to continue with his educational journey, we also

respected his right to make the decision to withdraw.  This point was expressed with every

reason we could think of for him to stay. The meeting transitioned from sharing knowledge to a demonstration of love and caring for a friend in need. No one worried that we put our studies aside; our friendship with Anthony overshadowed any educational need or responsibility. Our small community came together to support the needs of one of our own. On that day, Anthony felt the power of the cluster, the power of love, and support that comes with peer relationships.

The epilog to this vignette is Anthony remained in Fielding, refocused his attention on earning his degree, and graduated the next year. He completed his course work, his dissertation, and presented his Final Oral Review at the same table where he announced he was leaving the program. Now, instead of quiet tears, he spoke endlessly on the exact colors of his graduation cap and gown. The smile returned to his face and the power returned to his voice. The lion once again could roar! Even after his graduation, Anthony continued to attend some of our cluster meetings. He said he came to ensure we stay on track to complete our own educational journeys. While I am sure this is true, I cannot help but believe he continues to attend because he knows this group will always be a part of his life, and he will always be a member of this cluster.

**Section 3:  Humanizing Fielding through Peer-Advising**

*When I saw the e-mail from Mary[3] in my in-box, it brought a smile to my face.  Even though we live more than 2,000 miles apart, I consider her a good friend.  Our first interaction was during a group knowledge area.  Our friendship was based on numerous conference calls until we met in person and participated in a group presentation at National Session.  During my term as peer-advisor, Mary would contact me and we had several discussions on how to survive and thrive in Fielding.  Prior to receiving her message, it was close to 2 years since our last interaction.  I was happy to hear from her and looked forward to rekindling our friendship.  To my surprise, her message was more than catching up: Mary was on the brink of withdrawing from Fielding and she wanted to speak to me as a friend but more importantly as a peer-advisor. Without hesitation, I responded to her message and set up a time to talk.*

*When we spoke, after a short period of catching up, I told her I was surprised to hear about her situation with Fielding.  She enjoyed her studies and made great progress in the program.  After a brief moment of silence, Mary told me why she was considering withdrawing from Fielding.  As the matriarch of her family, the demands of her life were becoming too much. She was dealing with family and personal health issues and her responsibilities were beginning to overwhelm her.  She was tired and lost her drive to continue with her Fielding studies.  Out of all of her obligations, her role as a Fielding student was the one she felt was expendable. Earning a doctoral degree was a personal goal and one she could choose to end.  Eliminating her role as a student would mean one less source of stress in her life.  As I listened to her talk, I could hear the desperation in her voice, but what I did not hear was the sound of defeat.  I did not interrupt as she shared her feelings with me.  I provided a hypothetical shoulder to lean on and the comforting voice of a friend.  When she finished, I knew I had one opportunity to help, to*

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[3] This name has been changed for confidentiality purposes.

*prove to her that she can complete her educational journey and I would be there to provide*

*support.*

*When Mary asked for my opinion, instead of telling her what to do, we talked about how much of the program she already completed. We recounted our work together in group KAs and how much we learned about each other and ourselves. We shared stories of our readings and interactions with faculty and peers. I told her how valuable her contribution was to our presentation at National Session. As part of the presentation, she selected a theme song to help motivate other students. We laughed as we recalled playing that song and getting the entire group to sing along with us. Once the mood lightened, we discussed the work she had remaining to complete the program. She was writing her study, but still had a few KAs to complete. I could tell she would benefit from being with her peers, so I suggested she take another group KA. I knew of a group KA that was just starting. I gave her the name of the instructor and suggested she try to join that group. By the end of our conversation, I could hear the confidence returning to her voice. She was reconsidering her decision to leave the program but still needed some time to think it over. Before we hung up, I asked Mary to call me and let me know once she made her decision.*

Mary was an active member of her local cluster. She attended meetings and participated in group projects but when she needed someone to talk to regarding withdrawing from Fielding, she went to an individual, not a group. Fielding does not place operational limits on their clusters and as a result, Fielding clusters differ in their approach (http://www.fielding.edu/). The Oakland cluster focus is on academic and personal support; her cluster may not provide the type of support she required. To maintain confidentiality, she wanted to voice her concerns with an individual, not a group. As the matriarch of her family, she was concerned about the impact her

situation could have on her family.  Confidentiality was the key.  A peer-advisor offered her the one-on-one support she needed to discuss her situation.

Peer-advisors offer more than just academic support; peer-advisors can help students adjust to the role of a student.  The role of a student is self-imposed by adult learners.  When this role begins to have a negative impact on the student's quality of life, frequently the answer appears to be the elimination of this role.  Removing the stress associated with academics and tuition can be a win-win for a struggling Fielding student.  Adult learners typically have a full life outside of their studies.  Adding the academic demands of a student to his or her professional, family, and personal responsibilities can make the additional role of student a difficult transition.  Additionally, Fielding students may find the transition to distributed learning daunting.  A self-directed learner is not only the student, but also the instructor and the student's only peer.  Peer-advisors can help with this transition.  A study on the effects of peer-advisors with English as a Second Language international students found peer advisement helped the student's ability to cope with the academic and social adjustments of a new learning environment (Fishkin, 2004).

Peer advising can also address the high attrition rates of distance learning and doctoral students.  A study on American Indian/Alaska Native college student retention found peer-advisors assisted these students in achieving their educational goals.  American Indian/Alaska Natives have the lowest enrollment and graduation rates of any student cohort in United States colleges (Guillory, 2009).  "American Indian/Alaska Native students, particularly from Indian reservations, experience feelings of academic inadequacy, isolation, alienation, and marginalization (Guillory, 2009, p. 14).  To nurture success, schools must provide the tools and services these students need to remain viable students.  Peer advising is one of the crucial

elements toward college persistence for American Indian/Alaska Native students. Fielding students suffering from the same feelings of marginalization can benefit from the services provided by peer-advisors. Poor academic achievement is not the only reason students withdraw from college. Students may be prepared for the academic rigors of a doctoral program but unprepared for the isolation associated with distributed learning. Peer advisors provide students with a friendly, familiar face and comfort zone. Students have an outlet where they can express their fears and concerns regarding any issues they may experience. Peer-advisors act as role models and help students adjust to the academic rigor of a college curriculum (Guillory, 2009).

*Two weeks later, I called Mary to check on her situation. Her voice brimmed with confidence as she told me she was participating in the group KA we discussed on our call. After our initial call, she took some time alone to reconsider her situation and re-evaluate her goals. Her role as family matriarch meant she was the one who provided the support her family members needed to achieve their goals. She was always there for her family and now it was time to be there for herself. While she would never turn her back on her family, she let them know how important it was to her to complete her studies. I was not surprised to hear that her family would support her in achieving her goal of a doctoral degree. She would still have to deal with her personal health issues, but her family's support had revitalized her spirit. She was excited to be back on track. I suggested we set up check-in calls to help maintain her focus. She readily agreed and we talked every week. Our calls continued until Mary felt she was ready to go on her own. We vowed to support and encourage each other and to do the same for any Fielding student in a similar position.*

*When I saw the Fielding announcement for Mary's Final Oral Review I immediately sent her a congratulatory message. I wanted her to know how proud I was of her and to celebrate*

*her accomplishment.  She responded almost immediately with a message she titled "A Note of Gratitude."  In the message she wrote, "I will never forget the help Gregg Kurita gave me.  More important, I will never forget the kind and gentle approach he used to convince me that I could and would earn my degree from Fielding.  Had his attitude been different, or had his advice been what I wanted to hear [withdraw from the program]; the end of my doctoral journey would have occurred on a cold, dark, and dreary day in March 2009.  Instead, I will proudly participate in the graduation ceremony at the 2011 National Session.  I have no idea how much peer advisors earn, but the help Gregg gave me was priceless."  I cannot take any credit for Mary's accomplishments.  My role was to be her friend and her peer-advisor.  Both of these roles are easy to fill; all you need to do is interact with your peers and show them they matter.*

There is no single correct method for humanizing Fielding's student experience.  As students have different learning styles, students require different methods and degree of support.  There are many different facets to peer relationships.  Some students can thrive as independent self-directed learners, while some need the support of groups.  Mary was an active member of her local cluster, attended and participated in National Session, and was active in Fielding student leadership.  Even with all of these peer group activities, a peer-advisor provided the support in the way that worked for her.  For some Fielding students, a one-to-one interaction with a peer is the support they need.

## CHAPTER SIX:  A NEW BEGINNING

**Too Much Relationship, Not Enough Progress**

*What are you going to do with your doctoral degree? This question, posed by the faculty leader of the Oakland cluster seemed simple enough.  She posed this question at the beginning of our meeting to generate an interactive discussion on where we are and what we intend to do once we complete our Fielding journey.  I did not want to acknowledge it to my peers, but her question scared me.  I searched for an answer as one-by-one my peers responded.  The more I thought about my response, more and more questions came to mind.  Why did I start this journey with Fielding?  Why am I still working on my study instead of being an alumni of this program? These questions needed to be answered before I could say what the future might hold.  I have given Fielding more time and tuition than necessary to complete my study.*

My original study topic was related to social capital and distance/distributed learning.  I knew I wanted to focus on the value of community in Fielding and thought this would be a good approach.  The concept of social capital relates to how social connections have productive benefits for groups or for society at large (Field, 2008).  My study was going to demonstrate the value of social capital in Fielding's distributed learning environment.  While reviewing available literature, something did not feel right and I shared my feelings with my faculty mentor.  He reminded me of the importance of my topic making a unique, significant contribution to the world and asked me the value of researching social capital.  He asked me to say in plain language just what it was about my community of peers and my relationships with them that seemed most important and worthy of reflection.  In my attempt to phrase this response, I realized that what kept me in Fielding, and fed my spirit as well as my mind, is my participation in peer advisement and the humanizing aspects of it I seemed to be cultivating.

Autoethnography is my research method for this study. I feel I did not choose autoethnography, it chose me. Academic jargon and endless theories and authors some of my peers would recount frequently overwhelmed me. I often felt I did not belong in Fielding and frequently considered ending my enrollment. It was not until after my struggle with my research topic and concept paper that I learned about autoethnography. Once again, my cluster was my savior as at one meeting we discussed research methodologies and my relationship with autoethnography was born. My decision to use autoethnography was finalized during a retreat where Heewon Chang, PhD. led a discussion on autoethnography as a research method (H. Chang, personal communication, September 22, 2010). Discussing the merits of using my personal experiences as data and writing in a narrative voice was the key to my decision. Even before my introduction to autoethnography, my goal was to write a readable study (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography validated my desire to write a reader-friendly study, one that is not filled with words with mysterious meanings. I was frequently intimidated by the content of articles and dissertations I reviewed as part of my studies. Instead of focusing on the content of the document, I was constantly searching for the definition of words which made reading documents disruptive. Often I moved on to the next document in hopes it was written in a readable manner. I wanted my audience to read and not realize they were turning the pages of my study.

This is not to say that using autoethnography as a research method is easy. In comparison to traditional research methods, autoethnography is still proving its worth in the world of academics. Some Fielding faculty members have just recently accepted autoethnography as a true research method (Jacobs, 2008). Even the Fielding faculty member who hosted the autoethnography retreat is a recent convert. One criticism of autoethnography is

the perception it is storytelling with the researcher simply retelling personal experiences. Autoethnographers must be careful to provide a cultural interpretation and analysis of their narrative and not be swept away in telling their stories. When using autoethnography the researcher must also recognize that he may become vulnerable when writing about himself (Ellis, 2000). Recounting personal experiences forces the researcher to relive the events and associated emotions. For some autoethnographers, this can be emotional as reliving the events can bring up bad memories. In my case, revisiting the events described in my study only reinforced my passion for peer-to-peer relationships and the positive benefits they have for Fielding students.

**Why Humanizing Fielding is Important**

Humanizing Fielding's distributed learning environment is important because it supports the entire person and not just the role as a Fielding student. There is more to every individual enrolled in Fielding than his or her role as a student. Each adult learner enters Fielding with a set of roles, each with its own obligations. These roles can include professional and personal roles that provide the foundation for the individual's reality. All these roles must work together for individuals to maintain balance in their lives. The question is not if but when will an event upset this delicate balance? The majority of Fielding students will encounter barriers and how these obstacles are addressed can determine whether the student withdraws or persists with his or her studies. Many students have personal support systems in place to help them address issues and return to their chosen path. When life's problems become overwhelming, and they begin to have a negative impact on their studies, this is where Fielding must provide their students with an appropriate set of support systems.

Providing the opportunity to build relationships with peers humanizes the educational process. Not only do these relationships create a learning community and provide academic and

personal support, interactions with peers expand the student's scope of knowledge. Fielding students can learn about authors and theories from books and articles but the information is static and conceptual. The experience of their peers can bring these theories to life. Returning to healthcare delivery for an example, phlebotomists are taught how to draw blood through books and lectures. There is a clinical aspect where the training is done on a prosthetic arm complete with replica veins and blood. While this provides the training phlebotomists need on how to draw a blood sample, they do not learn how to draw a blood sample until they do it on a real patient. The only way to learn the intricacies associated with learning is through real-life practice.

Fielding students need the opportunity to interact and learn from their peers. Every student's reality is based on their life experiences and the lens through which they see the world. Many students may not recognize the limitations of their personal reality until they hear the experiences of a peer who lives a different reality. Sharing these experiences transitions learning from theory to practice and is a first step in using knowledge to have a positive impact on the world. Humanizing Fielding through peer relationships provides the bridge from theory to reality and from knowledge to learning.

This is not to say that Fielding does not provide humanizing opportunities to its students. The problem is many of these opportunities are insufficient. Fielding offers student advising services that include policies and procedures, program requirements, and taking time off from Fielding studies (http://www.fielding.edu/). Faculty mentors, academic advisors, and staff are able to provide support, but this support focuses on academic performance. Where can a Fielding student turn for support when personal issues threaten his or her progress? While student-advising services exist, there is an issue with access to this support. Student support

services must be easy to find and provide more than a list of options. Students searching for support are in need and unless the support is readily accessible, it may not be sufficient to meet the student's needs.

**Recommendations**

My recommendations will address Fielding Graduate University specifically, with implications for other distributed learning institutions. To humanize their doctoral programs, Fielding needs to take advantage of the limited face-to-face opportunities built into its current curriculum. As stated in this study, Fielding's single residency requirement is the New Student Orientation (http://www.fielding.edu/). This is the single event where Fielding students all at the same point in their studies gather as a group. The orientation is the forum for introducing new Fielding students to the school's operations and academic requirements. Along with this vital information, Fielding should incorporate presentations on the potential impacts of functioning in a distributed learning environment. The presentations should stress the importance and value of connecting with peers and how to maintain these connections for future support. A buddy system could be implemented where students are matched with their peers during student orientation to help bolster the development of peer relationships. That first peer connection becomes the building block of a supportive learning community.

At the conclusion of the orientation, all students should leave with at least one scheduled group course. This will not only assist the student in the transition into Fielding, but will also support the budding relationships among new peers. The benefit of group courses should be taken a step further. Group courses should be a mandatory part of Fielding's curriculum. This would serve a number of purposes. It will help new students maintain and expand their learning community, it will expand the learning community as students from the entire program will

participate in the group courses, and it will provide students with the opportunity to expand their knowledge and personal realities by learning from their peers. Even students who thrive on their independence will benefit from learning from their peers. Some or the entire set of core courses should be mandated in group format. Structural Inequality and Diversity should always be a group course. If completed as an individual KA, the student has done a disservice to himself, Fielding, and the world. You can read about social injustice but you do not learn of the impact on others until you hear it from someone with first-hand experience.

Cluster groups are another powerful, yet underutilized humanizing resource. While Fielding promotes cluster groups to its students, little more than a vague description and list of cluster groups is provided. A cluster group requires the support of local Fielding faculty and students. Fielding provides some guidance and financial support but the majority of work is left up to the faculty and student to create and maintain a cluster group. Fielding needs to create a more robust structure to support cluster groups. All students need access to a live cluster group. Due to the nature of Fielding's student body, this may not be geographically possible but additional efforts must be taken to support rural students. As with group KAs, students with clusters in their local area should be required to attend a pre-determined number of cluster meetings during their first year of enrollment. This will expose students to peers in their area, expand their learning community, and provide an additional level of support if needed in the future.

National Session is another humanizing opportunity in Fielding's programs. The main disadvantage to participating in National Session is the associated cost. Cost will always be a limiting factor as some Fielding students are not financially able to participate in this type of event. If cost was not a limiting factor, or if supplemental financial means became available,

attending National Session should be required for second-year students.  National Session is an opportunity for students to reconnect with their peers.  First-year students attend their New Student Orientation and can benefit from those peer interactions.  Second-year students are a year removed from orientation and may need the opportunity to revive their peer connections. To increase the value of participating, Fielding should add sessions that address the isolation of distributed learning, hold events that reconnect peers with their New Student Orientation peers, and make student support services available for those who need them.  This is the only event outside of the NSO where Fielding peers gather and the focus needs to be on all students not just those near the end of their studies.

My final recommendation is the revival of the peer-advising program.  Fielding's peer-advising program ran from 2008-2012.  During this 5-year run, peer-advisors had a positive impact on Fielding's student body.  The group interactions at New Student Orientation and the outreach to individual peers created a network and safety net for Fielding students.  Having a peer-advisor participate in New Student Orientation provides new students with someone they can relate to.  A peer-advisor has been in their position and experienced similar issues.  There is no hierarchy or superior position to interfere with questions or concerns.  Peer-advisors become a point of contact and help create and expand Fielding's learning community.  In addition to the work at orientation, peer-advisors perform outreach to students who may not have access to other means of peer-to-peer interaction.  As described in this study, outreach does not have to be academic based and can be powerful when students realize Fielding knows they are out there. Peer-advisors provide the bridge between Fielding students and Fielding itself.

**Conclusion**

Fielding provides its students with a map to guide them on their academic journey. While the intention of the map is to provide a comprehensive student guide, it is incomplete. The map has a beginning (New Student Orientation), a middle (either comprehensive exams or core writing courses), and an end (dissertation). While the information is accurate, it does not take into account the difficulty of completing the journey. The path Fielding students choose to follow is up to them. Although the academic requirements are the same, each path can be different. To ensure students complete their journey, Fielding must humanize its operations to support the development of peer-to-peer relationships. No single action or process will address all of the issues raised in this study. Putting any of my recommendations into place may provide support at that one specific level, but these issues identified in this study are systemic. Creating a one-time interaction is insufficient to end these structural problems. Similar to taking the traditional medicine approach in treating a patient, the symptoms may be treated, but the underlying cause remains unchecked. Fielding must approach these issues as a system in order to support their students and their goal of graduating students who can have a positive impact on the world.

*One-by-one my peers responded to the question of, what are you going to do with your doctoral degree? Many of my peers in the cluster group are academics and provided in-depth insight on how this degree will promote their careers and provide validation for future research. The closer it came to my turn to speak, the more anxious I felt. When I started with Fielding, the degree had direct application to my career. I am no longer in the same career position and that direct application is no longer the case. In fact, I remained at Fielding because I saw the relationship between peer relationships and student success. I remained to complete my study to*

*validate this relationship and encourage Fielding and other distributed learning institutions to take these steps in humanizing the distributed learning environment.  My degree will be a personal reminder of how accepting, developing, and nurturing peer relationships allowed a formerly overconfident, independent student to complete his Fielding program.  In the end, it was the desire to create and share this knowledge about humanized education, rather than any career-related motivation that kept me moving forward.  With this thought clear in my mind, I could not wait for my turn to share it with my peers.*

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