

**Partnering for Formation in Ministry:
A Descriptive Survey of On-Site
Field Education Mentoring**

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A theological field education internship is not simply busy work for a seminary student or cheap labor for the church or organization where the student intern is ministering. Instead, involvement in a theological field education experience is a fundamental element in the intentional development of a future ministry leader. A great internship opportunity can place a seminary student in an environment where God can work through the student in the lives of other people. Further, a great internship can provide an environment where

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

God can work in the seminary student's own life to expand a greater understanding of God's call, deepen the student's Christ-like character, and further develop ministerial competencies.

The development of the seminary student during the theological field education experience does not happen in isolation. The direction of an on-site field education mentor or supervisor is priceless to a promising ministry leader. Just as with a coach or a trainer in athletics, growth and change does not happen without a relationship with someone who is able to provide resources, assessment, motivation, and accountability. Spiritual formation and personal growth happen best in the context of relationships. Mentoring for ministry formation is an interpersonal partnership, where the on-site field education mentor "takes on the responsibility of cooperating with the student in the pursuit of ministerial skills, in the development of a ministerial identity, and in bringing book knowledge into dialogue with the life of the community."¹

Senior pastors, associate pastors, ministry directors, and organizational leaders all have the ability to make a lasting impact on the seminary students who complete their theological field education requirement in these leaders' local churches and ministry organizations. It is our contention as professional theological field educators that the on-site field education mentor at the internship site is actually more important than the internship site itself. A fantastic internship site with a poor on-site field education mentor is worse than an adequate internship site with a great on-site field education mentor. Every professional theological field educator participating in the Association of Theological Field Education (ATFE) relies heavily on these on-site field education mentors in churches and ministry organizations for the ultimate success of the school's formation of students for ministry.² With the vital role that on-site field education mentors play in the theological education picture, it is important to hear from these mentors in regard to their work with seminary students.

The purpose of this descriptive study was to observe current trends in church and ministry organization internships at one non-denominational, evangelical seminary. While the limitation of looking at just one school is recognized, it is hoped that this snapshot will help other professional theological field educators, seminary faculty members, and on-site field education mentors to evaluate trends in their own field education programs. The survey included seventy-two on-site field education mentors who had worked with

master-level students at Dallas Theological Seminary from 2003 to 2007. This study reports the responses of these on-site field education mentors to questions on the level of structure in their individual internship programs, the identification of student interns at the mentors' churches or ministry organizations, the ratio of student interns to mentors, the compensation of student interns at the churches or ministry organizations, and the value of student interns to the churches and ministry organizations where the students serve. Implications for on-site field education mentors and professional field educators are discussed.

METHOD

The population for this study was based on a list of on-site field education mentors who had worked with master-level students at Dallas Theological Seminary from 2003 to 2007. The current master-level enrollment at Dallas Theological Seminary is 1,816 students.³ To oversee the master-level field education program at Dallas Theological Seminary, the school created the Spiritual Formation and Leadership Department in 2003. The authors of this article are either faculty members or staff members in this academic department.

The Spiritual Formation and Leadership Department of Dallas Theological Seminary maintains a database of 236 former and current on-site field education mentors.⁴ This database included on-site field education mentors working with Dallas Theological Seminary's main campus and extension sites (Houston, Austin, San Antonio, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; and Tampa, Florida).

For this descriptive study, we utilized an online survey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) and queried seventy-two of our most active on-site field education mentors about their internship programs and their dealings with student interns from Dallas Theological Seminary. While a few of the questions offered potential answers for the respondent to choose from, most questions allowed for the respondent to give open-ended responses. This number of participants represented 30.5 percent of the total number of on-site field education mentors in the database.

Of the on-site field education mentors who participated in the online survey, twenty-two of the mentors were senior pastors in a local church setting (30.6 percent of respondents), thirty-seven of the mentors were associate pastors or ministry directors in a local church setting (51.4 percent of the respondents), and thirteen of the mentors were parachurch leaders

(18.1 percent of the respondents). While most of these on-site field education mentors served at churches and ministry organizations in Texas (sixty-three mentors or 87.5 percent of respondents), we did have nine out of state mentors (12.5 percent of respondents) complete the online survey.

SURVEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Structured Internship Program

We were encouraged that over one-third of our internship sites had formal internship programs outside of the internship structure provided by Dallas Theological Seminary (table 1). Typically most churches think very little about the strategic development of leadership among their own membership.⁵ While the definition of a structured internship program was left to the respondents of the survey, some of the common themes in the open responses to the survey were the following:

Does the on-site field education mentor's church/organization have a structured internship program for college and/or seminary students preparing for vocational ministry?	Number of Respondents	Percent
Yes	26	36.1
No	46	63.9

Table 1. Structured Internship Program

- Having a formal internship application process in place for students to complete
- Stating clearly defined learning objectives for the internship that are separate from the learning objectives provided by the school
- Providing well thought-out educational times for all interns at a given site (such as a weekly or monthly meeting for all of the interns)
- Giving systematic exposure to the various departments with the church/organization
- Including the student interns intentionally in the same leadership development programming as the paid staff of the church/organ-

zations (such as leadership development conferences, personal development conferences/retreats, outside developmental readings)

- Utilizing professional and personal developmental plans for student interns that are similar to the paid staff's developmental plans and that are separate from the seminary's field education development plans
- Providing formal evaluation for the student that is separate from the school's field education assessments

Of course it is easier for a larger church or ministry to have the resources and the critical mass of interns to develop a formal internship program. It must be acknowledged that Dallas is the land of the "mega-church," with numerous churches in the area having over 10,000 active members. In fact, many of these large congregations have more paid staff members than the average church in the United States has in total membership. On the other hand, a quick inspection of the above listed items indicates that many of these ideas are within the reach of most church and ministry settings, no matter its size or financial resources.

It is vital to recognize the uniqueness of each church and ministry organization. One size does not fit all. The mentors in our survey represented all sizes and all styles of churches and ministry organizations. Furthermore, each mentor is unique, even when there are multiple mentors at the same internship location. With the assistance of the professional field educators from the seminary, on-site field education mentors could look for ways to implement some of these suggestions to bring additional internship structure to their mentoring relationships in distinctive ways.

The bigger issue though is making sure that quality mentoring is taking place in the first place. A major function of professional field educators at seminaries is to equip their on-site field education mentors with the fundamentals of how to mentor those preparing for ministry roles. We constantly hear statements from our on-site field education mentors concerning the ineffectiveness of their own field education experience when they were seminary students. While the art of mentoring is most often "caught" rather than "taught," it is unfortunate that so many of the on-site field education mentors have never been on the receiving end of a healthy mentoring relationship. Now that these on-site field education mentors have the opportunity to create a positive internship experience for the next generation of leaders, the question needs to be asked if these mentors have a tangible knowledge of what a healthy mentoring relationship for ministerial formation looks like.

Identification of Student Interns

Identifying potential student interns is very much based on personal interface between the student intern and the on-site field education mentor. According to our survey, the majority of both student interns and on-site field education mentors personally ask the other to be involved in the field education experience (table 2). We are encouraged by how proactive both students and mentors are. Having the students be proactive in their internship site discovery is a key aspect that we stress at our school, but it is also found to be crucial in the educational readiness of the student as well. Adults learn best when they have ownership, authority, and self-direction of their own education (diagnosing, planning, implementing, and evaluating) and when they have a readiness and eagerness to learn based on their felt needs.⁶

How are potential student interns identified by the on-site field education mentor and/or church/organization?	Number of Respondents	Percent
Church/organization has formal process	13	18.1
Mentor has formal process	11	15.3
Mentor recruits students	44	61.1
Students proactively ask	46	63.9
<i>Note: Respondents could give more than one answer to this question.</i>		
Table 2. Identification of Interns		

Mentor Motivation

Many mentors are motivated to recruit interns because of immediate needs in their ministries. Our study found that thirty-seven of the on-site field education mentors (51.4 percent of respondents) are looking to student interns to meet immediate needs in the mentor's local church/organization, such as filling the need for youth minister, children's minister, worship leader, or small groups pastor (table 3). This immediate ministry need means that the student intern will be able to have significant ministry immersion with real world experience.

Why is the on-site field education mentor personally involved with working with student interns?	Number of Respondents	Percent
Meet immediate need in church/organization	37	51.4
Identify future staff members	32	44.4
Develop leaders for the worldwide Church	57	79.2
<i>Note: Respondents could give more than one answer to this question.</i>		
Table 3. Mentor Involvement in Internships		

Moreover, many of the on-site field education mentors are looking to the student interns as future hires at the mentor's church or ministry organization. (44.4 percent of respondents) are looking to student interns as future staff members. Both the student intern, as the potential employee, and the on-site field education mentor, as the potential employer, will look to the field education experience with a greater sense of focus and scrutiny.

At this point, a word of warning needs to be given. Using student interns in pastoral roles in the church can create a confusing mix of roles and responsibilities. In these situations, such as the seminary student serving as the church's youth minister, there is always the danger of the lines between the educational growth of the seminary student and ministry employment of the pastor being blurred. For example, will a seminary student in this type of situation have the freedom to explore ministry venues outside of the official job description? A student's employment as a minister does not automatically translate into educational development.⁷ As with providing guidance in the fundamentals of mentoring, the input of the seminary's professional theological field educator is vital in developing and maintaining a healthy balance between education and employment for all parties.

Ratio of Interns to Mentor

A fourth area investigated in the survey concerned the ideal ratio of student interns to on-site field education mentors (table 4). With sixty-four of the on-site field education mentors saying that one or two student interns is the ideal number to work with at a given time (88.9 percent of respondents), clearly the mentors understand the importance of individual attention to the student interns. True mentoring can only take place where there is a

What does the on-site field education mentor consider to be the ideal number of student interns that the mentor can personally work with at a given time?	Number of Respondents	Percent
One	30	41.7
Two	34	47.2
Three or More	8	11.1
Table 4. Ideal Number of Interns per Mentor		

reasonable span of care.⁸ It is interesting to note that even at the churches with the largest intern population (eight to twelve interns per year), the mentors at these internship sites stressed the importance of low intern-mentor ratios.

Forty-six of the on-site field education mentors (63.9 percent of respondents) preferred to meet individually with their student interns, while twenty-six of the on-site field education mentors (36.1 percent of respondents) preferred a combination of individual meetings and cohort-style meetings (table 5). Due to the differences in internship structure from one school to another, this meeting can be called by a variety of names, such as supervisory conference, reflection meeting, or formation meeting. Also depending on the setting, this meeting may involve other people, such as members of the lay committee or other interns at the same site.

Does the on-site field education mentor meet with his/her student interns one-on-one or in a cohort of student interns?	Number of Respondents	Percent
Individual meetings only	46	63.9
Individual meetings and cohort meetings	26	36.1
Table 5. Mentor Meetings with Interns		

No matter the setting or structure of the meeting, the primary concern is for the student intern to have consistent interaction with the on-site field education mentor for supervision and reflection. This consistent interaction is the heart of the internship experience and needs to be a sacred priority

for both parties. These meetings provide regular opportunities for communication and instruction. The on-site field education mentor must create an environment where the Holy Spirit can work in the life of the student intern so that the student can focus on spiritual and professional development. Great mentors are able to help craft a safe and courageous environment of confidentiality, trust, safety, and space to breathe, experiment, and dream.

Compensation for Interns

The major area of discussion in internship trends deals with the specifics of compensation for student interns. One of the questions that our office hears the most from church and ministry organization leaders is “How much should I pay my intern?” To discover compensation ranges, we asked a series of questions that covered the number of hours typically worked by interns, the amount and frequency of intern pay, additional benefits to interns, and typical lengths of internships.

Our findings on the expectation of hours of service per week were very evenly divided across the options we provided (table 6). With compensation, our findings were that twenty-six of the on-site field education mentors (36.1 percent of respondents) stated that their student interns served in a volunteer (unpaid) role, thirteen of the on-site field education mentors (18.1 percent of respondents) stated that their student interns were paid on an hourly basis, ranging from \$8 to \$15 an hour; twenty-two of the on-site field education mentors (30.6 percent of respondents) stated that their student interns were paid on a monthly basis, ranging from \$400 to \$1,250 a month; and eleven of the on-site field

Approximately how many hours a week does the typical student intern work at the on-site field education mentor’s church/organization?	Number of Respondents	Percent
5–10 hours	13	18.1
10–15 hours	11	15.3
15–20 hours	44	61.1
20 or more hours	46	63.9

Table 6. Hours per Week

education mentors (15.3 percent of respondents) stated that their student interns were paid each semester in a one-time payment, ranging from \$1,000 to \$1,500 a semester (table 7).

Approximately how much does the church/organization pay student interns and in what way (i.e., hourly, weekly, biweekly, etc.)?	Number of Respondents	Percent
Volunteer	26	36.1
Hourly	13	18.1
Monthly	22	30.6
Semester Gift	11	15.3
Table 7. Intern Monetary Compensation		

In addition to monetary compensation, on-site field education mentors reported other benefits student interns received for their service at the church or ministry organization. By far the most widely reported non-monetary benefit (twenty-three of the on-site field education mentors) was paying for a student intern to attend a training conference with the church's or ministry organization's staff, such as conferences organized by the Willow Creek Association, Leadership Network, or Dallas Theological Seminary's Center for Christian Leadership. Other benefits mentioned by the on-site field education mentors included seminary tuition assistance paid directly to the seminary (seven of the on-site field education mentors) in the name of the student intern, purchase of the student intern's seminary textbooks for the semester (four of the on-site field education mentors), providing on-site housing for the student intern in an apartment at the church or ministry organization site (four of the on-site field education mentors), and providing medical insurance for the student intern (one of the on-site field education mentors).

When asked how long the typical internship lasts, it was very interesting that over half of the on-site field education mentors (forty of the respondents or 55.6 percent of respondents) indicated that their internships were open-ended (table 8). So what does this mean that over half of the internships are considered open-ended? Well, it depends. We know that some of our on-site field education mentors actually run a two-year internship for students in their program, so perhaps these on-site field education mentors indicated "open-

How long is the typical internship at the on-site field education mentor's church/organization?	Number of Respondents	Percent
A Semester or a Summer	12	16.7
A School Year or Calendar Year	20	27.8
Open-ended	40	55.6
Table 8. Internship Length		

ended" instead of "a school year or calendar year." We also know of numerous occasions where a great internship just naturally morphed into more full-time employment for the student with the church or organization. In other cases, the church or organization is utilizing the student in more of a formal "pastoral" role, such a church's youth minister or music minister. Thus, the church or organization wants to maintain consistency in that position if they have found a quality candidate to fill that particular role.

Again, it must be recognized that the internship structure at Dallas Theological Seminary and other nondenominational seminaries might not reflect the internship structure at other seminaries, especially denominational seminaries working with their denomination in ministerial or priestly ordination prerequisites. In some seminaries and due to denominational requirements, the student intern may be required to complete a field education placement only in a "full-time" capacity (30–40 hours a week) with a local church or ministry organization. For these seminary students, a "part-time" or concurrent enrollment internship is not an option. Or in various cases, the student intern may not be allowed to receive financial compensation at all for his or her internship service. In other situations, the student intern may receive compensation from the denomination instead of the local church or ministry organization. So we acknowledge that these findings and discussions about compensation may be more relevant for nondenominational or evangelical seminaries.

Value of Interns at Churches/Organizations

A final heartening response came when we asked how valued the student interns are. To our great pleasure, seventy of the respondents (97.2 percent of respondents) expressed that that there was value for the student interns

at the church or organization (table 9). There is always a danger of the student interns being ignored or unappreciated at their place of service. Most professional field educators know of horror stories of seminary students being undervalued or even traumatized from a poor internship experience. In these cases, it is usually a result of a combination of various factors, including role confusion, mixed or unrealistic expectations from one or both parties, poor mentoring skills, lack of communication, abusive environments, or other factors. While the perfect internship situation or intern/mentor relationship cannot be guaranteed, the professional field educators can assist to make sure that the likelihood of a positive experience is promoted.

How valued are the student interns by the leadership of the on-site field education mentor's church/organization?	Number of Respondents	Percent
Very valued	54	75.0
Somewhat valued	16	22.2
Somewhat undervalued	2	2.8
Very undervalued	0	0.0
Table 9. Value of Interns at the Church/Organization		

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for On-Site Field Education Mentors

1. *Celebrate the uniqueness of church/organization's distinctive offerings to student interns.* On-site field education mentors can be found at all sizes of churches and ministry organizations, and each mentor and internship setting is unique. Smaller settings have a contribution to student development as much as larger organizations. Those mentors at smaller churches and ministry organizations should not be discouraged, but instead should realize that they can have just as great of an impact on the lives of seminary students and the Kingdom of God as mentors in larger settings.
2. *Continue to be on the look out for quality students to invite into the internship process.* We found that the process of linking students and mentors is still very much a personal connection. Potential mentors need to continue to place themselves in environments where they

can come in contact with potential student interns, including identifying seminary students who may already be involved in serving at the mentor's church or ministry organization.

3. *Remember the educational purpose of a student's internship* While the church or ministry organization benefits a great deal by having student interns serve at the particular setting, the ultimate purpose of the internship is for the student intern to develop in his or her understanding of calling, to deepen in Christ-like character, and to expand in ministerial competencies. The demands of ministry employment must never cancel the educational needs of the student intern, even if the student is an employee of the church or ministry organization.
4. *Consider the bigger picture of student internships in the worldwide mission of the global Church.* On-site field education mentors have the opportunity to leave a legacy by investing in the lives of seminary students who serve at these churches and ministry organizations "for a season." The student interns who are allowed to serve at these churches and ministry organizations are the future pastors, missionaries, educators, and influencers of the next generation of the Church. When seen in this light, the task of mentoring becomes a very exciting and humbling endeavor.
5. *Maintain low student/mentor ratios. Student interns benefit the most from the personal interaction they receive from on-site field education mentors.* While most students come with similar educational and training needs, mentors need to be responsive to the individual needs of the student intern through quality personal time. In fact, some areas of spiritual formation (holiness and virtues) can only be addressed in more of a one-on-one setting. Even in cohorts, student interns will manifest personal issues that require personal responses. On-site field education mentors need to seriously consider the time commitment that is involved in mentoring a seminary student and should not become involved in a mentoring relationship if they are not able to reasonably perform that task.
6. *Provide fair compensation for student interns.* While no one will ever enter pastoral ministry solely for the money, it is only right to give fair compensation to student interns who are serving at a church or ministry organization. On-site field education mentors should work with the school's professional theological field educator to develop compensations guidelines that are reasonable to the student and in line with local economic situations. As was seen in our study; compensation can include hourly pay, monthly pay, semester pay, and tuition and book assistance, as well as other creative means.

7. *Elevate the value of student interns* The on-site field education mentor plays a crucial role in developing a culture that values student intern. This includes making sure that student interns are not chained to only administrative office work (although there is great importance in this work), but that every student intern is given opportunities to have ownership and demonstrate leadership of a ministry area.

Implications for Professional Theological Field Educators

1. *Assist on-site field education mentors in developing structures for student interns that complement the school's provided internship structure* There is not only one right way to structure internships. In fact, beneficial internships can take place in a wide variety of structures. All sizes of churches and ministry organizations can put into place some structures to help student interns in their development. Having formal internship application processes, stating clearly defined learning objectives, providing well thought-out educational times for all interns, giving systematic exposure to the various departments, including the student interns intentionally in staff leadership development programming, utilizing professional and personal developmental plans, and providing formal evaluations are all things that can be implemented in most church or ministry organization internship settings.
2. *Place an emphasis on training mentors. Just because a church or a ministry organization has a structured internship program does not necessarily equal a quality internship experience for the student.* As was stated earlier in this article, a fantastic internship site with a poor on-site field education mentor is worse than an adequate internship site with a great on-site field education mentor. A priority of all professional theological field educators should be to train on-site field education mentors in mentoring styles and good mentoring techniques.
3. *Encourage students in getting involved in ministry service in local churches and ministry organizations early in their educational cycle.* Students cannot expect local churches and ministry organizations to welcome them with open arms without first demonstrating some form of commitment to the church or ministry organization. On-site field education mentors are not interested in just being used by students to fulfill academic requirements. Professional theological field educators need to communicate to students early in their academic career the importance of serving and developing relationships in potential internship sites.
4. *Stress to mentors the importance of the individual needs of the student intern.* Professional theological field educators need to assist both stu-

dents and mentors to develop a mentoring plan that meets both the needs of the student and the church/organization. The school's internship planning documents become essential in individualizing a student's internship in a particular location. The internship planning document assures personal fidelity and covenant between student intern and on-site field education mentor.

NOTES

1. Regina Coll, *Supervision of Ministry Students* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 16.
2. Additional information about the Association of Theological Field Education can be found at www.atfe.org.
3. Dallas Theological Seminary, *Dallas Theological Seminary 2008–2009 Catalog* (Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2008), 210.
4. As a word of clarification, at Dallas Theological Seminary the individual seminary student gets to select an internship site and on-site field education mentor based on the student's degree track (pastoral leadership, cross-cultural ministries, educational leadership, women's ministry, media arts and communication, and so forth) and vocational intent. We give our seminary students the freedom to "pitch" their internship ideas to our department staff for approval. Nevertheless, because this article is written to a broader audience, we know that other schools have very different methods of matching seminary students with on-site field education mentors and internship sites. But no matter the system, the same mentoring qualities are vital for success.
5. Aubrey Malphurs and Will Mancini, *Building Leaders: Blueprints for Developing Leadership at Every Level of Your Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2004), 31–37; Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, and Eric Arnson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, Ill.: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 47–54.
6. Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy* (River Grove, Ill.: Follett, 1980).
7. Janet F. Fishburn and Neill Q. Hamilton, "Seminary Education Tested by Praxis," *The Christian Century* 101, no. 1 (1984): 109–10.
8. Doran McCarty, *Supervision: Developing and Directing People in Ministry*, 2nd. ed. (St. Augustine, Fla.: McCarty Services, 2001).