

Excellence in Supervision: Listening to Our Students

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Imagine a confidential document falling into the hands of a supervisor/mentor. It turns out to be an evaluation of their performance as a supervisor and mentor in the context of their ministry. What has their student ministerial intern written about them?¹ Continue to imagine how this supervisor/mentor feels as they read the following:

- My supervisor/mentor listened and asked very helpful questions.
- She provided a safe place for me to say what was really on my mind and heart. She then offered great insights that made me say, “Dang!”
- He was a tremendous coach. He took me on a grief visit and included me in the funeral service. Then we debriefed and he broke it all down into baby steps for us to do theological reflection.
- I experienced real care and vulnerability. They were brave enough to authentically care.

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Sharing this student feedback in a confidential manner during supervisor/mentor training will encourage ministerial leaders who commit to the call to participate in the formation of students. For us as theological field educators, hearing what students say provides valuable information about

- what constitutes excellence as they perceive it;
- what might be underscored in orienting, training, and supporting supervisors/mentors; and
- what we might take into consideration when we design our plans for evaluation and assessment of placement sites and the supervision and mentoring they can offer.

METHODOLOGY

We determined that both quantitative and qualitative data were necessary to get at the lived experience of students in relationship to their supervisors/mentors and to hear their voices. First, using technology-assisted conferencing, we jointly designed a ten-question survey that could be shared electronically with students currently enrolled in a field education placement.

For the online survey, the team used Qualtrics survey software to gather data from student participants. Each of the study's authors sent a survey link to all the students from their institution who were engaged in a field placement during the spring semester of 2019. In addition to the four institutions represented on the study team (Duke Divinity School, Iliff School of Theology, Oblate School of Theology, and Church Divinity School of the Pacific), students attending schools that are part of the Graduate Theological Union who were in placements during spring 2019 were invited to participate. The survey was completed by seventy-seven students. See appendix A for the full set of survey questions.

Second, we crafted a series of questions that were designed to solicit stories from spring 2019 field education students about specific experiences of supportive supervision and intentional mentoring. Following the distribution of the survey, these questions were used with student focus groups at Duke Divinity School, Iliff School of Theology, and Oblate School of Theology.²

- Tell us a brief story about a time when your supervisor/mentor was really helpful for you.

- Tell us about a time when you went to your supervisor/mentor for support. What did your supervisor/mentor do in response?
- How has your supervisor/mentor supported you in engaging your learning goal(s)?
- Tell us about a challenging or critical moment in your field education experience. How did you navigate that experience? [If the supervisor/mentor is not mentioned, follow up with something like “What did your supervisor/mentor have to say about that?”]

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS: SURVEY RESULTS

According to survey results, a core aspect of supervised field placement is the relationship between the student and their supervisor/mentor. This relationship is fostered through one-on-one supervisory meetings, which also serve as the locus of reflective learning based on the placement experience. Given the importance of one-on-one meetings, the survey opened with questions about their frequency and length. We were surprised to find that only half (50.6 percent) of students reported meeting with their supervisors/mentors on a weekly basis and about one-quarter (27.2 percent) met with them biweekly. Some respondents (14.2 percent) reported meeting with supervisors/mentors monthly, and a few (7.7 percent) met with them less than monthly.

About a third (35.0 percent) of the students indicated that the meetings with their supervisors/mentors lasted about an hour, with roughly the same percentage (36.2 percent) reporting meetings of thirty minutes or less. Some meetings (28.4 percent) lasted ninety or more minutes. In hindsight, because we have a standard of practice that emphasizes weekly one-on-one meetings lasting an hour, we believe it would have been illuminating to have asked students about their perspective on whether the reported meeting patterns were sufficient.

We asked students the extent to which their supervisor/mentor modeled particular aspects of excellence in ministry. Among the specific aspects we listed, the highest proportion of students reported strongly agreeing or agreeing that their supervisor/mentor “possesses a passion for what they do” (91 percent), which was closely followed by “has relevant experience and/or expertise” (86 percent). A strong majority of students strongly agreed or agreed that their supervisors/mentors exhibited the other aspects we asked about, including “exhibits joy in their vocational path” (82 per-

cent), “engages in effective practices of leadership” (81 percent), and “reflects intentionally on self and relationships” (79 percent). Perhaps not surprisingly, the lowest-rated way students saw their supervisors/mentors model excellence in ministry was by “cultivating a healthy lifestyle” (71 percent).³

In addition to the specific attributes asked about in the survey, students were offered the opportunity to define additional ways their supervisors/mentors modeled excellence in ministry. In response to this open-ended question, students identified the following:

- living their faith and values through witness, prayer, and knowledge;
- effective pastoral concern and care for those in the placement context and for the student;
- engaging in regular self-reflection and integrating theory and action;
- knowledge and practice of leadership skills in conflict, communication, changing organizational dynamics; and
- effective relational engagement with, and management of, staff and volunteers.

The survey next asked about specific attributes and practices associated with excellence in mentoring. The highest percentage of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their supervisor displayed excellence in mentoring by “inviting and encouraging them to ask questions in order to share observations and concerns” (83 percent) and by “engaging them as an adult learner by holding them accountable for their own learning and formation” (82 percent). Seventy-five percent of the students strongly agreed or agreed that their supervisor/mentor “reflects theologically and/or spiritually with them on the practice of ministry and/or leadership,” 72 percent strongly agreed or agreed that their supervisor/mentor “provides meaningful learning experiences on site,” and 71 percent strongly agreed or agreed that their supervisor/mentor “asks important questions and offers encouragement, support and relevant feedback in supervisory sessions.” It is of concern that only 61 percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their supervisors exhibited excellence in mentoring by “intentionally designing and inviting the student into opportunities relevant to their formational needs.”

Although students may not have had experiences that were crafted specifically for them, in the open-ended question about other attributes of excellence in mentoring, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that indi-

vidual support from supervisors/mentors was critical to a good placement experience. Students identified the following as ways supervisors/mentors modeled excellence in mentoring:

- actively and openly listening;
- providing new and different perspectives based on the supervisor/mentor's experience;
- offering supported opportunities to take on leadership roles, experiment, and take risks;
- expressing confidence in the student's future as a clergy person; and
- sharing openly about the situations and challenges that arise in the supervisor's own ministry.

In the remainder of the survey, we asked respondents to provide their thoughts on excellence in three areas: the personal characteristics of excellent supervisors/mentors, the practices or activities of excellent supervisors/mentors, and the most important activities for one-on-one meetings between the student and their supervisor/mentor.

When asked for the three most important *personal characteristics or attributes* of an excellent supervisor/mentor, the following were mentioned in some form by at least 10 percent of the students in the survey:

- caring, loving, kind, supportive, encouraging, and nonjudgmental
- good listener
- experienced and knowledgeable
- self-aware, humble, and willing to be vulnerable
- a learning mindset—seeing the self as a focus of learning and committed to the student's learning
- passionate about ministry—their own and that of the student

When asked for the specific *practices or activities* that contributed most to the effectiveness of supervisors/mentors, 10 percent or more of the student respondents identified the following:

- making and taking time for intentional supervision
- providing a variety of opportunities for learning and growing and reflecting on them
- modeling through preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and reflection

When asked about the most important *activities during one-on-one meetings* with their supervisor/mentor, 10 percent or more of the students identified the following:

- reflection, both theological and on the practice of ministry
- listening well and responding to observations and questions
- engaging in open discussion

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS: STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

In order of greatest frequency to least, the following words or phrases were used by students in their storytelling. We grouped together some words or phrases when the story suggested that connection. Illustrative sentences from the focus groups are included.

1. *Theological reflection on ministry/debriefing an experience/processing partner*
 - He's been really flexible . . . and comfortable with me bringing ideas from books and class . . . into real-life ministry . . . a good processing partner.
 - I'm from a different tradition, and she helped me process the theological differences.
 - I had kind of a scary visit with an elderly man with dementia. Later, I processed that with M____ and learned a lot about the elderly, illness, and mental challenges.
 - I felt like I was tapping into a larger wisdom in our theological reflection times.
2. *Encouraged/affirmed/assured*
 - He really encouraged me as a preacher and helped me think about how difficult texts spoke to the congregation.
 - He affirmed my call to the ministry as a female in a denomination that does not ordain women.
 - I encountered a student who had been abused as a child. It brought me to tears because of the wound I carry [from] having been abused as a child. My supervisor listened and later assured me that we all have wounds that will emerge in ministry.
 - I was frustrated with myself and impatient. He was gracious and encouraged me to be patient with myself.

3. *Mutuality*

- We started something new and are in this creative endeavor together, so he treats me like he treats the other staff members. Mutuality is a big theme for him.
- Over time I recognized that there was a kind of mutual gift-giving.
- I experienced a high level of mutuality.
- It became a kind of professional friendship. We were walking together as co-equals.

4. *Shared wisdom/provided insights*

- My supervisor/mentor listened and provided insights that could only be given by one who has been there a long time.
- I was asking him about how to say “No” to somebody. . . . He was good about saying . . . this is how I approach things . . . it made me think about my overall goals.
- Thanks to their counsel I think I’ll travel through life with more courage; not feel like I have to have a handle on everything.

5. *Invited/guided participation*

- A person came in off the street having a personal crisis and I was allowed to participate and observe him engage the crisis with care and compassion.
- I loved the emphasis on learning by doing!
- She invited me and joined me in that work. With skill and passion she was quickly able to bring me into things happening already. It was meaningful to me.

6. *Listened*

- My supervisor/mentor listened and asked very helpful questions and assured me of her prayers for me.
- She listened, and I appreciated the way she reflected thoughts and ideas back to me.

7. *Modeled*

- Watching her do hospital visits, even if they weren’t a crisis, was really helpful.
- My supervisor shared his journey of coming to love the homeless, it was not an instant thing, but a process.
- I was able to attend many staff meetings and see her be responsive to the needs of the various staff.

8. *Predisposed to say "Yes"/permission-giving*
 - R_____ was great because he was predisposed to say, "Yes!" I felt like he gave me the freedom to explore the full range of ministry.
 - I had a good deal of freedom but always felt it came with support.
9. *9. Welcoming/hospitable/gracious*
 - I experienced hospitality, and surprisingly, friendship.
 - Her concern for me as a person was very touching.
10. *Advocated*
 - At the beginning she made sure that I made a lot of connections with people.
 - I was surprised that he encouraged me to commit where I felt I should, and not commit when I didn't feel I should.
 - She has been an advocate for me in a space where I don't have a lot of advocates.
11. *Coached/prepared me for a ministry experience*
 - One conversation where he was concerned that I give all the time, he just stopped the day and went to the board with me to map out my time. It was a great exercise to be more aware of boundaries.
 - He was a tremendous coach. He took me on a grief visit and included me in the funeral service. Then we debriefed and he broke it all down into baby steps for us to do theological reflection.
12. *Vocational discernment/interests/skills*
 - We explored call, the community, the congregation, what was life-giving in them, and then we'd engage my stuff.
 - The ministry setting provided a catalyst for further discernment of my path toward ordination. My supervisor listened and asked very helpful questions.
13. *Patience*
 - I felt shunned by the persons I was supposed to minister to. My supervisor gave me more of the background. It helped me to embrace the idea of "ministry of presence," and by being patient, the clients began to warm up to me.
 - This congregation is sort of known as the 'second chance' place and I saw why in the patient and peaceful behaviors that he modeled.
14. *Concern/care/prayer*
 - My supervisor assured me that these things happen in ministry and prayed with me.
15. *Orientation to ministry context/background stories⁴*

- Prior to beginning ministry, my supervisor gave me an orientation to the setting, a tour of the facility, background stories that were helpful in setting aside my fear of the unknown.
- He prepared me for my first visit with a patient in hospice and then came with me and debriefed the experience afterward.

Based on these findings, we infer that excellent supervisors/mentors exhibit:

- flexibility within the form of the program for the sake of student formation;
- hospitality exhibited in theological reflection, a generous and ecumenical spirit, and the willingness to make the time to orient to the context;
- encouragement and feedback that is specific;
- affirmation that celebrates the student and their call;
- compassion toward students who are challenged by difficult ministry events;
- collegiality grounded in a community of practice;
- generosity in sharing ministerial wisdom;
- patience and empathy when students engage new ministry experiences;
- modeling of ministerial leadership and practices;
- permission-giving spirit, encouraging student eagerness to explore and supporting student initiative in “learning by doing” opportunities;
- coaching capacity to foster growth towards competence; and
- prayerful support and advocacy when necessary.

CONCLUSION: CORRELATING SURVEY RESULTS WITH FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

In comparing the results of the qualitative and quantitative inquiries, we discovered some areas of confirmation and contradiction.

Confirmation. The relationship between supervisor/mentor and student is key to the overall ministerial formation process of theological field education. In both qualitative and quantitative answers, key words such as mentoring, listening, guiding, discussing, responsiveness, wisdom, compassion, prayerfulness, availability, and modeling of leadership appeared throughout.

Contradiction. Relationship was experienced as central to excellent placement experiences, but the quantitative answers revealed that only half of the students met weekly with their supervisors/mentors. Although re-

spect for supervisors/mentors was abundantly clear, both sets of data included some students who did not think they were being given meaningful ministry tasks that were supportive of their particular formation process.

These data underscore areas for particular emphasis in recruiting, training, and assessing excellent supervisors/mentors and placement sites. Specifically, recruiting should emphasize the affective and empathetic attributes of excellent supervisors/mentors that are reflected in our data. Training and assessment should also incorporate structural frameworks and expectations for both one-on-one meetings and individual student learning goals and opportunities. Based on the training already being offered by the authors, we expect improvement in placement site supervision will be motivated through assessment, utilization of tools that measure student experience on these dimensions, and results that are shared with current and future supervisors/mentors for clarity in supervisor/mentor expectations and continued excellence in practice.

Appendix A

Qualtrics Student Survey Questions

Q1: How frequently do you meet with your supervisor/mentor?

- a. Weekly
- b. Bi-weekly
- c. Monthly
- d. Less than monthly

Q2: On average, how long are each of your meetings?

- a. Less than 30 minutes
- b. 30 minutes
- c. 60 minutes
- d. 90 minutes
- e. More than 90 minutes

Q3: My field education supervisor/mentor models excellence in ministry:⁵

- a. Has relevant experience and/or expertise that is evident in ministry and/or leadership

- b. Possesses a passion for what they do that is evident in ministry and/or leadership
- c. Engages in effective practices of leadership in their contexts (e.g., visioning, preaching, conflict management, listening, non-anxious presence, etc.)
- d. Cultivates a healthy lifestyle through holistic care of body, mind, and spirit
- e. Exhibits joy in their vocational path
- f. Reflects intentionally on self and relationships within their particular context

Q4: Name other ways your supervisor/mentor models excellence in ministry.

Q5: My field education supervisor/mentor exhibits excellence in mentoring:⁵

- a. Provides meaningful learning experiences on-site
- b. Intentionally designs, and invites me into, opportunities relevant to my formational needs
- c. Engages me as an adult learner by holding me accountable for my own learning and formation
- d. Invites and encourages me to ask questions in order to share observations and concerns
- e. Asks important questions and offers encouragement, support, and relevant feedback in supervisory sessions
- f. Reflects theologically and/or spiritually with me on the practice of ministry and/or leadership

Q6: Name other ways your supervisor/mentor exhibits excellence in mentoring.

Q7: Based on your experience, what are the top three most important personal characteristics or attributes of an excellent supervisor/mentor?

Q8: Based on your experience, what specific practices or activities on the part of your supervisor/mentor contribute the most to their effectiveness?

- Q9: Based on your experience, what are the most important activities in which you engage in your one-on-one meeting times with your supervisor/mentor?
- Q10: What else is important for us to know about your experience of supervision/mentoring?

NOTES

- 1 Comments were gathered by our team during student focus groups.
- 2 The timing of the study did not allow for the inclusion of focus groups from Church Divinity School of the Pacific.
- 3 Student reports coincide with research findings on clergy health: <https://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives/clergy-health-initiative/learning> accessed October 24, 2019.
- 4 Other words or phrases mentioned one or more times included responsive, accompanied me, safe place, answered questions, asked questions, regular and clear communication, structure, and shared their personal story.
- 5 These questions were rated on a Likert scale of 1 to 7, with response options as follows: strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.