

## Supervising *For & In* the Future

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### Supervising for the Future

What does it mean to supervise someone in the *present* with the *future* in mind? Is it possible to supervise someone *now* while considering their *later* self? I ponder these questions as I approach supervision with an understanding that not all supervisees will stay with me forever (and nor I, with them). I remember being told by a supervisor long ago, “I am preparing you for your next job.” At the time, I did not understand what they meant, and part of the sentiment felt as though they were pushing me out and away. It took time and reflection to realize they were not. Instead, they were trying to build me up in a way that not only added to the work I was doing in the moment, but also the work I would do later in my career — here, I was developing new skills, gaining new experiences, and engaging with different ideas within and around my work.

We should all be supervising folx for the(ir) next job.

So, how do I supervise someone in preparation for their next job? Furthermore, how do I supervise someone in preparation for their next job, *and* not appear as though I am pushing them out or away? Currently, I directly supervise five people, several of whom supervise people under them. A big part of my job involves engaging with them beyond their prescribed work tasks. For example, supervising for the future requires understanding your supervisee’s strengths, and also the areas where they could, and might, thrive.

To do so, I have learned good supervision is helping your supervisees take advantage of their institution or organization. For example, in a position of power, you are a gatekeeper to opportunities and access for your supervisee. Here, one can engage with supervisees on things like flex-hours, teleworking opportunities, or professional development that does not require them to use their time off/away (or is solely housed in student affairs/services entities). You do your supervisee a disservice by seeing them as a worker-only. This includes letting them try new things within the functionality of their role.

In 2014, I wrote a blog post about a “young-professional sabbatical.” This concept still resonates with me today. As a young professional at the time (though, I would argue I am still young), I shared the following sentiments:

But what if, within the first five years as a professional, individuals were allowed 2-3 months (or even 2-3 weeks) to go and do something [impactful] within another functional area? Bold, I know. But this is the internship concept, right? Why reserve internships solely for those individuals who are still studying? If we can all get to a place where lifelong learning is accepted and executed, what would be stopping us from allowing young professionals to spread their wings in a facilitated and boomerang-like manner?

“Because there is still a job to be done, Michael,” you might assert.

And, “Because an individual’s development takes a backseat to organizational objectives,” you might further argue.

Practically, as a supervisor, I get the pushback. There *is* still a job to be done. And organizational objectives do not always align with personal wants or needs (as a former supervisor once told me). But what if there was some way to reimagine what that looks like — how might you give someone an internship or sabbatical to flirt with other functional areas in a way that allowed them to better understand the field, and also their job in relation to those areas? Later in my post, I charge supervisees or supervisors with a (radical) idea:

To the supervisees ... My charge today is to pause on your current “now.” Reach out to your supervisor. Engage in a conversation about learning new tricks and seeing new sites. Dream up other tools for your kit, and draft a one or two month plan which will allow you to be truly drenched in, “learning.” The least your supervisor can do is say no, and at that point, you’ve lost nothing. [S]how them this post, and ask for their thoughts — if they think this is [impossible], agree and make some snide remark about how bogus I am. If they’re down, have a plan, a dream-session, a moment to think, feel, and believe, “what if.” Gather new skills and frame those needs in a way that benefits the students and communities you are serving. Everybody can win here.

To the supervisors ... Find a way to help make this happen for your employees. Try a summer pause for your people, a winter exchange with another department, campus, or organization (or whatever variation exists for those in whatever field or area of employment), or some way to professionally develop those serving under you. If anything, carve a “go do whatever, learn, see, inquire, dream” opportunity. Remember, you don’t know it all, and sometimes others can help your people be a better person for you and for your community. And finally, make sure you are modeling the way. Be

learning, seeing, doing, engaging, and let your people see this, too, should be a value of theirs while working for/with you.

So, is this doable or possible in all contexts? Probably not. Are there ways to simulate this type of opportunity to help develop and grow your supervisees to further understand their interests and career objectives? Yes. This might even mean helping them *out* of fraternity/sorority life and *into* another student affairs functional area. This might even mean helping them see fraternity/sorority life is multidimensional and multilayered — there are myriad functionalities within the functionality of fraternity/sorority life. You can help open those doors for your supervisee. Consider how the AFA Core Competencies manual and professional development planning guide can help draw some of those possibilities out, and establish a clearer connection to the organization’s needs and the individual’s needs (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2018).

### **Supervising in the Future**

Acknowledging people will come and go from institutions and organizations (sometimes with your help), I often wonder, do we have an obligation to the people we once supervised? What becomes of our role long after the supervisee has left? And who are we to those people? Simply a past supervisor? A mentor? A reference? A hallway-dodge at AFA?

Before unpacking some of this, I should disclaim: I know there are individuals who might leave a position or supervisor and not look back, and they never want to see or interact with them again. Workplace abuse, trauma, and a chilly climate for women, people of color, and queer folk might contribute to a space where your supervisor has no future with you. And it is absolutely okay to move away from that supervisor and not want to or have to look back.

Aside from these instances, supervision can be a partnership lasting, in a sense, forever. I have two past supervisees who remind me of this constantly. Whether it is an in-job reflection, or a future job prospect, I think an honest availability and semi-regular engagement with past supervisees allows you to continue nurturing and supporting them in ways that look different than when they were under the same organization structure as you. And in some instances, you might be able to advise them differently than if you were still supervising them.

This idea makes me think a lot about working with graduate students, and especially as they learn self-authorship. Something I’m quick to remember and remind graduate students about is self-authorship is a long-term journey. Self-authorship is not a fully-developed existence upon one’s undergraduate college graduation (“I graduated, I’m self-authored!”). While self-

authorship is a developmental process often discussed in relation to student development in college, students are adults who continue developing long after they leave institutions for higher education. In Baxter Magolda's longitudinal study, participants began trusting their internal voice, built an internal foundation, and secured internal commitments as part of their development process from young adulthood and beyond (Baxter Magolda, 2009).

Specifically, I am drawn to crossroads, which exist at the point where an individual's internal voice begins to emerge (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Crossroads are developmental moments requiring an individual to evaluate and interpret what is happening around them through a new perspective, prompting them to reexamine their previously held beliefs and assumptions (Baxter Magolda, 2009). For Baxter Magolda's participants, crossroads mostly occurred after college, as a result of disappointing relationships, unsatisfying careers, health crises, or the internal realization they must construct their own belief system (Baxter Magolda, 2009). As supervisors, we should pay close attention to this finding.

Our supervisees are experiencing crossroads and life circumstances during their time with us, and beyond. In Baxter Magolda's (2009) longitudinal study, some, often in their 30s, faced dissonance, and additional crossroads, involved with enacting their newly espoused beliefs, values, and ideologies, whereas for others, new commitments became second nature. If we believe this to be the case, we should aspire for some sense of understanding for those who we are supervising shortly after undergraduate and graduate college graduation. This might mean past supervisees will come back to you for advice or support or guidance, and just as their perspectives have evolved and developed, so should yours. The way you engage with them about their learning and development will look different in later years, and certainly after you are no longer supervising them ("Oh, things weren't as bad as I thought," or, "I finally found a place I felt comfortable and safe," or, "I needed a change of environment to impact my experience," and so on, might be later reflections of your past supervisees).

Years ago, I had a supervisee with whom I would take time to pause in our one-on-one meetings. We would listen to music in silence, center ourselves, and even at times would lay on the floor as part of a meditation practice. I would later tell this supervisee they would never find a supervisor as weird as me, but also unfortunately, they might never find a supervisor who knows how to meet them in that place, sometimes in music, and sometimes on the floor. Whether they did or did not, they are certainly now in a different place of supervision than they once were — same supervisee, different state of being supervised. And still, I engage in reference calls, do recommendation letters, and consult with them on current happenings with that memory in mind. They were growing, and continue to grow.

As I think about this experience, I draw on the principles of the AFA Core Competencies model (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2018). Thinking about the *future* is a big part of establishing competence in the profession (needs, issues, and personnel all change over time). As a result, thinking about someone in the future is also about understanding they might still be contributing the field — this is preparing them for the future *of* the field and *their* future *in* the field.

Part of supervision, like working with students, is meeting your people where they are at. Sometimes, that includes in the future, advising and guiding them to think forward in their career. Other times, that involves a later reflection, and together thinking about the ways they have developed over time; thus making them a (re)new(ed) professional in their current, away from you, existence. And sometimes it means on the floor, unconventionally, with the music on, and peace in the space. Either way, you hold the responsibility and opportunity to make a difference, now, later, and again and again in the future.

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