

Excellence in Supervision: Training Site Supervisors/Mentors

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the Excellence in Supervision project, the training site supervisors/mentors committee focused on gathering data on the types of training and support provided to site supervisors/mentors by Association of Theological Field Education (ATFE) schools.¹ The specific mandate for this committee was to survey ATFE schools to determine the types of training provided for on-site supervisors/mentors and where this training was situated in their academic programs.

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The committee began by developing the survey and clarifying the nomenclature used in order to distill out the training specific to on-site supervisors/mentors. The decision was made to utilize *field education* rather than *contextual education* or other terms since our guild is the Association for Theological Field Education. A distinction was also made between on-site supervisors/mentors and other mentors such as theological reflection faculty, lay committees, and field education supervisors within the academic setting. This distinction allowed the committee to narrow responses to those pertinent to on-site supervisor training.

With the survey developed, the committee then began to invite participation. One hundred and eighty-two member schools had at least one contact email address, and the committee determined that email would be the mode of invitation for participation. Several schools had more than one ATFE member on the membership email database; surveys were sent to all email addresses in those data sets. Thus, 200 representatives from 182 schools were invited to participate in the survey. Two waves of survey invitations were sent, one in May 2019 and a second wave in September 2019. In total, 48 ATFE members participated.

Based on the first wave of results, the committee determined that an additional data set that would be important to review was a sampling of the handbooks that schools employed in their training of site supervisors/mentors. The committee's findings below include a review of those materials. In retrospect, it was apparent that the survey was not a perfect tool and that, despite our best intentions, some of the nomenclature was unclear (such as distinctions between reflection as a method of training for site supervisors/mentors and training supervisors to do reflection with students), but important insights were still gathered from the results. The following is a summary of the important findings.

TYPES AND TIMES OF TRAINING OFFERED

The first area of focus was the varieties of training provided. Table 1 indicates that a high percentage of survey respondents relied upon manuals or handbooks (87 percent) and physical orientation (on campus) (71 percent) as primary means for training, followed by approximately half of the programs utilizing online resources and printed resources. Site supervisor reflection times (22 percent), reflection options (20 percent), and retreats (6 per-

cent) were also employed. In addition, programs were allowed to add other options not listed above. Four programs noted they offered virtual training, and two named site visits as training opportunities. Several individual programs noted the use of workshops, one-on-one consults, and phone or email as means of training. One program provided a free certificate in mentoring.

Table 1. Types of training provided for on-site supervisors/mentors by field education programs. Note: Figures and percentages are based upon Association of Theological Field Educators programs surveyed.

Type of Training	Number of Programs	Percentage of Programs
Online Resources	24	48%
Physical Orientation (on campus)	35	71%
Manuals/Handbooks	43	87%
Site Supervisor Reflection Times	11	22%
Printed Resources/Theological	24	48%
Reflection Options	10	20%
Retreats	3	6%

For programs that gathered participants together, many (30 percent) favored orientation at the beginning of the school year while others (35 percent) tried multiple times per semester, in the summer, or at other times. Training times varied from one hour to a half-day or a series of ninety-minute sessions throughout the semester. Some programs required different amounts of preparation for veteran and new mentors, and one program raised a question about evaluation practices. Overall, the wide range of approaches indicates the great amount of creativity put into designing training curricula and events to resource specific program needs and to meet site supervisors/mentors where they serve.

Additional comments included the importance of staying in contact with supervisors/mentors through various means of correspondence (e.g., email, Zoom conference calls, site visits), additional online and on-campus training opportunities, and perks such as offering supervisors/mentors the ability to audit a course at no charge or use on-campus overnight accommodations for a personal retreat. Due to the significance of manuals/handbooks (87 percent) in training identified in both the survey section on “ad-

ditional comments” and in response to the questions summarized above, a sampling of these is explored in the next section.

REVIEW OF HANDBOOKS/MANUALS

Eighty-seven percent of the survey respondents indicated that site supervisors/mentors were provided with a handbook, manual, or other written materials. A review of a selection of collected handbooks indicated that several components were typically included in the supervisor/mentor handbook:

- guidance regarding weekly meetings with student interns/ministers;
- characteristics of strong mentoring and mentor models;
- the development of a learning/serving agreement or covenant created by the mentor and student intern;
- reference to orientation and/or training, whether in person and on campus or virtually;
- ongoing support of the supervisor/mentor by the placement office; and
- guidelines for student intern and site placement evaluations—some included samples of completed evaluations.

Other components that appeared most regularly in manuals distributed by seminaries embedded in a university system included human rights and/or Title IX policies and reporting procedures.

Guidelines for the mentor/intern meetings (most mandated weekly sessions) ranged from a strong leaning toward theological reflection, scriptural foundations, and prayer to a much stronger emphasis on professional development, critical feedback, and student self-awareness. Also, the relationship between the site supervisor/mentor and the placement office seemed to vary widely, from very intensive contact and regular meetings or class sessions to contact only as necessary beyond the initial orientation or training. Three of the manuals had detailed descriptions of the process of terminating a field placement prior to the completion of the expected duration of the placement and of the supervisor/mentor’s role in that process. Several also had clear definitions of the qualifications of the supervisor/mentor, including length of professional/ministerial service, ordination, and academic credentials.

Two of the manuals reviewed stated that site supervisors/mentors received financial remuneration; several noted other benefits such as free auditing of classes, use of the seminary library or other seminary resources, continuing education units, and spiritual retreats. In the survey, 25 percent responded that they compensated their site supervisors/mentors with course audits and 25 percent responded that they offered library privileges. It would be interesting to further explore whether or how these financial and other benefits influenced the quality of the mentoring in the placement site or compelled site supervisors/mentors to be more attentive to trainings and further professional development through their relationship with the seminary and the student intern.

SITE VISITS AS TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to the question on types of training provided, as noted in the first section of this article, the survey also included a section specifically focused on site visits. Site visits can be important training opportunities for site supervisors/mentors and can offer additional time to build strong collaborative relationships. Although some schools noted that students selected their own sites, the majority of the schools played a role in the selection and training of sites and site supervisors. Seventy-two percent responded that they did in-person site visits, and 30 percent noted that they conducted virtual site visits. Other comments in this area were "We visit only in the case of emergencies" or "We do a sampling of on-site visits each year, we do not visit all students at all sites." Some noted concerns that having sites around the country or world prohibited site visits, and others noted that recent budget cuts or lack of time impeded their ability to do site visits. Another group of comments were from respondents who acknowledged that site visits were important and that this survey had served as a good reminder to take site visits more seriously at them again.

An additional question related to site visits asked about the nature of the setting for field placements. Eighty-nine percent of respondents said they placed students in teaching parishes. The same percentage also utilized placements in chaplaincy work, which included hospitals and prison chaplaincy. Eighty-one percent placed students in social justice or other non-profit sites. And 68 percent noted that they utilized placements in educational institutions. The diversity of placement settings is reflected in the

comments in the following section that focus on the need to develop training materials for a broader variety of placements.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS AROUND OBSTACLES OR FRUSTRATIONS AND CREATIVE APPROACHES TO TRAINING

Recognizing the diversity of schools and the training they provide, the survey included multiple open-ended questions inviting additional comments. The following comments are an attempt to summarize these comments in two broad categories: obstacles or frustrations and unique or creative approaches to training. Participants were invited to name the obstacles or frustrations they experienced in organizing training for site supervisors/mentors. This question had the most open-ended responses, with thirty-one comments from the forty-eight respondents (65 percent). The bulk of the frustrations fell under two broad categories: lack of time (twenty respondents) and lack of commitment (ten respondents). In the area of lack of time, thirteen of the twenty respondents noted that their supervisors/mentors had the desire to participate in training but that it was hard finding a time or format that worked. On the other hand, seven comments noted that they struggled with supervisors/mentors who had no desire to make the time to participate. Thus, a lack of commitment was partially manifested in a lack of time. In the specific comments related to lack of commitment, responses were evenly split between frustrations with sites that were only looking for “free labor” and site supervisors/mentors who were not committed to the collaborative teaching aspect of supervision. One example of a response in this category is as follows: “The on-sites model their supervision as they experienced it in seminary decades ago. Adult education principles are not on the radar.”

Some additional frustrations included supervisor/mentor turnover and concerns regarding geographic, cultural, or language limitations. A couple of responses expressed a concern about the limitations of written material for training—either limitations in language (only offered in English) or limitations in focus (only focused on congregational settings). Several respondents noted demands on their own time as an issue, particularly when it came to finding suitable training materials or adapting training materials that did not fit their settings.

These responses brought focus to the process of selecting sites. Recognizing that this process is different for each institution, it might be important to offer clarity around outcomes for student learning and note the ways site supervisor training helps in meeting those outcomes. Additionally, the comments brought to light the reality that good supervisors/mentors are very busy and, despite their desire, participation in institutional activities is still low. All of these comments speak to the reality that clarity around learning outcomes and the role site supervisors/mentors play in the education of students are important components of any site supervisor/mentor training. Creativity in modes of training is important for integrating the content into supervisor/mentor relationships.

Survey respondents were also invited to provide additional comments or suggestions concerning how they offer training to their site supervisors/mentors. The array of unique concepts and creative responses is about as diverse as are the schools involved in theological field education. The survey responses noted that the process of selecting supervisors/mentors impacts the type of training site supervisors/mentors accept. In some settings, students independently select their site supervisor/mentor, and in others, the site supervisor/mentor is selected and vetted by the director of field education. Many of the respondents recruit local alumni to serve as site supervisors/mentors, providing a deeper connection with the seminary as well as ensuring that the supervisor/mentor is familiar with the theological field education process used by the seminary. Most field education offices maintain close contact with site supervisors/mentors throughout the academic year through trainings, monthly emails, site visits, personal contact, and telephone contact.

Some respondents noted the increasing number of nontraditional settings for field education, which raised the concern of utilizing site supervisors/mentors who are not theologically educated. One comment highlighted this concern: "How can we assure that non-traditional settings maintain theological significance?" One respondent wondered what is theological about field education in a nontraditional setting. Another highlighted the wide variety of non-congregational settings current students are choosing. Many of the resources specifically developed for theological field education are congregational ministry normative, thus limiting their relevance for those serving in nontraditional contexts. Nearly all of the survey respondents indicated that nontraditional ministry sites are valued and utilized as

field placement options. Developing training materials for site supervisors/mentors in non-congregational settings as well as developing student understanding of their ministerial identity in diverse settings are two important areas for continued research and development.

Concern about the value institutions place on theological education was also noted. One respondent indicated, "We really have only one ministry professor (myself) teaching a full load, mentoring our new students in spiritual formation, and also running the supervised ministry program." After serving as director and full-time faculty member for twenty-five years, a respondent's faculty position was discontinued. This respondent encouraged the group to share with seminary leadership the importance of theological field education, specifically the value of the field education director serving as a regular faculty member. As noted regarding site visits, budget cuts and time constraints also impact field educators' sense of the value their institutions place on field education. Accrediting bodies such as the Association of Theological Schools play an important role in naming field education as critical to a ministerial degree.

Field education departments vary significantly based on the size of the institution, number of students, denominational focus, and resources available. It is apparent that field education faculty are an innovative and creative group, committed to providing effective and formative teaching and learning as students serve in a variety of settings both in the church and in community ministries.

CONCLUSION

This project and survey provided a window into the programs of a broad spectrum of institutions and field educators. Field educators are a caring and committed group of people focused on creatively meeting the needs of their students and site supervisors in a variety of ways. The context of field education is changing. There are new modalities in terms of locations around the world and in terms of placement settings moving from the traditional congregational settings to interreligious, nonprofit, for-profit, and secular settings. There are also new pressures on theological students to adapt to the changing demographics in the world around them. More and more students are graduating and taking on what is now termed "bivocational ministry," and theological field education is adapting to pre-

pare students for a variety of ministerial challenges in this type of ministry. This variety brings to the forefront the importance of site supervisor/mentor training and the critical need to offer such training in new and creative ways. Written materials in different languages, materials focused on training in diverse or bivocational realities, and even training in theological concepts for site supervisors/mentors themselves will be important areas for future research and development.

Of the training that is currently offered, it is clear that field educators work hard to ensure “buy-in” from site supervisors/mentors. They understand the importance of the collaborative teaching relationship that site supervisors/mentors play in the education and formation of the ministerial identity of their students, and they continuously reimagine how best to offer such training.

Two key areas surfaced related to this creative response: relationship building and handbooks. Field educators see building strong relationships with site supervisors/mentors as a critical piece of training. They build these relationships through regular communication over time and, if possible, in person. Training happens in written form, in site visits, in reflection, on retreat, or in community gatherings. When training is offered (in person or virtually), field educators attempt to offer these at intervals, times, and locales that are flexible and constantly reimaged in order to meet their site supervisors/mentors where they are with the goal of clarifying their role as collaborative teaching partners. Technology is also used as often as possible to augment relationship building.

The other key area that surfaced was the use of handbooks. Accreditation bodies such as the Association of Theological Schools state that schools should have written policies. The development of these policies into handbooks that offer a much larger scope of training material is the practice of the majority of the survey respondents. These are important training and communication devices that in some cases cover everything from guidance on student and site supervisor/mentor weekly meetings to Title IX policies and procedures for the termination of a site. Field educators who offer this resource to their site supervisors/mentors also find them important for accountability.

Finally, the willingness of field educators to collaborate among schools to share exceptional training materials is a gift. Field educators should not hesitate to reach out to colleagues at other schools for advice and support in

designing training materials and assessment tools or in developing regional opportunities for site supervisor/mentor training. Collaborative working groups could be more formalized to share resources and develop others as needed. The caucuses that already exist within ATFE by religious denominations provide some of this already, but working groups organized by regional cohorts or institutional modalities could also provide starting points for future collaboration. Overall, field educators see the importance of training site supervisors/mentors despite the changing demographics.

NOTES

- 1 Administrative assistance for the survey was provided by Antoine Porter of Drew Theological School.