The Importance of Mentoring in Fraternity/Sorority Advising: Mentoring vs. Supervising

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The concept of mentoring is a hot topic among graduate students and new professionals in fraternity/sorority advising. During graduate school and in the first few years of one's career, "find a mentor" is a recurring message, but unfortunately most of us do not know how to find a mentor. According to J. Sterling Livingston in Managing Individuals and Groups (1992), a young person's first manager is likely to be the most influential individual in that person's career. Livingston's (1992) research suggests that if supervisors are ineffective in developing the skills of younger employees, those employees set lower standards for themselves than their capabilities, their images of the field are impaired, and they will likely develop negative attitudes toward jobs, employers, and their careers.

Acting as a mentor is one of many responsibilities we can undertake during our careers. Despite its importance, the role of mentor is often viewed as just a title with very little responsibility. To be effective in developing a mentoring relationship that fosters growth and development for both parties, mentoring must be viewed as an act rather than a title.

In serving as a mentor, one might argue that we allow ourselves to be challenged, become better collaborators, and strengthen our ability to provide effective feedback. Creamer and Winston (1999) found that student affairs professionals are ineffective at providing feedback to those with whom they work. The inability to provide feedback can hinder our ability to be effective professionals. It is important for us to find ways to enhance these skills. By serving as mentors, we are able to experiment and develop our professional skills. If given the proper attention, the mentor-mentee relationship becomes a mutually beneficial partnership for those involved. The interaction between the mentor and mentee must be viewed primarily as a partnership that is mutually beneficial for both parties.

How We Grow as Professionals When We Mentor

The Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (2007) has adopted the Core Competencies for Excellence in the Profession that serve as guiding principles for effective professional practice in fraternity/sorority advising. Two of the competencies that relate to the theme of mentoring are "Educator" and "Advisor." As an "Educator," one should be able to apply development theory and foster understanding of the connection between what students are learning and their curricular lives. The "Advisor" competency involves providing experiential opportunities to enhance classroom learning and focuses on building relationships. Being a mentor helps individuals to develop skills as an educator and advisor.

Being a supervisor is not the same as being a mentor. These roles, although often effectively combined, are separate because they require a different type of relationship between two people. As a supervisor, your focus is on the responsibilities that are required for the job and on managing employees. A mentor provides guidance, counsel, challenge, and support to the mentee to help him/her become a better professional. Mentors also make certain that any applicable opportunities for learning are achieved. Certainly supervisors can also be mentors. This may be the best case scenario, but it is important to note that not all supervisors are equipped or suitable to serve as mentors. For example, within an office, the director may be the first person someone might go to when seeking mentorship, because there is a certain level of experience and skill associated with the position. However, another full-time staff person within or outside of the office may be able to provide a more beneficial mentorship based on that individual's experiences, availability, or the ability to relate more directly to the mentee's needs.

As mentors, individuals are able to fine tune their skills as an evaluator; practice the act of effectively communicating expectations, and seek out and develop resources for mentees. They also hone their ability to build rapport and foster an effective learning environment. The mentor relationship can also enhance people personally through the exploration of values that occurs as one gains a partner who can hold them accountable to espoused values.

Setting a Successful Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The mentor-mentee relationship takes work. It is a relationship that has an ebb and flow and progresses over time when properly attended. Setting expectations is always the first step as it lays the foundation upon which one can build. When setting expectations, it is important to establish how often you will meet, how often you will receive feedback, and what you especially hope to gain from this partnership. It is important to clearly communicate and identify the parameters of the partnership early on to ensure both individuals mutually agree upon the expectations. Mentors need to also take time to evaluate the mentee's level of competence and skill in order to adapt their mentoring style to fit the needs of the mentee.

Determining what each needs from the mentor-mentee relationship can be difficult; to help overcome that, building rapport will be essential to establish trust. You should take time to get to know one another, learn each other's work and communication styles, hobbies, interests, and future plans. A great mentoring relationship is one grounded in trust; however, you cannot completely trust each other if you do not build the relationship beyond what you do at work.

Mentors must also be able to recognize and confront problems within the relationship. Being able to notice non-verbal cues and/or surface level conversation is important; these details may signify the level of
comfort the mentee has within the relationship. Diagnosing and dealing with issues from the start is also extremely important. Unless proper attention is given to these issues, the outcome of the mentor-mentee relationship could be more detrimental than helpful.

**Why Mentor?**
Both being a mentor and having a mentor are two of the best roles you can fill within the fraternity/sorority profession. The two authors of this article feel quite lucky that they have been able to establish a successful mentoring relationship. Below are testimonials from both the mentor and mentee perspectives on why mentoring is essential in our field:

**From a mentor standpoint:** *Our relationship has truly helped me develop into a better professional. While I have mentored others before, I never realized the impact a mentor could have on an individual. Being a mentor has helped me better clarify my values. It has also made me think about the type of professional I am and the skills I need to further develop. It has allowed me to provide challenges and support in authentic ways without being worried about whether I will be resented later or whether I will be seen as someone who is a "softy." It has also provided me someone of whom to be proud. It hasn't always been easy and sometimes when you see someone take steps you wish he/she hadn't, you question whether you've done your job as a mentor. What is important, though, are the developmental conversations that you have after these steps. It is truly one of the best experiences I have had as a professional.*

**From the mentee standpoint:** *The relationship I developed with my mentor as a graduate student helped me in ways I never dreamed it would. The level of support and guidance gave me the confidence that I often lacked. I was able to lean on my mentor in times where I was afraid to take that next step, especially when I was unsure where that next step was going to lead me. Relationships like these are not always easy, but those challenges brought about some of the most enlightening moments. To have one's views challenged compels us to examine our thought process and look at why we think the way we do. It also helps us to become more accepting of others’ views, which is necessary in any good work environment. I have continued having these developmental moments with my mentor into my professional career, having sought guidance, support, and clarification on many topics. I know that my mentor has my best interest at heart, which motivates me to continue the work I do.*

In order to make our field more developmental and congruent with our professed values, we need to take time and make mentor-mentee relationships a priority. While one can recognize that as fraternity/sorority professionals we have a lot of work to do on a daily basis, the impact that experiencing mentoring as a mentor, mentee, or both can have on individuals helps us to recharge. Find someone to mentor or be mentored by and take the relationship seriously. You will be a better professional for it.

**References**
