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## 800 Miles in Transition

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## 800 Miles in Transition

Lexi Kane & Cristina Vega

*Currently we find ourselves in a moment of transition, what initially seemed like a match made in graduate assistantship /supervisor bliss would quickly become 800 miles of change. Transitions are often two fold - full of hope and grief as we long for all that is next and reflect on the things we left behind. However, our shared experience of how it feels to be BIPOC in predominantly white institutions, and how identity plays a role in either assimilating or resisting the structure at hand is what led to our dynamic relationship.*

As people of color at predominantly white institutions, we've found that community has been instrumental in our success in the ways we are able to show up as ourselves partially because those who came before us created space, and partially because we continue to advocate for ourselves and those who will come next. For Cristina Vega (Vega), and Lexi Kane (Lexi) their narrative is one that started out as supervisor/supervisee and has, along with distance, transitioned into something more holistic. We, Lexi and Vega, hope that our truth serves as a reminder that good relationships include vulnerability as well as levity, that the space in which relationships form can transcend its initial structure, and that our paths however planned will continue to shift.

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*Lexi Kane (she/her) is a M.Ed. candidate in the University of Vermont Higher Education and Student Affairs program. Lexi grew up in North Kingstown, Rhode Island, and holds a B.A. in Drama with minors in Musical Theatre, English, and Public Relations from Hofstra University. She hopes to challenge her audiences to dream big and challenge the present.*

*Cristina Vega, or Vega is currently the Associate Director for Chapter Services at The Ohio State University. While Vega has spent most of her life on the east coast enjoying lakes and the ocean, she's looking forward to exploring the Midwest and all Ohio has to offer. Before joining OSU, Vega served as the Assistant Director for Fraternity and Sorority Life at the University of Vermont. It was at UVM where she developed her skills in restorative practices, and community building. She has led trainings and created programs related to inclusion for students and staff. Vega has a certificate in Design Thinking from IDEO and has attended the Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI). She is also trained in Restorative Practice, Sustained Dialogue, and the Intergroup Dialogue program. Vega believes in deeply collaborative and synergistic relationships with students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community stakeholders.*

**Vega:** I remember meeting Lexi during interviews. I reflected on my time as a practicum student for Fraternity and Sorority Life. The practicum experience connected me to graduate students before me and later to those who came after. My practicum supervisor, Dr. Kim, referred to her grads as our FSL family. I initially didn't understand what she meant, even when she shared a living document of all the grads she'd supervised during her time at UVM. This document was a physical piece of their legacy, it included the projects they worked on and where they work and is updated annually. Initially, the document seemed like a simple list of names, but throughout the years I have had the opportunity to meet these alums, mainly because they've stayed connected to Dr. Kim; that's her legacy.

When I returned to UVM in 2018 I knew I wanted to continue her legacy. I knew then, as I still know now, there are people who will support you. I wanted to be able to create a similar environment even though the pandemic emphasized loneliness and individuality, I wanted to believe we could also offer connection and camaraderie. As we reflect on our time together the nostalgia weaves its way through to the beginning - a cold morning in February.

**Lexi:** When I first met Vega during our Interview Days, I was excited about coming into a space that I had some confidence in. Of course, the normal feelings of my imposter syndrome shone through, but I was immediately relieved to see another woman of color on the screen that morning. This was a new experience for me- I had never worked with a BIPOC supervisor before, and the potential power that our partnership could create felt exciting to me. When I left the conversation, I knew that I would be extremely lucky if I was offered this assistantship.

I continuously grew excited and nervous as the start of my job grew closer. Would I live up to the expectations that Vega had for me? Would I even be qualified enough to work in this position? As these thoughts were running through my head, I met with Vega once more before my move to Vermont. I was so extremely nervous that I came with a list of questions, which I eventually learned is how I best work in new environments. Our conversation was refreshing- I had already felt so connected to someone I had not seen in person before, so I could only imagine how dynamic our supervision would be in person. It seemed like I had finally found a mentor and someone I could confide in who may have shared similar identity struggles

and joys. A tell-tale sign that I knew I was on the right path was that after ending our Facetime call before my big move, she immediately sent me a list of coffee shops to try in Burlington. At that moment, I knew that this experience and mentorship could be a great start in my personal identity journey.

**Vega:** Coffee had become the language by which we initially learned to communicate. The start of our relationship included sharing coffee favorites, meetings off campus at various coffee spots, and alternating coffee pick-me-ups. However, since then we've learned that it takes a little more than coffee to hold us together in these moments of transition. From the grad playlist I shared during interviews to sharing some of my favorite local places, I wanted Lexi to feel planted so she could create her own roots in Vermont. I daydreamed about inviting Lexi to her first Women of Color Celebration - an event that transformed how I saw myself in the context of higher education/ UVM. My first WOC celebration was planned by one of my cohort members, Lizzy, as part of her practicum. I remember walking in and being met with a sea of hugs and good food – what would now be strange to do during this pandemic.

**Lexi:** On my first day of work, I carried what I consider to be my security iced coffee in my hand, ready to face whatever this day would throw at me. Walking into the office was an experience I was not quite prepared for. After visiting HESA Visit Days virtually and seeing how diverse our candidate pool was, I thought that there would be a great number of BIPOC individuals working within the institution. My thoughts were quickly diminished. This realization instantly put a greater emphasis on the mentor relationship I was hoping to form with Vega. I wonder if she could sense it too, because she started to help me form connections to other individuals and resources on campus who had made an impact on her UVM career thus far. Forming those connections had been beneficial, and still aid me in my work currently. She was helping to pave the way for me to succeed and making my struggle as a woman of color a little less difficult.

**Vega:** I celebrated another opportunity to supervise a person of color. As I envisioned the next two years with Lexi, moments of laughter during recruitment, or adventures to local coffee shops. I was also struggling in my role in ways I've never struggled with professionally. The last academic year proved to be exhausting, arduous, and heavy. One afternoon, after a

particularly tough day I applied to a different job and in a few short weeks I received an offer that was full of hope. Hope. I too was seeking camaraderie and purpose, and after much discernment I had to say yes. However, this meant I would not be working with Lexi in the ways I had wished.

My time with Lexi shrunk immensely and all I wanted was to give her as much of me as I could before I left. What I realized in this process is that it was even more important to make sure that she knew that however lonely the next couple of weeks or months would feel, there are many who want to see her succeed, and many who would lend a helping hand. Every meeting I had with Lexi included connecting her to others on campus, nearby alum, or to people who would answer a call - often intertwined with a story or two. Our time together flew by too quickly.

**Lexi:** When I found out that Vega was leaving, I went to get what would help me process in that moment: an iced coffee. It felt grounding and reassuring at the same time and helped bring me back to a place where I could process what I was feeling. In looking back on these initial moments, I was feeling a sense of loss and grief. I was losing a major reason as to why I chose this institution. I was losing a mentor, a colleague, and someone who cared about me as an individual. I was losing one half of what I had hoped to be the “dream team”. I was also losing another BIPOC individual within my predominantly white office. This collective sense of loss weighed on me and continues to weigh on me. It has made me introspective in how I choose to show up in spaces that I sometimes don’t feel brave enough to be in. It has also allowed me to assess the strength I have, even as a team of one at the moment.

Support looks different in many ways now, and I am coming to terms with how support can serve me best in these moments. These moments have allowed me to understand that self-advocacy is what helps me to persist and continue. My presence and perseverance have never been stronger. By embracing these new challenges, I have learned a great amount about my self-worth and my voice, and I owe it to the experiences that I have had with Vega. I know she is there to celebrate my moments of joy and talk me through my difficult moments, and we will do it together with a cup of coffee in hand.

**Vega:** Leaving UVM was incredibly difficult, and if I am being honest, it is still hard. Every conversation with Lexi includes all the ways in which I should have left her more transition information, or me wishing I was there to intervene, or even just being able to offer a listening ear in-person. But my role looks different now, less about tasks and more about the big picture. I am most invested in who Lexi is and who she is becoming.

Much of our conversations these days happen via text or brief facetime calls in-between meetings or class. Nevertheless, I am so thankful for the ways in which I still get to watch as she forges new relationships, affirm her in this work, and best of all - bear witness as she finds strength in her own voice.

**Lexi:** After writing and crafting this piece, I feel as though it has been my own cathartic journey in finding peace with a journey that felt so definitive in its ending. I've been able to form a new relationship with Vega and bypass the supervisor/supervisee relationship into one that feels more holistic. It fills my cup to know that someone is out there, however far away, and truly has my best interests at heart. Although it might not have been the transition notes or Instagram passwords I needed, it is the compassion and care that shows how powerful relationships can be, however short the time spent together.

We've learned that while we may no longer have a traditional supervision relationship, we've gained something more dynamic: the supervision/mentorship experience can be resistance in its own way, particularly as women of color. It has transformed into moments of joy, through laughter at chaos, or through three-hour zoom meetings while we write. These little pockets of time have shown us that we, as people, can grow in community with each other even through distance. We hope that you have found yourself within this narrative and find comfort in the fact that the torch is being passed, one woman of color at a time.