

A Worthwhile Investment

The Synergistic Supervision of Graduate Assistants in Student Affairs at
Ohio University



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Introduction

It should come as no surprise that graduate students depend upon their assistantship supervisors for guidance and support during their transition from an undergraduate student to a graduate student and then through their graduate program. According to some researchers, “no relationship holds greater natural potential to influence self-image, career satisfaction, and professional development than the relationship with a supervisor” (Harned & Murphy, 1998).

Additionally, supervising graduate students as soon-to-be student affairs professionals assists in maintaining and advancing the field. As entry-level student affairs professionals often have the most student contact, it is imperative that new professionals receive effective supervision to guide their practice and to encourage not only their development and growth, but also that of the field (Barham & Winston, 2006; Cliente, et al., 2006; Shupp & Arminio, 2012).

Are we prepared to be effective supervisors of graduate assistants? Many student affairs professionals have never received supervision training. In fact, Harned & Murphy (1998) state that “there may be few organizations as deprived of traditional managerial, supervisory training, and development protocols as colleges and universities.” Since the field of student affairs is built upon student development theory, it would be a natural connection to view supervision as a developmental process. With that developmental lens in place, we must ensure that graduate students are receiving the best supervision possible, that they are being guided into the profession and not just guided in their daily, job-related tasks. We need to resist the temptation to just hand work to the students and expect them to be immediately productive. Spending time making a commitment to developmental supervision is a worthwhile investment.

The Division of Student Affairs values graduate assistants as emerging professionals and believes it is our division’s responsibility to support their professional growth. We have a long-standing partnership with the College Student Personnel and Higher Education programs in the Patton College of Education that includes a commitment to provide a meaningful assistantship experience that inter-relates classroom and practical learning.

Supervision is the “lynchpin” of student affairs staffing practices; without supervision, it would be nearly impossible to sustain a work force capable of providing effective programs and services to students (Winston & Creamer, 1997). This document serves as a guide to those who supervise graduate assistants within Ohio University’s College Student Personnel program within the Patton College of Education. It includes definitions, relevant research information, and action suggestions for cultivating an effective supervisory relationship.

“The quality of educational practice is directly related to the creativity and quality of the performance of the people who conduct the work of the institution.”

— Winston & Creamer

Graduate Students & Supervision

Based upon the literature, we can ascertain a few things about graduate students and supervision. First, even before beginning their assistantships, graduate students, like other individuals drawn to fields of human development, expect to have a supervisor who is both nurturing and caring. In fact, it is not uncommon for graduate students to anticipate being “apprenticed to their supervisors,” and plan to rely solely upon their immediate supervisors for guidance, support in making decisions, and assistance in solving problems (Harned & Murphy, 1998).

Second, graduate students likely have a wide variety of WANTS when it comes to supervision (Shupp & Arminio, 2012; Winston & Hirt, 2003; Barham & Winston, 2006):

- Supervision that is intentional and tailored to their unique needs
- On-going and consistent feedback via informal means and formal evaluations
- Professional development opportunities and developmental support
- Consistent attention and treatment that has a professional focus and involves guidance, teaching, and modeling appropriate behavior
- A supervisor who is both accessible and approachable and willing to engage in open and frequent communication
- Opportunities to express frustrations in a safe environment and unconditional support
- A personal, meaningful relationship with a supervisor
- Demonstrated trust

Third, graduate students likely have six professional development NEEDS (Ciente, et al., 2006):

- Receiving adequate support
- Understanding job expectations
- Fostering student learning
- Enhancing supervision skills
- Developing multicultural competencies
- Moving up in the field of student affairs

Finally, there are four main CONCERNS that soon-to-be professionals may experience (Ciente, et al., 2006):

- Making the transition from an undergraduate student to a graduate student
- Clarifying job expectations
- Establishing a relationship with a mentor
- Understanding organizational culture

“ The literature demonstrates that entry-level staff members need seasoned supervisors to make sense of work experiences and to create teachable moments from which the new professional can learn. ”

— Shupp & Armino

Defining Supervision

Supervision is “one of the most complex activities that student affairs professionals are called upon to perform” (Winston & Creamer, 1997). It is much more than monitoring the day-to-day job responsibilities of a staff member. In a broad sense, Schuh and Carlisle (1991) define supervision as “any relationship where one person has the responsibility to provide leadership, direction, information, motivation, evaluation, or support for one person and more persons.” Simply put, supervision is a helping process.

Ideally, supervision should do the following (Winston & Creamer, 1997):

- Support staff
- Encourage true collaboration
- Be tailored to the individual and the context of the relationship
- Result in the accomplishment of organizational goals and the supervisee’s personal and professional development

Facilitating this helping process with graduate students prepares the next generation of senior-level practitioners, contributing greatly to the future of the field of student affairs.

A Synergistic Model of Supervision

Overwhelmed? Have no fear! There is a supervision model within student affairs called Synergistic Supervision that is consistent with all of the above mentioned expectations, needs, wants, and concerns of graduate students and also advocates for a collaborative effort between the supervisor and supervisee. With synergistic supervision not only can you tackle all of the above, but you have some help, too; you and your graduate assistant are in this helping relationship together!

What is synergistic supervision?

Synergistic supervision is an approach that embodies effective supervisory practices. It is a “cooperative effort between the supervisor and staff members that allows the effect of their joint efforts to be greater than the sum of their individual contributions.” Basically, synergistic supervision can be expressed as “1+1 = 3” (Winston & Creamer, 1997).

Synergistic Supervision has nine components (Winston & Creamer, 1997):

- Dual focus
- Joint effort
- Two-way communication
- Focus on competence
- Growth orientation
- Proactivity
- Goal-based
- Systematic and ongoing process
- Holism

Here are the definitions of each synergistic supervision component followed by action suggestions for the supervisor and GA. For synergistic supervision to be effective, both the GA and the supervisor must be willing and active participants in the process.

Dual Focus

- The starting point of synergistic supervision is that it focuses both on working toward the goals of the institution and department and on promoting the personal and professional growth of the staff members.
- With this dual focus, it is fundamental to engage staff in the process of approaching institutional and departmental goals, such as Vision OHIO and the mission and goals of your department.
- It is vital that supervisors show concern for their staff members growth and development, which begins by establishing a relationship based upon trust, respect, openness, and mutuality.

Action Suggestions

1. Are you having conversations about how the GA job responsibilities enhance the goals of the department or university?
2. Are the GA's responsibilities of the caliber that they enhance the academic program and bring a practical application to what's learned through their coursework?
3. Do the GA's goals show a connection between their work and the department/university's goals?
4. Is the GA knowledgeable about the Division of Student Affairs and University policies (and professional expectations?) (e.g. Sexual Misconduct Policies which includes a statement on staff dating students.)

Joint Effort

- The relationship between supervisors and staff members should be mutual and equal.
- Both parties must create clearly defined goals together and work toward meeting those goals through supervision.
- When supervisors and staff members contribute equally, supervision can become infinitely successful.

Action Suggestions

1. Are both the supervisor and GA putting forth energy and demonstrating commitment to this professional relationship?
2. Does the supervisor view their role as one of mentor or coach? Is this known to the GA?
3. Are job responsibilities and goals for the GA clearly established?

Two-Way Communication

- The essence of developing a healthy and effective supervisory relationship is open and honest communication.
- In order to create the most successful use of supervision, both supervisors and staff members must be willing to know one another on a personal level and to learn about the daily functions of each other's positions.
- Supervisors and staff members should create an environment where they can provide and receive all types of feedback.

Action Suggestions

1. Is there a professional comfort level between the supervisor and GA so the two can openly communicate?
2. Do the supervisor and GA understand the expectations each has for the other?
3. In what way is trust developing?
4. Does the supervisor ask for feedback as a means of modeling open

5. communication?
Is the supervisor comfortable providing feedback? Does it occur regularly?
(See addendum Effective Feedback in Supervision)

Focus on Competence

- Build knowledge and information
- Teach work-related skills
- Guide on personal and professional development skills
- Address effective professional attitudes

Action Suggestion

1. Do supervision meetings include discussion of professional topics which enhance the GA's knowledge base?
2. Is the GA clear on skills needed for the position and is there opportunity to learn or hone these skills?
3. Is the GA being coached on professional behavior and attitude?

Growth Orientation

- Focusing on personal and professional growth is a hallmark of the synergistic process. Think of "student development" as it applies to supervision.
- It is necessary to perform assessment through supervisions of current abilities, skills or knowledge and to explore career aspirations, current stage of development and expectation of work.
- Staff members should feel that they are more proficient at their jobs and should have a sense of accomplishment with their positions through this process.

Action Suggestions

1. Are there regular conversations on the professional and personal growth of the GA?
2. Are professional development opportunities outside of the GA position discussed and encouraged?
3. Do the established goals have assessment points along the way?

Proactivity

- Identify potential performance problems early
- Pro-act to concerns rather than react
- Rule of Thumb: Nip it in the Bud
- Both participants raise concerns early (not a sign of weakness)

Action Suggestions

1. Are concerns addressed early?
2. Is the supervisor or GA comfortable giving and receiving feedback?
3. Is raising concerns early accepted by both as a growth opportunity and sign of open/constructive communication (not a sign of poor performance)?

Goal-Based

- Participants need to have clear understanding about the expectations each has of the other.
- The starting point for building expectations is through goal setting and creating statements of expectations both of which should be reviewed and evaluated frequently.
- Individual goal setting should include both short and long term personal and professional goals, which the staff member should discuss with the supervisor.
- This goal setting and goal review process should be completed outside of the performance appraisal process.

Action Suggestions

1. Are the GA's responsibilities and expectations clear? Have goals been set related to these responsibilities?
2. Do goals include both short and long term goals? Are these goals reviewed in regular supervision meetings?

Systematic, Ongoing Process

- In order for synergistic supervision to work, it must be approached methodically.
- Regular time must be set aside for one-on-one meetings
- One-on-one meetings: Examine the progress of meeting goals, discuss emerging issues, discuss priorities, exchange views, provide and receive feedback, and solicit advice.

Action Suggestions

1. Have weekly or bi-weekly supervision meetings been set between the GA and supervisor? (These are to be a one-on-one supervision.)
2. Is the format of the supervision meeting well outlined and agreed upon by both?
3. Are supervision meetings NOT canceled?
4. Are supervisory meetings more than just reporting on tasks completed? Do they include an opportunity to process experiences, discuss what is being learned, and receive feedback and skill development?

Holism

- "Who one is determines to a large extent the kind of job one is able to do."
(Winston & Creamer)
- Help staff be effective in both their jobs and personal lives while assisting with career advancement.

Action Suggestions

1. Does the supervisor value the GA as a whole person, not just an employee?
2. Do the supervisor and GA have discussions about the GA's classes, personal issues, and topics unrelated to the job when appropriate?
3. Are there discussions about the GAs practicum (both 1st and 2nd year), seminar paper and job search (2nd year)? This should include the anxiety and emotions that can surround all of these.
4. Is the GA encouraged to reach personal goals as well as professional goals?
5. Is the supervisor discussing balance and a wellness lifestyle related to work for the GA?

Action Suggestions in Chronological Format

Weeks 1 and 2

1. Are job responsibilities and goals for the GA clearly established? (joint effort)
2. Have you set weekly or bi-weekly supervision meetings between the GA and supervisor? It is recommended that these are one-on-one supervisions to be most effective (systematic, ongoing process)
3. Is the GA clear on skills needed for the position and is there an opportunity to learn or hone these skills? (focus on competence)
4. Are there conversations about how the GA job responsibilities enhance the goals of the department or university? (dual focus)

Weeks 3 and 4

1. Is the format of the supervision meeting well outlined and agreed upon by both? (systematic, ongoing process)
2. Do the GA's goals show a connection between their work and the department and university's goals? (dual focus)
3. Do goals include both short and long term goals? (goal-based)
4. Do the supervisor and GA understand the expectations each has for the other? (two-way communication)
5. Is the GA being coached on professional behavior and attitude? (focus on competence)
6. Does the supervisor view their role as one of mentor or coach?
7. Is this known to the GA? (joint effort)
8. Is the GA knowledgeable about the Division of student affairs and University Policies (and professional expectations?) (e.g. Sexual Misconduct Policies which includes a statement on staff dating students.)

Weeks 5 and 6

1. Do the established goals have assessment points along the way? (growth orientation)
2. Do supervision meetings include discussion of professional topics which enhance the GA's knowledge base? (focus on competence)
3. In what way is trust developing? (two-way communication)
4. Are both the supervisor and GA putting forth energy into this professional relationship? (joint effort)
5. Is the supervisor discussing balance and a wellness lifestyle related to work for the GA? (holism)
6. Does the supervisor ask for feedback as a means of modeling open communication? (two-way communication)

Weeks 7 and 8

1. Are the GA's responsibilities of the caliber that they enhance the academic program and bring a practical application to what's learned through their coursework? (dual focus)
2. Are there regular conversations on the professional and personal growth of the GA? (growth orientation)

Ongoing

1. Are the supervisor and GA meeting weekly or bi-weekly in a one-on-one supervision? (systematic, ongoing process)
2. Are supervision meetings NOT canceled? (systematic, ongoing process)
3. Are supervisory meetings more than just reporting on tasks completed? Do they include an opportunity to process experiences, discuss what is being learned, and receive feedback and skill development? (systematic, ongoing process)
4. Is raising concerns early accepted by both as a growth opportunity and sign of open/constructive communication (not a sign of poor performance)? (proactivity)
5. Are both the supervisor and GA committed to this relationship? (joint effort)
6. Is there a professional comfort level between the supervisor and GA so the two can openly communicate? (two-way communication)
7. Are concerns addressed early? (proactivity)
8. Is the supervisor or GA comfortable giving and receiving feedback? (proactivity)
9. Are the GA's goals reviewed periodically during regular supervision meetings? (goal-based)
10. Are professional development opportunities outside of the GA position discussed and encouraged? (growth orientation)
11. Is the GA encouraged to reach personal goals as well as professional goals? (holism)
12. Does the supervisor value the GA as a whole person, not just an employee? (holism)
13. Are there discussions about the GAs practicum (both 1st and 2nd year), seminar paper and job search (2nd year)? This should include the anxiety and emotions that can surround all of these. (holism)

It is a Worthwhile Investment

Utilizing synergistic supervision may seem like a lot of work. Is it actually worth all of the time and energy? According to the research, synergistic supervision is:

- *Effective* - Individuals said that discussing job performance, long-term career goals and aspirations, their personal attitudes and opinions, and receiving frequent performance appraisals were effective supervisory practices (Saunders, Cooper, Winston & Chernow, 2000)
- *Quality* - Supervisors who integrated a staff member's skills with the needs to the institution, focused on a staff member's "human needs," and viewed supervision as deliberate and on-going were rated as high-quality supervisors (Arminio & Creamer, 2001)
- *Valuable* - Guidance, meaningful interaction, unique supervision, formal evaluations, and opportunities for professional development are the supervisory practices most valued by staff (Shupp & Arminio, 2012)
- *Professionally Satisfying* - Individuals who experience synergistic supervision report higher levels of job satisfaction, lower levels of burnout and overload, and minimal intention to leave the field (Tull, 2006).

“ Most remarkable about our findings is that quality supervisors who participated in [our] study did ordinary things but in a persistent and direct fashion.... They supervise as ethical and principled educators constantly and consistently, seeking to accomplish goals through synergistic relationships in supportive environments. ”

— Arminio & Creamer

Conclusion

If graduate students are successful now, they are more likely to ensure a successful future for the profession. Engaging in quality and effective supervisory relationships as part of their graduate assistantships will likely result in graduate students engaging in such supervisory relationships as new professionals. The graduate assistant experience can be the beginning of a positive cycle of supervisory practice. It is a worthwhile investment.

Ideally, graduate students in Ohio University's Division of Student Affairs will benefit from an intentional and effective model of synergistic supervision.

To that end, the following recommendations are being made:

- Both supervisors and graduate assistants participate in a division-sponsored workshop on effective supervision based upon the concepts presented in this document. The outcomes of the workshop can be that the supervisor and supervisee pairs could begin to build rapport and mold their unique relationship while learning about synergistic supervision.
- Encourage supervisors and graduate assistants to both read this document, sit together to discuss its content, and create a plan for their supervisory experience.
- Educate graduate assistants about being personally responsible and accountable for their professional development, and encourage them to be proactive and engaged in their supervisory relationships, present and future.
- Make a commitment to utilizing the synergistic approach to supervision and acknowledge the importance of quality supervision.

Effective Feedback in Supervision

Why Provide Feedback?

1. It's an essential component in the developmental process of helping an employee move from point A to point B.
2. It demonstrates a commitment to the employee and the job for which they are responsible.
3. It provides the content for the formal performance review process.
4. It is an essential component of being an effective supervisor.

Benefits

1. Provides insight for both the employee and supervisor.
2. Provides clarity.
3. Most often will result in improved job performance.

Barriers

1. Uncomfortable giving feedback when it's negative.
2. Inexperience at giving feedback.
3. Frustration which can lead to a harsh delivery of feedback.

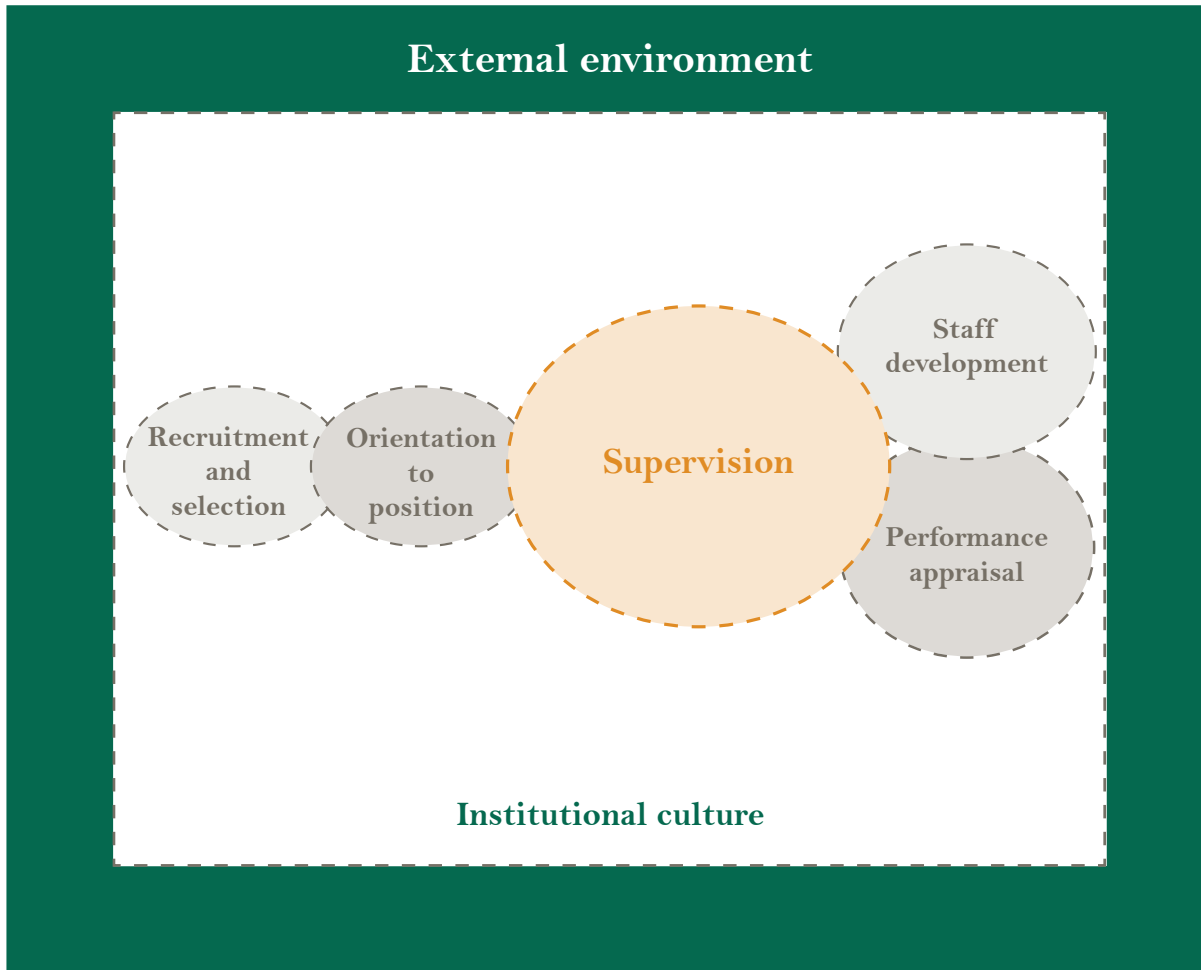
Components of Effective Feedback

1. Deliver in a respectful manner (gelcap vs. syringe)
2. Be timely. Provide feedback as close to the actual incident as possible.
3. Be clear and specific. "You shouldn't do that" or "That was good" is too broad. Specifically, how was it good or not appropriate?
4. Use examples to explain your observations or perceptions.
5. Be objective in describing the behavior. Keep it professional; don't let it become personal.
6. Describe the impact of the behavior on you and the team, floor section, community, etc.
7. Set behavioral outcomes if needed.
8. Ask the receiver to paraphrase the feedback so that you can determine whether they understood the intended message (intention vs. perception)

Feedback Steps

1. State observations or concerns
2. State how or why this is a problem
3. Refer back to expectations
4. Listen to the receiver's perceptions
5. State what needs to change
6. Set action plan

Components of Staffing in Student Affairs



“Firmly embedded within the institutional culture and often affected by events and forces outside the college or university, student affairs staffing practices involve five interlinked and overlapping constellations of activities: recruitment and selection, orientation to new position, supervision, staff development, and performance appraisal. Each is best seen as a process, often ongoing, rather than as a periodic recurring event.”

— Winston & Creamer

Division of Student Affairs Performance Management Guidelines

The Division of Student Affairs values its employees and the contributions they make to the Division and Ohio University. The performance management process is an ongoing annual process that is used to create a participatory goal setting process, provide valuable feedback to employees, design programs that will provide professional development opportunities, and reward employees appropriately. This process is utilized for administrative staff and graduate assistants. Details of the process including the Performance Management form can be found at <http://www.ohio.edu/studentaffairs/performancemanagement.cfm>.

The timeline for graduate assistants is as follows:

- *Second week of Fall semester* - Complete Individual Goals.
- *December 15* - Mid-Year Evaluations Completed - Supervisors will discuss progress toward job responsibilities, goals and values with each employee. Goals can be formally adjusted at this time, if necessary. Supervisors with employees that fall below expectations will create a performance improvement plan in writing with those employees to outline improvements needed and monitor progress. Employees on performance improvement plans will have regular performance discussions with their supervisor.
- *February/ March* - Self-Evaluations Prepared - Self-evaluations are completed on the Performance Planning form or in a narrative form according to the supervisor and GA preferences.
- *March 15* - End-of-Year Evaluations – The annual performance review is completed in writing using the Performance Management Tool and reviewed with the GA by their supervisor. The GA will have the opportunity to respond to their evaluation in writing on the summary page of the form. Summary forms will be submitted to the Vice President for Student Affairs with overall rating and brief comments regarding each employee's performance. The completed Performance Planning form will be submitted to the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and become part of the employee's official personnel file.

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