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No Cookie Cutter Approach: Supervision in Community College Student Affairs

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Abstract

Supervision is considered an integral function of managing student affairs personnel, yet there is a dearth of literature on this issue. Winston and Creamer (1997) state that the role of supervision in management is to not only support the institution but to also support the staff by encouraging improvements in both their personal and professional lives. Data for this study were collected through 19 interviews with individuals with at least three years of supervisory experience, who supervise at least one full-time professional staff member, and work at a community college. Several themes emerged in the interviews. Supervision styles varied based on the individual employee, with more participants describing supportive styles over authoritative styles. Meanwhile, participants utilized one-on-one and team meetings as their preferred method of communication.

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While supervision is considered one of the most integral functions of managing student affairs personnel, there is a dearth of literature on this issue. Winston and Creamer (1997) state that the role of supervision is to support the mission of the institution as well as to support the staff in terms of their personal and professional goals. Similarly, Arminio and Creamer (2001) describe supervision as a continuing relationship that works on meeting the goals of the institution, the division, the unit, and the staff member.

Winston and Creamer (1997) assert that synergistic supervision is the most useful supervision style for student affairs professionals. Synergistic supervision is described by Winston and Creamer as a holistic approach to supervision where the supervisor focuses on both the goals of the organization as well as the personal and professional goals of the employee. Shupp and Arminio (2012) conducted a study to discover which supervision styles were most beneficial to entry-level student affairs professionals. They concluded that synergistic supervision is a crucial component in supervising effectively and holding on to new student affairs professionals. Using the Synergistic Supervision Scale, Tull (2006) found a strong positive correlation between perceived synergistic supervision and job satisfaction.

Saunders, Cooper, Winston, and Chernow (2000) developed the Synergistic Supervision Scale (SSS) to measure the perception that staff have of their supervisor's ability to meet the goals defined in synergistic supervision. The results of their study complement those of Winston and Creamer (1997) which establish synergistic supervision as an effective approach to supervision within student affairs.

In their study on what makes a quality supervisor, Arminio and Creamer (2001) found that supervisors reported establishing regular meetings both with individual staff members and

with groups, including staff in planning, frequent communication, and introducing challenges incrementally as behaviors that embody quality supervision. Kortegast and Hamrick (2009) also found that frequent communication between supervisor and staff led to fewer surprises and a smoother transition if and when a staff member decides to leave.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to describe how community college student affairs staff describe their supervision style. The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants were purposively selected based on the following criteria: (1) have had at least three years of supervisory experience, (2) supervise at least one full-time professional staff member, and (3) work at a community or state college. We recruited 19 eligible participants who volunteered to participate in individual interviews. All participants were given pseudonyms. To gain a description of supervision style, we employed a thematic analysis developed by Merriam (2009).

Findings

All of the participants had previous supervisory experience prior to their current role, and several reported a significant number of years serving in a supervisory capacity. The number of years of supervisory experience ranged from 0 to 38 years, with an average of 16.4 years for those who responded. Supervisory experience prior to the participant's current role was quite diverse and included positions both within and outside academia. Those supervisory positions included, but were not limited to, supervisor at a state university in academic technology, bank manager, disability resource office coordinator, and sales manager for a telecommunications company.

Supervision styles reported by participants were varied. Five of the participants reported utilizing some form of adaptive or situational style of supervising, in which the manner, scope, and frequency of supervision was dependent upon each individual who was being supervised. One participant stated "There is not a cookie cutter style that will work for all." Other supervision styles mentioned were authoritative, democratic, laissez faire, participative, transformational, servant leadership, and synergistic. One participant simply said that their supervision style was "supportive and encouraging" while another said only that they were "big on collaboration."

One participant, who described his supervision style as servant leadership, stated that he prefers to lead by collaborating on department strategy and communicating regularly about the strategy in a clear, concise manner. He remarked that after developing a strategy and communicating it with his team, he makes sure his staff has the tools to do their job effectively and "stands back in a servant role to enable the team's success and unblock any roadblocks."

Another participant noted that her supervision style had changed over the years. Early in her career she reported being more authoritative with a drive to inspire enthusiasm, whereas now she has embraced a more affiliative approach and strives to develop a sense of team and belonging. She noted that her approach is more democratic, aiming for staff buy-in and ownership, than it was earlier in her career.

The participants also varied in their supervision methods. Once again, several of those interviewed commented that the methods used to supervise depended on the individual and the ways in which the employee best responded to supervision. Most of the participants discussed utilizing both one-on-one meetings with their direct reports as well as team meetings. The

frequency of such meetings ranged from weekly to monthly. Two of the participants commented that they actively supervise their staff every day but avoid micromanaging.

The communication methods used by participants include scheduled one-on-one face-to-face meetings, emails, staff retreats, phone calls, meetings via an open-door policy, and meetings by appointment. Five of the participants stated that they meet more frequently with individual direct reports with less frequent team meetings. Four participants stated that they use staff retreats to communicate with their staff. One participant who uses staff retreats said that getting everyone into a new environment helps generate new ideas. Another participant stated that retreats allow them to participate in team building exercises and professional development activities.

Finally, there appears to be a lack of formal training for supervisors within community college student affairs prior to them serving in a supervisory role. One participant stated that "a new student affairs person needs to be aware of the legal landscape" because of extensive regulations involved in higher education at the federal and state levels. Another participant pointed out that regulatory training is required twice each semester. Many of our participants noted that most leadership trainings occur one-on-one, restricting varied supervisory experiences for all employees.

Implications

Significance for Practice

Because there is no cookie cutter approach to supervision, supervisors should be introduced to a variety of supervision styles. One potential way is for graduate programs to introduce this topic within the curriculum. The findings of this study suggest that these programs could cover types of supervisory styles, focusing on styles that are supportive of staff like

synergistic, adaptive, and servant leadership. Another potential way is for institutions to offer training programs to provide entry-level positions with more leadership and supervisory programs in preparation for their next role. Participants in this study noted the lack of formalized training in the area of supervision, and the offering of these instituition-based trainings programs would help address this concern.

Participants noted using a variety of supervision and communication methods, which suggests that future supervisors could benefit from training on supervisory techniques. Based on our findings, we suggest these trainings cover topics such as how to conduct individual meetings, communication skills, and how to avoid micromanaging. Departments should have a balance of staff and personal development in wanted areas to encourage growth for the individual and department.

Significance for Policy

Participants noted that supervisors should be aware of state and federal regulations to be effective in their positions. Given the dynamic nature of student affairs policies and procedures, one policy that seems worthy of consideration is a requirement for an annual (or semi-annual) training. For example, these trainings should provide updates to staff regarding the regulatory changes that have occurred in the previous year to both ensure compliance as well as consistency in practice throughout the institution. In addition, professional associations like NASPA could offer certification for student affairs professionals to ensure the standardization of training for supervisors.

Significance for Research

The findings of this study made several contributions to the literature of student affairs. The population of community college student affairs supervisors has not been examined in the

literature with regard to supervision styles. The findings add to the limited research base and encourages more research on supervision and supervision styles in student affairs by highlighting a lack of research activity in this area. By identifying the common supervision styles noted in this study, future research can focus on the effectiveness of such approaches.

In conclusion, this study highlighted an area that has been rarely studied in the literature of higher education and student affairs. By addressing the dearth of relevant literature on supervision styles of community college student affairs administrators, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting an area that practitioners in student affairs can use to improve their supervisory skills. Improved supervisory skills may lead to more effective decision making in student affairs, to better communication, and ultimately to more efficient and effective services for students.

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