Reflections on Building Capacity as a Supervisor in College Student Services

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My desire to develop supervisory skills was a major factor in my decision to attend a student affairs graduate program rather than pursuing a student affairs position without acquiring a graduate degree. Once I began graduate school, I believed my professors would teach me the necessary theoretical frameworks to inform my supervision. Naively, I thought my classroom experience would teach me theories and provide me with sufficient knowledge to supervise the individual employees and staff groups for which I might be assigned responsibility. Soon, I discovered learning to be a good supervisor is not as simple as receiving instruction. I learned that, for me, making sense of something as complex and nuanced as supervision requires experience, as well as understanding theories of human and organizational development.

Supervision, I discovered, is about building relationships with groups and individuals, as well as implementing policies and practices to create clear expectations. These policies, practices, expectations, and relationships ought to give rise to a work environment that encourages creativity, learning, and personal growth. A combination of theory, opportunities for relationship building, and regular opportunities to apply my learning in practical settings combined to shape my current approach to supervision.

In this chapter, I reflect on my personal experience as a first-time supervisor and share the challenges with which I was confronted and the learning that resulted from my efforts. I describe the role mid-level supervisors played in supporting my performance, learning, and skills as an early-career student affairs professional. This chapter is written as a personal
narrative in which I recount key episodes from my professional experiences and the learning I gained from my supervisors.

**Early Lessons: Experiential Learning Opportunities**

I am running through the hallways of my student co-op to answer the house phone. I am nineteen years old and late for the fourth time to my shift as a lifeguard at the student recreation center. This is my first job, and already it has been a big term for me: my partner moved in with me; the police came to our thirty-student co-op for the second time this term responding to noise and drug complaints from a neighbor; and my grandfather and dog died. It is my first term as a queer student leader on campus and I am often so excited about projects for my student union that I am frequently late to my lifeguard job. I am having trouble balancing my lifeguard job and my student leadership role, as well as my responsibilities at the co-op. On the day I receive a call from my supervisor, I am cleaning the co-op's shared bathroom and have failed to keep an eye on the time.

“Cathlene, we are going to have to let you go.” It is my supervisor from the pool on the phone. From the beginning of my employment at the recreation center, when she provided work expectations for the lifeguards, she indicated that we had three opportunities to be late to work. She reminds me that I am late for the fourth time. I am shocked. I start to cry and go through a tearful account of all the stresses in my life—from my dog to my grandpa to the police to my partner. She reminds me of our employment agreement and then suggests to me campus resources that might help me manage my stress and problems with time management.

Though I did not appreciate it at the time, my supervisor offered me several insights into the role of supervisors: she provided clear communication to me at the beginning of my employment experience, explaining her expectations; when my behavior did not meet those expectations, we revisited the expectations; she explained to me the effect of my behavior on other staff members; and when my tardy behavior did not change, she terminated my employment, consistent with the expectations she set at the beginning. During the termination conversation, she made an effort to empathize with the personal struggles I was having. At the same time, she explained to me that I would no longer have a job as a lifeguard, and why. She kept her role as a supervisor clear, as well as the limits of her ability to provide resources to me. Even when I showed signs of distress during the termination conversation, she did not waiver from her decision to end my employment. At the same time, she demonstrated concern for my well-being by providing me with information about campus resources.

This approach eventually helped me to understand that a supervisor must be very clear with supervisees about expectations. She also demonstrated the importance of holding supervisees accountable for fulfilling expectations.
Passing Along the Lesson: Expectations of Accountability

Some years later I remembered my experience with my lifeguard supervisor when I called a student worker to my office. I asked my current supervisor to help me have the conversation with her, as I wanted to be clear about the purpose of the meeting and felt the need to have someone with more experience help me. The student worker was in the middle of a messy breakup with her girlfriend and had been unable to fulfill her job obligations in my office. The student and I had had two meetings prior to the impending meeting to address my concerns about her performance. In addition to relationship challenges, the student was working through difficult experiences with abusive family members.

As soon as the student sat down with my supervisor and me, she began to cry, while offering explanations about her priorities. My supervisor helped me explain to her that we needed to make progress with the projects attached to her position and we needed to find a new student worker who could make these projects a priority. We told her we cared a great deal about what was happening in her life and we wanted to continue to be a source of support for her. When the student left my office that day, I remember feeling broken-hearted, wondering if she would continue to use the support services provided by my program.

Three years after that conversation, I had the occasion to chat with the same student via instant messenger. She had graduated, moved to a big city, and was living happily on her own. During the course of the communication, I told her I was writing a narrative on my experiences as a supervisor. She asked if I was intending to include the event when I fired her. It was clear to me that she understood, as did I, that the experience of terminating an employee is significant for the supervisor and supervisee. It also reinforced for me the long-term impact supervisors can have on supervisees.

Impacts of My Supervisor/Supervisee Relationships

Supervisees need support that matches the level of preparation they have to perform their job. I came to understand this when, at the age of twenty-two, I found myself working in an area that I had long coveted—student affairs. My professional development was enhanced by two student affairs professionals who provided me with substantial career-related opportunities. Two student affairs professionals, one in Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) services and the other in student orientation programs, provided me with internships affiliated with their national and regional professional organizations.

During these experiences, both leaders assigned me projects to manage that were just beyond my skill level. They set clear timelines and goals and followed up at regular weekly meetings and when I needed support for specific project-related matters.
Both of these supervisors communicated to me very different examples of how one can approach professional roles. Other student staff and I regularly went to lunch and out for drinks after work with one of my supervisors. With this supervisor we shared stories from our personal lives and regularly disclosed information about romantic relationships, friends, and frustrations at work or school. This supervisor and I observed each other cry during moments of frustration.

The other supervisor and I went to lunch only when there were occasions to celebrate. I never saw her cry or demonstrate outward emotions. I knew little about her personal life, though I chatted with her about my life often. When I shared frustrations from other parts of my life with her, she would gently direct me to campus resources to help me with my troubles. She cautioned me to maintain appropriate boundaries in my relationships with students as I transitioned from a student role to one of a young professional in student affairs. She explained that I could expect my relationships with students and professional colleagues to change as I moved from student status to a professional role. She believed I needed to distance myself from friendships with students and learn to curtail my indiscriminate spread of personal information, which was a habit of mine. She warned that appearing to be close with some students could alienate other students. She also told me that there needed to be clear boundaries between student affairs professionals and the romantic relationships of the students with whom the professional works. In her view, the power imbalance between professionals and students is too great to have unclear relationship boundaries.

These two supervisors helped me to understand that the role of a supervisor involves more than just making sure an employee performs the tasks associated with her job. I learned the important role a supervisor plays in orienting a supervisee to standards of professional conduct, providing guidance on developing necessary relationships, and providing insights into the risks associated with one’s role at the institution.

In practice, I’ve blended the two styles of supervision because I believe my role as a supervisor of LGBT students entails some unique considerations. For example, I often find myself in the position of using the same LGBT resources in my community as the students with whom I work. Because our city is small, there are very few options for LGBT nightlife, which means I can expect to run into at least one of the students with whom I work while I am out socializing. Because of this, students see me interacting in my personal life and are aware of whom I am dating or who my personal friends are. In addition, because of the absence of LGBT professionals to serve as mentors and role models, I have decided to share aspects of my life openly with students and demonstrate for them how I am navigating my queer identity and relationships, as many of them struggle with the coming-out process.

My supervisors conveyed to me that a supervisor should work with his or her supervisees to understand the supervisees’ career goals and then
provide opportunities to support those goals. I remembered this advice when a student told me that she wanted to pursue a career in student affairs. By the time she shared this ambition with me, she had worked in my office for a year. She had been a consistent and reliable employee and a creative problem solver. We worked together to find projects to challenge her. I suggested to her that she read student development theory and we could talk about where that might apply. She tried that idea and did not like it. She wanted something more focused on practice than theory. Our office needed help organizing an LGBT ally training program. As a work project, she reviewed our current materials and suggested new exercises that we could incorporate into our program. This effort required that she facilitate new exercises in front of groups who had never received this kind of training. Her work developing the program eventually led to our office having the opportunity to present a “Multicultural Awareness in the Workplace” workshop to organizations within the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Region V.

The midlevel supervisors with whom I worked exposed me to the importance of being engaged in professional associations. Their mentoring was crucial to my developing confidence, as well as to developing skills in designing workshops, presenting, and public speaking.

Having the opportunity to provide mentoring to student workers, similar to that which I received during my internship, increased my feelings of effectiveness as a supervisor. Though my supervisors informed the many ways in which I mentor students in the area of goal setting, their approaches to creating and maintaining professional distance from students have not met my needs in working with students. While I agree with the views of previous supervisors that there is a power imbalance between supervisees and supervisors, I also believe supervisees are more successful when they are able to bring their whole lives to a work environment. I believe the degree of professional distance I was advised to keep between students and me does not contribute to nurturing the work environment I hope to create.

While I was advised that I ought to limit the amount of personal information that I share with and solicit from supervisees, I have not experienced personal aloofness to be useful when students are looking for information to successfully navigate their unique experiences or identities. For example, a literature review confirms that contemporary students in the United States face incredible pressures and misinformation about issues of drug and alcohol use and sex (National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2007). However, while there are many sources of information on campus for risk reduction with alcohol, drugs, and safer sex practices, information on bondage and dominance or polyamory (the practice of navigating open relationships in ways that are ethically and emotionally sustainable) (Easton and Liszt, 2009) is not readily available on our campus.
Some time ago, while driving from Oregon to Idaho for a conference, eight students started a conversation about polyamory. The students involved in the conversation wanted to know how these relationships worked in practice: Did all of you live together? What did your parents think? How did you talk about your relationships in class when you were a student? Because I was open to sharing and hearing the experiences of the students, they were able to talk with one another about the experiences they were having in their lives. My experience shows me that students are looking for information that is more nuanced than student affairs professionals have provided in the past. In smaller cities, such as where I reside, student affairs professionals may be the only resource for these kinds of questions. I have drawn upon the advice of previous supervisors and find it helpful to have had supervisors with different work styles. At the same time, as a person at the early stage of my career, it is helpful to have a supervisor who coaches me through challenging situations and supports me in developing a supervisory style that suits my personality and job responsibilities.

Power and Supervision

A discussion on personal disclosure in supervisory relationships can reveal power dynamics between the supervisor and supervisee. Two lessons from my personal experiences illuminate my understanding of power in supervisory relationships. First, when I was pursuing my master’s degree, I had a position in the dean of students’ office. Within the first three weeks of my graduate school experience, a significant number of people I met told me I needed to meet a particular colleague. By chance, I happened to meet this person when we both arrived at the same time to conduct business with the dean’s assistant. He introduced himself, and we both said we had heard great things about each other. He was at the office to sign his papers to become the interim director of LGBT Services, an office where I would intern in the coming months and where the following interaction took place:

“Why would you call us ‘your’ students? We work with you; we don’t belong to you.” A group of us were headed to a meeting together, and one of “my” favorite students was confronting me. As a graduate intern in the LGBT center, I help to advise the staff of the center. I explained to her that a former supervisor always called her employees “her” students and that I had looked forward to working with a staff of students of my own. I told her that I’d always experienced the term as a sign of affection. My new colleague overheard this exchange and he asserted that a staff should not be a group of students that I seek to call my own, but, instead, a group of student colleagues with collective and individual goals and developmental needs. He also shared with me insights on power relationships. He talked about different kinds of power: power over, power to, power of, and power
with, a theory pioneered by Mary Parker Follett (1924). He explained that power of is a conferred power, as in power of attorney, and that power to is a power that I give to someone. What I had just experienced with the student was tension between power with and power over. Power over describes a power relationship that is characterized by dominance. The student explained to me that from her perspective, I was looking to have a power over relationship like a parent has power over his or her children. She said that she preferred to be in a power with relationship with her supervisors. She explained that this is a relational kind of power, the kind of relationship where students are colleagues.

The conversation about power helped me think about the type of relationship I would like to have with my supervisor. I prefer to have a relationship characterized by sharing, collaboration, joint problem solving, and open communication. I wish to have a supervisory relationship that allows for mentoring and empowerment, as I know being empowered and mentored by a supervisor will enhance my job satisfaction and success (Manathunga, 2007; Boje and Rosile, 2001). The supervisors with whom I have worked have modeled for me many of the attributes I hope to possess. At the same time, some behaviors (such using the term my staff) do not fit well for me.

The second lesson occurred recently as I navigated my experience as the first director of the campus LGBT center. I supervise a four-person staff and a graduate assistant, and share supervision of 85 volunteers with the center’s graduate assistant. The LGBT center existed as a student organization for 30 years prior to my arrival; the center became a department housed within the student affairs division in 2010.

I began this experience with limited understanding of the expectations of my position. At the start of my first year, I inherited a student staff that had been hired by the previous advisor. Inheriting a staff had both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage was having a team of people who understood and were a part of the organizational culture of a commuter-serving institution. The disadvantage was that the staff was hired under a particular set of expectations, and I struggled to move them to different expectations I had for their roles. Because the students were accustomed to leading in a student organization, they struggled with the more structured and disciplined environment I sought to establish with the staff.

In my initial supervision of the center, I chose to micromanage the staff. I placed myself at an incredible disadvantage because, rather than allowing supervisees to make decisions based in their expertise, I insisted they follow my recommendations for how to handle issues. Now I believe my supervision would have been more effective if I had trusted their abilities. However, that would have been possible only if I had had the confidence to do so. As a result of reflection, learning, and growth, I am able to supervise using a consensus model that places much more responsibility on supervisees. I am able to serve in more of an advisory role and perform in a
way more reflective of our mission and vision. This shift has had a positive influence on how satisfied supervisees are in their jobs and how happy I am in my role.

My new position was LGBT Center Director at an urban, commuter institution; my previous position was at a large research university. As I made the transition from one institution to the other, I relied on my supervisor for help translating the culture and helping me to navigate the campus-specific ways of doing things. For me, the supervisor was a translator and guide, helping me to understand the meanings behind behaviors, while also helping me figure out how to be successful doing things differently. At the same time, I was trusted to supervise the center staff, which allowed me to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. Supervisors play a crucial role in providing orientation to a position and institutional culture.

Navigating Differences

I believe that some of my first-year supervision blunders came from my unwillingness to translate what I learned in the classroom and from my mentors into practice. I also believe the struggles came from the difficulties I faced in engaging with student colleagues who are different from myself. When student affairs professionals are asked to engage with underrepresented populations or with populations that are different from them, a balancing act may ensue. The professional must be supportive of the student's educational and emotional needs, hold the student to high expectations in his or her job, and be aware of the complexities of identity development as a marginalized student. Marginalized students may not receive valuable critical feedback or be held to the highest employment standards as a result of a student affairs professional's concerns about negatively affecting the student's identity development. For example, at times, when working with transgender students or students of color, I felt confused in my ability to understand and support their developmental needs within our supervisory relationship. I managed to convince myself that a transgender student I supervise wouldn't be able to manage the complexity of issues he faces on our campus and absorb the feedback I want to give him about his work performance. However, after raising this concern with the student, I realized that my fears were unfounded.

Working with this student provided me opportunities to work with ideas, experiences, and people that were unfamiliar to me. From this and other challenging experiences, I resolved that supervisees with whom I work must learn how to effectively engage people who are different from them.

My supervisors have held me accountable for exploring difference and working with students, staff, and faculty who are different from me, utilizing the awareness, knowledge, and skills model. Multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills are integral to my success in the student affairs pro-
fession (Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller, 2004). My supervisors have been important guides for exploring my responsibility to incorporate multiculturalism into my performance.

**Drawing on Past Experiences and Looking Ahead**

At the beginning of my experience as a student affairs professional, I thought I would learn everything I needed to know about supervision from my classes in a student affairs graduate program. However, I learned that my supervision style is largely informed by my experiences as a supervisee and by synthesizing past experiences and classroom learning along the way. Losing a job, gaining new supervision responsibilities, understanding theory, and reflecting on past supervisee experiences each shapes my beliefs and philosophies on supervision. As I continue to gain experiences as a supervisor, my philosophy and practice will evolve to meet the changing needs and expectations of my work environments, supervisors, and supervisees.

In the next chapter, Delores McNair discusses the importance of having a supervisory philosophy, the need to connect that philosophy with one's specific core values of supervision, and tangible steps a supervisor can take to develop or reassess his or her philosophy and articulate it to others.

**References**


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