Communication Between College Counselors and Academic Faculty When Supervising Graduate Student Trainees

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College counseling centers play an important role in the training and supervision of counselor trainees. This article addresses the importance of communication between college counselors and academic counseling program faculty when college counselors supervise graduate students from academic counseling programs. As the authors discuss, effective communication contributes to positive and productive training experiences for graduate student trainees. Suggestions are offered for successful communication between counseling center staff and program faculty.

The Accreditation Standards for University and College Counseling Centers of the International Association of Counseling Services (Boyd et al., 2003) highlight training and supervision as important responsibilities of counseling centers. Furthermore, the training of students in counseling programs represents one important activity in which college counselors can engage to support the educational mission of their institution. Generally speaking, because college counseling centers have a long-standing tradition serving as practicum and internship sites for trainees in counseling programs (Gallessich & Olmstead, 1987; Neimeyer, Bowman, & Stewart, 2001; Richardson & Massey, 1986), and counseling centers and academic counseling programs have historically shared a strong commitment to clinical, research, and training activities (Guinee & Ness, 2000), it is not surprising that the two entities often develop strong ties.

Given the important role that counseling centers often play in the training and supervision of counselor trainees, many college counselors are likely to serve as supervisors at some point during their tenure. When college counselors assume the responsibility of supervision, it is required that they establish and maintain communication with their supervisee’s faculty to facilitate a mutually positive and productive training experience for the student as well as for the counseling center. To ensure that this type of communication between practicum supervisors and training program supervisors occurs, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision’s (1993) Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors stipulate that “supervisors in training programs should communicate regularly with supervisors in agencies used as practicum and/or fieldwork sites regarding current professional practices, expectations of students, and preferred models and modalities of supervision” (Standard 3.13). Counseling center supervisors typically communicate with one particular faculty member who serves as the training program’s liaison or practicum placement coordinator. There may also be communication with additional faculty members who might be serving as a trainee’s faculty supervisor. Some counseling centers designate one staff member to serve as training director to coordinate training activities, but...
all college counselors serving as individual supervisors—not just the training director—must effectively communicate with their trainees’ program faculty. When the student arrives from a training program located at a different institution than the counseling center, communication is particularly vital. It has been our experience, however, that college counselors who become supervisors often have not identified the steps that are necessary to ensure that communication with program faculty is successful.

The primary purposes of this article are to show why communication between college counselors and program faculty is important when college counselors supervise graduate student trainees and to offer suggestions for college counselors to enhance such communication. We discuss what college counselors should expect from academic counseling programs regarding communication related to the training and supervision of graduate students. This article addresses primarily the training and supervision of students completing a supervised field experience while still in a counseling degree program, either at the master’s or doctoral level. Such students are usually referred to as *practicum students, interns, or trainees.*

Need for Communication When Sharing Trainees

Early Communication

We believe communication between college counselors and program faculty can be important even before students apply for a practicum or internship in a college counseling center. If there is good communication between an academic program and counseling center training site, then students will routinely seek training opportunities at that counseling center (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). Students may feel more positive about seeking training in a counseling center that has a good relationship with their program, because it can provide a sense of confidence and stability in the training environment. Conversely, if there seems to be a lack of communication between counseling center staff and program faculty, then students may try to avoid that particular counseling center for fear that it could pose problems somewhere along the way during the experience. In addition, early communication can help facilitate matching of trainees who are appropriate for a practicum in a counseling center on the basis of their interests and skill level (Falvey, 2002).

Early communication can occur in several ways. First and foremost, counseling centers that offer formalized practicum placements must keep academic programs fully informed about their training offerings and provide application materials to prospective trainees. By providing specific details about the practicum experience, preferably in a brochure or other printed material for applicants, counseling centers can establish clear, foundational guidelines and expectations. Some counseling programs may invite potential supervisors from the counseling center to provide information and answer student questions at informational sessions; when offered, such sessions represent ideal opportunities for college counselors to promote their center as a practicum site and recruit prospective trainees.

Communication between college counselors and program faculty then becomes especially critical once students are accepted as trainees. Supervisors must know what is expected of them when they agree to assume responsibility for trainees, and they should actively seek clarification of the program’s expectations if these expectations are not clearly communicated (Roberts & Moratti, 2001). Such expectations may
be related to clinical hours, hours of supervision per week, qualifications of the supervisor, audiotaping and/or videotaping of sessions, and evaluations of trainee performance. Bernard and Goodyear (2004) suggested that such expectations be communicated in writing and in person by program faculty to site supervisors, noting that it is not the student’s responsibility to do so. The sharing of training manuals and mutual participation in orientation programs for trainees represent effective ways for counseling centers and counseling programs to communicate their expectations to each other and prevent any misunderstandings. As we discuss more fully later in this article, the use of training agreements or contracts can especially help clarify and ensure the mutual understanding of expectations and goals.

If expectations are not clarified from the outset, we believe potential problems may emerge as students move forward in their training experience. It has been pointed out, for example, that an academic program and a training site can have differing goals that might be at odds with each other (Dodds, 1986; Scanlon & Gold, 1996). For example, an academic program is likely to emphasize the education and training of their students, whereas a counseling center, as a service provider, may be more concerned about the delivery of quality services to clients. Counseling centers must be careful not to allow training and supervision to supersede their primary role as a service agency (Boyd et al., 2003). Moreover, some counseling centers may impose time limits on counseling, which might be incompatible with a program’s goal of having students see clients on a longer term basis. In some cases, trainees may be asked to do more than what is expected of them from their training program. On the basis of our experience, even counseling centers with the best intentions to provide high-quality training may be vulnerable to using trainees almost like part-time junior staff members with significant caseloads, especially centers that are understaffed with limited resources to meet increasing demand for services. In turn, it is important that counseling center staff and program faculty mutually agree that there is a compatibility of goals and expectations, particularly in an era of increasingly moving toward a managed care model of practice, which may involve session limits (Williams, 2000) and the use of evidence-based treatment approaches (Owen, Tao, & Rodolfa, 2005) in college counseling.

Another important issue for counseling centers that take on trainees is the growing need to inform academic counseling programs about the skills considered necessary when working in today’s counseling center (Bishop, 2006). In other words, students must be adequately prepared to encounter the complexity of issues and problems faced by contemporary college students (Maples, 2000). Otherwise, potential supervisees may be underprepared for or have misconceptions about what a college counseling center training experience entails. As an example, prospective trainees may assume that most of the presenting problems of college students are primarily developmental in nature even though increasing numbers of college students seem to present with psychological problems of a more serious nature (Sharkin, 2006).

Training Agreements or Contracts

As we noted earlier, training agreements (or contracts) are critical tools for establishing detailed goals and expectations for the training experience. They can be used to ensure that all parties involved—the trainee, the supervisor, and the faculty supervisor or the person in the trainee’s program responsible for field placements—mutually agree on the requirements of the placement. These
agreements are especially important because they establish the groundwork for subsequent communication between college counselor supervisors and program faculty once the trainee’s placement is under way.

Although these agreements are sometimes written in general terms, we recommend that they be modified to be specific to the unique aspects of the college counseling center training site. In some cases, counseling centers and training programs each have their own agreements that stipulate their expectations and requirements. Whether there are one or two contracts, it is important that the trainee, counseling center supervisor, and faculty supervisor all have signed copies for their own records and to refer to when needed. In a contract, responsibilities can be divided into two sections: one for the trainee and one for the supervisor. At a minimum, we recommend that the contract include or address the following points:

1. Names and contact information for the counseling center supervisor and faculty supervisor (if someone is assigned as such). Names and contact information for the faculty practicum coordinator and counseling center training director (if someone is designated as such).
2. The period of the contract (typically one or two semesters).
3. The number of hours on site per week or total number of hours for the period of the contract.
4. The number of clients or direct service hours per week for the trainee. The trainee should not retain too many or too few clients in his or her caseload.
5. Procedures for screening and assignment of clients to the trainee. Cases assigned to the trainee must be appropriate for his or her level of training and competence (Boyd et al., 2003).
6. The number of intakes to be conducted by the trainee (if expected).
7. Requirements regarding audiotaping and/or videotaping of the trainee’s sessions.
8. Is the trainee required to carry professional liability insurance?
9. The number of hours of individual and/or group supervision. There needs to be close supervision by experienced, qualified staff (Boyd et al., 2003) and sufficient supervision time to adequately oversee each case assigned to the trainee (Falvey, 2002).
10. Are there any specific requirements for the counseling center supervisor, such as type of degree or license?
11. Requirements regarding the trainee’s maintenance of documentation and the need for the supervisor to sign off on records kept by the trainee.
12. The trainee is expected to understand and adhere to all ethical and legal standards for the profession.
13. The trainee is expected to understand and adhere to counseling center policies and procedures.
14. Clarify procedures for sharing of case notes, audiotapes or videotapes, or other work samples (e.g., when the trainee needs to use such samples in supervision with a faculty member or in a practicum class).
15. Is the trainee allowed to do crisis intervention without his or her supervisor or other senior staff person? What is the trainee expected to do in the event of a client crisis situation?
16. Is the trainee expected to engage in any group work, testing and assessment, outreach, consultation, professional development, staff meetings, or other activities?

17. How often is the trainee to be formally evaluated? Is there a specific evaluation form to use? What opportunities will there be to remediate any deficiencies?

18. A statement related to the counseling center’s right to terminate a trainee who behaves in an unprofessional/unethical manner or does not perform up to expected standards.

Agreements should be developed and used by counseling centers with all training programs from which trainees are selected. Additional points may need to be included in the contract depending on the trainee’s program. For example, the contract may need to be written in a way to reflect the fulfillment of accreditation standards (e.g., Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, American Psychological Association) for practicum and field placements.

Ongoing Communication

Ideally, communication between counseling center supervisors and training program faculty should be ongoing. In addition to informal communication through phone calls and e-mail, some authors have recommended that program faculty schedule periodic visits to the training site (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Roberts & Moratti, 2001). We believe that it can be helpful to hold joint meetings between counseling center staff (or the training director in particular) and program faculty (or the program liaison in particular) at least once per semester. Such meetings can be used to assess and consult about the ongoing training and supervision of shared trainees and address any concerns that may emerge.

Communication between counseling center supervisors and program faculty during the training experience is also vital to the ongoing assessment and evaluation of a student’s progress. According to Elman, Forrest, Vacha-Haase, and Gizara (1999), communication regarding evaluation of trainee performance is often inadequate. Although there may be evaluation forms that are to be completed by site supervisors, there may be little structure in place to address trainees who are not making adequate progress toward professional competence or who are displaying signs of unprofessional behavior or impairment (Forrest, Elman, Gizara, & Vacha-Haase, 1999). Ongoing communication allows for quicker intervention when problems or conflicts emerge related to a trainee’s professional development.

Communication is needed, furthermore, to address problems or distress experienced by the trainee in relation to the training experience. Perhaps one of the more common problems may occur when a trainee experiences conflict or incompatibility with his or her primary clinical supervisor (Gray, Ladany, Walker, & Ancis, 2001; Ladany, Walker, Pate-Carolan, & Gray Evans, 2007). Sometimes such conflicts are addressed by the counseling center site without much input from the trainee’s program. For example, a switch to a different supervisor may be made without consultation with anyone in the trainee’s program. Nevertheless, we recommend that any changes in supervision be discussed with the trainee’s faculty practicum supervisor to promote and reinforce the need for collaboration between college counselors and program faculty.
Another potential complication that can be addressed through ongoing communication is related to cases of dual supervision. In some academic programs, students are assigned a faculty supervisor in addition to having an on-site supervisor. In such cases, trainees may receive different and sometimes conflicting information from the two supervisors. Such differences of opinion can even occur in the handling of ethical dilemmas (Lee & Cashwell, 2001). Lee and Cashwell have suggested that trainees be encouraged to bring such differences to the attention of both supervisors, who can then discuss the situation with the trainee and each other. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the on-site supervision provided by college counselors takes precedence in all matters of client well-being, and this needs to be clearly established from the outset.

Finally, ongoing communication enables both entities to inform each other of any changes being implemented that might affect training. If a counseling center makes any policy or other changes that may affect training or supervision, these changes would need to be conveyed to program faculty. As an example, a counseling center may change the way clients are assigned or begin imposing time limits on counseling during a particularly busy semester. Likewise, if an academic program institutes any changes that may affect on-site training (e.g., changes in required hours), they should be communicated to counseling center supervisors.

When successfully established at the outset, ongoing communication should help make the training experience a positive one for students. Nevertheless, as counseling center supervisors and program faculty become busier and more distracted with other responsibilities, ongoing communication can break down. What should college counselor supervisors do if this happens? Attempts to reestablish communication should be made by contacting either the faculty supervisor or the program’s practicum coordinator. There may be a need to review the training agreement and revisit the issue of how best to maintain ongoing communication to ensure that all expectations and requirements for the practicum placement are met. If necessary, the contract can be revised to include a requirement for a minimum number of meetings between the counseling center supervisor and the faculty representative for the remainder of the period of the contract.

If there are continuing problems with maintaining communication with a particular program, then college counselor supervisors may need to reevaluate that particular program’s suitability for recruiting trainees in the future.

Conclusion

A crucial dimension of the relationship between counseling centers and academic counseling programs when they share trainees is the need for a mutual commitment to high-quality training. In an early article, Pipes (1981) identified this type of communication as one of several characteristics required for a productive and successful relationship between counseling centers and academic programs. Pipes defined high-quality training as “ensuring that trainees will have high-quality supervision and appropriate caseloads” (p. 470). In today’s counseling centers, high-quality training might also include training seminars and other learning experiences, attendance at staff meetings, involvement in group work, ongoing trainee performance evaluation, and other elements of a meaningful clinical training experience. As we have attempted to show, good communication, therefore, seems to be a critical component of the mutual commitment to high-quality training,
for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, despite good intentions, communication is sometimes inadequate or lacking (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Holtzman & Raskin, 1988).

To address this concern, in this article, we have attempted to delineate ways for college counselors to establish and maintain good communication with academic program faculty when sharing trainees. Continuing efforts to reinforce and strengthen the communication between the two can only enhance the quality of training that graduate students obtain when they seek training experiences in college counseling centers.

References


