

HOW TO THRIVE IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

30-Minute
Professional Development
on Key Topics

Self-Directed
Courses for New
Professionals



www.paper-clip.com
info@paper-clip.com

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Written and Edited by Julie Phillips

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Section I: Key Student Affairs Skills and Expertise

THESE BASICS MAKE UP MUCH OF THE BACKBONE
OF STUDENT AFFAIRS, SETTING STAFF MEMBERS
UP FOR SUCCESS.





Section I: Key Student Affairs Skills and Expertise

Top 5 Student Affairs Supervision Strategies

This 30-minute self-directed learning course focuses on *Student Affairs Supervision Strategies*. It’s about very intentionally developing connections, boosting morale, enhancing job satisfaction and participating in retention. It involves setting clear expectations, boundaries and goals. It’s about challenge and support. It takes assessing your skill levels so you can continue strengthening your supervisory approach. And it’s about helping your supervisees become the best versions of themselves, as you work to become the best supervisor possible.

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Section I: Key Student Affairs Skills and Expertise

Supervision Strategies: HANDOUT

Student affairs is a field involving trickle-down supervision: senior administrators supervising mid-level managers, mid-level managers supervising new professionals, grad students and new professionals supervising undergraduate students... We all impact one another – and making sure that impact is positive takes intentionality, care and know-how.

Supervisory skills are a critical tool as you move forward, working to connect with those you supervise, boost morale, enhance job satisfaction and help bring out the best in them. “Your number one priority should be to create an environment and support system that helps your supervisees grow and succeed as professionals,” wrote Marcelius Braxton for Modern Campus. It’s all part of the challenge and support approach that student affairs is well-known for (see box).

“When supervisors are ill-equipped to manage, employees report increased issues in the workplace.”

~ Emily Holmes in “Student Affairs Supervisor Training, Preparation, and Perception of Job Satisfaction,” School of Education Doctoral Project, 2022

CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

Two words often go hand-in-hand when discussing student affairs supervision: challenge and support.

- The challenge component refers to how supervisors set expectations, encourage their supervisees to grow, even when it’s uncomfortable, and give feedback on a regular basis.
■ The support component refers to helping supervisees work through issues and decisions, address their areas needing improvement and reach their goals, with care and compassion.

You never want to skew your approach, so consider how you can provide equitable levels of both challenge and support as an effective supervisor. For example...

Challenge: “I’d like to see you giving your supervisees more specific praise so they can better understand what it is that they’re doing well and that you’re thanking them for. They’re more likely to feel valued and to repeat those positive behaviors as a result.”

Support: “Let’s role-play a few ways that you can give that kind of specific praise. We can both give examples.”



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5 STRATEGIES

You'll become a more efficient, effective supervisor when you incorporate these five strategies into your overall approach: be inclusive, create a culture of transparency, advocate for your staff, be upfront about feedback and meet supervisees where they are. Here's more about each one...

“We can't afford not to invest in our staff.”
~ Dr. Amy Wilson, co-author of *Inclusive Supervision in Student Affairs*

1. Be Inclusive. Drs. Amy Wilson, Carmen McCallum and Matthew Shupp, co-authors of the book *Inclusive Supervision in Student Affairs*, shared four tenets of inclusive supervision during a *Student Affairs NOW* podcast. They include:

- **Creating Safe Spaces.** Wilson said, “So this may be done through creating a very open and trusting environment where staff can get feedback without fear; where there is an openness to different styles, different ways of thinking, different approaches; that every voice is valued, no matter what level you are within that organizational chart; that there’s a real openness to and an ethic of care and the personal interactions and where supervisors help staff navigate the culture of the office, the culture of the institution and just some of those boundaries.”
- **Cultivating Holistic Development.** This involves thinking about our supervisees as “these complex beings,” Wilson said. We need to consider people’s dimensions of identity and welcome, nurture, cultivate and celebrate them, whether it’s their race, gender, personality, sexual orientation... “all of that comes into that space,” she explained. “Supervisors who are more adept at bringing in those identities and welcoming those identities in the space create more responsive and satisfied staff.”
- **Demonstrating Vulnerability.** The authors found that people considered the most multiculturally competent were willing to acknowledge that they didn’t know everything, admit to their limits and engage in the discomfort of cultural mistakes. Those personal moments of vulnerability, Wilson said, “have the power to transform.”
- **Building Capacity in Others.** This is “both an action of inclusive supervisors,” Wilson explained, “but also an outcome of inclusive supervision.” Supervisors can actively invite and welcome conversations about social justice and inclusion, she said, while also focusing professional goal setting “around enhancing your competency in this area.” It’s also about modeling inclusiveness, therefore “both intentionally and unintentionally building your capacity to do the same.”

2. Create a Culture of Transparency. Being transparent at the beginning of your supervisory journey, as well as throughout, creates an environment of openness, builds better relationships, allows for more workplace engagement and leads to mutual trust. When you’re transparent, wrote Marcellus Braxton for *Modern Campus*, “other people can easily discern how you feel, what you want, and what motives you have.” They know where you’re coming from, rather than being constantly surprised. To be transparent, he said, you can:

- Outline your expectations for the job and the workplace culture
- Share your leadership style



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- Provide insight into your personality and how it informs your management style
- Create an open environment that isn't just one-sided by asking supervisees "how they feel rather than *telling* them how they should feel," Braxon recommended
- Share mistakes you've made to show vulnerability and humility

3. Advocate for Your Staff. Let supervisees know that you're there to support them in meaningful ways, including helping them reach their goals. Ask what they'd like to achieve in the next three to five years, Braxon suggested, and then help them get there. "We should embrace the advancement of our staff as a good thing," he wrote. In addition, he said being a good advocate in a supervisory role means:

- "Asking what supervisees want to get out of their positions
- Asking what experiences, skills, and qualifications they wish to gain (as well as having them articulate what they do well and what they wish to improve upon)
- Asking what they want in the future
- Articulating that I will hold myself accountable for helping them reach their goals"

4. Be Upfront About Feedback. When first meeting with a supervisee, Braxon recommended, ask them to identify areas of strength as well as those they wish to improve. Get them involved in the process upfront so feedback isn't perceived to be about judgment; rather it's a two-way conversation that encourages mutual responsibility and ownership. Braxon said the feedback loop can be most effective when:

- You "deliver specific, tangible feedback that relates to the areas supervisees identified as important"
- You're "solution-oriented in the feedback you provide" by identifying an issue, explaining why it's a problem or could become one, and then developing a plan to solve it in a reasonable timeframe
- You "ask your supervisee to help you brainstorm ways you can improve" so feedback goes in both directions – and so you're not just waiting for unsolicited feedback – allowing you to respond thoughtfully, ask for more specifics and develop a plan for improvement, together

5. Meet Supervisees Where They Are. All of these strategies point to one key thing: personalizing your supervisory approach to each unique individual you're privileged to supervise. For instance, some may initially balk at feedback because they've been (wrongly) taught that it's "all about criticism," so they'll need more care and feeding in this area. Others may be unsure about their three to five year goals, so will require more intentionality in goal-setting. Still others will need to get used to collaborating with their supervisor, as they may have learned that authority figures (like supervisors) should be providing all the answers. The trick with all of this is to meet your supervisees where they are and help them develop within a context that makes sense for *who* they are.

Sources: *Modern Campus*, 3/24/20; Shea, H. (Host). (2021, Feb. 3). Cultivating Inclusive Supervision Practices (No. 24) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Student Affairs NOW*. <https://studentaffairsnow.com/inclusive-supervision/>; Holmes, Emily, "Student Affairs Supervisor Training, Preparation, and Perception of Job Satisfaction," (2022). School of Education Doctoral Projects. 28. <https://aquila.usm.edu/highereddoctoralprojects/28>



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Tuning in to Your Supervisory Strengths and Areas of Improvement: SELF-WORK

Now that you've explored some effective supervisory strategies, it's time to take a good look at your own supervisory competencies. These don't just come to you instinctively; they require intentionality and a good dose of self-awareness.

So, first, what do you believe are 5 strengths you currently have in the supervisory area?

- 1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Pick one of these strengths and expand on it a bit, exploring why you believe you're fairly competent in this area, maybe providing an example, examining the impact of this supervisory strength, etc.

More about my strength:

How might you go about improving on this strength? Identify one action step.

Now, what do you believe are 5 areas needing improvement that you currently have in the supervisory area?

- 1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Pick one of these areas and expand on it a bit, exploring why you believe you need work in this area, maybe providing an example, examining the impact of this supervisory strength, etc.

More about my area needing improvement:

How might you go about improving on this area? Identify one action step.

CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT: MY STYLE

After reading about the challenge and support philosophy within student affairs, ask yourself how you might make this your mode of operation...

How might you challenge your supervisees in an effective way?

How might you support your supervisees in an effective way?



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Setting Expectations: SELF-WORK

A good supervisor lays the groundwork by sharing their professional values and expectations, goals for the year and supervision/leadership philosophy. As you begin to lay this groundwork, your staff will benefit by hearing about your...

- Expectations of them as employees and departmental/institutional representatives
- Supervisory style
- Goals for the year
- Departmental/institutional changes that may impact your time together
- Communication style and how you expect your interactions to go
- Strengths and limitations
- Pet peeves
- Level of availability and any limitations (e.g. how late to call, preference regarding texts or calls, etc.)
- Interests outside of work
- Other responsibilities you have

EXAMPLES OF EXPECTATIONS

Here are a few specific examples to get you thinking about the expectations you'll share with supervisees...

- Actively support the mission of our _____ program
- Be intentional in your work with students
- Communicate openly and frequently
- Strive for excellence, yet not perfection
- Complete paperwork and administrative tasks in a timely, thorough and thoughtful manner
- Be ethical, respectful and professional
- Ask questions freely
- Admit mistakes, and actively learn from them
- Have fun
- Take care of your personal well-being
- Take initiative
- Challenge yourself to grow
- Do your best work
- Support, encourage and celebrate fellow team members
- Abide by policies and procedures

YOUR TOP 10 EXPECTATIONS

Now it's your turn! What are the Top 10 expectations you believe are important to communicate to your supervisees this year?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

SET YOUR TEAM UP FOR SUCCESS

Taking the time to set team expectations is so important! When you do so, you make a commitment to yourself and to your staff. When setting expectations, consider the following areas...

- Attendance at meetings/ special events
- Attitude
- Attire
- Responding to various forms of communication
- Communication with one another
- Communication with your supervisor
- Role modeling and representing the institution
- Taking care of yourself
- Giving and getting feedback
- Handling problems and conflicts



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A Supervisory Conundrum: CASE STUDY

Good supervision is at the root of all we do in student affairs. When it goes well, things tend to run fairly smoothly. When it doesn't, however, workplace problems can arise, leading to bumps in the road. Consider the following scenario to determine how you might react...

THE ONE-ON-ONE BLOW-OFF

Milo is a young man you supervise. You hit it off during training and things went pretty well during the first month or two. You enjoy him and your weekly one-on-one discussions, and Milo seems to have a positive rapport with you.

One Sunday, Milo texts you that he won't be able to make his weekly one-on-one on Tuesday due to a dentist appointment. He's apologetic and asks if you can reschedule. Since it's a nutty week, you let him know that it's okay and that you can skip your one-on-one this time.

A few weeks later, Milo messages you at the last minute, saying he's overwhelmed and can't make time for your one-on-one. He doesn't apologize or give further explanation. You let him know that you'd like to reschedule, yet he doesn't respond to this request until you nudge him a few days later.

Soon after, for the third time in two months, Milo texts you that he's running behind and won't be able to make your one-on-one. At this point, you've had it and are feeling disrespected and frustrated. Doesn't Milo consider your time important? Why doesn't he see the importance of one-on-one supervision? You want to nip this behavior in the bud before it continues, yet aren't quite sure how exactly to approach Milo.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

And don't hesitate to discuss them with others, too!

- Why do you believe regular one-on-one supervision time is important?
- How might you get this across to Milo?
- How do issues of respect play into this scenario?
- What are some ways to approach conflict like this between you and a supervisee you have a good relationship with, without letting it taint that positive connection?
- What types of expectations might you set with Milo for future one-on-ones, flexibility, respecting each other's time and more so this type of situation doesn't arise again?



Section I: Key Student Affairs Skills and Expertise

Where You're at with Supervision Skills: SELF-ASSESSMENT

Supervision is made up of big things – like the 5 supervision strategies outlined in the beginning of this module – and little, everyday things, too. Take a look at the following supervision skills, some of which come from the University of Colorado Boulder's Student Employment Office...

1. Set a Good Example by Modeling Strong Work Habits
2. Be Flexible When Warranted
3. Communicate Expectations
4. Give Frequent Feedback So Nothing is a Surprise
5. Be Fair and Not Too Lenient
6. Take Time to Train Your Supervisees on Important Skills, Attitudes and Habits
7. Be a Team Player and Nurture Each Member's Unique Contributions
8. Show People Their Work is Valued
9. Provide Recognition in Supervisees' Preferred Style (public, written, private, verbal, etc.)
10. Offer Specific Praise So They Know What's Going Right and Why
11. Include Staff in Decision-Making
12. Build Trust
13. Be Vulnerable by Admitting Your Own Mistakes to Show Them They Can, Too
14. Pay Attention to Supervisees' Growth and Development
15. Advocate for Your Staff and What's Important to Them
16. Give Your Time
17. Look at Efforts Through a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Filter
18. Share the Vision to Add an Element of Purpose and Meaning
19. Tune in to Issues of Job Satisfaction and Employee Morale
20. Be an Educator

WHERE YOU'RE AT

In looking at these 20 supervision skills, consider a few things...

- Highlight the skill you feel is your top strength
- Underline 5 skills you're most comfortable with
- Put a star next to each skill you've used in the past week
- Circle 5 skills that you think need the most work
- Next to each one, write an action step for how you'll intentionally try to improve in that area
- Put a rectangle around the skill you'd most like to improve and then talk with *your* supervisor for guidance

Take these codes to your next supervisory meeting so you can discuss them with your supervisor and continue your self-awareness, self-improvement work.

Source: Student Employment, University of Colorado Boulder, www.colorado.edu/studentemployment