



You Can Do Both: Faculty as Field Supervisors

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Introduction

In a profession that emphasizes the importance of setting boundaries and avoiding dual relationships, it is typically not advised for a faculty member to also serve as a student's internship supervisor. The mere mention of dual relationships in social work practice often invokes thoughts of crossing boundaries and unethical behavior. However, in this article we present a model in which such relationships are encouraged, and argue that it may enhance student learning experiences. Now more than ever, schools of social work are managing a scarcity of resources, where cutbacks and budgetary constraints are an unfortunate reality. Additionally, demands on students' lives are often overwhelming, and the need to find flexible options for student learning, specifically field internships, is critical. The purpose of this paper is to present a model in which faculty at a school of social work also serve as supervisors to MSW interns. The article provides case examples and important components to consider when creating this type of internship experience.

The primary method of providing field education in social work practice is through the field instructor-student relationship (Bogo, 2005). In most cases, this occurs between a supervisor and a student at the agency at which the internship takes place. In 2012, we developed a program that aims to address barriers that prevent students from persisting in college. Drawing on the literature that suggests the importance of one supportive individual in a college student's life, and the relationship of this support to college persistence, we developed a program that pairs students with peer mentors to help provide the emotional and social support and referrals needed. Given the vast number of students seeking support through this program, the program

partnered with the school of social work to provide BSW and foundation-year MSW students internship opportunities to work with college students. These interns receive supervision from a MSW faculty member who is also one of the founders of the program. Over the years, this role of faculty-as-supervisor has presented students with incredible learning opportunities, and also with particular challenges. Before establishing this dual relationship, it is important to consider these challenges.

Context

While at the institution there have been five instances of students pursuing an internship in which faculty played dual roles (supervisor and instructor), the focus of this paper is primarily on one experience. The internship site referred to in this paper – the mentoring program described above – is unique in several ways. Our school of social work has used this site for nine years, since the inception of the program. In fact, the supervisor is also the person who helped develop the program in 2012. The relationship with the school of social work is unique because the program was founded upon principles of social work practice. Social work has been embedded in the design of the program, and the program has a positive and collaborative relationship with faculty and field staff at the school of social work. The faculty supervisor in this particular example works closely with the program team members, and attends team and staff meetings. There is ongoing communication among all team members, which helps students have a positive learning experience. Additionally, this program is located on the college campus, and provides a distinct opportunity for social work students to have an internship experience where they also attend school. The other instances in which faculty were also student supervisors were built on some of the lessons learned within this particular experience, while recognizing that some of these lessons are unique to this program.

Case Examples

The following brief case vignettes provide a few examples of some of the challenges that arose between students and the supervisor/faculty. Some of the overall themes that arose are the perception of favoritism, over-familiarity, and management of boundaries within the dual relationship. One of the assumptions we made was that it is the faculty member's responsibility to create an environment in which these challenges are identified and closely monitored.

Case Example 1: Familiarity

One of the students was taking a foundation-year course with the MSW faculty supervisor. The interaction between the supervisor and the student was more relaxed and less formal in weekly supervision than the interaction that occurred in the

classroom. It was a bit challenging at first to transition from the supervision setting to the classroom. There was a familiarity between the student and faculty supervisor that was not present with other students. The faculty supervisor had to manage this while also creating an environment of fairness to the other students.

Case Example 2: Other Students

The faculty member, in her role as supervisor, typically takes her supervisees (as a group) out to breakfast at the conclusion of supervision. The group breakfast is a way to terminate and thank the students for their work during their internship. Since these are foundation-year students, there is the potential that they may have the faculty supervisor as an instructor in their advanced year – and this indeed occurred for a few of the students in the following year. During one class session, a student mentioned that the faculty member had taken them out to breakfast. This obviously caused a look of confusion on the faces of some of the other students in the class.

Case Example 3: Internship Concerns

During one academic year, there was a transition in the program in which students were interning. At the college level, changes occurred that required the program to restructure how services were delivered. This restructuring caused a period of disorganization within the program and, as a result, had an impact on the students' internship experiences. Two of the students were frustrated with their internship and, understandably, discussed this with their faculty liaison. The students felt that the internship was disorganized and there was a lack of communication within the program; they questioned whether they wanted to continue with the internship. While this is a common experience for many students during their internship, what was unique and challenging is that their faculty supervisor could have been privy to these conversations. The usual opportunity for the faculty liaison to process this information is during a faculty meeting, where the faculty supervisor was present. There was concern about ensuring that students had a place to vent and process their frustrations with their academic advisor.

Case Example 4: Student Issues

One of the students was struggling in one of her foundation-year classes, in which the instructor was also her faculty supervisor. The faculty member had several meetings with the student about her performance in the course. It was uncertain whether or not the student would pass the class. During this time, the student attended supervision, where it was expected that the student process field-related issues. The existence of the power dynamic was obvious and there was concern about this interfering with the student's learning.

Case Example 5: Gift Giving

It is not uncommon that, at the end of the supervisor/student experience, the student gives a small gift to the supervisor. There were several instances in which the student interns provided a small “thank you” gift to the faculty supervisor. This would typically not occur in the usual faculty–student relationship. Similarly, many students hugged the faculty supervisor at the end of the supervisory relationship. While this wouldn’t customarily happen between a faculty and student, it is not uncommon between a supervisor and student.

Considerations

These examples briefly illustrate some of the challenges that surfaced over the years between the students and the faculty supervisor. While many of them were anticipated (and planned for), some of them we learned from as they emerged. When developing a field experience in which the supervisor is also the student’s faculty member, there are a number of elements to consider.

Transparency

This is perhaps the most important element to consider before beginning the student and faculty supervisor relationship. In our case, this began during the time when the students were being interviewed for their internship. We explained to them some of the potential challenges and discussed the important steps to take to manage these challenges. These conversations continued throughout the supervision experience. In fact, we found that even during times when the faculty supervisor was personally challenged, it was beneficial to discuss this with the students. This was done in a manner that supported student learning, and was about the student, not about the faculty supervisor processing her own feelings.

Another element of transparency took place in the classroom. The faculty supervisor found it useful to casually mention during a class session that she was the supervisor of the student. Without needing to take a significant amount of time during the class session to discuss this, a casual comment allowed other students to know that there was/is this other relationship.

Attentiveness to Power Relationships

There is no avoiding that a power relationship exists between an instructor and a student. Pretending that this does not exist, or that it can be prevented, is impossible. We found it particularly helpful to talk about these dynamics with the student intern

often. During the interview, we talked through scenarios with the student and gave them space to express discomfort. This was done at the agency without the presence of the faculty supervisor. Additionally, it was most critical that the faculty supervisor seek consistent peer consultation. This allowed for an opportunity for the faculty supervisor to elicit feedback.

Boundaries/Dual Relationships

As previously mentioned, this dual relationship was purposeful and enhanced the learning experience. In supervision, it was helpful to talk about boundaries and dual relationships, using their internship to model the components of a successful dual relationship. However, it was essential that the faculty supervisor maintain a professional boundary, especially outside the supervision experience.

Oversight of Supervisor

Other faculty were familiar with the agency/program and its experiences with student interns. Over the years, there had been missteps made by the program, the staff, and the supervisor. These missteps often impacted student interns. One of the lessons learned was the importance of staying open to constructive feedback and responding in a manner that puts students and their learning at the center. There were times when this was challenging, and we found peer support for the supervisor to be essential in order for them to receive this feedback in a constructive manner.

Student Disciplinary Issues

One of the most challenging aspects of this experience was when students had issues within the class taught by the faculty supervisor. Fortunately, this did not occur often; however, it was difficult when it did occur. While there may be no way of eliminating the discomfort that comes with this, we found ways to minimize the risk. Being transparent and honest throughout the supervision experience is crucial. We also found that clarifying with student interns (before any challenges arose) that they are able to switch sections to another professor's was helpful. We also found it useful to encourage students to talk to other professors about the coursework.

Written Policy

A few years into this program we learned that it was especially beneficial to have a written policy in place for the student interns. The policy addressed what to do when challenges arise, and also discussed what the student intern can expect from their faculty supervisor regarding transparency, honesty, confidentiality, and boundaries. Finally, and most importantly, it stressed that the intent of the policy was to protect

and support the student should any issues arise.

Confidentiality

The faculty supervisor spoke to the student interns about her commitment to protecting their confidentiality. This promise took time for the supervisor, and trust from the student. One of the promises was that whatever was discussed in supervision would not be brought back to other faculty in any manner (with obvious exceptions). We also explained to student interns that at faculty meetings, faculty often discuss student issues. The faculty supervisor provides all faculty with the names of the student interns she supervises. If any of those students are to be discussed, they are discussed last, and the faculty supervisor excuses herself from the meeting.

Conclusion

We have found that this experience has offered a tremendous opportunity for students, and has enhanced their learning. For example, the faculty supervisor is fully connected to the student's academic experience. The supervisor's familiarity with the curricula helps the student as they navigate applying course concepts to the internship experience. This manifests itself in the faculty supervisor being able to answer questions about course assignments, helping students with their learning contracts, and seeking learning opportunities that are connected to the coursework. This experience also affords the faculty supervisor an opportunity to model boundaries and management of dual relationships in a professional and positive manner.

While not the primary purpose of this paper, we would be remiss if we did not briefly discuss the benefit of this experience to the faculty supervisor, and to the school of social work in general. In a supervisory role, the faculty member is able to learn about the student internship experience in a way that otherwise would not happen simply by being in the classroom. The faculty member benefits by getting to know a student in a different capacity, and this often translates into being better able to help them in the classroom and as they prepare for either their advanced-year internship or their professional goals after graduation.

In our view, the school of social work has also benefitted from this experience. There were several instances in which we reevaluated and changed course assignments based on the field experience. The faculty had first-hand knowledge about how some of the assignments were not reflective of the field experience, and changes were made accordingly.

Finally, this experience has benefited the program and the college. The program has benefited from having social workers as key individuals in providing support

and resources to thousands of college students. The work that the interns engage in is grounded in social work principles; therefore, the program benefits from having students apply these principles when working with students toward their college success. This also benefits the college, as the interns can help student retention by being the support person who students can trust and reach out to when they are struggling. Additionally, the college benefits from having interns serving thousands of college students at no cost to the college. In sum, we believe that, overall, this model offers a positive learning experience to students, provided that there is honesty, transparency, and openness to communicate and anticipate challenges.

References

Bogo, M. (2005). Field instruction in social work: A review of the research literature. In L. Shulman & A. Safyer (Eds.), *Supervision in counseling: Interdisciplinary issues and research* (pp. 163-193). Haworth.