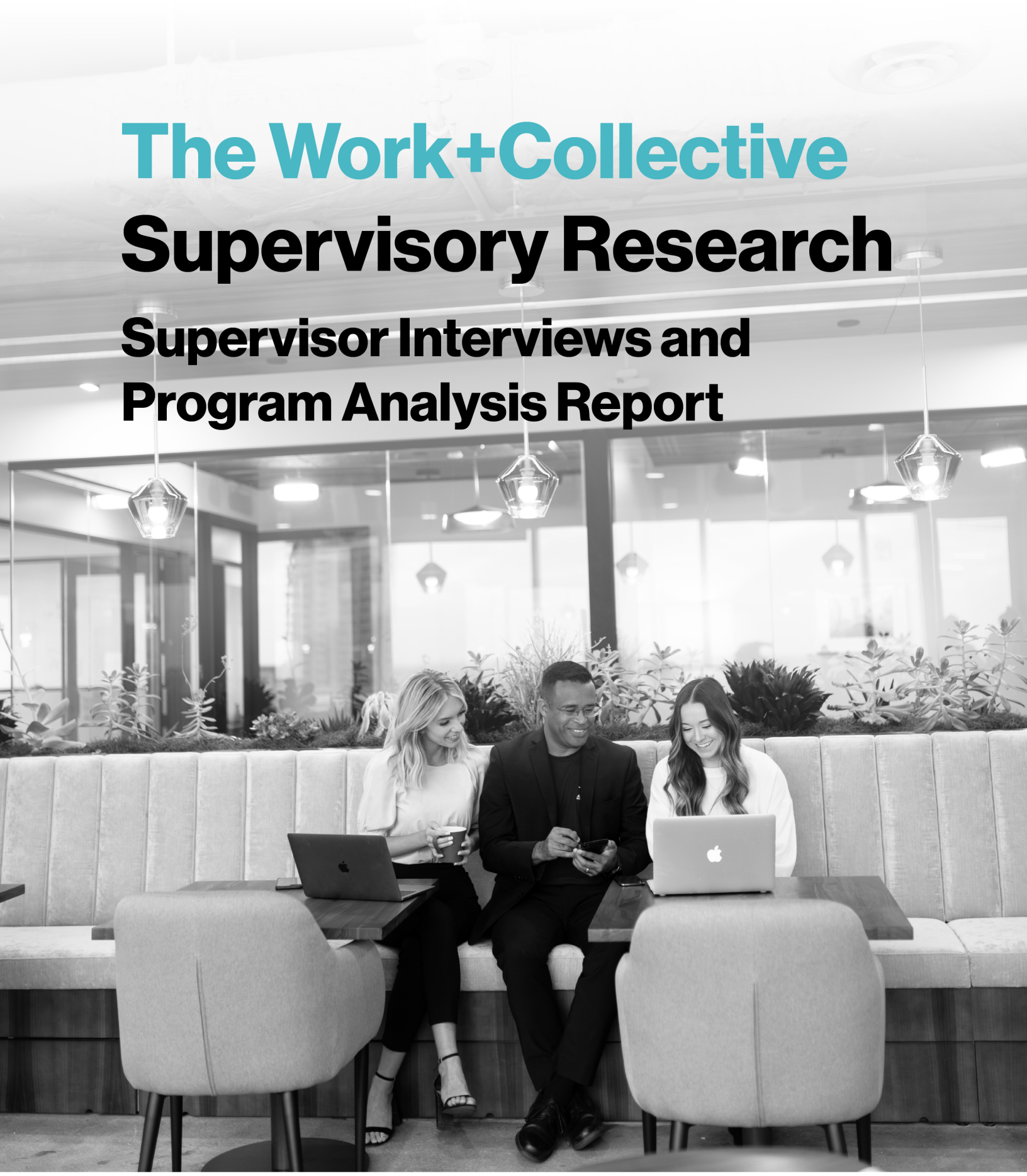
The Work+Collective

Supervisory Research

Supervisor Interviews and Program Analysis Report



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How can we support our working learners?

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Executive Summary

Explore findings from master's program analysis and professional interviews, uncovering gaps and challenges in supervising working learners.

The Background

The Work+Collective, a network of higher education institutions, has identified effective supervision as critical to achieving their organizational goals. Despite its importance, training for supervisors of working learners (WLs) remains inconsistent. This report examines the preparedness of higher education professionals to supervise WLs through an analysis of master's programs and interviews with current practitioners.

Methodology

The study analyzed 195 higher education master's programs to identify curricula related to student supervision. Additionally, 14 higher education professionals from the Work+Collective were interviewed. These professionals provided insights into their training for supervision and supervisory practices with WLs.

Findings

Program Analysis

Only 13.9% of the analyzed programs included coursework on supervision, with a limited focus on supervising WLs specifically. In contrast, 65.1% offered leadership courses, and 80.5% had experiential learning requirements, but only 1.9% of these specifically mentioned supervisory skills as a key outcome. The lack of dedicated supervisory training in master's programs contrasts sharply with the need for such skills in professional practice.

Supervisor Interviews

Most participants felt their academic programs inadequately prepared them for a WLs. While 71.4% had no specific coursework on supervision, practical experiences like internships were cited as the most valuable preparation.

Despite limited training, 78.6% of participants expressed a strong personal commitment to effective supervision, emphasizing personal support, career preparation, and clear communication and expectations as key focuses in their supervisory practice. However, systemic support for supervisory practices was notably lacking.

Participants reported insufficient institutional support for supervising WLs. Effective supervision often depended on individual motivation rather than systemic or departmental backing. Participants noted a lack of training materials, inconsistent support structures, and, most significantly, systemic issues that inhibit effective supervision.

Recommendations

Higher education master's programs and institutions more broadly should prioritize supervisory training for WL supervisors. Incorporating this focus into curricula and training initiatives can bridge the existing skills gap.

Institutions must administer systemic change to prioritize WL supervision and rectify ways existing policies and procedures inhibit effective supervision. Institutions should:

- Improve and standardize hiring and onboarding processes for WLs.
- Recognize WL supervisory responsibilities in job descriptions and allocate time and resources accordingly.
- Evaluate and address systemic barriers impacting student employment, such as support structures and supervisory ratios.
- Implement measures to assess and address equity gaps in supervisory experiences based on demographic analyses.

02

Introduction and Methodology

Examine the disconnect between higher education curricula and supervisory practices in preparing professionals to supervise working learners.

Introduction

The Work+Collective, a national network of American two- and four-year public institutions of higher education devoted to enhancing the student employment experience on their campuses, sees effective supervision as a key practice in service of their organizational goals. Supervisors can make or break WL experiences, yet training for and in student supervisory positions remains inconsistent among those working in higher education.

This report discusses both the assessment of higher education Masters programs and interviews with current higher education professionals to understand how higher education professionals are prepared to supervise WLs. This program analysis provided insights into the differences between what program administrators find valuable to teach in their curricula. These values do not entirely align with those of practitioners, whose preparedness for their professional careers, especially for supervising WLs, varies greatly and often does not align with the common and most frequent experiences of their professional practice.

Methodology

This program analysis utilized the NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Graduate Program Directory Search to identify well-established Masters programs in Administration, Counseling, Leadership, and Student Learning and Development. 195 programs were identified with degree programs that are often aligned with preparation for professional careers in higher education, as opposed to an academic discipline more likely to lead to a faculty position. Each program was analyzed to determine how supervising WLs fit into the curriculum, if at all, compared with courses about leadership and other practical or experiential learning opportunities.

In addition, all 15 current members of the Work+Collective were invited to share an interview interest form with new professionals on their campuses. They responded depending on their eligibility based on the following criteria:

> Have graduated from a relevant master's program (e.g. Higher Education Administration) in the last five years.

> Have worked in higher education (including positions in student affairs, academic affairs, etc.) since graduation from their master's program.

> Supervise currently or have supervised during their previous professional or graduate experience, WLs (i.e. paid student employees).

Respondents were also informed that they could be randomly selected for a pair of Beats Headphones to incentivize participation. Most respondents met these qualifications, though some expressed interest and were interviewed with more professional experience or since supervising students was no longer part of their job description. Some also had a master's degree in a field other than higher education. Individuals were encouraged to share the sign-up form with others they knew would qualify for and be interested in this interview opportunity.

21 individuals expressed interest in being interviewed, and all were invited to participate. Of these, 14 scheduled and completed an interview. These interviews occurred between June 14 and July 12, 2024. The interview protocol details a review of participant consent, which was also collected as they indicated their interest and scheduled their interview, as well as a series of guiding questions related to participants' current professional role and supervisory experiences, their preparation for supervising WLs, and their prioritization of supervision. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for common themes.

03

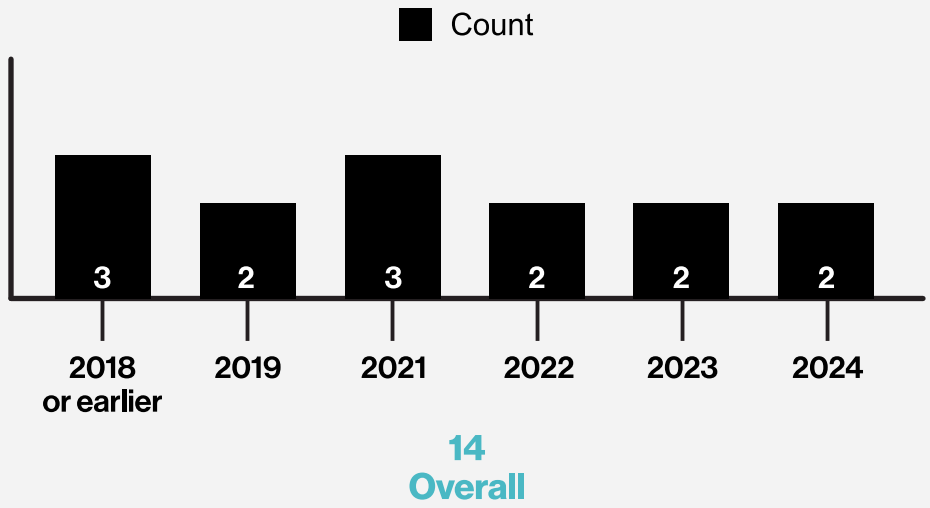
Participant Demographics

Including participants from six universities with diverse gender, racial identities, and master's degrees in higher education fields, we explore the demographic variety.

Participant Demographics

Participants represented six participating universities in the Work+Collective. 71% identify as female, 21% as male, and 7% as non-binary. 71% identify as White and 29% identify as Black, African American, or American Descendant of Slavery.

64% hold master's degrees in higher education or a related field, while 36% hold master's degrees in different fields, including public administration, communication, and technology management. Table 1 depicts the distribution of master's program graduation years.



04

Findings

WL supervision is underemphasized in higher education master's programs, with few focusing on supervisory skill development.

Program Analysis

Put simply, WL supervision is not a curricular priority in higher education master's programs. **Of the 195 programs analyzed, only 13.9% included a class in the curriculum related to supervision.** However, many of these classes were not required to graduate, focused on supervision broadly and not necessarily or explicitly on WL supervision, and/or only included supervision as one of many professional skills covered in the course.

For comparison, **65.1% of programs included a leadership course** in the curriculum. While these courses also varied in focus, they demonstrate a stronger curricular commitment across higher education programs to leadership theory than a key practical avenue in which leadership theory could be applied, namely WL supervision.

80.5% of the analyzed programs also contained some kind of experiential learning requirement, such as an assistantship or supervised internship. Based on available information, **only 1.9% (n = 3) of these programs with experiential requirements explicitly mentioned developing supervisory skills** as an outcome of these experiences.

Though everyone who supervises WLs in a higher education context does not hold a degree in higher education, these programs do not prioritize skills or practice in student supervision. This curricular emphasis (or, more accurately, the lack thereof) does not match the needs of higher education professionals, as many jobs for which one might be "prepared" with a higher education degree include student supervision as a key practice.

05

Supervisor Interviews

Individuals share their journey and engagements related to supervision, academic experiences, training and more as we delve into interviews.

Introductions and Current Role

Participants began their interview by sharing generally about their current position, their journey into the field of higher education, and their experience supervising WLs. These questions primarily served to provide context for the interview and help participants begin to think about supervision as a part of their professional journey. As such, most of these responses were disparate, highlighting professional experiences from Residential Life to Educational Technology and almost everywhere in between, as well as supervisory experience with a handful to dozens of WLs.

However, **71.4% of participants identified their own WL experience as a key reason for their professional journey in higher education.** As one described:

> **"I entered higher education because of positive experiences I'd had as a working learner. So, during my undergraduate career I worked for various departments on campus to earn a paycheck, be able to afford to stay over the summer and not have to go home cross country. So you know, kind of fell into that, had positive experiences doing so, and really felt like higher education was a place that I could, you know, see myself working long term. So that's what I looked for in my first professional roles. And I've stuck with it ever since."**

This trend highlights work-based learning, especially in student employment, as a high-impact learning opportunity.

Preparation for Supervision

The next portion of the interview engaged in questions about participants' preparation for supervision, both in and beyond their academic programs. All participants identified their master's programs as the most recent academic experience that prepared them for their current role. However, **71.4% indicated that they did not have any class focused on student supervision** in their program:

> **"And then, in relation to the students, I do feel like there were no classes or anything focused on the working learner parts of things. There was no even mention of it, and I had to keep asking my professors, 'So how would you apply this to, you know, students talking to their peers about this kind of stuff?' and there was no real consensus on anything."**

> **"So there was no course or no anything that was outright of like, 'Hey, this is how you supervise... student workers,' or these are the tools or this is how...you would supervise student workers."**

Participants whose master's programs were outside of higher education were far more likely (60.0%) than those with higher education master's degrees (11.1%) to have a supervision-related course in their programs. Among those who completed higher education programs (n = 9), some considered student development theory (55.6%) or a class in counseling or helping skills designed to help foster support skills in that field (33.3%) as most relevant to their supervisory practice.

Half (50.0%) of all respondents suggested that hands-on experience, such as an internship or assistantship, **was the most helpful part of their academic experience** in terms of preparing them for supervision, whether or not supervision was specifically a focus of their development in those experiences:

"I think that my program really focused on how you get internship experiences in your GA position, and it really leaned on that as the way to translate it. I don't know that I would say a lot of translation happened within my courses, and like really great reflection on what we would actually do in those situations. I wouldn't say it was the best."

"But I would say what prepared me the most to supervise were the, you know, jobs that I had while I was in grad school and part of the grad school experience was we were required to do internships, and we were required to do...most people at least, did assistantships and things like that. So you know, I guess you could argue that it's built into the master's program. But in terms of the classroom piece itself we didn't discuss supervision specifically."

Beyond their academic experiences, participants identified internal WL supervisor development opportunities at their university (42.9%), supervisor training for their role in residential life (14.3%), and sessions at professional conferences (7.1%) as the only spaces where they have encountered additional supervision training. Notably, these trainings varied in quality and their explicit focus on student supervision, compared to supervision more broadly. Many of those citing internal development opportunities explicitly cited Work+ as a key factor in the availability of those opportunities:

"Work+ is the first time where I've been like able to communicate and talk with other student supervisors outside of my own unit."

"We did host once we started onboarding the Work+Collective we did host a supervisor training last summer. And I was involved and participated in that. And that was definitely helpful, more so in the fact of understanding all of the actual procedures that were in place for our university."

Notably, however, **42.9% of participants said the only training they could cite outside of their academic program was their own experience:**

> **"Although there is no like, you know, set training, I can at least be there to supplementally train my colleagues who are doing it for the first time now, cause I didn't have anyone to kind of go to, and I'm you know, learning on the fly how to supervise student workers."**

These responses about preparedness continue to support the idea that academic and professional development programs designed to enhance the work of higher education professionals simply do not consider WL supervision a priority. While individual supervisors may demonstrate the motivation to learn and perform well in this area, little structural or systemic support exists to encourage their pursuit of effective student supervision.

Prioritizing Supervision

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the population and sampling process, participants consistently expressed interest in supervising WLs effectively. **78.6% explicitly mentioned a personal commitment to effective supervision,** no matter how they're able to prioritize it as a professional practice:

> **"That's why I come in every day [as opposed to working remotely]. So students could run the front desk. No question. They have the training. They could run it without us being there, you know, just ask us questions on our messaging platform, but I just think it's better for one of us to be here to be able to be like available in a moment's notice for them and feel like they have the support they need, but they know that they got it."**

> **"I view [supervision] as very important and a really high priority, because I want to have good relationships with my students. But I think when you would actually like break down the amount of time dedicated to putting work into it. It's very, it would be a lot lower than most of my other tasks."**

Participants were asked to describe what they prioritize in their supervisory relationships, and the most common themes included **personal support** (85.7%), **career preparation** (57.1%), **effective communication** (35.7%), and **clear expectations** (21.4%). Supervisors often spoke in clear and compelling ways about these priorities:

> **"The [broader] culture doesn't breed the certainty... that the step you make is gonna be, it's gonna be okay to make mistakes, like that's the purpose of the journey. Just you have to reflect and learn, and then continue making steps to take risk and things of that nature. And so like, how I operate, how I lead [here] is to cultivate confidence. And then coming to my current role, a lot of it stemmed from also my colleague who also believes in that, of how can we create a safe space for students to be able to be open about what are they struggling with in regards to their personal and professional growth, even saying, it's okay to not know where you wanna go, but let's have a conversation."**

"I think one of the most important things for me is the **presence**. So even if you're not currently working with the students on a one on one basis that maybe there's some, you know, talking to customers, and is that I situate myself up at our front desk in a different, like cubicle, where I could still hear, see, and know what's happening."

"I want them to feel like even though I am their supervisor, that we are working to, we're **co-designing our relationship.** It is not me to tell them how this will look. It is for us to discuss and move through that together, and if they have specific needs that I'm not providing, I want to create a space where they can ask for those things."

"I wanna model what a good supervisor looks like to students, especially so that they know when they're **going out into the workforce**, you know, what they're looking for, and, you know, have hopefully been exposed to some good practices."

"I wanna make sure that my student employees know that I'm **engaged and invested in their professional development, but also their personal development.** And I think, being within the career services realm, it makes it a little bit easier to prioritize those conversations with my student employees, because the things that they are doing to work on their personal development will flow into the job. Helping them look for jobs and internships that helps them as well as working with other students."

"And letting them know from the beginning, you know, these are things that I want you to do. These are things that if you make these mistakes we might be having some conversations and letting them know what that looks like, too. So if we do end up having to have any corrective conversations, they've been exposed to what that's gonna look like. **And they know what that structure is like.** So it doesn't come as a surprise."

These responses and themes suggest these supervisors are highly motivated to cultivate a positive working and learning environment for their students, despite the lack of training they've experienced and support they receive in their positions. **These participants were far more likely to indicate that they felt supported by their specific department (64.3%) as opposed to their institution as a whole (7.1%)**. Institution-wide support was almost entirely lacking, but departmental support often occurred for practical reasons (e.g. students serve a key functional role and their supervision is, therefore, valuable) or based on the personal commitments of individual directors or managers.
On this lack of support:

> **"I mean, I don't feel a ton of connection to [my division] in terms of what I do day to day at work."**

Given the essential role WLs fill at universities, that their supervision is not prioritized feels surprising. In fact, **42.9% of participants said they initiate and drive their supervision**, as opposed to receiving departmental or institutional support to do so:

> **"I think that there's nothing necessarily set up in the structure of the department that encourages prioritizing the supervision. I think it's something that I have to self lead. So I think that my department appreciates it. But you know it's not necessarily encouraged in a structural or organizational way other than you know verbally talking about like this is something that is important. I think it's something that people want to be prioritized, but it can be difficult to build structures to do so."**

In addition, only **28.6% of participants explicitly mentioned that student supervision is included and prioritized in their job descriptions.** Systemically, student supervision does not reach a significant level of prioritization, even if individual supervisors are committed to creating meaningful experiences with their WLs. **All participants gave responses that suggest they are effective supervisors, but this effective supervision is occurring primarily due to their own individual motivation to do so, not due to their academic or other training, institutional priorities, or departmental structures and policies.**

Supervisor Influences and Growth Opportunities

Participants were asked to identify any individuals that have affected their practice of supervision, **and all (100%) were able to identify a positive supervisory influence** in their working lives. However, unprompted, **35.7% of participants also identified negative supervisory influences** that impact their supervisory practice:

> **"Yeah, I mean, I think every single super supervisor I've had from when I first was a student worker myself up until now has impacted my supervision style and how I approach it. For both positive things I've taken away from it as well as things I've taken away saying, you know, I wanna do it differently. And I think that you know, I think that's the nature of everyone. You look at your own experiences and you decide what you liked and what you didn't like, and you kind of build that into your own style as well."**

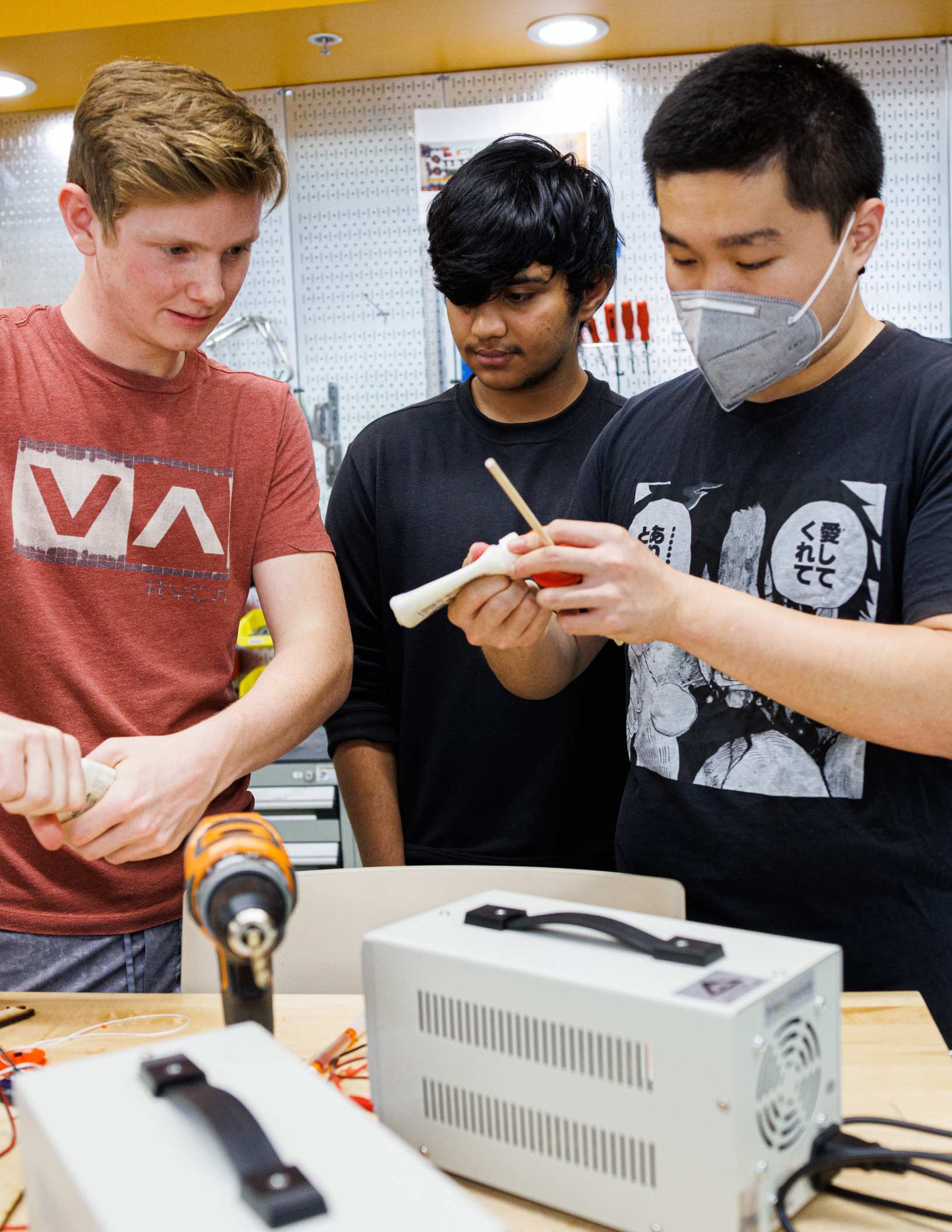
"I've had experiences with both good and bad supervisors and I have learned so much, I think, even from the ones who aren't so great.... So I feel like I really learn from the ones I don't care for. Because those I feel like are more inherent, like the ones who I had a supervisor in grad school, who, you know, like, didn't listen to my ideas, didn't take time for me, wasn't interested in getting to know me personally, all things that I have come to realize that I really value. So yeah, I think I've actually learned more from the ones who weren't very good supervisors for me."

These responses suggest both that experience continues to be the main teacher of supervisory practices and that supervisory practice matters and leaves a lasting impact. With the evident lack of training in this area, wide experiences of practice, learning supervisory dos and don'ts intentionally or unintentionally from one's own supervisors, are the most common ways supervisors actually learn to supervise. However, the ease with which each participant could identify supervisors that impacted them, positively or negatively, solidifies the value of this role and professional function as one that can be particularly formative and high-impact for student learning.

Participants were then asked broadly about what would enhance their WL supervision. While some participants mentioned **training opportunities** (42.9%), gaining more **practical skills and experience** (28.6%), or **expanding or centralizing resources** available to them (14.3%), **the largest proportion (71.4%) identified systemic barriers that needed to be addressed:**

> **"My students, we get a lot of like mandatory trainings passed down from the university, but they are all at different times, with sometimes like very aggressively worded consequences. Like, if you don't do your information security training, you will get fired. And you have one week to do it. And I'm like this student doesn't work this week, they work every other week, and sometimes they get a little lost in that."**

> **"I definitely think, at least as far as the hiring goes, that is the hardest part of being a student supervisor. It's not when they're here, when they're here, things are great. It's when I have vacancies."**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"You see internships coming from IBM, Google, Apple and people are signing up to do that work for free. But we're still paying our learners, but they'd rather go work for a larger name for free, because they think they're getting some experience and why are they not feeling like they could do that on their own campus?"

"But I do think like limits on how many people you can supervise and and although of that sort of thing would be really helpful, like making it a bigger part of every person's job description. Like, let's make it a percentage of every person's job description that has students, not just a bullet point you supervise these this group?"

"So I think the biggest thing is finding, creating better mechanisms to support and even reward faculty and staff that are able to do above, beyond, to create more equity in that space of support. Understand there's different layers to when we talk about supporting students, in their personal and professional journeys.

Not only do higher education institutions tend to not support WL supervision, **they often operate in ways that inherently inhibit effective supervision.** Training and skill development will still enhance supervisory practice, but institutions would benefit from holistically analyzing their policies and procedures that affect student job searching, applying, hiring, onboarding, training, performing and evaluating in and for WL positions.

Other Notable Responses

When given the opportunity to identify anything else they wanted to say about WL supervision, participants offered a wide range of responses. Some of these below describe the overall struggle a participant faces in their position that further depicts a lack of institutional support, person-first supervisory support (mentioned at some point by 28.6% of participants), and the need to constantly train student staff:

> **"My role is to support them as a human first... like their human needs come first always to me."**

> **"It's like supervising students is Groundhog Day. You are constantly training your staff. You are never functioning at a level where your staff are fully trained."**

"The only other thing that I would say is that I think in general the mindset is that you figure it out as you go, and that's okay. Where I think that can cause a lot of damage when someone doesn't know what they're doing, but you know, I mean, I'm talking about a GA that we have in my department who supervises 90 people and never got any training for it.

When I was a GA we actually like our training for the staff didn't exist, and I had to make that, as a, you know, 24 year old first-year grad student who didn't have any classes under her belt... I think I did a pretty good job with what I had, but I wasn't at that time able to base anything off of best practices or theory, because I didn't even know that that was something I should do, and I think it gets left to that a lot. And you know, when, because when I bring up things like we should have supervisor training for student staff, you know, staff, who have been working 20 years, are like, well, I never got that, and I figured it out, and I'm like, but do you do you know that you're doing it the right way? Like even you could deal with some training, not just me who's never done it before. And then that that creates a cycle, and I know you probably know all of this.

But you know, if the person who I'm looking up to never had training either. How do I know that that was a good example? I'm just basing it off of what I personally liked, and so I think that, like having standards and training that people have to go through is the best way, in my opinion, to improve a lot of these problems."

06 Conclusion

Supervisory training is absent in higher education pathways, requiring systemic changes to prioritize and support student supervision.

Conclusion

Among these findings, the following takeaways feel most pressing for application and future research:

Supervisory training is largely absent from the most common pathways higher education has constructed for developing its own professionals

Whether based in a higher education master's program or in professional development experiences, training explicitly related to supervising student staff is not a field-wide priority. Skills in this area are often developed by accident, and focusing on student supervision as an essential professional development initiative would meet a skills gap among staff at most higher education institutions.

Effective student supervision is largely due to individual supervisor motivation, not institutional or departmental prioritization

Well-intentioned professionals can only resist other priorities for so long. Despite this lack of broader support, individual supervisors continue to have a profound impact on their students.

Systemic changes are necessary to address the negative impacts current institutional practices have on WL supervision

This lack of prioritization is not neutral. Institutions seeking to enhance the WL experience cannot assume that their existing systems will support the processes and development needed if focus shifts to student employment; these systems serve as barriers to effective supervision. Based on suggestions from interview participants, institutions would benefit from:

- Unifying and enhancing hiring and onboarding processes for WLs to ease the burden on individual supervisors as they hire.
- Recognizing WL supervision as a responsibility on par with professional staff supervision, and ensuring positions have space designated in their job descriptions to dedicate to supervisory practice.
- Considering supervisor to WL ratios as an identifier of areas of concern. If areas can only operate with student staff that will inherently receive no support, they may need to reconsider their operations or receive additional resources.
- Identify means of evaluating WL experiences (including those of their supervisors) that include effective demographic analyses, in order to recognize and subsequently rectify and equity gaps based on identity.

About the Author

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Jonathan serves as the Director for First and Second Year Experiences at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. Prior to beginning this position in 2024, Jonathan served in student leadership development at VCU and continues to bring a passion for building inclusive communities, developing innovative leaders, and transformative learning experiences to his role as Director. He is a current Ph.D. student in VCU's School of Education, where his research focuses on equitable and transformative supervision of student leaders and employees. He holds a Master of Divinity from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, and a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies and History from Messiah University in Mechanicsburg, PA.

Jonathan also brings to his role a commitment to equity, justice, and inclusion that stems from his role as an ordained United Methodist minister. He seeks to cultivate spaces of welcome for all students and ensure every student has the support they need to accomplish their goals. He lives in Henrico with his spouse, Abby, and rescued pitbull, Winnie, and loves improv comedy, music, video games, and podcasts.

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