

Defining the Job of University Supervisor:  
A Department-Wide Study  
of University Supervisors' Practices

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Introduction

The descriptions of our first positions as assistant professors included the supervision of student teachers, a set of responsibilities that we believed we clearly understood. As prior secondary teachers, we had served as cooperating teachers for student teachers and had worked with university supervisors from local colleges and universities, and during our graduate work at different universities, we had supervised the student teachers ourselves. Consequently, we, as well as most participants in teacher education, were quite familiar with the use of the term "university supervisor" to describe the individual who oversees student teachers' work and represents the university during teacher candidates' internship in the K-12 schools. As we discussed our prior work with student teachers, however, we discovered that, although we had had similar experiences, our practices were certainly not identical. This finding prompted us to question the notion of universality in the practices of university supervisors. We wanted to determine whether there was clear understanding, not only across the nation but even

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within one department, of what a university supervisor actually does. To address this issue, we designed a study to explore how individual university supervisors, operating within a teacher education department of a college of education at a large public U.S. institution, valued, defined, and enacted their supervision of student teachers.

### Research Gap: Limited Research on University Supervisors

The practicum field experience, in which a teacher candidate, cooperating classroom teacher, and university supervisor form a cooperative learning triad, is often cited as fundamental to the development of beginning teachers. In fact, when classroom teachers are asked to evaluate their own field experiences, they consistently rank that portion of their education as the single most influential factor in their teacher education programs (Clifford & Guthrie, 1990; Franke & Dahlgren, 1996; Friedus, 2002; Geddes & Wood, 1997; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Lortie, 1975; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1987; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002; Zahorik, 1988). Further, time in the field has been recognized as having “the potential to play a major role in helping novices learn to teach” (Borko & Mayfield, 1995, p. 502).

Given the recognized importance of the student teaching experience, it is not surprising that literature on multiple aspects of the student teaching experience is abundant. However, despite the potential for university supervisors, as participants of the student teaching experience, to shape the development of teacher candidates, literature on the responsibilities and practices of these individuals is “relatively sparse and outdated” (Enz, Freeman, & Wallin, 1999, p. 132). Of the 2,040 pages that comprise the first two editions of handbooks of research on teacher education (Houston, Haberman, & Sikula, 1990; Sikula, Buttery, & Guyton, 1996), only seven pages are devoted to the members of the student teaching triad, and of those seven pages, just two-and-one-half are allotted specifically to university supervisors and their relationships to their university and to the triad. Moreover, the variety and range of their practices are not examined.

Student teacher supervision by university-based individuals occupies four pages in *Studying Teacher Education* (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), but these pages relate to supervision only in professional development school settings and not in the majority of schools that are not affiliated with colleges of education. Finally, in the recently published third edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, subtitled “Enduring Questions in Changing Contexts” (Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser, McIntyre, & Demers, 2008), neither student

teaching nor student teacher supervision are afforded attention within the volume's 1,354 pages. Consequently, not only is there a dearth of literature on the work of university supervisors, but there is also a lack of understanding about the complexity or nuances of the job.

In part, the absence of research on the work of university supervisors may reflect the tension that exists between the conceptual and pragmatic aspects of teacher education. Teacher education classes often focus on theoretical aspects of teaching, while university supervisors often concentrate on the practical application of such theories. As Grossman et al. (2009) assert, "Practice has always had an uneasy relationship, at best, with higher education" (p. 2056). Standing at the intersection of kindergarten through 12th-grade practice and higher education, the work of the university supervisor has been largely ignored.

In response to that gap in the research, this study addresses the following questions: What value is placed on the work of the university supervisor at this institution? What practices are articulated by the department and enacted (or not enacted) by department members? What practices are constructed by individual supervisors, and are these practices consistent within and across programs?

## Research Methods

### Design

The nature of our questions called for a qualitative study design. Because we sought to understand how the members of a particular teacher education department defined and enacted a common, shared, lived experience of university supervision, we assumed a phenomenological (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Schwandt, 2003) approach that allowed us to identify, compare, and contrast the ways in which individual members of this department, given the oversight and culture of the department, defined university supervision and enacted supervisory practices.

### Context

We chose Smyth University<sup>1</sup> as the site of our study for a variety of reasons. As a large, nationally ranked university, Smyth offers a well-regarded teacher education program. The secondary teacher education department houses four distinct programs with student teachers (English education, mathematics education, science education, and social science education), thereby providing a range of content areas. Further, the programs employ individuals of various ranks to perform the work of

the university supervisor: an emeritus professor, full professors, associate professors, assistant professors, adjunct faculty, and graduate students.

Each of the participants in this study had teaching experience in at least one middle and/or high school before taking on the work of a university supervisor. One individual had taught in a correctional institution and in an adult education program, in addition to several high schools, and another had taught in military schools as well as a high school. The amount of teaching experience for the participants ranged from one to 34 years, with a mean of 8.7 years. Three individuals, all former middle or high school teachers, held the position of non-tenure track adjunct faculty. Two of these taught one or two classes as well as supervised student teachers, and one worked only as a university supervisor. Unlike many teacher education programs at other universities, at the time of this study, this particular department did not employ retired teachers or administrators as university supervisors unless they were serving as adjunct faculty. The department satisfied its need for university supervisors for all its student teachers through faculty members (regular line or adjunct) and doctoral students (all of whom were required to have at least three years of teaching experience).

In addition, Smyth University does not provide an induction program for those taking up the work of university supervision. In this regard, this university is not unique. Recent research on student teacher supervision reports that, of 60 Carnegie Corporation-defined research extensive universities that participated in a study on university supervision of student teachers, one-third provided no induction programs for new university supervisors, and the duration, structure, and focus of the programs offered at or required by the other universities varied greatly (Steadman, 2006). Additionally, while the use of particular kinds of forms and a minimum number of visits—three—are required by the College of Education, the college affords a great degree of autonomy to its university supervisors in developing and enacting their practices. Thus, the practices that emerge from this study reflect, to a significant degree, individual decisions rather than university-imposed practices. The elements of national status, variety of content areas, constellation of faculty members and graduate students, and level of autonomy, qualified Smyth University as a rich site for the study of university supervisor practices.

Because not all individuals who regularly participate in supervision were involved in that work during the study's duration, data collected include department members' current and historical supervisory practices. Therefore, the participation of those with supervisory experience, a total of 14 individuals, was sought, and all voluntarily agreed to take part in the study as a means to construct a comprehensive picture of the

supervisory practices, past and present, employed by members of the department. Table 1 presents the program and professional rank data.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Four sets of data were collected for this study. The first set of data was gathered during a regularly scheduled department meeting during the fall semester when the 13 department members in attendance responded to an anonymous two-item questionnaire: Do you believe that the university supervisor is a necessary component of the student teaching experience? (Please briefly explain your answer) and Who should do the work of the university supervisor?

The second set of data was gathered from August through April during the year of the study. This set consists of the minutes from nine department meetings (averaging two hours and four minutes each). The minutes of each meeting were analyzed to identify times when faculty addressed university supervision issues.

Individual university supervisor's responses to a 30-question instrument designed to illuminate not only the structure of their practices but

**Table 1**  
**Participants**

<i>Program</i>	<i>Student Teachers</i>	<i>University Supervisors</i>	<i>Professional Rank</i>
English Education	9	7	1 professor emeritus 1 full professor 1 associate professor 1 assistant professor 2 adjunct faculty 1 doctoral student
Math Education	5	3	2 associate professors 1 assistant professor
Science Education	4	1	1 full professor
Social Science Education	9	3	2 assistant professors 1 adjunct faculty
Total	27	14	1 professor emeritus 2 full professors 3 associate professors 4 assistant professors 3 adjunct faculty 1 doctoral student

also individual expectations for their interactions with their student teachers, comprise the third set of data. This assessment instrument, administered during the fall semester, contained a mixture of survey questions and open-ended questions, with some of these questions requiring short answers and others asking for more lengthy responses. We aggregated short-answer questions that addressed similar topics, and, based upon frequently appearing topics, we identified three overarching categories and nine subcategories.

The three overarching categories concern the decisions made by the university supervisor regarding his or her own practices, the paperwork required by the university, and the requirements that the university supervisor and/or program placed upon the student teacher as presented below.

*Category 1: Decisions initiated by the supervisor:*

- Number of visits made to the student teachers' classrooms.
- Whether visits were scheduled.
- Length of classroom observations.
- Length of post-observation conferences.

*Category 2: University paperwork:*

- Supervisors' use of college-provided forms.

*Category 3: Requirements placed upon student teachers:*

- Completion of lesson plans.
- Completion of unit plans.
- Attendance at meetings held outside of school day.
- Regular emailed updates on progress.

As we studied the self-reported supervisory practices of department-associated participants, we sought to identify not only the ways in which each individual carried out his or her supervision but also points of consistency and inconsistency within each program and among the four programs in the department. We defined a practice as consistent when at least two-thirds of applicable participants enacted a practice in a similar manner. For example, if at least two-thirds of the supervising members of a program required teacher candidates to submit lesson plans before an observation, the practice was considered to be consistent for that program. When areas of inconsistency were illuminated, longer responses to more in-depth questions from the questionnaire, semi-structured individual interviews, collected artifacts, and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) allowed for a more nuanced look at complex aspects of university supervision as enacted in middle and secondary teacher education at this university.

The fourth set of data, gathered in the fall semester, was comprised of artifacts from those individuals and/or programs that produced written materials, the College of Education forms, and the *Student Teaching Handbook*. Mathematics education provided their student teachers with a syllabus-like handout that outlined expectations, a week-by-week assumption of teaching responsibilities chart, and descriptions and rubrics for all required assignments. One member of the English education program employed a similar syllabus-like overview of the student teaching semester that explained the responsibilities of all three members of the triad, the purpose of and format for assignments, and contact information. One individual in the social science program developed and provided students with a one-page information fact sheet that outlined their responsibilities regarding communication with the university supervisor, visits from the university supervisor, and assigned projects.

Member checks were performed at several levels. For example, when a particular consistency or inconsistency was noted in specific practices within a program, one or more members of that program were queried to identify possible reasons for the consistency or inconsistency. In addition, the results of the study were shared with the department chair, who had served as a university supervisor in previous years in one of the four programs under study. She confirmed that the data revealed practices that aligned with her understanding of the department's approach to university supervision. For example, the department did not specify any aspects of the role of the university supervisor. The department simply adhered to the practices outlined at the college level.

It should be noted that the study has several limitations. Both researchers have served as secondary teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors and may have inadvertently infused personal biases and understandings of university supervision in the analysis of the findings. Cooperating/clinical teachers were not included in this study, as a fine-grain examination of the practices of university supervisors was the focus of the study; however, in retrospect, incorporating cooperating/clinical teachers might have provided worthwhile data.

## Results

### **The Importance of the University Supervisor**

The department members' responses to the two-question instrument and data from department meeting minutes address the question: What value is placed on university supervision in this department? Results from the two-question instrument suggest a significant level of consistency in department members' perceptions of the value of university supervision.

Of the 14 respondents to this question, only one stated that university supervisors are not necessary members of the student teaching team, asserting that “helpful, good (classroom) teachers know what to do.” All other respondents asserted that university supervisors contribute to the student teaching experience in various ways, from offering “resources to students” to acting as “someone to translate or make intelligible the tension between schools and the university experience.”

The role of the university supervisor as a mediator or liaison between the university setting and middle and secondary classrooms was seen as central by several respondents. One stated, “The university supervisor has the opportunity to synthesize the activities in the classroom where the student took teaching courses with the activities in the middle or high school classroom,” while another offered, “This is the capstone experience for prospective teachers. At this juncture, the connection between the university and the public schools is at a point where presence is critical.” One department member described the university supervisor as

a third window, the objective one, in that as a non-participating member of the classroom, this person can capture what happens during an observation, providing a mirror for internal reflection. Finally, the relationship between supervisor and student teacher needs external support.

Two department members offered examples from their own experiences in defining the importance of the university supervisor’s role in the student teaching semester. One noted:

For the student teacher, the university supervisor acts as a necessity mediator when there is any kind of problem. For example, if the teacher asks, ‘Are you ready to teach all six classes now?’ on day 2 of the experience, the student may feel intimidated about saying, ‘NO!’ but the university supervisor can gracefully step in for him/her and explain to the teacher that the students should not yet be ready to take over. Also, for the cooperating teacher, the university supervisor serves as a liaison to the university program, helping the cooperating teacher find recent resources, discuss current best practices, etc.

Another wrote:

From my research the individual can/and should bring an alternate perspective to the experience, alternate from the mentor and student teachers. Often cooperating teachers/mentors and student teachers focus on classroom management. The university supervisor can bring to the supervisions [sic] a focus on pedagogical content knowledge and content knowledge, careful consideration of who are the university supervisors is important.



A third respondent focused on the benefit to the individual programs, stating that university-based mentors allow for a way to “close the cycle of preparation of future teachers (providing) information needed for program improvement.” Thus, over 93% of the department members who responded to this question asserted that university supervisors are essential members of the student teaching team, whose presence benefits the teacher candidate, the content area specific programs, and, in some cases, the cooperating/supervising classroom teacher.

In nominating categories of people who should carry out the work of university supervision, seven department members felt that assistant, associate, and full professors should be involved in the work, with one member insisting that “appropriate credit must be given to this important position.” The notion of an apprenticeship or targeted instruction for doctoral students employed as university supervisors appeared in four department members’ responses. Three suggested that “trained” doctoral students would benefit from being involved in supervision of teacher candidates, and another wrote that suitable supervisors include “tenured and tenure track faculty, doctoral students who have gone through a program of preparation on supervision. Just because they were a teacher doesn’t mean they can supervise,” thereby highlighting the concept that different skills are required to teach classroom students than to mentor pre-service teachers.

Two prominent themes emerge from this data. First, although members of this department considered the work of the university supervisor to be important, they did not perceive it as rising to a level that warranted thoughtful discussion. Despite assertions by participants that university supervisors perform an essential job, minutes from the nine department meetings indicate that university supervision was never a topic of discussion, either scheduled or arising spontaneously in response to any other topic. Even in the meeting in which time was devoted to completing the two-question instrument, faculty members provided their responses but did not discuss supervision on a broad or specific basis. Such an absence suggests that department members saw no need to discuss, define, or document this aspect of teacher education. The lack of conversation by department members about supervision may suggest that, once members were doing the work, they did not see a need to revisit or reflect upon it and, instead, viewed other matters as more pressing.

Second, members of the department perceive that instructional training is essential to prepare doctoral students to take up this position. Despite the members’ insistence that instructional training for doctoral students is vital, no formalized program exists at Smyth University

for educating or mentoring graduate students who wish to or who are required to become university supervisors. Further, despite faculty endorsement of a training program for graduate students, no department members indicated, either directly or through implication, that faculty members could or should serve as mentors to doctoral students or that the faculty members themselves might also benefit from instruction in student teacher supervision.

### Consistency of Practices

Analyses of the study's data, specifically the 30-question instrument and artifacts, illustrate that this department's university supervisors employed divergent sets of practices that not only varied from program to program but also within the same program. Table 2 presents information related to the university supervisors' observation practices and use of college-provided forms.

Because one individual in science education enacted all the supervision responsibilities for that program for several years, inherent uniformity exists; therefore, science education was not included in the programmatic analysis portion of the study. These data were included, however, in the department-wide analysis. In exploring the practices

**Table 2**  
**Supervisor-controlled Practices and College Requirements**

<i>Supervisor-controlled Practices</i>					
<i>Program (Supervisors)</i>	<i>Visits</i>	<i>Visit Scheduled</i>	<i>Observation</i>	<i>Post-Observation Conference</i>	<i>College Requirements (Forms)</i>
English (n=7)	4-5	100% yes	20 mins.-entire class	25-60 mins.	100% college-provided; 47% also take notes
Math (n=3)	4	100% yes	One class period	15-45 mins.	67% college-provided; 33% use no form
Science (n=1)	5	100% yes	One class period	Varies	No form; blank notepad
Social Science (n=3)	4-6	33% yes 67% drop-in period-3 hrs.	One class	30-60 mins.	100% college-provided; 33% also use alternative college-provided

that took place in the other three programs, English, mathematics, and social science education, the degree and points of consistency and inconsistency varied.

Within the mathematics education program, the practices of university supervisors were highly consistent in eight out of nine categories. The only area in which they demonstrated inconsistency was in the amount of time spent conferencing with teacher candidates after the observations. Mathematics education was also the only program of the four whose members had collaboratively developed a handout, provided to each student teacher and cooperating teacher, that defines the purpose of the student teaching semester and the responsibilities of the student teacher during that semester. The responsibilities of cooperating teachers and university supervisors, however, are not directly addressed in the program's handout.

**Table 3**  
**Requirements by Program**

<i>Program (Supervisors)</i>	<i>Lesson Plans Required</i>	<i>Unit Plan Required</i>	<i>Meetings Outside School Hours</i>	<i>Emails Required</i>
English (n=7)	100% on day of observation; 14% daily lesson plans; 57% follow school site policy	43% yes 57% no	77% yes 33% no	28% weekly; 16% monthly; 28% invite teacher candidates to email; 28% no emails
Math (n=3)	100% on day of observation; 100% daily attendance	100% yes	100% yes	100% weekly
Science (n=1)	Decided by cooperating teacher	Finished before student teaching begins	Weekly seminar meetings	Weekly
Social Science (n=3)	67% on day of observation; 33% follow school site policy	33% yes 67% no	67% at the beginning of the semester; 33% four times during the semester	33% weekly; 67% no requirement

The requirements that university supervisors placed on their student teachers are presented in Table 3. Taking the information from Table 2 and Table 3 together, it becomes clear that, in contrast to mathematics supervisors, members of the English education program were consistent in only three of the nine categories: they visited their teacher candidates four or five times, they all used forms the college of education provided, and they all scheduled their visits for observation. Their greatest inconsistency related to what they required of their teacher candidates. Regarding email communications, two supervisors required weekly emails, one required monthly communications, two invited their teacher candidates to email if they wished to, and two neither required nor suggested email discourse.

Social science education supervisors were consistent in only two areas: the use of college forms and meeting with their teacher candidates as a group at the beginning of the semester, although one supervisor met an additional three times with her supervisees throughout the course of the semester. The greatest variation within this program was reflected in the amount of time spent observing the teacher candidates: two supervisors reported being in their pre-service teachers' classrooms for an average of one class period per visit, and another described spending up to three hours during a single visit observing one teacher candidate.

As seen in Table 4, when viewing supervision practices across the department, rather than by program, one can see that inconsistencies are less obvious; department-wide consistency exists in six of the nine subcategories: number of visits, practice of scheduling visits, length of observation, length of post-observation conferences, forms used, and occurrence of meetings outside school. Of the four categories related to student teacher requirements, only the one concerning meetings outside school demonstrates some consistency; however, the nature of those meetings varied within programs, except in the science education program, which provided students with a practicum course carrying a mandatory attendance policy. As seen in Table 3, disparities exist in the practice of requiring lesson plans, unit plans, and email communications.

The data demonstrate that consistency exists to a greater degree among elements of supervision over which university supervisors have control, i.e., their own behavior. The inconsistency with respect to requiring regular email communications, lesson plans, and unit plans is conspicuous in that these three elements require compliance on the part of the student teacher. Interviews with supervisors and an examination of the Student Teaching Handbook, distributed to student candidates, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors, confirm that neither a departmental nor College of Education policy existed in regard to regu-

lar communication, email or otherwise, between the teacher candidate and university supervisor. In an informal interview, one university supervisor explained, “I considered requiring a weekly reflection, and it sounds like a good idea. But what happens if they don’t turn it in? Do I fail them over that?” The response suggests uncertainty about what university supervisors can require of their student teachers.

**Table 4**  
**Elements of Program-wide Practices**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Percentages</i>	<i>Consistent</i>	<i>Inconsistent</i>
<i>Supervisor-controlled Practices</i>				
Number of visits	4-6	4-5: 83% 6: 17%	X	
Scheduled visits		86% in advance 14% drop in	X	
Observation	20 mins.- 3 hrs.	20-30 mins.: 8% Entire class: 84% 3 hours: 8%	X	
Post-observation conference	15-60 mins.	15-30 mins.: 7% 30-60 mins.: 93%	X	
<i>College Requirements</i>				
Forms used		College forms: 86% No forms: 14% Also use other forms: 29%	X	
<i>Required of Student Teachers</i>				
Lesson plans		On day of observation: 86% Daily: 35% Rely on school site requirement: 23%		X
Unit plan		Required: 53% Not required: 47%		X
Meetings outside school		Required: 89% Not required: 11%	X	
Email reports		Weekly: 50% Monthly: 7% Invited: 14% Not required: 29%		X

In contrast to the absence of an established policy for communication with student teachers, the *Student Teaching Handbook* states, “Student teachers are expected to produce and keep on file unit, weekly, and daily plans.” Comments by individual supervisors suggesting that they were reluctant to implement any requirement not specifically supported by established policy (such as requiring lesson and unit plans) are striking in light of the presence of this widely disseminated written policy and suggest a lack of awareness on the part of the university supervisors of the policy.

A further aspect of the reporting process connected with the student teaching experience is the final evaluation form to be completed collaboratively by the cooperating teacher and university supervisor and to be submitted to the College of Education as evidence of the teacher candidates’ successful completion of the student teaching semester. For the time in which this study occurred, the department had 27 undergraduate student teachers. For these 27 teacher candidates, only 22 final evaluation forms were submitted, for a department completion rate of 82%. By program, the results indicated a submission by 100% of the English education teacher candidates, 20% of the mathematics education teacher candidates, 100% of the science education teacher candidates, and 90% of the social science teacher candidates.

Final evaluation submissions stand in contrast to the variation in practices in regard to email communications, lesson plans, and unit plans in that evidence of requiring these artifacts from teacher candidates could be ascertained only through self-reporting, while the submission of final evaluation forms was required and recorded by the College of Education. Interestingly, although 18% of the teacher candidates’ final evaluation forms were not submitted to the college of education, there were no repercussions. This lack of response suggests that a minimal degree of oversight exists, not only at the department level but at the college level as well.

The descriptions that the university supervisors provided of their practices also demonstrate a range of topics and ways of interacting with student teachers. For example, one individual wrote that, in his post-observation conferences, he “always” asked how his teacher candidates were “getting along with their cooperating teachers” and “what they like about/dislike about teaching.” Further, he discussed specific classroom management issues as well as teacher candidates’ general emotional, psychological, and health concerns. Other supervisors wrote that they provided an overview of the observation or asked the teacher candidate to do so and then invited the teacher candidates to suggest topics of concern to be explored. Often these served as topics of future

observations. One stated that he focused on giving “as much positive feedback as possible,” while pointing out “anything that might improve performance or student relationships.” An experienced supervisor wrote that she “spends less time going over what I observed in any single lesson and more time helping the intern think of his/her role as a teacher in terms of the Big Picture (not ‘how did you ask THAT question?’ but ‘How can you ask *effective* questions?’ for example.)”

These different ways of structuring supervisor-student teacher conversations about an observed teaching event suggest different definitions of the work of the university supervisor. For example, discussing a specific classroom management event and ways to approach that event, should it arise again, represents a different conversation focus than exploring how to ask effective questions in a variety of settings. Consistently focusing the discussion only on immediate or isolated teaching concerns or only on one-time teaching practices has the potential to shape the kind of thinking asked of the student teacher. While the first instance engages the teacher candidate in an “in-the-moment” discussion, the second instance asks the teacher to reflect on a teaching and learning strategy that may influence long-term teaching practices. Thus, although members of the department might be consistent in the number of visits that they make to their teacher candidates, the kinds of paperwork that they complete, the length of their post-observation conferences, and so forth, the differences in approaches to supervision described by the department supervisors have the potential to provide very different kinds of learning opportunities for student teachers.

### Conclusions and Implications

The department members who participated in this study agreed on the importance of the work of the university supervisor in integrating university coursework and practical classroom experiences to provide student teachers with appropriate feedback, to mediate complex situations, and, in general, to provide and enrich opportunities for learning and skill development in the final semester of teacher preparation. Despite the concordance of perceptions on these issues, we sought to determine whether their practices represent a consistent definition of how university supervision is done.

#### **Effects of Individually Constructed Practices: Autonomous and Inconsistent**

It is not the intention of this study to assert that absolute uniformity is necessary or even desirable for the enactment of effective supervision

by university personnel of student teachers, as consistency of ineffective practices would not serve student teachers well. Rather, the purpose of the study was to explore whether university supervisors who were afforded a significant degree of autonomy in shaping their supervisory practices constructed ways of defining and enacting supervision that were consistent with what fellow university supervisors did and with the minimal requirements of their teacher education program. The findings demonstrate variation in how supervision, in relation to central aspects of student teaching, was carried out in this department. For example, not all university supervisors required evidence of the development of a unit plan. Some supervisors asked for daily lesson plans across the semester while others did not. Some kept closely informed of what their student teachers did each week in the classroom via emails, and other supervisors required no weekly reports. Some supervisors focused on specific events from one teaching observation while others encouraged student teachers to look beyond the current lesson for larger questions and answers. Overall, supervision is not enacted the same way by university supervisors in the program under study.

Is it important to determine whether the points of inconsistency matter in the overall student teaching experience? Given the dearth of research pertaining to the university supervisor and his or her role, we simply do not know. But if the student teaching experience plays a critical role in the final phase of teacher education programs, teacher educators certainly need to articulate points of required consistency and acceptable points of divergence. Simply stating that supervisors must observe students a minimum number of times without outlining what should take place on the part of the supervisor before, during, and after those sessions will not suffice.

### **Implications for Future Study**

The results of this study raise questions for the larger conversation on teacher education. The demonstrated inconsistency within this teacher education institution stands in contrast to the notion that the term “university supervision” carries a reliable, dependable definition across the legion of institutions that prepare individuals to become teachers. The lack of research on the work of university supervisors and the impact of that work on student teachers may contribute to such inconsistency, not only hindering teacher education programs as they strive to build effective support systems for their teacher candidates but also restricting the resources available to university supervisors themselves as they attempt to understand and implement effective



practices. Zeichner's (2005) call for the need to improve teacher education not by taking up the "dominant practice in the U.S. of reforming teacher education programs by a 'seat of the pants' approach" (p. 123) but rather by pursuing a scholarly and reflective path to informed decisions on salient aspects of student teacher development seems applicable in exploring the supervision of student teachers.

Larger studies on supervisory practices, on what practices student teachers and cooperating/clinical teachers view as most helpful, and even the language used when discussing supervision would contribute significantly to our understanding of this phase of teacher education. In a time when education as a whole is called to exhibit greater accountability, it is not enough for doctoral students engaged in job searches and faculty members who take up the work of university supervision merely to be able to respond in the affirmative when asked if they have participated in university supervision. Instead, these individuals must be able to articulate the basis for their practices and the contributions these practices make to beginning teachers' development.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The university and all participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

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