The Work+Collective
Supervisory Research
Working Learner Survey Report

TheWork+Collective

VCU

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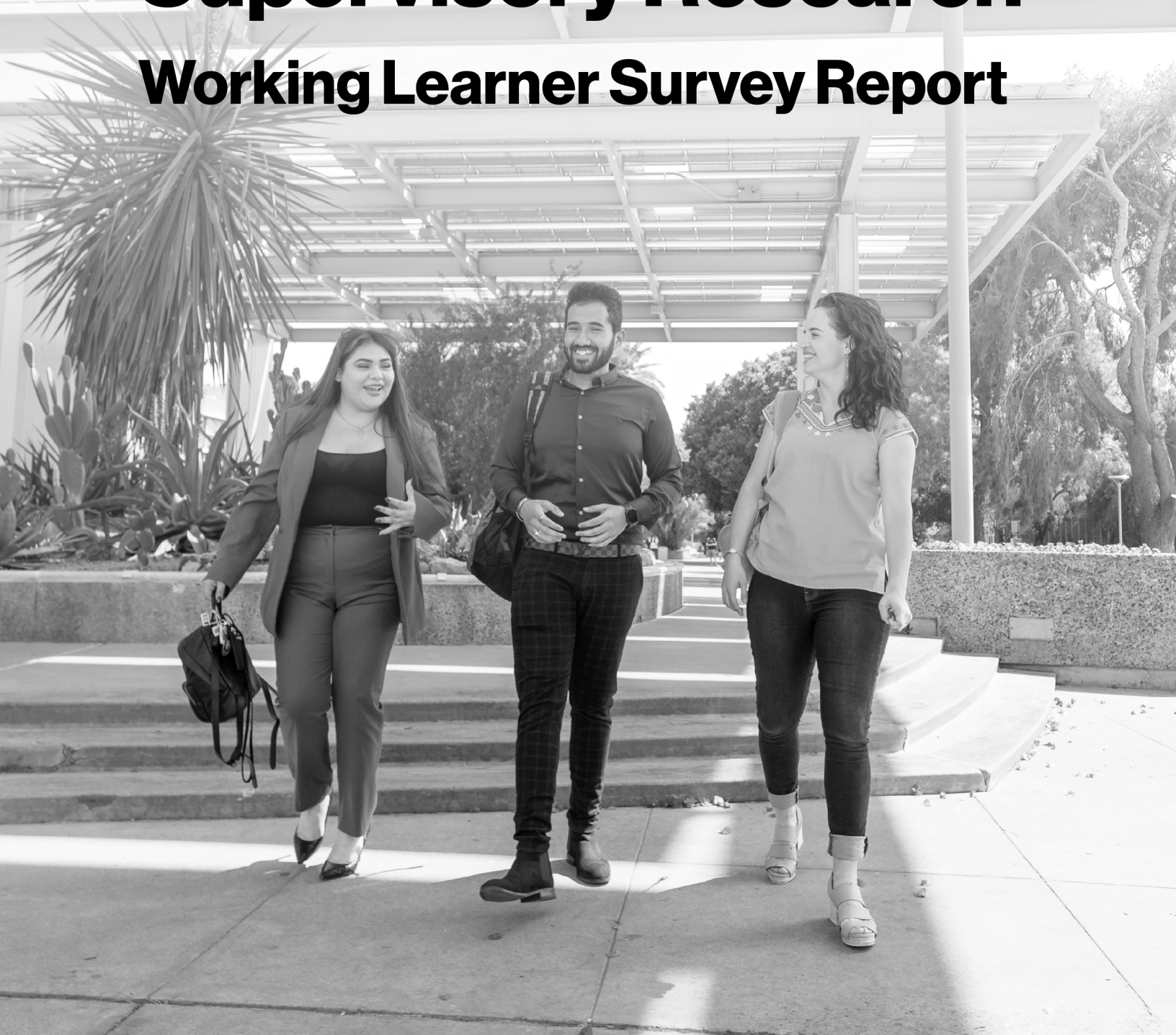
How can we define support to boost success?

01

Executive Summary

Explore how supervisory relationships shape student employment through insights from a pilot study, fostering empathy, honesty, and adaptability.

The Background

In 2024, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) developed the Student Supervisor Support Measure to assess student perceptions of the support received in student-supervisor relationships (SSRs). The initial pilot showed the measure to be statistically significant and reliable. This report details a second pilot conducted with the Work+Collective, a network of higher education institutions, to further test the measure and gather feedback on supportive behaviors and the definition of support.

Methodology

The survey received responses from working learners at four participating institutions: VCU, Arizona State University, University of Texas–San Antonio, and University of Michigan–Dearborn. Respondents (n = 298 complete of 538 partial) rated their SSRs using the support measure and provided qualitative feedback on supervisory behaviors and the support definition itself.

Findings

The measure demonstrated statistical significance with high correlations among questions.

Average support scores were positive, indicating strong supervisory support, though areas for improvement were noted. The highest-rated areas included supervisors' commitment to student goals and honest feedback, while the lowest were related to adaptability and supporting career readiness.

Key supportive behaviors included personal support and empathy, effective communication, and creating a positive working environment.

Commonly identified unsupportive behaviors were inconsiderate actions, poor communication, and unavailability. Most students did not report unsupportive behaviors, but those who did cited these issues as impacting their sense of support.

The existing definition of support was well-received.

However, feedback suggested enhancements to include holistic support for well-being and more empathetic relationships.

Recommendations

Refine the support definition to: **"Support is consistently fostering an empathetic relationship defined by honesty, mutuality, and adaptability that prioritizes each student's learning and holistic success." This revision addresses student feedback for greater clarity and inclusion of well-being.**

Improve supervisory practices **by focusing on enhancing personal support, empathy, and effective communication. Training programs should address these areas to foster a more supportive and inclusive environment for working learners.**

Future iterations of this measure should continue to assess demographic data **to identify and address potential equity gaps and directly lead to developmental interventions for working learner supervisors.**

02

Introduction and Methodology

This research blends quantitative and qualitative methods to reveal student employment intricacies and uncover effective supervision strategies.

Introduction

Researchers at VCU developed and piloted a Student Supervisor Support Measure in 2024 to create a means to collect and analyze student perceptions about the support they receive in their SSRs as working learners. Results from this pilot proved promising, with the definition prompting positive student feedback and the tool itself demonstrating statistical significance and internal reliability.

This report discusses the implementation of and results from a second pilot measure conducted with participating members of 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. In addition to testing the measure as it was originally developed, this pilot also intended to solicit student feedback about particular behaviors they perceived as supportive in their SSRs and the definition of support on which this measure is based. Survey responses offered valuable insights into working learner experiences and highlighted important pathways for future support of both students and their supervisors.

Methodology

All 15 current members of the Work+Collective, as of Summer 2024, were invited to participate in this survey opportunity if they were willing to distribute the survey through relevant channels to working learners on their campuses and encourage their participation. 5 institutions initially agreed to participate, with four producing responses: VCU, Arizona State University (ASU), University of Texas–San Antonio (UTSA), and University of Michigan–Dearborn (UM-D). Each institution distributed the survey to active working learners with responses collected between June 10 and July 7, 2024. Students at each institution were incentivized to participate through a drawing for a pair of Apple AirPods if they met a minimum number of respondents per institution (each institution cleared this threshold).

After identifying as a member of a particular institution, respondents were asked to rate their SSR on a four-point Likert-type scale in response to several prompts. These questions corresponded to the six measurable components of the definition of success.

1

Consistency

My supervisor is regularly engaged with me and my work

I can rely on my supervisor to follow through on their commitments

2

Honesty

I am comfortable receiving honest feedback from my supervisor

I am comfortable giving honest feedback to my supervisor

3

Mutuality

I learn from my supervisor

My supervisor is open to learning from me

4

Adaptability

My supervisor is open to change within our work and relationship

My supervisor is willing to adjust their practices based on my needs

5

Orientation to Student Learning

My supervisor helps me learn beyond my specific role and responsibilities

My supervisor takes action to encourage my personal growth and development

6

Orientation to Student Success

My supervisor wants me to achieve my goals

Because of my relationship with my supervisor, I feel more prepared to pursue my career goals

In addition, the survey included a general question, "I feel supported by my supervisor" to measure internal reliability. Responses to the twelve specific questions translated into a numerical score out of 48 that indicated a student's perception of the support they experience in their SSR.

Students were also asked to provide information about how much time they spend in their working learner position each week and identify specific behaviors they've experienced from their supervisor that make them feel supported or unsupported. Respondents then had the opportunity to react to and provide feedback on the working definition of support developed for this measure: **"Support is consistently fostering a relationship defined by honesty, mutuality, and adaptability that is oriented toward the student's learning and success."** Then, students could respond to optional demographic questions.

Table 1: Response Rate by Institution
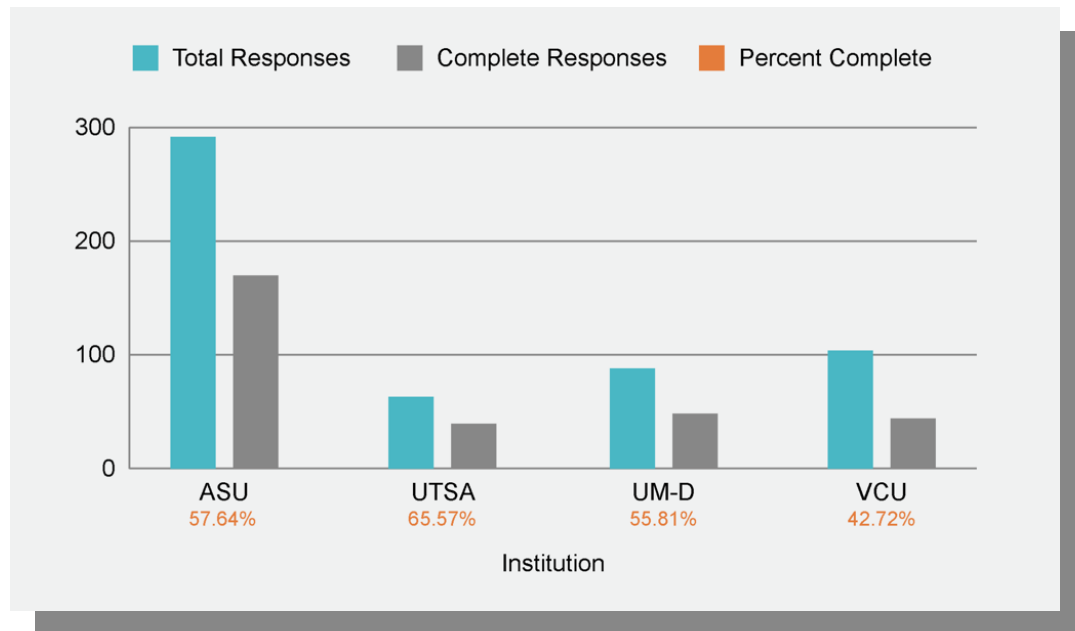
538 students started the survey, and 298 completed it. A full breakdown of responses by institution can be found in Table 1.

Responses were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the statistical soundness of the measure, identify and interpret descriptive statistics, and identify key themes from open-ended working learner responses.

03

Findings

From effective
communication to fostering
mutuality, the findings
highlight the most valued
supervisory behaviors
and areas for growth.

Likert-type Measure

The measure continues to demonstrate statistical significance, as all twelve developed questions were positively correlated with one another and the baseline question ($p < .001$). This finding suggests that student responses to particular questions can be considered aligned with their understanding of support. Table 2 describes both the strength of these correlations and the average ratings from student responses.

Table 2: Correlations and Average Ratings

Question	Average *r* Score*	Average Student Response (out of 4, n = 400)
I feel supported by my supervisor	0.693	3.64
My supervisor is regularly engaged with me and my work	0.632	3.53
I can rely on my supervisor to follow through on their commitments	0.627	3.57
I am comfortable receiving honest feedback from my supervisor	0.647	3.61
I am comfortable giving honest feedback to my supervisor	0.628	3.55
I learn from my supervisor	0.643	3.55
My supervisor is open to learning from me	0.643	3.48
My supervisor is open to change within our work and relationship	0.636	3.51
My supervisor is willing to adjust their practices based on my needs	0.621	3.43
My supervisor helps me learn beyond my specific role and responsibilities	0.655	3.50
My supervisor takes action to encourage my personal growth and development	0.676	3.57
My supervisor wants me to achieve my goals	0.640	3.69
Because my of relationship with my supervisor, I feel more prepared to pursue my career goals	0.669	3.48

*All r scores were significant at the p < .001 level. Average scores reflect the mean of each correlation coefficient produced by the comparisons among all statements.

Likert-type Measure

Among the measure-specific questions, **the following statements were rated highest,** indicating the highest levels of agreement from student respondents:

> My supervisor wants me to achieve my goals (3.69)

> I am comfortable receiving honest feedback from my supervisor (3.61)

> I can rely on my supervisor to follow through on their commitments (3.57)

The following statements were rated lowest; though still relatively high scores, these scores indicate the lowest levels of agreement from student respondents:

> My supervisor is willing to adjust their practices based on my needs (3.43)

> (tie) My supervisor is open to learning from me (3.48)

> (tie) Because of my relationship with my supervisor, I feel more prepared to pursue my career goals (3.48)

On average, **respondents rated the support they receive in their SSR at 42.48** out of a possible 48 points. Table 3 compares this average rating among the participating institutions. Overall, these scores are positive and suggest a strong supervisory support system that many students experience based on the utilized support definition. Only VCU and ASU demonstrated statistically significant differences in these averages ($p < .001$), but all four institutional scores still suggest strong SSR support with room for improvement.

Table 3: Comparative Average
SSR Scores Among Institutions

■ Average Support Score (out of 48)

ASU	UM-D	UTSA	VCU
41.29	43.05	43.61	44.89

42.48
Overall
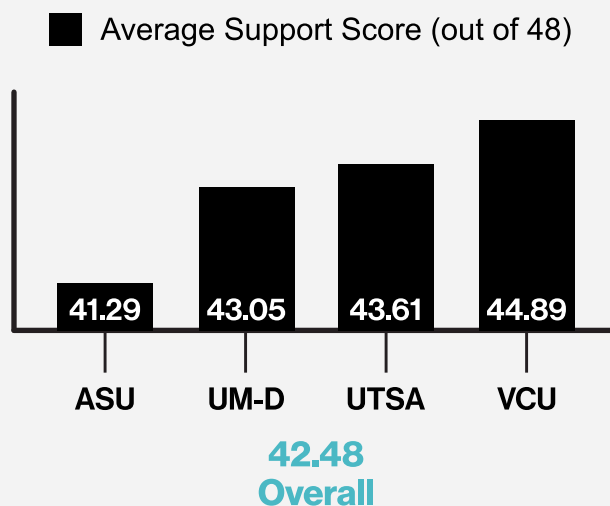
04

Supervisor Behavior

Explore behaviors of supportive supervisors, including empathy, communication, and fostering trust in working learners.

Open-ended: Supervisor Behavior

Students were asked to identify specific supervisory behaviors that make them feel supported in their role. Key themes and quotes from these responses (n = 390) are listed below:

Personal support/empathy (53.1%): many students identified the most supportive behavior they experienced from their supervisor as understanding and supporting them as a human being before doing so as a student or working learner.

———

"Ask appropriate questions about my personal life to get to know me better, share opportunities that help me better connect to other students and my culture, always check to see whether or not I feel supported."

———

"I feel truly supported by my supervisor due to his confidence in my abilities and his genuine concern for my schedule. He consistently shows trust in my work and makes an effort to accommodate my personal and academic commitments, which greatly enhances my sense of support."

———

My supervisor asks me daily, sometimes multiple times a day if there is anything she can do to help me or support me. She reminds me that I can always ask her questions or let her know what I need from her. She does not make me feel guilty when I am unsure of something."

Effective communication /responsiveness (41.3%): many students cited the quality and pace of communication as a key practice that helps them feel supported in their working learning positions.

"My supervisor is always communicating with us and keeping us updated on any changes/important information. She is always willing to answer any questions that I have and takes the time to explain things I don't understand. She is also open to any comments/suggestions that I may have and always takes them into consideration."

"My supervisor listens to me and engages with my ideas!"

"She always follows up about everything. She sends me emails saying good job, keep up the great work when I stay on top of certain parts of the job. She takes all of my concerns seriously, and goes above and beyond."

Create a positive/trusting working environment (27.9%): Though this area overlaps with the other two, many students cited how their supervisors make them feel when they're working. This positivity was most often aligned with an environment full of trust.

"Asking me questions about my classes and clubs. Asking me about my family and weekend plans. It feels nice when I feel like I am heard."

"They encourage me to strive the best I can be and not letting average work pass by, they also have high expectations which helps make sure that my work matches what is asked of me."

———

"They always work around my school and extracur-
ricular activities schedule. Whenever they see me
down or stressed, they offer an open ear to talk too.
In addition, they always inform me of opportunities
around campus that could benefit me. Every month
they offer me a free lunch just to celebrate my hard
work and give us a little break to catch up."

Other notable themes include being **adaptable (19.5%),** being **available
(15.9%),** and **showing appreciation (3.8%).**

Students were also asked to identify specific supervisory behaviors that make them feel unsupported in their role. Of all responses (n = 386), **76.4% did not identify any unsupportive behaviors** that they noticed in their SSR. However, among the remaining responses, the following unsupportive behaviors emerged most consistently:

Inconsiderate (37.4% of those experiencing unsupportive behavior): respondents often expressed dissatisfaction when their basic needs were not being considered when decisions were made by their supervisors. This behavior often led to a negative environment or overall emotional experience in the workplace.

"Honestly, I think that when he signs me up for projects that I didn't originally say I wanted to do, it makes me feel like it's just another thing added to my plate."

"Sometimes, I feel as though my concerns are too small for their higher-up role."

"He is not willing to learn or make changes that improve the work environment for me and my peer student workers. He does not know how to do most things that are our daily tasks, and struggles to manage a schedule that works with everyone's availability."

Poor communication practices (35.2% of those experiencing unsupportive behavior): respondents cited everything from unhelpful to ineffective or absent communication that translated to a lack of support. Communication is not aligned with student needs, meaning a lack of clear expectations or directions on tasks left working learners feeling ill-equipped to do their role or isolated.

"There have been instances where communication can become or be perceived as passive aggressive. Instead of asking questions and understanding the situation first there are assumptions followed by reprimanding."

"Does not communicate very clearly, often doesn't listen thoroughly to work related issues."

"I do not feel supported when my supervisor doesn't respond in a timely manner."

"Over-assessment of work performance, giving out additional work while claiming it isn't additional work, responding negatively/emotionally when roadblocks arise or feedback is not what was expected."

Unavailability (33.0% of those experiencing unsupportive behavior): some respondents recognized the challenges of seeking out supervisory support and not finding it because of their supervisor's commitments, schedule, or obligations.

———

"She is not as involved with us as she probably should be. We talk kind of rarely."

———

"The virtual gap and not opportunities to engage over zoom."

———

"My supervisor and all the supervisors create friendships with certain people, which results in major favoritism for them. They constantly take their friends side in any scenario and then all the blame gets put on myself or they tell me I am not doing my job. My supervisor is constantly with others and to try and have anything done with her can take forever."

That last quote also highlights another less common theme among those who experienced unsupportive supervisory behaviors: **favoritism (12.1%)**. Other notable themes include **micromanagement (6.6%)** and **inflexibility (3.3%).**

Respondents were given the opportunity to share anything else they desired about their relationship with their supervisor. Of all responses (n = 314), **62.1% shared nothing or something generically positive.** Only **3.2% shared challenges of any kind.** Among those that shared specific positive feedback, **51.3% highlighted the personal support** they receive from their supervisor and **37.8% appreciated the positive or inclusive environment** their supervisor created for them. Students also appreciated the **strength of their SSR** (15.1%) and cited **mutual respect** as a key element of their experience (9.2%).

05

Interacting with the Support Definition

What does support mean to working learners? Discover how this definition resonates and inspires new ways to enhance supervisory practices.

Interacting with the Support Definition

After completing the previously listed portion of the survey, students were taken to a separate page that disclosed that the previous questions were based on this definition of support, developed by the VCU team: **"Support is consistently fostering a relationship defined by honesty, mutuality, and adaptability that is oriented toward the student's learning and success."** When given the opportunity to consider how implementing this definition would change SSRs, **88.3%** of responses (n = 358) **indicated that this definition operationalized would improve SSRs, with 71.9% indicating it would make SSRs "much better."**

Respondents were then invited to respond to the definition and provide suggestions about anything they would add or change. **80.2%** of the responses (n = 349) **either affirmed or would not change the definition.** No suggestions for changes were common among more than 5.2% of respondents.

Several suggestions would be addressed by operationalizing the definition and providing broader understanding in particular contexts. For example, 5.2% of respondents sought additional clarity around the meaning and importance of mutuality, but many of these cited inclusion and respect as key practices, which aligns strongly with the ideas that informed the inclusion of mutuality in this definition.

However, two suggestions warrant further consideration given their alignment with the original definition and the process by which it came about. **2.6% of responses wanted student well-being to be incorporated as an outcome alongside or in place of learning and success.** One respondent said, "I wanted to add that any worker feels more supported, connected, and loyal to a supervisor they feel that cares about their well-being beyond just work. Students tend to have a lot on their plate especially if they are working and having a supervisor who understands that can really make a difference." This commitment to well-being feels well-aligned with the definition's mention of student success, but could be more explicitly mentioned.

In addition, **4.0% of respondents wanted to include personal support practices, like demonstrating understanding, kindness,** or **empathy**. Given the importance of these kinds of skills in cultivating a supportive SSR that many respondents already identified, this trend is not surprising. However, these suggestions could present an opportunity to clarify what is to be expected when supervisors "foster a relationship" with their working learners.

One comment also stands out in its critique of passive language in the definition: "I don't believe 'fostering a relationship defined by' has much clarity. 'Defined by' especially seems to be a suggestion and a little vague. Maybe something like 'support is consistently PRACTICING/ EXERCISING honesty, mutuality, adaptability' - something more active. 'Oriented toward' has a similar issue for me. Maybe something like 'that CENTERS/PRIORITIZES the student's learning + success'"

Respondents were then invited to ask questions about this definition of support. **82.6% of responses to this question** (n = 344) **did not indicate any clarifying questions.** The remaining responses could largely be split into four categories:

6.1% thought that examples of applying this definition could help clarify it for them.

In a similar vein, 5.8% asked questions about how the definition would apply in certain situations.

0.9% wondered about how working learners themselves can contribute to a supportive environment.

4.7% asked clarifying questions about particular aspects of the definition (e.g. meaning of certain words or phrases)

06

Demographic Information

Equity in focus: explore the demographic trends and how they inform inclusive supervisory practices for all working learners.

Demographic Information

Though more than 350 students completed most of the demographic questions, all of these questions were optional. The following tables document respondents' self-reported class year, residential status on their campus, gender identity, and race/ethnicity.

Equity gap analyses were conducted to see if students who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community (21.1% of respondents, n = 356) or hold a historically minoritized racial or ethnic identity (70.9% of respondents, n = 356) demonstrated consistently different responses in their surveys. No such gaps have been identified.

Table 4: Respondent Academic Class Standing

Year	Count	Percentage
First-year	4	1.14%
Sophomores	35	9.94%
Junior	83	23.58%
Senior	113	32.10%
Graduate/Professional Student	117	33.24%

Table 5: Respondent Residential Status

Status	Count	Percentage
On campus	61	17.33%
Off campus with parents and/or family members	99	28.13%
Off campus with others	150	42.61%
Off campus by myself	42	11.93%

Table 6: Respondent Gender Identity

Gender Identity (select all that apply)	Total Responses	% Respondents	% Responses
Woman	210	59.49%	56.30%
Man	117	33.14%	31.37%
Agender	2	0.57%	0.54%
Transgender	7	1.98%	1.88%
Cisgender	12	3.40%	3.22%
Non-binary	11	3.12%	2.95%
Genderqueer or gender nonconforming	5	1.42%	1.34%
An identity not listed*	1	0.28%	0.27%
Prefer not to state	8	2.27%	2.14%
Total Respondents	356		
Total Responses	376		

Table 7: Respondent Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity (select all that apply)	Total Responses	% Respondents	% Responses
African American or Black	42	11.97%	10.74%
American Indian or Alaskan native	7	1.99%	1.79%
Asian American or Asian	129	36.75%	32.99%
Hispanic or Latinx	74	21.08%	18.93%
Middle Eastern or North African	14	3.99%	3.58%
Pacific Islander	2	0.57%	0.51%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0.00%	0.00%
White or Caucasian	103	29.34%	26.34%
An identity not listed*	4	1.14%	1.02%
Prefer not to state	16	4.56%	4.09%
Total Respondents	356		
Total Responses	376		

*Respondents who selected "An identity not listed" for either their gender identity or race/ethnicity were given the opportunity to self-describe their response through an additional text box. In a separate question, 189 respondents also disclosed their nationality to further expand upon their identity.

07

Conclusion

As we look ahead, these insights guide our mission to redefine student supervision with character-driven principles and inclusive practices.

Conclusion

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

This measure effectively captures student perceptions of the listed definition of support

> The results of this pilot reflect the results from the first pilot conducted in Spring 2024 suggesting that this measure can be utilized to help institutions understand where they can focus training and resources to improve student supervision. Though some changes may continue to enhance the instrument, it can continue to serve working learners, supervisors, and campuses well as they seek to improve their student employment experience.

In addition to developing ways to clarify the support definition in practice, it should be adjusted to address students' expressed need of holistic support, including support for their well-being

> While those with additional context for this definition's development may view the most recommended adjustments as already addressed in the existing definition itself, this exposure to student feedback provides two affirmations: the definition is strong and can become stronger with clearer wording.

Among the various behaviors working learner supervisors can prioritize, students most value personal support and effective communication.

Based on responses related to both supportive and unsupportive behaviors, students felt supported most often when they perceived that their personal circumstances were noticed and prioritized (and conversely, felt less supported when their circumstances were not). Supervisors can base their support with a person-first supervision mentality, which centers a student's personal identity, needs, and opportunities for growth before addressing their identities as a student or employee; of these, employee is the least important identity to consider (though not unimportant).

In addition, supervisors could contribute to a positive working environment by focusing on their communication skills. In concert with personal support, this strategy may entail understanding individual student or student group communication preferences and demonstrating adaptability to define and meet shared expectations. Practicing effective communication can help working learners feel like an essential part of the team; many respondents who felt unsupported because of poor communication practices felt like they did not matter as much in the office or organization.

Defining preferred communication practices and maintaining consistency in implementing them will contribute to a more effective and collaborative working environment with working learners.

Rather than the original definition, "Support is consistently fostering a relationship defined by honesty, mutuality, and adaptability that is oriented toward the student's learning and success," the definition should read:

> "Support is consistently fostering an empathetic relationship defined by honesty, mutuality, and adaptability that prioritizes each student's learning and holistic success."

These three minor changes make substantial improvements that address student feedback:

> Defining the SSR as quintessentially empathetic highlights the identified need to prioritize personal support as a defining supervisory experience.

> Prioritizing student learning and success simplifies and clarifies language, and adopts a growth mindset that assumes student learning, not performance, remains the primary goal of student employment.

> Expanding the idea of success to consider students more holistically allows for room to ask about overall well-being and career outcomes.

These changes also warrant further consideration of the questions in the support measure to ensure all areas of the definition are effectively assessed. **Empathetic relationship** will be considered a new, seventh area of measurement, with its own pair of statements for students to compare with their own experiences:

My supervisor cares about me as a person, not only as an employee.

I value my relationship with my supervisor.

In addition, the final two measurable areas will be adjusted to **Prioritizes Student Learning** and **Prioritizes Holistic Success**. The first question under this last area will also be adjusted to read, "My supervisor helps me prioritize my well-being," rather than, "My supervisor wants me to achieve my goals." This specification includes well-being and career outcomes when considering holistic success in an effective SSR.

Consistency

1

My supervisor is regularly engaged with me and my work

I can rely on my supervisor to follow through on their commitments

Empathetic Relationship

2

My supervisor cares about me as a person, not only as an employee

I value my relationship with my supervisor

Honesty

3

I am comfortable receiving honest feedback from my supervisor

I am comfortable giving honest feedback to my supervisor

4

Mutuality

I learn from my supervisor

My supervisor is open to learning from me

5

Adaptability

My supervisor is open to change within our work and relationship

My supervisor is willing to adjust their practices based on my needs

6

Prioritizes Student Learning

My supervisor helps me learn beyond my specific role and responsibilities

My supervisor takes action to encourage my personal growth and development

7

Prioritizes Holistic Success

My supervisor helps me prioritize my well-being

Because of my relationship with my supervisor, I feel more prepared to pursue my career goals

As institutions continue to use this measure to evaluate working learner supervision, **administrators should continue to collect and analyze demographic information to identify any equity gaps**. Though these gaps were not evident in this pilot, the first pilot suggested LGBTQIA+ students were having a less supportive experience, on average, than their straight peers.

Future iterations should also **prioritize potential development avenues for supervisors in response to findings**. For example, these respondents rated their supervisors' adaptability the lowest. Institutions that notice this kind of response could develop an adaptive leadership workshop specifically for working learner supervisors to help foster a learning environment that is more receptive to change.

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.

TheWork+Collective