

The Responsibilities of Advising a Student Organization

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Recently I accepted an invitation to speak at one of our Student Personnel in Higher Education classes. I was asked to walk the class through my career over the past 22 years. One of the questions that was asked by a first year student was why did I choose to advise a student organization so frequently during my career. I have advised a mountaineering club, residence hall association, conference host committee, and a caving club among others. I shared with the class that there are few experiences in student affairs that allow you to walk with students, talk with students, and travel with students in their own environment while being exposed to their cultures, codes, and conduct. It has been a valuable part of my professional development.

Another student asked how did I know how to advise a student organization? This question provided me the opportunity to "walk through the door." I shared information regarding the academic preparation of student affairs professionals and the emphasis at many programs to hold assistantships in supervisory positions all while attempting to advise a student organization. The advisers usually relied on the observable experience they had as an undergraduate student working with their organization's adviser as the sole basis for how they currently advise an organization. This is not unusual at many of our graduate preparation programs. It is reassuring to see increased research, publications, dedicated web sites, and conference training on advising student organizations.

With numerous responsibilities and functions of advising a student organization, one of the more frequent questions I receive is what is most important for an adviser to focus on during their year of advising. I have developed the five most important functions of advising a student organization. Part of this list was determined from a national study of residence hall association advisers, a study of general student organizations, and my experience.

The most important function for an adviser is to meet with their executive board. The adviser's role during this meeting will be different than during the regular member meeting. The adviser will play a more active role in the executive board meeting and more passive during the regular member meeting. For many organizations their regularly scheduled meetings are weekly or monthly. The organization's executive board should meet separately prior to the regular member meeting. The organization's president will preside over the executive board meeting. The adviser may offer advice to legal, financial, or other institutional matters during the meeting. The adviser may also point out upcoming institutional events, deadlines, or other information necessary for the board to oversee the organization. It is important that the students feel comfortable with the information being discussed during this meeting since the students will be in the leadership role during the regular member meeting and will need to address many of the same questions raised during the executive board meeting.

The adviser should attend meetings and activities. The students want to see the adviser and take note when the adviser is present at meetings and activities. That said, it is vitally important for the adviser to have a discussion with the executive officers soon following their election or selection to the board about expectations. During this time (many organizations will develop a one or two day retreat for this purpose) the adviser needs to address availability due to family, spirituality, or other personal and professional commitments. Having that understanding early in the year reduces the students' expectation that the adviser should attend every meeting and activity. Many student organizations that are high performing facilitate or host activities every week. This may not be realistic for an adviser to be present during each activity. There will be activities that carry potential legal or financial liability (i.e., concerts, ski shows, etc.) where it is important to have an adviser present. For many of these activities a staff member can attend in place of the organization's adviser. Additionally, there may be activities that are very important to the organization due to tradition or participation by the adviser where the students will want their adviser to be present. All these matters should be discussed during the meeting early in the year.

The adviser will serve as an information resource person. The students will frequently call upon the adviser for information on how to reserve a van, complete a purchase order, find a banquet room, identify a speaker, and on and on. Clearly, the adviser with long term continuity with the campus and organization is well-positioned to address these questions. The adviser new to campus and new to the many policies and procedures will have to rely on colleagues and referrals while their learning curve is lessened. Responding to students with comments that you will assist them in finding their answers will go a long way to establish your credibility as a new adviser with the students.

The adviser will be an interpreter of institutional policies. Whether a student organization can serve alcohol, drive members in personal vehicles to an activity, use raffle tickets to raise funds, and the like will require the interpretation of institutional policies. Many advisers will require assistance with these types of questions. Most institutions employ a student activities office or general counsel office where the more difficult questions can be answered. Don't hesitate as an adviser to take a student with you to visit with a representative of the general counsel's office or student activities office. The experience and sharing the experience with other students will assist in developing a trusting relationship.

An adviser will motivate and encourage members. Understanding what motivates individual members and executive officers will assist you in knowing who to send a thank you note to, take to lunch, send a certificate, or just pat on the back. You do not have to be a cart-wheeling cheerleader to motivate, but it is important to recognize not all students are motivated in the same manner. Utilize the students to provide peer

recognition and motivation. To the student it is a red ribbon event when a they receive a note of thanks or are publicly rewarded during a meeting.

Concentrate on these five adviser functions this year and observe a marked improvement in your relationship with the students and the feelings that you still get after 22 years of working with student organizations.

Additional Resources:

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Hyatt, R.Y. (2001, November/December). Student and advisors: Creating partnerships that work. *Campus Activities Programming*, 34(5), 54-57.

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