



# Advising Student Organizations:

## Strategies for Establishing and Maintaining Successful Advisor/Student Relationships

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Sometimes we may feel that the challenges and obstacles we face as student organization advisors outweigh the benefits and rewards. Many advisors can become overwhelmed and frustrated while working with students and student groups; however, learning to seek advice from others can be extremely beneficial. If an advisor feels they do not have the proper tools to guide them in being a successful and effective student organization advisor, perhaps some of these strategies will point them in the right direction. One of the most daunting tasks you have as a professional or graduate student advisor is learning that you may not always have the answer, but you can certainly seek ways to get the answer.



## Establishing Effective Advisor/Student Leader Relationships

An advisor can either be assigned to or chosen by a given student organization. Therefore, all advisors should have a working knowledge of how the organization operates, as well as the history of the group and how it was established. Roles should be defined so that there is no confusion as to what each person thinks the other is doing.

It is important to keep in mind that there is a difference between advising and supervising. Student organization members and those in leadership positions, for the most part, take initiative and are highly motivated. Advisors should encourage, support and be a resource for leaders and the student organization. Supervisors exert control and give direction, as well as take responsibility if or when things go wrong. When a problem arises, advisors assist the students in reflecting and assessing the events and how to improve upon them for the future.

In both cases, when working with a new group of students, it is important to set goals and expectations. This encourages individuals to grow and learn without feeling pressured to please others.

## Establishing Identity as a Student Organization

Student organizations should have a mission and purpose that will guide them in their efforts to improve student life on campus. Create a connection among the members of the organization through trainings and retreats and student leaders will learn to trust each other and their advisor. If the organization plans to do something, it is crucial to follow through, all the while gaining respect from the campus community and each other. Once an organization feels it has established an identity, it will help to define and direct what they execute.

## Investing in the Organization

Investing time and interest in the organization can be a great way to interact with your student leaders and help them to develop their skills. Try to attend as many of the regular meetings and events as possible to demonstrate to students that you want them to succeed. Encouraging student leaders to have trainings and retreats will allow the group to create a sense of ownership while learning their positions. As an advisor, you can offer advice and support the efforts of the student organization.

## Gaining and Maintaining Respect

Advisors are expected to maintain a professional relationship with their students. Students will respect you if you show them the appropriate way to behave as an advisor. Respect is a two-way street, though. It is also important for student leaders to gain respect on campus, as well.

Advisors should set limits as to when students should expect them to be working, and advisors, in turn, should respect students' personal time. Being available and approachable to students builds rapport and trust. Advisors have the responsibility to know

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## To Be a Successful Advisor:

- Establish relationships with students, based on appropriate boundaries and limits.
- Help the student organization establish its identity on campus.
- Invest time in the organization.
- Set expectations and encourage respect.
- Balance and prioritize your responsibilities.
- Provide effective training for new members.
- Establish goals and deadlines for difficult students and strive to understand their perspectives.
- Create recognition opportunities.
- Help students manage multiple leadership roles.
- Keep your students—and yourself—motivated and strive to avoid burnout.
- Recognize the challenges and rewards of advising.

when it is time to have fun and when it is time to be serious. As the advisor, you set the example.

Starting out as an advisor can be stressful, but if you set expectations and follow through, students will listen. If you find that your expectations are too high, you can always relax them. It is much easier to start off running a tight ship and ease up later, if necessary. Sometimes showing some “tough love” to your students will get them to understand where you stand, as long as you continue to listen and give honest feedback when they need it.

### Balancing and Prioritizing Your Job Responsibilities

Learning when to use the word “no” is the best advice one advisor can give to another. There will be times when student leaders will, sometimes without even realizing it, take advantage of their advisor if the advisor allows it. It is also important to realize that you have specific responsibilities, and taking on extra projects and commitments without more available time may be foolish if you have to complete them hastily.

Taking time to figure out a system that works well for you and your advising style will help you balance all your work responsibilities. For example, make to-do lists, identify days and times for specific tasks and learn to take “me” time.

Sometimes that may mean saying no to a student who wants to have a meeting at 10 pm and asking them to meet earlier in the day. From time to time there will be situations students deem as needing immediate attention,

and it will be up to you to determine how desperate the circumstances actually are. But once you are familiar with your responsibilities and workload, you can lead a balanced work and personal life.

### Establishing Boundaries—Advisor vs. Friend

There is a difference between being a friendly advisor and being a friend. Advisors are responsible for setting the boundaries between themselves and students they advise. It is important to tell students they are being inappropriate if they exhibit behavior that violates boundaries; otherwise, your silence will tell them it is acceptable.

Be up front with your students about what you are and are not able to do with them. Keeping your interactions with students limited to work and school-related activities should clear up any confusion as to your role.

Dressing professionally makes a statement to students that you are a working professional. It is natural to be friendly and even caring as an advisor, but remember to maintain appropriate relationships.

### Training of New Members

When advising a student organization, especially if it is the first time you are involved with the group, it is ideal to have a retreat or planning session with the entire group before the semester begins. This gives everyone a chance to set expectations for themselves, as well as for their advisor. It is a great time to review policies and procedures, as well as changes to any of them since last year.

Pairing up new student leaders with experienced student leaders gives new members the opportunity to make a connection with someone who has been involved before, but also gives them someone to go to with questions and concerns they might have. Student leaders are constantly learning and developing new skills. Work with your experienced student leaders to train incoming members and transition them into their positions and help them learn the expectations for that position.

Finally, allow time in training sessions for students to have “free time” together and get to know each other, such as going out to eat, to the movies, bowling or other group activities. This will help to create a team that is bonded and wants to work together, as opposed to a group that is forced to work together.

### Dealing with Difficult Students

If you find yourself dealing with a difficult student, or group of students, establish goals and deadlines for them to be accomplished. Trying to see their perspective and understanding where they are coming from will create a better working relationship and, in the long run, make life easier for all.

If you feel they are exhibiting a challenging behavior, address it and explain the impact they have on others when they behave that way. You can also attempt to make a personal connection with the student by finding a common interest, which would show them you are making an effort to know them, which, in turn, means you care and want to build a working relationship with them.

## Creating Recognition Opportunities

Hosting an end-of-the-year celebration or recognition banquet is a great way to not only end the year, but to celebrate the accomplishments of student leaders and student organizations. It helps students feel they have contributed and made a difference on their campus and that the work they have done has had an everlasting effect at their school.

If you work with other advisors, creating and distributing an advisor handbook or set of guidelines will assist them in their position and help them feel more connected to the student organization. Advisors often dedicate their free time to work with a student organization and, therefore, should also be recognized each year for their continued support.

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## Managing Students with Multiple Leadership Roles

Having the ability to truly listen is one of the best traits you can possess as an advisor. Students often will tell you what you want to hear, but you can listen for underlying information that will help you to better understand them.

It is important to assist student leaders in managing their time well and help them to not become overwhelmed by their responsibilities and obligations. Regularly check in with them by asking how they are doing, how their classes are going or how the big exam went. Even asking how their weekend at home went will give you a sense of whether or not a student is balancing everything while still having time for themselves.

## Motivating Others, as Well as Yourself

### ● *Motivating Others*

As an advisor, you can find it difficult to motivate students while keeping yourself going day after day, event after event. Motivating others can be a challenge, but there are things you can do to keep morale high in your student organization. Always have a smile on your face—it might seem to be a small thing, but it goes a long way. Recognizing others' accomplishments gives individuals a sense of belonging. Lastly, being a positive role model who does their best to make work fun will also help create a highly motivated crowd.

### ● *Keeping Yourself Motivated*

Being content and satisfied in your job can be difficult for many to achieve, so if you do like your job, it's crucial to stay fresh and motivated. Self-motivation only contributes positively to others' motivation. If students see that you are dragging, they will think it's fine to slack off, whereas,

if you stay motivated and keep going, they will also forge ahead with full steam.

### ● *Avoiding Advisor Burnout*

One of the biggest challenges we sometimes face as advisors is trying to avoid burnout. The field of student activities, more often than not, requires extra hours, most of which are outside the typical workweek. Keeping a positive attitude and an open mind can really make a difference on the job. Be sure to take time for yourself, and if it seems like you are always sacrificing your personal life for work, try to re-prioritize what is really important and what can wait until tomorrow.

Sometimes professionals can become frustrated with the way things are accomplished on their campuses, or the red tape they may endure, but if you find someone with whom you can vent, you will feel much better and make your days less stressful. In our field, there is always going to be change, and there will always be a new group of students each year. Do your best to take time for yourself, especially during breaks and the summer, and you will feel rejuvenated when the new year begins.

## Recognizing the Challenges and Rewards of Advising Student Organizations

There are times when advisors realize there are many variables that are out of our control; but recognizing these factors is the first step to overcoming them. There are going to be members of the organization who do not see your position, or you personally, as a valuable asset. Typically, there is a high turnover of members each year. But rather than looking at this as a challenge, advisors can treat it as a blessing. New members and new ideas can be the lifeline of a student organization. It is imperative to know the past and learn from it, but it is also essential to realize that change is inevitable and should be embraced.

Advising students is a privilege that can and does really make a difference in the lives of students. Think of yourself as the coach of a team. It is your job to be concerned about students in terms of academics, their personal lives and how they contribute to the team.

Students should always hold their academic careers as the top priority. It is very easy for student leaders to overextend themselves and become overwhelmed. Letting our students know we are there for them and care about them and their success as students is extremely important. Caring about our students comes naturally and can really make a difference to them today, tomorrow and in the future.

## About the Author

**Erin Morrell** is director of Campus Activities at **Albertus Magnus College (CT)**, where she oversees all student organizations and campus events, as well as advises the Student Government Association. She also coordinates the new student orientation program each year. She currently serves as the NACA Northeast Regional CO-OP Buying Coordinator and previously served on the 2005 NACA Northeast Regional Conference Committee as the On-site Volunteer Coordinator. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Connecticut in human development and family relations and a master's degree in applied psychology from Fairfield University (CT).

