Advising Student Organizations

What Is It That We Do?

By Han Mi Yoon

Editor's Note: The conclusions and assertions represented in this article are those of the author, based upon her professional experience and observations. As presented here, they are not based upon a research of authoritative sources in the campus activities field.

What is the role of a student organization advisor? I believe that it is both broad and ambiguous. As a result, many in our profession have experienced disparity between our perceived and actual duties and responsibilities. Our students and colleagues, too, have perhaps experienced some confusion regarding our roles. While specific expectations of advisors may vary from institution to institution, it is my intention here to help clarify the role of the advisor, to offer a job description of sorts—a training manual and guide for new advisors in particular.

Who Are Advisors?

Advisors are professional staff who are trained and educated to provide support to the many student organizations on campus that plan activities and services for the university community. As members of the student affairs profession (or as a member of the university faculty), the advisor is, in my opinion, primarily concerned with individual and group development of students. However, it is pointless to address student development issues before a student/advisor relationship is established. Relationships and levels of involvement vary, depending upon the particular student and organization. I believe they should be negotiated with the organization and its leaders during the establishment of the student/advisor relationship.

The advisor may be expected to meet several institutional expectations, which include but are not limited to: monitoring funds; disseminating policy and procedural information; processing forms and contracts; and advising on safety and risk management issues. The advisor also serves in an educational capacity, developing strategies to influence the quality and content of students' educational experiences outside the classroom. The advisor is, in my opinion, on the "front lines," applying student development and organizational theory to practice, working toward the fundamental goal of the profession—to develop each student's total potential.

Advisors are often charged with creating, maintaining and influencing the environment where ideas and points of view are openly voiced and challenged. However, as the title says, the advisor's role is to ADVISE, not dictate. Advisors counsel individuals and organizations as they exercise responsibility and suggest alternatives to actions that might be considered inappropriate. I don't think advisors should make decisions for the organizations, lead them or do their work for them. That responsibility and accountability ultimately lies with the students. However, I do believe the advisor is responsible for providing accurate information to ensure that students understand the consequences of their decisions and actions. Advisors not only pro-

vide encouragement and guidance, but also maintain an institutional responsibility to protect the best interests of the students and the campus as a whole.

I believe that cocurricular activities are designed to help students acquire valuable leadership skills, learn ethical and moral decision making principles, and gain practical experience—there is much for them to learn from their programming successes and failures, lessons that can later be translated into after-college work experiences. With this in mind, I think advisors should strive to maximize the benefits students gain from experience and association with campus organizations.

Establishing Effective Advisor/Student Leader Relationships

The role each advisor plays is multifaceted, and may include educator/trainer, resource person, source of continuity, budget monitor, confidant/counselor, and conflict mediator. Yet, I don't believe an advisor can be effective in any of these roles if an effective advisor/student leader relationship is not established and maintained.

How is this accomplished?

I believe one of the most important events affecting the nature of the advisor/student leader relationship is the introduction of an advisor to an organization. It is especially critical if the advisor has been assigned to an organization rather than having been chosen by the students.

Advisors must be equipped with a history of the organization, its purpose, and a description of the type of students who generally comprise its membership. At the very least, he/she should be supplied with the organizations' constitution and bylaws, a list of executive officers, and a calendar of events. After the advisor has assessed the nature of the organization, he/she and the students should come to a mutual agreement defining the roles everyone will play in the organization. As an organization develops and leadership changes, the advisor, his/her supervisor, and the students should re-evaluate the advisor's role.

Attendance at Student Organization Meetings and Events

The level of involvement the advisor maintains in an organization is most likely to depend upon the organization and its leaders. Attendance at meetings, for example, may or may not be necessary. While attendance is clearly the best way for an advisor to stay informed of the organization's activities, it is not unusual for an organization to not want an "adult" or a member of the "administration" present. In such cases, the advisor may make arrangements to meet regularly with the officers to keep him/herself informed. If the advisor's attendance at meetings is welcomed, then the advisor may participate in an advisory capacity. He/she should not run the meeting. Rather, they should help facilitate discussion, offer objective points of view, present alternative solutions to problems, and encourage the student leaders. Through observational participation, advisors can make suggestions on how officers can improve their leadership skills and serve as a sounding board for plans and ideas.

Many in our profession may have experienced disparity between our perceived and actual duties and responsibilities.

It is important for an advisor to attend organization events, whether it be in an official capacity or only to show support. Occasionally, the advisor's schedule will prevent attendance at an event, especially if it occurs on a weekend. However, I would caution advisors to enter their positions with the awareness that many extra hours are spent working late into the evening. Attendance at events should not be viewed as chaperoning or supervising, but as an opportunity to show support and encourage students. Sometimes, the advisor is called upon to help manage a crisis situation at an event. Thoughtful pre-planning involving student organizers can minimize those occurrences, however.

Influence and Control

It is not wise to underestimate the extent of an advisor's influence. Regardless of whether students accept or resist an advisor, the advisor's influence, I believe, is still substantial. Consequently, it is easy to cross the line that separates influencing student leader decisions and controlling them. While an advisor may want to control decisions or programming, the ultimate decisions must lie with the students. Advisors disseminate, articulate, and enforce the guidelines within which organizations must operate. These guidelines include institutional policies, safety and security measures, and liability issues that are established by the institution, not the advisor.

Advising vs. Supervising

While the campus activities advisor does not take responsibility for program content, program failure, or a group's actions, he/she should be available in case emergencies or problems arise during an event or program. Student organization membership and leadership are self-initiated, self-directed activities. Therefore, from a developmental point of view, I don't believe an advisor can supervise students in an activity without infringing on their rights and responsibilities. Nevertheless, in some institutional settings, a supervisory role may be expected or encouraged. The advisor may want his/her supervisor to define advising vs. supervising. If the advisor is expected to supervise a programming board, then program content, program failure, or a student group's actions would indeed be a part of the advisor's responsibilities.

Authority

All students, student organizations, and advising staff must abide by institutional policies and regulations as well as all local, state, and federal laws and regulations. Advisors may have the authority to interpret and enforce policies, but they may also defer to a higher authority

when policies are questioned and/or challenged. Depending upon the institution and the manner in which organizations are recognized, advisors may or may not have authority to discipline an organization for violation of policy. Advisors, do, however, have a responsibility to bring violations to the attention of the proper governing board.

Credibility

An advisor's credibility may come from a number of sources, including position, knowledge, and performance. Oftentimes, positional power that comes from an advisor's title is minimal due to the institution's hierarchy. Therefore, title alone will not give an advisor credibility. Knowledge power stemming from the length of tenure and experience and knowledge of the institution will add to an advisor's credibility. Performance as an advisor or in other capacities within the institution can also greatly enhance or diminish credibility as well.

Other relevant factors that may affect credibility include age, race and gender. These factors are important in understanding the initial dynamics of the student/advisor relationship and how students will react or respond to the advisor. Oftentimes, new professionals or graduate students serve as advisors. Students may use the age similarity to their advantage or deny the advisor credibility by projecting "peer" status onto him/her. Similarly, race and gender can be used to discount an advisor's credibility. For example, an ethnic organization may give less credibility to an advisor who is not of the same ethnic origin than to one who is. A women's rights organization may give less credibility to a male advisor than to a female advisor. However, I don't think successful advising is dependent on any of these factors. I believe credibility can be gained through development of the student/advisor relationship.

Situations may occasionally arise wherein an advisor's judgment is challenged and/or overruled by a higher authority. Such an event may also reduce credibility. To avoid this pitfall, an advisor may consult with colleagues and his/her supervisor before making a decision. When time does not allow such consultation, an advisor should use his/her best judgment while remaining aware of institutional politics and possible implications of his/her actions. It is important to keep clear, written records of situations and circumstances, and the logic used to reach and support decisions that were made.

Even when precautions are taken, advisors can still be overruled. It is important to continue building rapport with students and the organization to re-establish a strong advisor/student leader relationship if this occurs. As the saying goes, "Never let them see you sweat."

continued

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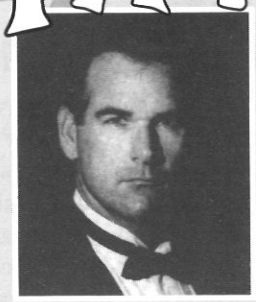

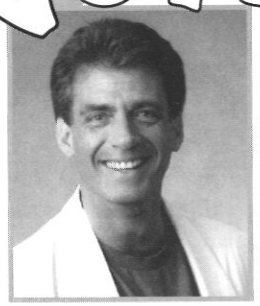

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Bruce Berkowitz
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Katie Hanson
University of San Francisco

BRUCE McDONALD

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Marilyn Lott
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Respond With Confidence

In my opinion, the student leadership experience should help students develop and refine basic leadership skills, exercise moral and ethical judgment, and question and challenge their own assumptions, as well as those of others. The experience should also help them develop greater degrees of self-confidence, improve their interpersonal skills, develop critical thinking skills and enhance their awareness of self-identity.

I believe the advisor is the primary educator when it comes to helping students achieve these goals. He/she plays a critical role in the day-to-day education and development of the student organization and its leadership. The next time anyone asks us, "What is it that you do?", I think we should respond with confidence and pride, "I am an advisor for student organizations." ❖

Tips for Advisors

By Han Mi Yoon

Here are tips that I've found to be helpful to advisors:

- Stay informed of an organization's plans and problems. This can be accomplished by attending meetings and events, reading the campus paper and electronic news groups, and talking with student leaders.
- Be visible and accessible to students. Eat where they eat, walk where they walk, and maintain an open door policy.
- Arrange regular meetings with student leaders. The meetings may range from informal conversations about how things are going to more formal critiques of leadership skills. However, the form the meetings take is not as important as their frequency and regularity.
- Don't get discouraged when a group rejects you. If a group is defensive, the best way to get beyond it is to explain, or better yet, show what the benefits of having an advisor are and what he/she can do for the group.
- Show students your own pre-event excitement. Ask how ticket sales are going. Comment on the visibility of the advertising. Let them know of conversations overheard by students who expressed excitement.
- Let go of feelings of responsibility for failures. Attendance does not equal success. Help the organization learn from failures to improve on future events. Learn from what you did or didn't do as well.
- Applaud successes. Congratulate individual students and the whole organization for a job well done. Recognize individuals and groups by nominating them for campus awards.
- Give feedback. Have informal conversations about programs, advertising, and the planning process. Give constructive criticism and suggestions of how to improve for the next time around.
- Model good leadership. The same requirements apply to the advisor that apply to students when programming: careful planning, budgeting, and collaboration. Delegate when necessary and accept constructive criticism.
- Give recommendations and suggestions, not orders. Present ideas as options rather than requirements. Organizations will be more willing to accept them if they feel they have a choice in the matter.
- Keep a sense of humor. If advisors are not able to laugh at themselves, then they are in the wrong profession.
- Don't act surprised by anything and keep records of everything. Written notes and documentation of problems or complications are helpful tools when dealing with similar situations in the future. It is also a good training tool for future advisors.
- Don't take ownership of an organization and its actions. This depends somewhat on the climate of the institution, but advisors are not parents to the student organizations. Advisors can attempt to influence behaviors and decisions made by students or the organization, but there is no guarantee that they will accept your advisement.
- Trust and respect between students and the advisor should be mutual. Teach students that leadership and adulthood come with certain levels of responsibilities, and that as the advisor shows trust and respect for students, he/she should expect the same from students. If mutual trust and respect are not present, then the advisor must address the issue if an effective advising relationship is to take place.
- Recognize that various organizations and individual students are at different levels of organizational and personal development. Treat each student as an individual and address his/her specific needs as necessary.

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