

Advising the Undergraduate Student Organization: This Worked for Us!¹

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Abstract

New faculty members are often assigned the task of advising undergraduate student clubs and organizations, but new faculty are typically unprepared for this role. Not only are new faculty members unprepared for the advisorship, they are often unmentored in transitioning the club or organization from one advisor to the next. In addition, balancing the important role of organization advising with the expectations of promotion and tenure can be frustrating for new faculty members. Therefore, my colleague and I wrote this article for the purpose of sharing our undergraduate organization advising experience. This is what worked for us as we transferred the advisorship of a large, active undergraduate student organization from one advisor to another. For this article we wrote practical, general suggestions for advising undergraduate student clubs and organizations. Specifically, though, we are sharing guidelines that worked for us during an advisor-transition year.

Introduction

As an undergraduate student, I chose to become an active member of the department's undergraduate student organization. This choice proved to be valuable in my undergraduate career. In fact, being elected as an officer in the organization became the major variable in my decision to return to college after winter break of my sophomore year (I almost left college to accept a full-time job). Knowing I had made a commitment to the organization was the catalyst for my decision to return to campus, which, again, was a wise decision for my undergraduate career and beyond.

At the beginning of my graduate assistantship, I was excited to be asked by the department head to serve as a graduate assistant advisor to the same undergraduate organization I had led several years earlier. Today, many years after my first introduction to the organization, I am pleased to serve the organization as its faculty advisor.

Many new faculty members find themselves answering a similar call from the department head to serve as the faculty advisor for an undergraduate club or organization. "The first form of departmental or

university service experienced by new faculty members is the role of a faculty advisor for an undergraduate student organization," writes Dee (1999, p.1). Fortunately for me, I have a history with the organization, which gave me a bit of necessary and welcomed insight. My concern, however, is most new faculty members are thrust into advising student organizations with no background information about the organization, and with no experience to prepare them for the role of the faculty undergraduate organization advisor. In addition, faculty members have had no preparation for transitioning from the previous advisor to the current advisor.

Undergraduate Education and Organization Faculty Advisors

An effective undergraduate education reaches far beyond the classroom. Currently undergraduates are encouraged to enrich their education through such endeavors as required minors, internships, and study abroad experiences. These out-of-classroom opportunities are designed with career competence in mind. Development of the whole person, though, not just their career competence, is the ideal model for undergraduate education. Rosovsky (1990) stated that learning involves the development and practical application of those human qualities that will assist the college student in becoming a leader in the community.

Developing the whole person involves cognitive, psychomotor, and emotional maturity as a student. University coursework and internships are designed for developing cognitive and psychomotor maturity, but emotional maturity does not tend to be a topic of discussion at university curriculum meetings. Therefore, undergraduate organizations are a natural fit for assisting with the necessary emotional maturity that evolves as a critical component of the undergraduate experience. Hughes (1992) suggested that undergraduate organizations assist students in making the transition into college, especially in a large university.

Advisors of undergraduate organizations, therefore play a significant role in the development of students. Advisors, for one thing, are usually one of few consistencies throughout a student's undergrad-

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uate experience. Yarbrough (2002) believed that students and their organization advisors develop a heightened personal investment in the success of the individual. Therefore, advising in general, and advising specifically during a transition from one advisor to another, deserves care and attention for an efficient and effective year in the life of an undergraduate student.

Advisor Transition

Advisor transition is an important event for a viable undergraduate student club or organization. Listed below are guidelines for shaping a seamless transition year, and for running the organization smoothly for many years thereafter.

Declaring the change. A “special meeting” of the officer team, the old and new advisors, and the department head is important. At the special meeting the department head shares the news of the change. It is appropriate at this time that the department head asks to be added to the agenda for the next meeting of the organization for the purpose of making the formal announcement to the organization. An official meeting of the organization is the right time to visually exchange the advisorship as well.

Timing the change. The best scenario for an official change in advisorship of the undergraduate student organization is a time that coincides with a naturally occurring change in the organization's year. For example, choosing to change advisors at the beginning of the school year, or at the beginning of the terms for new officers, allows the change in advisorship to be massaged into an existing emotional change for the organization.

Hosting a casual gathering. The new advisor will want to spend time with the officer team. Hosting the group in the advisor's home is a warm gesture. During the meeting the discussion starters will focus on, “What has been working well?”, “What would you like to change?” and “What activities would you like to keep/implement?” During this gathering be sure to bring calendars so all dates are recorded. The new advisor needs to plan now for attending every event of the organization!

Gathering guiding documentation. Begin gathering all documentation necessary to increase the advisor's knowledge regarding the organization. For example, has the organization been officially registered with the university as an organization? Is there a Program of Activities? Does a Memorandum of Understanding exist between the organization and the department? Are there guidelines from the university that must be followed? Is there a constitution for the organization? If so, has it been followed? If a constitution does not exist, existing organizations such as the National FFA Organization have a template that can be used as a starting point. In either the constitution for the organization or in the Program of Activities, the advisor will find a list of

duties. Duties might include, but are not limited to: attending meetings and events, working with the officer team, explaining university policies, serving as a resource, signing documents as the university representative, initiating ideas for discussion, overseeing the finances and budget cost centers including following the state and university legalities associated with fundraising, instilling teamwork, and setting a positive example (Dee, 1999). In addition, advisors are the “voice of consciousness” on all decisions of the organization.

Writing a budget. A budget will indicate the activities in which the organization participates and the cash flow generated or expensed for those activities. What is the financial status of the organization? Most universities require that student organization records be audited by the guiding university organization. If this is not the case, an advisor needs to immediately implement an auditing system on an annual basis.

Is a ledger book being used to record receipts and expenses? Is there a receipt book with carbons for receiving dues? Are the bank statements hole-punched and filed? If the files are not being kept electronically, the new advisor may want to suggest that files be computerized.

Are the finances for the organization administered through the department or is there an independent checking and savings account at a local bank? Guarantee that university policy is being followed in either situation. Is the advisor's name on the checking account? If so, the old and new advisor will need to go to the bank together to change the signatures on the official bank documentation. A dual-signed system for check-writing between the treasurer and the advisor is an important consideration. Keep the records archived for seven years or according to your university policies.

Who are the donors to the organization? What donations does this organization make to charities? Ask the former advisor for details related to financial and philanthropic giving and receiving, such that the new advisor is politically savvy during the transition.

Storing files and archived information. An advisor transition is a good time to sort and clean. As the organization's files are moved from one advisor's office to another, read, think, question, and clean. Electronic files can be emailed as well as provided on disk or CD and labeled. Find out where all of the organization's storage areas are located. Can storage be condensed to a single space? This may be the time to purchase clear plastic storage containers for labeling and organizing.

Valuing the former advisor. Brainstorm with the former advisor regarding your specific duties. Ask for help when needed. If there is a calendar conflict with an organization event, ask the former advisor to fill-in at the event. In most cases, the students will be glad to see the former advisor and the former advisor will be glad for the opportunity to interact with the

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students. Ask the former advisor the extent to which he/she would like to still be involved. For example, would the former advisor like to chair the nominating committee, or chaperone a fieldtrip? Would he/she like to be invited to the annual banquet? The potential emotions attached to the transition can be eased through these subtle interactions.

Imaging the transition. Students are likely to be loyal to the former advisor. Therefore, an image of an efficient and effective transition must be apparent to the students. When appropriate, inform students that the former advisor's advice will be sought regularly. If a project is ongoing or incomplete at the time of the advisor transition, work together with the former advisor and new officer team to complete the project.

Seeking institutional wisdom. A change in advisors often means a loss of institutional wisdom. As a rookie advisor, try to capture as much as possible from informal conversations or lunch with the former advisor. Who are the key people and contacts for organization activities? What is the history regarding traditions held valuable to the organization? The learning curve is quite steep at this juncture. Harnessing background information will prove insightful in decision-making for the organization.

Evaluating progress. Throughout the first year, when appropriate, informally ask the former advisor his/her perception of how the organization is progressing. The two-way dialogue will be valuable. Formally, there are self-assessments available. For example, in the Student Organization Advisor's Manual (2004) at Bowling Green State University, an advisor's checklist is provided for assessing progress as an undergraduate student organization advisor. Provide formal assessment opportunities to the members of the organization, so the advisor continues to improve.

Promotion and Tenure and Advisorship?

The "publish or perish" mentality can drive, and potentially frustrate, faculty members. Promotion and tenure certainly must be considered when setting priorities concerning workloads and departmental responsibilities. Yes, advising a student organization takes a considerable amount of time. However, for many faculty members, advising the student organization provides a welcomed emotional release from other aspects of the professional day. Faculty members, in close consultation with the department head and tenured colleagues will make prioritizing decisions regarding the balance between promotion and tenure and advisorship.

Suggestions for finding balance include: consider the opportunities that exist for tying outreach and service activities (advising) to scholarly activities. Is there research that can be aligned with the advising role? Are there course content, such as leadership or

professional development topics, naturally embedded into the advisor role that can be used as real-life examples in teaching? Can advising an undergraduate organization be substituted for credit hours in the expected course load? Can a work-study student help with logistics associated with the advisorship? Creative management may be a key to balancing the formal and non-formal expectations of faculty members in today's promotion and tenure culture.

Summary

The first year of advising an undergraduate student organization is the most difficult. Not only is one charged with advising the organization, which in itself is challenging, but one is also transitioning an entire body of students, called an organization, from the former to the current advisor. Working together for the benefit of the students will be critical.

During this inaugural year, with promotion and tenure looming in the background, the new advisor must focus on the personal and professional benefits of advising an undergraduate student organization, while simultaneously exploring opportunities to balance the time commitment with other scholarly endeavors. Very few faculty members, other than undergraduate student organization advisors, will work beside their students in non-formal settings and enjoy the personal relationship that develops as a result. Likewise few faculty members, with the exception of those that advise undergraduate student organizations, will participate fully in the emotional maturity that lies at the heart of the undergraduate student organization's mission in the university system. Enjoy the experience.

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