

The Role of the Student Organization Advisor **by Paul A. Bloland**

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In discussing the function of the advisor as a group leader, it would be well to keep in mind the distinction between the adult leader and the student leader. The advisor is not the elected leader of the group. His authority came from the college while the student leader's authority comes from the group which has selected him for leadership. The advisor is most often related to the group because the college requires that each organization have an advisor before it can be chartered. The student leader is most concerned with helping the group reach its goals while the advisor must be concerned as well with the goals of the college, professional responsibilities and the educational relevance of the activity.

What is the advisor expected to accomplish in this assignment? One school of thought would say, "Nothing. The advisor should be seen but not heard. He should be available if the students turn to him for advice but should keep out of their programs otherwise." Adherents of this laissez-faire position feel that it is undemocratic and manipulative for the advisor to exert influence upon the group, that the student participants are being denied their democratic rights if all activity does not grow out of the group itself. Working toward advisor-held goals is felt to be inconsistent with democratic leadership. Also involved in this position is the often-heard philosophy, "Give the poor student a chance: Let him call his soul his own. Do not put him under medieval patriarchalism."

While there is a certain popular appeal to this laissez-faire position, I feel it has little educational or logical merit if one conceives of the extracurriculum as having education potential and if one sees the teacher's classroom role as an active one. It then follows that this educational potentiality can be exploited for the benefit of the participants and that exploitation connotes conscious and deliberate activity on the advisor's part. The teacher who feels an obligation to teach in the classroom and then adopts the laissez-faire philosophy when working with student organizations has in effect abandoned his educational responsibilities in that situation.

Williamson phrases the problem as a question, "To Advise or Supervise?" he argues that "advising and supervising relationships may be integrated in some form in the same staff, even at the risk of confusing the two roles in many instances and of triggering resistance." Authorities in the field of social group work have come to grips with and rejected the theory that all decisions must come solely from the group with no influence or help from the advisor. Klein, for example, speaks of the group worker as being "engaged to direct the group process consciously toward specific destinations" and goes on to say that group workers should see themselves as "social workers and educators who use democratic methods to achieve defined ends, rather than as democratic leaders who fear that they may be guilty of superimposition when they seek to help groups to reach specific goals." The goals themselves, however, may be defined internally by the organization, externally by the advisor, or by mutual agreement of the group and the advisor.

Instead of contrasting the passive or laissez-faire role and the active or teaching role of the student group advisor as opposite polarities or characterizing them in political or civil rights terms as “democratic” vs. “authoritarian,” it may be more profitable to look analytically and positively at the advisor’s functions and duties.

Three Sets of Functions

It may be helpful to think of the advisor’s role in a student organization in terms of three major areas: (1) maintenance or custodial functions; (2) group growth functions; and (3) program content functions. Within each of these broad areas the group advisor may perform certain functions which call for considerable activity on his part in some specific situations and instances, or none at all.

Maintenance Functions

Advisor activities which merely maintain the student organization in existence and out of difficulty such as providing a link with the history and tradition of the past, heading off situations which might give rise to bad public relations for the institution, preventing the group from breaking the college’s rules, serving as an exemplar of intellectual virtue, and arbitrating intra-group disputes.

Note that these are responsibilities that require little initiative on the part of the advisor until or unless the situation calls for him to act in some way. These maintenance or custodial functions may be regarded as minimal requirements of the staff advisor. Even if he subscribes whole-heartedly to the laissez-faire philosophy he may find it necessary to respond to a group situation with one or more of these advisory activities such as when a student organization votes to violate a university regulation or when members turn to him for technical advice in his field of professional competency.

In addition to these general maintenance and custodial responsibilities there are a number of areas in which the group advisor assumes a more active leadership role, whatever techniques he employs. Given a set of objectives, whether those of the group, the college, the academic discipline, or his own, the advisor assumes some responsibility for the achievement of these objectives and actively seeks a way of using his relationship with the group to promote them. These functions might be classified as growth functions and content functions.

Group Growth Functions

By group functions we refer to those advisor activities which improve the operation and effectiveness of the group and help it progress toward its goals whatever they may be. They are facilitating functions that can be utilized with little reference to the program content. Related advisory activities might include teaching the techniques and responsibilities of leadership and followership, providing the officers with the elements of good organizational and administrative practice, developing self-discipline and responsibility in the group, teaching the principles of effective group operation, developing procedures and plans for action, keeping the group focused on its goals, stimulating and even initiating activity.

Skilled advisory activities in this area should result in an improved student organization more capable of progressing towards its goals with a minimum of lost motion and a maximum of efficiency and effectiveness. In such instances the advisor has not introduced new objectives or goals to the organization but has suggested ways in which the group can better attain its own established goals.

Program Content Functions

Obviously, the student organization exists for other purposes than to maintain itself. It is thus in the area of program content that the faculty advisor assumes a genuine educational function and one which can parallel, complement, or supplement the formal curricular offerings of the college. Here the advisor answers the question, "For What?" It is here that the advisor can stimulate the intelligence and ability of the student participants and help them plan activities which will contribute to their own educational development and welfare while enriching campus life. Advisor activities related to program content might include the following: suggesting new program ideas with some intellectual flavor; providing opportunities for the practice of classroom-acquired skill; helping the group to apply principles learned in the classroom, pointing out new perspectives and directions to the group; and supplying expert knowledge. It is when the advisor consciously influences the content of the organization's programs so that it complements the college's purposes that he helps to bring about what has been called in "reintegration of curriculum and extracurriculum."

It is my feeling that these three major classifications of advisory activities and functions—maintenance, growth and content functions—are not in conflict with one another. They do not represent the democratic vs. authoritarian anti-thesis nor are they incompatible roles. They are, instead, stages of advisor activity which may be adopted in succession or in their totality by an advisor depending upon his own interests, the quality of group leadership and ideation, the specificity of his institutional responsibilities, and the interests and abilities of group members.

For example, the faculty advisor to the History Club in one particular year may be working with an organization with imaginative and aggressive leadership and an active and interested membership. For much of the year, the advisor may need to furnish only maintenance functions, serving as the club's principal resource in the field of history, acting as a chaperon at club social functions, as well as providing continuity within the group. The officers and members of the History Club will themselves provide the growth and content functions solely on their own initiative with little guidance from the advisor. In another year, the same advisor may find that the History Club has elected a group of inexperienced officers and that, thereafter, membership, interest and morale decrease. In this context, the advisor may discover that he must not only provide maintenance support to the club, but must also coach officers in their duties and responsibilities, help them to evaluate their performance until they have developed ideas and content which will stimulate member interest, help plan procedures for accomplishing their objectives, and even suggest new objectives. If he/she is successful in these active roles, the History Club may well grow and assume more of these responsibilities. If the advisor is unsuccessful, the organization may become inactive or die.

These examples suggest that the advisor may be engaged in a process of eliminating the need for his presence. In some respects this may be true. If college is designed to fit the intellectually and socially immature student to take his place in society of man as a mature, responsible, productive and reasoning individual, then as the student progresses towards this idealized state, the college must permit him sufficient scope and elbow-room to grow. As the organization and its officers assumes the growth and content functions the advisor may withdraw his direct participation or influence. The group will, in a sense, begin to internalize these functions and assume them for its own, become self-directing or self-starting to a greater degree and hence more democratic as a result of the leadership and guidance of the advisor. He must never be reluctant to participate and to contribute his ideas, and he will never be free of the maintenance and custodial functions, but he must be alert for signs of responsibility and then encourage them.

In practice, the skilled and experienced advisor in all probability will be performing maintenance, growth and content functions as they seem appropriate to specific situations and not necessarily in the sequence described above. It is at this point that advising student groups becomes an art, or perhaps an applied science, since everything the advisor has learned about individual and group psychology must be brought into play in his efforts to make membership in the organization an educationally meaningful experience. If good advising is good education, then the student organization advisor must go beyond the role of the passive bystander and be prepared to provide active and on-going educational leadership to each student group.

A Novice's Guide to Organization Development Or... Growing Your Own

As a group leader, you are responsible for the overall planning of your organization's activities. You must concentrate your energies on making the best use of the skills, talents and interests of your members. By doing this, you will promote both organizational and individual growth, and organizations must grow in order to survive.

Growth isn't measured in numbers alone. An organization must experience developmental growth as well as physical growth if it is to thrive. Healthy organizations recognize that this year's leaders must move on, making way for new leaders and new activities. That is the nature of the evolutionary process of organizational development. Each new cycle brings leaders and members who are enriched by what has gone before, but who must build on that enriched foundation by making their own unique contributions.

A primary function of an organization leader is to facilitate growth within the organization. To do that, you must first understand something about how organizations develop, and how to recognize the stages of organizational development. In the beginning it is important to know that: Each organization develops in two dimensions--1) personal relations, and 2) task functions.

Personal relations refers to the development of the human side of the group's activities. People progress in development from individuals to group members to people who feel some attachment to each other and, finally, to people who are able to link up in creative kinds of ways. Within the task function, a group comes together, learns what the task is, mobilizes to accomplish the task, and does the work. Four stages of group development are commonly experienced in groups that are organized for a specific activity.

In the initial stage, personal relations are characterized by dependency, and the major task functions concern orientation. Individual members tend to depend on the leader to provide all structure; the group members lean on the chairperson or advisor to set ground rules, establish the agenda, and do all the "leading." The parallel stage in the task function to be accomplished is the orientation of group members to the work they are being asked to do. Issues have to be specified. The nature of the work itself has to be explored so there is a common understanding of what the group has been organized to do. Common behavior at this point includes asking questions such as: Why are we here? What are we supposed to do? How are we going to get it done? What are our goals?

Stage two is characterized by conflict in the personal relations dimension, and organization in the task-functions dimension. Interpersonal conflict inevitably ensues as a part of a small group interaction, particularly with regard to authority, dependency, rules and agenda. (The conflict may remain hidden, but it will be there.) We experience interpersonal conflict as we organize to get work done. Who will be responsible for what? What are the work rules? What are the limits? What is the reward system? What are the criteria? The organization concerns that emerge reflect interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict over leadership and leadership structure, power and authority.

In stage three, the personal relations area is marked by cohesion and the major task function is data-flow. It is during the third stage of development, assuming the group gets this far, that people begin to experience a sense of group, a feeling of catharsis at having resolved interpersonal conflict and "gotten together." They begin sharing ideas, feelings and information related to the task. Sometimes during stage three there is a brief abandonment of the task and the introduction of a period of play that is an enjoyment of the cohesion being experienced.

Stage four, which is not achieved by many groups, is marked by interdependence in the personal relations dimension and problem-solving in the task-functions dimension. Interdependence means that members can work independently, in any sub-grouping, or as a total unit. They are both highly task-oriented and highly person-oriented. The group's tasks are well defined, there is high commitment to common activity, and there is support for experimentation with solving problems.

NOTE: This article was written for students. Its purpose is to give leaders a basic understanding of group development. Just as a leader's role changes as the group develops, so does the advisor's. As the leader of the group as well as the group stabilizes, finds direction and matures, the advisor moves from being directive to coaching to participating to a more passive role.

Guidelines for Effective Advising

A. General Functions

1. Assist the group in negotiating all group members' roles.
2. A group advisor must express sincere enthusiasm and interest in the group and its activities. Advisors must be open to criticisms by the group. Work with them to re-evaluate your role. Be willing to be wrong.
4. At times it is wise to allow the group to be on its own. You can demonstrate your trust in them by stepping back for a short time; however, do not pull back too far because they may feel you have lost interest. If you never step back, they may feel you are a "parent."
5. Act as a positive critic to the group. Give them feedback on how they are doing.
6. Serve as a resource for alternative ideas or solutions.
7. Be aware of any and all procedures and regulations affecting the group. Assist them in adhering to them.
8. Encourage the group to keep records and evaluations in files.
9. Try to encourage the assignment of tasks to all members. If a member merely comes to meetings and listens, he/she will readily lose interest.
10. Use the tools you have to assist the group - discussion methods, goal setting, role negotiating, small sub-groups, group representatives, role playing, etc.

B. Group Building

1. It is important for group members to know each other well enough to be able to share thoughts freely and join in the group.
2. Get to know members and help them identify the contributions they can make to the group.
3. Work with group leaders to develop and implement procedures for building group feeling and purpose.

C. Group Goal Setting

1. Early in the year raise questions about the group goals. What is their purpose? What do they want to accomplish? Try the consensus method for group goal formation.
2. Keep a record of goals and encourage the group to periodically evaluate its progress in relation to those goals.

D. Group Meetings

1. Meet with the officers at least one day prior to the meeting to develop an agenda. This allows time to gather any materials and information needed. In planning an agenda for a meeting, help the officer consider what has to be done and what should be done in light of their goals.
2. Discuss ideas with the officers on possible methods of running the meeting.
3. Following the meeting, discuss with the officers any problems encountered during the meeting and offer suggestions for improvement.
4. In a supportive manner, try to hold the officers accountable for follow-up on any assignments made at the meeting.

Suggestions for Faculty Advisors

- Determine whether or not the organization is achieving the goals set forth by the executive board at the beginning of each semester.
- Represent the group to the administration and help create a better understanding of the system and its operations.
- Contribute to your organization newsletter or bulletin or to the INN Newsletter sponsored by the Campus Activities/Student Involvement Office.
- Attend as many meetings as possible.
- Advise and evaluate the officers on the performance of their duties.
- Help the group institute and maintain a well organized recruitment plan.
- Help new members feel welcome—encourage the group to integrate new people by providing orientation and training programs.
- Advise the organization's financial and legal matters.
- Provide continuity for the group. Guide the action of the organization to prevent harmful decisions or acts.
- Be aware of university standards and regulations as they apply to the organization.
- Work closely with the people in the Campus Activities/Student Involvement Office. Professional advisors can help, especially if you keep them informed about your organization's activities, plans and problems.
- Know as many students as you possibly can and know them well.
- Treat each student with the dignity and respect that you want for yourself.
- Deal with the important and relevant aspects of your position. Avoid getting burned out in dealing with petty differences.
- Be honest with yourself and others. It does no good to tell students what you think they want to hear.
- Never underestimate the power of your influence on a student. Your conduct and conversations are what you are—a model for others.

How to Have an Effective Executive Committee

A. Function of an Executive Committee

1. It is the clearinghouse for all organizational problems. This includes problem identification as well as the clearance of responsibilities.
2. It coordinates all organizational activities both within the organization and with other organizations.
3. It takes official actions required by the By-Laws.

B. Executive Committee Membership and Meetings

1. Membership usually includes the officers, the standing committee chairperson, and the advisor.
2. Executive committees are most necessary in larger organizations.
3. The frequency of Executive Committee meetings will depend upon the effectiveness of the club business and the efficiency of the officers. Most groups

find it helpful to have an Executive Committee meeting to prepare for each regular meeting of the group.

4. It is at Executive Committee meetings that the faculty advisor can be most helpful. In this small group he/she can speak more openly about organizational problems. Faculty advisors generally prefer to remain in the background during general meetings of organizations.
5. The Executive Committee should be allowed the authority it deserves. The tendency is to make a play for "democracy" by restricting the activities of this important group.
6. Important business should be discussed among the Executive Committee before it is brought up at a general meeting.
7. Business requiring general membership support should always be fully considered by the general membership to the point of obtaining "felt commitments," but the Executive Committee should give a great deal of thought to the problems in advance. It should develop various alternatives and prepare checklists, panel discussions, role playing, etc., to stimulate general membership involvement in the ultimate decision.

"If you want your children to improve,
let them hear the nice things you
say about them to others."

Dr. Ginott

"If you wish to make a man your enemy,
tell him simply, you are wrong.
This method works every time."

Henry Link

Responsibilities of Group Members to their Advisor

Taken from... On Being An Advisor by Marilyn Kritzman

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An advisor should be recognized as an integral part of the group; he/she is not a member. Therefore, additional courtesies and considerations should be extended to him/her. An advisor should be welcomed at all meetings and social events, and thanked for coming at the close of the event.

Group and executive board meetings should be planned at a time when the advisor is able to attend.

1. Be sure to relay the date, time and place for each meeting.
2. Have an advisor report as a regular part of the meeting.
3. Send the advisor a copy of all minutes.
4. Check with the advisor before scheduling a special meeting.
5. The president of the group should meet regularly with the advisor to discuss organizational matters and to relay and update information.

The group should inform their advisor of all organizational activities and extend an invitation for him/her to attend.

An organization should ask their advisor for his/her opinion and advice when problems come