

# Advising Student Organizations:

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

By Erin Morrell, MA  
*Albertus Magnus College (CT)*

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

*Advising students is a privilege that can and does really make a difference in their lives*



