

# Advising Student Organizations: A Literature Review and Recommendations for Future Research

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*Advising student organizations is an essential student affairs activity, however, it has been under-researched and under-supported at the detriment of the staff members who support student organizations. This literature review seeks to provide an overview of the available research and anecdotal experiences on the role of advising, the training of staff members, and the needs of student organizations. Following the review of literature, recommendations are offered to address the changing role of advisors, the diverse needs of student organizations, and areas of growth for the field.*

Many student affairs professionals will have an opportunity to advise a student organization during their professional career, whether through a required or voluntary role. With high numbers of student affairs professionals advising student organizations, understanding this role is essential. While advising “guarantee[s] students sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult who can help them shape such an experience” (Hunter & White, 2004, p. 20), the role is more complex than simply serving as a concerned adult. Student organization advising is also focused on helping students develop their leadership skills, manage group dynamics, and work within the institutional policies and procedures (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). The role of a student organization advisor is multi-faceted and complex; however, the topic has been under-studied and under-researched. This literature review will address the research available on advising student organizations, which includes the training process, the changing roles of advisors over time, and meeting the needs of student organizations. Following this review, areas for continued research will be identified, assumptions will be challenged, and recommendations for student organization advisors will be made to help bridge gaps between research and practice.

## **Student Organizations and their Advisors**

Student organizations are plentiful on college campuses and may include but are not limited to student government, Greek life, residence hall associations, programming boards, honors and recognition organizations, sports teams, special interest groups, identity-based organizations, and academic organizations (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). For many of these organizations to exist, they must meet a specific set of requirements, which often include having an advisor (Cuyjet, 1996). Advisors for these organizations can be faculty members and student affairs staff members as well as other non-university affiliated individuals from the community (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998; Vanguri, 2010). These individuals can be required to advise the organizations or they can take on these roles as volunteers. Faculty members may serve as student organization advisors; however, faculty are not able to or choose not to devote a significant portion of their time to advising student organizations (FSSE, 2012). While the Faculty Survey for Student Engagement (2012) suggests that faculty do not interact with many students outside of the classroom, Meyer and Kroth (2010) found that the number of faculty advisors exceeded the number of student

affairs advisors in their study. This discrepancy shows that while the majority of faculty do not interact with student organizations, there are faculty advisors for student organizations and those advisors are invested in student organizations. While it is known that student affairs staff members and faculty members advise student organizations, it is unclear the number of non-university affiliated individuals advising student organizations. Requiring advisors for student organizations has become a norm for many colleges and universities; however, there is limited data on who is filling the role. Without knowing who is filling the role, it is difficult to provide adequate training for advisors with various levels of experience and interaction with their institutions.

### **Taking on the Role: The Motivation and Training of Advisors**

While there is limited data on who is advising student organizations, there is research available on the motivations for advising which can further explain who is advising and why. In a study on one institution's student organization advisors, it was determined that advisors took on these roles based on "their jobs, passion for the organization, and the desire to help students through their college developmental process" (Vanguri, 2010). Mentorship was an integral component for the advisors since they saw mentorship as their avenue for assisting students in their development (Vanguri, 2010). Dunkel & Schuh (1998) found that individuals served as advisors based on their ability to "observe the development of students during their college matriculation," "be recognized by the institution, organization, and students," and serve as a reference and mentor (p. 13). Vanguri (2010) and Dunkel and Schuh (1998) addressed two of the same motivator

for individuals to advise student organizations, mentoring and developing students. Meyer and Kroth (2010) discovered an additional motivator for student advisors: the social function. Individuals that advise student organizations, academic organizations, and athletic organizations were all motivated to serve because of the social experience, so regardless of the content of the organization, advisors were attracted to advising for similar reasons.

When taking on the advisor role, individuals are often not given an adequate amount of training. DeSawal (2007) noted in her study of student organization advisors that the 47.5% of the surveyed advisors only felt somewhat prepared to advise students when they first started in their positions. Additionally, respondents to the study articulated they learned how to advise through a process of trial and error, on the job experience, undergraduate knowledge, vicariously learning through resources and/or peers, and graduate school preparation (DeSawal, 2007). Myers & Dyer (2005) supplemented DeSawal's findings with their survey of faculty advisors that indicated 21% of faculty members do not feel competent when advising student organizations, 82% have not been trained to counsel students, and 87% have not been trained to advise organizations. It appears that while the individuals serving as student organization advisors are intrinsically motivated to assist students through their student organization experience, they do not have the skills or tools needed when beginning these roles.

### **Changing Roles of Advisors**

Regardless of the training advisors may receive, advisors are expected to take on a variety of characteristics, roles, and functions in order to meet the needs of the

student leaders and the organizations. Boland (1967) defined advisors as having three main functions for student organizations: maintenance, group growth, and program content functions. The first two functions focused on keeping the organization active on campus while the last function sought to provide assistance in connecting the extracurricular activities to the academic experience. Hudson (1993) shifted away from Boland's understanding of advising and integrated more of the student development perspective when she discussed that student affairs staff members were hired to educate, be aware of and provide resources, and assist student leaders and the student organizations in the reflection process. Five years later, Dunkel and Schuh (1998) articulated a more comprehensive description of the requirement of advisors that described their job as various roles and functions with an emphasis on development within each role. They saw advisors filling the roles of mentors, supervisors, teachers, leaders, and followers (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). In their update, Dunkel, Schuh, and Chrystal-Green (2014), eliminated the roles of follower and leader while confirming the roles of mentors, supervisors, and educators from the previous edition. In addition to the developmental roles, Dunkel and Schuh (1998) also noted that advisors "must monitor activities and events for liability and risk management implications" (p.7). Janosik (2004) confirmed this role since advisors can be held liable in court for their role in managing risk and advisors must be able to make informed recommendations and decisions.

The role of the advisor was reexamined in 2006 by the ACPA Commission for Student Involvement through the creation of an Advisor Manual. The roles were defined as mentor, team builder, conflict mediator, reflective agent, educator, motivator, and

policy interpreter. Many of the roles listed in the Advisor Manual fit into Dunkel and Schuh's (1998) supervisor role; however, the ACPA Commission for Student Involvement did not use any literature on advising to confirm their roles. It appears much of their manual was based on the anecdotal experiences of advisors and the common themes across different institutional advising manuals. Ferris, Johnson, Lovitz, Stroud, and Rudsille (2011) remedied some the shortcomings of the ACPA Commission for Student Involvement Advisor Manual by studying the role of advisors in creating successful leadership and developmental experiences for students. The data showed that students saw the most important roles of their advisors as being mentors, teachers, motivators, and university policy and risk agents (Ferris et al., 2011). Over time, according to the literature, the role of the advisor has changed to fit the needs of student organizations, the campus community, and the field of student affairs.

### **Developing Leaders within Student Organizations**

In the educator role, advisors are "characterized by the sharing of knowledge, promoting critical thinking about decisions, and developing new understandings and skills related to leadership and the position" (Ferris et al., 2011, para. 16). Leadership development is a key component of student involvement (Astin 1984) and "leadership educators can provide structure to a student's education, help make meaning, and connect an understanding of developmental theory to one's life experience" (Rosch & Anthony, 2012, p. 47). Furthermore, Patterson (2012) and Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001) encouraged integrating the

academic experience with co-curricular involvement as they recognized that students developed more effectively when these two were paired together. While weaving the academic experience into the student organization experience promotes increased leadership development, “only 36 percent of the students [studied] believed their advisors helped integrate their academic interests” (Ferris et al., 2011, para. 30) into their advising experience. However, in the same study, 72% of advisors felt they addressed the academic experience in their meetings and discussions with students (Ferris et al., 2011).

This discrepancy could be based on the approach advisors took on addressing academics. While the study did not provide any additional information on this finding, students may see the educator role and believe that advisors can and should take on a more active role weaving the curriculum and co-curriculum together. Advisors, on the other hand, may only see themselves as educators within the realm of student and organizational development and may not be able to assist students in connecting their curricular and academic interests to their organizational involvement. Furthermore, this study surveyed only advisors and students from member institutions of the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), who work primarily with union/programming boards and student activities, so this may not transfer to advisors of other student organizations. Myers and Dyer (2005) did note that 60% of faculty believed they could advise students in a scholarly activity, so faculty advisors may be better at weaving together the learning experience based on their position than their colleagues in student affairs.

To assist students through developing leadership identity and skills, advisors should use leadership theories to provide a framework for student organization

members and their experiences. While advisors have been considered necessary components to the leadership development process for student leaders and student organizations, it is difficult to understand exactly where advisors fit into this role when leadership educators also provide these developmental opportunities. It is difficult to develop a student leader when the various student affairs offices can and do utilize different leadership development theories in their work. With so many different theories promoted, the student leader may become confused and may not be able to make meaning of their leadership. Additionally, students may not be able to put to practice the knowledge and skills they have learned, which would be detrimental to the development of their organizations and themselves.

### **Issues and Challenges Advising Student Organizations**

While each different type of student organization comes with its own challenges, this section seeks to address the broader and more general issues impacting student organizations and advising. Dunkel and Schuh (1998) noted retention, funding, fiscal responsibility, and advisor training as major challenges to student organizations and those have continued to be consistent challenges over time. The recruitment and retention piece is an issue for all of the student organizations mentioned (Carson, 2012; Miller & Nadler, 2006; Renn, 2007; Roberts & Johnson, 2006). Student governments are faced with the need to recruit and engage non-traditional students, as student government leaders cannot adequately represent all students if they do not understand the needs of this population (Miller & Nadler, 2006). Programming boards deal with disengaged committee members who are not given enough

substantial work to encourage their continued involvement (Holmes, 2012), and LGBT clubs find it difficult to retain members based on their varied identities and the level of their identity development (Renn, 2007). Funding and fiscal responsibility are also concerns for all of these organizational types; however, some may have more advisor oversight over their funding. Looking within student organizations, advisors may face challenges fostering inclusivity and diversity. Harper and Quaye (2007) caution advisors from tokenizing students of color in non-minority organizations. They also encourage advisors to promote cross-cultural interactions between student organization members so that race and ethnicity are not only tolerated in the organization, but also understood and valued in predominately white organizations.

As mentioned earlier, advisors do not receive much training and often learn through trial and error, which may frustrate student organizations that are seeking out informed university staff to serve as resources and/or policy interpreters (DeSawal, 2007). Additionally, advisors may not be trained in all aspects of their position, so advisors may not be able to take on the educator role immediately in the beginning of their experience. The ability, or lack thereof, to hold student leaders and members accountable has been discussed frequently in anecdotal articles in *Campus Activities Programming Magazine* (Holmes, 2012; Miller & DeLuca, 2012). Accountability of student leaders may be one of the most challenging aspects of working with student organizations because students have been clear in the research that they want to feel like they have ownership over their organizations and do not want advisors stepping in to perform like a student leader (Miles, 2011). However, students also expect advisors to provide

organizational knowledge and history (Ferris et al., 2011; Miles, 2011). This desire for advisors to perform as organizational historians and maintainers places advisors in an unclear environment where they are utilized to ensure the organization continues but cannot hold student leaders accountable. Gloe (2011) notes there is a fine line “between helping an organization and doing the work of its member” (p.12).

### **Recommendations**

With the various challenges facing student organization advisors, a call for increased intentional practice is necessary. Harper and Quaye (2009) define intentional student affairs practitioners as individuals “who are conscious of every action they undertake and are able to consider the long-range implications of decisions” (p.7). Blimling, Whitt, and Associates (1999) articulate intentional practice as using theory and assessment to guide work, providing inclusive learning experiences, setting high expectations, and developing ethical and moral students. A key component of good practice is performing and utilizing assessment. Currently within the field of student activities, assessment has not been utilized to its fullest extent. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) has created standards for Campus Activities Programming; Fraternity and Sorority Advising Programs; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Programs and Services; and Multicultural Student Programs and Services (2012). However, based on an overview of the literature, student organization advisors have not been using these standards to frame their approach, nor have they critically assessed the usability and value of the standards. Currently, assessment within student organizations is being addressed anecdotally through articles framed to assist advisors through the process

of assessment (Peck & Horne, 2012; Harowitz, 2011; Poindexter & Lamarre, 2013).

Moving forward, advisors need to use the CAS standards created for their organizations to assess their practice. Additionally, advisors need to devote more time to researching the topics they are addressing anecdotally, so that advisors can be sure the advice and knowledge they are providing is applicable to other institutions. More research should also be conducted on the student organization experience that has minimal interaction with student affairs staff or advisors in general. There is little known about these other campus organizations, and the profession does not know if these student organizations and leaders develop in the same ways as the student organizations that have a high levels of advisor/staff support. The scholarly work being conducted on student organizations is minimal and advisors cannot be intentional in their practice if they do not have the data to support their approaches.

The last point that student organization advisors should consider are the ethics of advising certain student organizations. What does ethical practice look like for student organization advisors? Is it ethical to allow failure when student fees are being used to fund organizational operations and

programming? Is it ethical to provide more support to certain organizations over others? Is it ethical to underutilize assessment when student learning is at stake? While student organization advisors are providing valid work with student organizations as they weave learning into the co-curricular experience, more research needs to be done on ethics and advising, the development of student organizations, and assessment. Furthermore, advisors have quite a few challenges facing them and need literature to support or deny their anecdotal beliefs on these topics.

Advising student organizations involves a variety of different staff members with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Advisor roles have been articulated; however, these roles change over time based on the needs of the current student population, as do the skills needed to assist these organizations. Many challenges and issues arise in working with student organizations, and the research in student activities and student organizations is not up to par to assist advisors in navigating through these challenges. In order to move forward in the profession, student organization advisors must conduct more research on the topics they are addressing anecdotally so that they are better able to provide intentional practice.

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