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Role of the Chapter Advisor

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The role of the local fraternity/sorority chapter advisor is often assumed but seldom carried out well in practice. “Conventional wisdom” among many stakeholders is that if one is a sorority or fraternity member, or a non-fraternity member with advising experience with other groups (Schuh & Dunkel, 1998), one knows how to be a chapter advisor. Such assumptions may lead to advisors who merely sign papers for social documents, live several hours from the chapter’s location, and as alumni are unfamiliar with the daily operations of the university sheltering the chapter.

The following comments support an advising model that focuses on teaching faculty members. Finding a person willing to volunteer as a local chapter advisor is a perennial challenge for the officers and members of an undergraduate chapter. Whether alumni member or university faculty/staff member, few undergraduates seem to know how to recruit a local chapter advisor. Based on my own research on chapter advising, the process of recruiting an advisor is very similar to recruiting a prospective undergraduate member. Make a friend of the prospective advisor first, introduce the person to the group so they find common interests, and then invite them to be the group’s advisor.

Recruiting Local Chapter Advisors

One of the most valuable actions a campus fraternity/sorority advisor can take is to seek and find local volunteers associated with the institution in the immediate geographic area to be chapter advisors. Other university student affairs staff members understand the institution’s daily operations, and they have specialized pre-service preparation in college student development theory. Student affairs staff members are also more understanding of undergraduate perceptions of time and lifestyle. They understand student groups meet in the evening, plan on an *ad hoc* basis, and often do not know when to communicate about an issue with an advisor. Student affairs staff members typically have the patience to work with undergraduate leaders in terms of group dynamics, student development, and risk management issues.

Advantages of Faculty Members as chapter advisors

Faculty member chapter advisors help chapters support the academic mission of the institution, provide knowledge of the instructional and advising system, and can help promote the positive attributes of fraternal organizations across campus. Faculty members can facilitate the “elements of engagement for successful learning” (Schweinle, Reisetter, & Stokes, 2009, p. 774) promoted in the classroom within the fraternity / sorority chapter, recognize the academic/vocational interests of students to engage them across in-class and out-of-class activities, and have the on-site availability to undergraduate members in their faculty offices that many chapter alumni advisors do not similarly enjoy. Faculty members’ behaviors are also observable at all times, so they may be less likely to relive their undergraduate experiences than local alumni advisors who do not have the same institutional accountability.

Rewarding Faculty Advisors

A faculty member advising any student organization outside of the department's academic interest areas is counter to traditional faculty culture (Eberly, 1997). Faculty members are most rewarded for their instructional expertise and research published and papers presented. While faculty retention, promotion and tenure criteria is based on teaching, research, and service, the category of service is often narrowly defined as service to the department, college, or university. Direct service to undergraduate students, as in fraternity / sorority chapter advising, is typically among the least rewarded elements of faculty service. As a consequence, a young faculty member is often discouraged from working with students outside the classroom unless the student group is directly associated with the department's academic mission.

On more than one occasion during interviews with university provosts about faculty members serving as volunteer advisors for fraternities (Eberly, 1997), they stated (paraphrased) that,

If I have a young faculty member come to me and express interest in volunteering as an advisor to a fraternity or sorority, I will tell them that if they think they have the time to do such work, that is time taken away from research and writing another publication toward their tenure. Don't do it.

Yet these same university academic leaders, with one exception, had all been presidents of their undergraduate fraternity. Further, these academic leaders all stated that the interpersonal and leadership skills they used in their role as provost had been first honed as a fraternity president.

Potential candidates for a fraternity / sorority chapter advisor are on-site persons who are well established in their career, have a reputation for good teaching, and who have the academic / professional standing to advise a group despite the oppositional pressures of faculty culture. Someone in their mid-life years (35-55) with tenure, who has positive student regard, and who enjoys a strong reputation on campus in both academic and campus governance areas is the person to seek. They have established networking skills on campus and access to administrators, other faculty members, and administrative professionals that most off-campus based alumni chapter advisors do not enjoy. Their well established teaching skills often transfer directly to chapter advising roles with executive officers and chapter committees, new member education, and chapter meeting interactions where their ability to intervene, but not dictate, facilitates cooperation, collaboration, and critical thinking about important moral and ethical issues. As Kouzes and Posner (1995) advocate, such faculty advisors know how to encourage the heart, praising, rewarding, and recognizing members as they make small steps towards maturity and autonomy. Moreover, a tenured faculty member's presence across time quickly makes them an "institutional memory" for the organization.

Educating Local Advisors for their Role

Of course, selecting a promising chapter advisor is the first step in an extended developmental process for both the advisor and the chapter members. Chapter advisors must not only participate at the local level, but find ways to apply their academic expertise and serve as speakers for fraternity / sorority regional leadership academies and actively attend national conferences where they can network with other chapter volunteers. Thus, local chapter advisors really serve as a resource to the organization well beyond the local chapter.

One major way local advisors, particularly faculty advisors, serve as a resource is related to their habits of scholarship, since they may be more likely to read the officer training materials found on the organization's website as a means of educating themselves about their role as an advisor. Unfortunately undergraduates, particularly men, often take their cues for their elected role based on what the man in the position did the previous year. These elected leaders seldom access written material about their specific role as an officer from the various headquarters websites. When local chapter advisors facilitate officer transition from one executive committee to the next, a valuable assignment is to require each new officer read and bring a printed copy of their official duties and responsibilities from the headquarters website.

Of course, all newly elected officers come from the organization's membership. An important role that is carefully honed in effective chapter advisors is identifying leadership talent among new members as they join the organization. There is a "common wisdom" that leaders step confidently forward to take the helm of student groups. The truth is that many leaders are hesitant about their abilities to lead until someone, particularly a trusted advisor, encourages them to take the risk to run for office. Members who, without directly being told to do so, spontaneously take time to clean up after an event, get chairs ready for meetings, and ask thoughtful questions in meetings are good candidates for future leadership.

Local chapter advisors can also materially benefit from membership in the Association of Fraternity and Sorority Advisors. Articles in *Perspectives* and *Oracle* are particularly helpful to local chapter advisors. In recognition of their service, undergraduate chapters should find the resources within their chapter budget to pay the chapter advisor's membership dues in AFA. At an even more advanced level, local alumni boards can contact department chairpersons to determine the cost of buying three units of a faculty member's time (one course) to free up the faculty member's academic load for chapter advising purposes, and to increase the visibility of group advising in a manner consistent with faculty culture. Faculty members are rewarded when they acquire outside money in the form of grants. Couching the purchase of time in the form of a research grant may make the donation even more attractive to academic administrators. Such service / research recognition grants can be arranged as tax-deductible donations through University educational foundations.

Constant Communication is Critical

Chapter advisors need constant contact with other stakeholders surrounding the organization. One means that a campus professional fraternity / sorority advisor has to encourage local chapter advisor engagement in the advising process is to copy the chapter advisor on all communications with the undergraduate chapter, its executive committee members, national / international headquarters, and chapter alumni. Chapter advisors cannot effectively carry out their role without being informed, and the one person most likely to include them is the campus fraternity / sorority advisor. If the group resides in on-campus facilities, the chapter advisor needs to know when residence life officials make contact with chapter officers. Issues with cleanliness, behavior, damage, and rules are all important for the chapter advisor to work collaboratively with campus officials in support of chapter and member growth.

Another opportunity to support chapter advisors is to maintain a network of all fraternity / sorority chapter advisors that is connected electronically via a listserv (or other electronic group), and that meets at least twice a semester face-to-face. Chapter recruitment activities, membership

development events, revisions to campus regulations, risk management issues, and advisor training can all be accomplished via an active advisor network. Everyone on the network can share campus academic news and deadlines with other advisor network members, raise awareness to important issues, and defuse misunderstandings between the campus authorities, individual and governing groups, and alumni. A chapter advising handbook, or an advising website, is highly recommended to maintain consistent communication about policies and procedures.

Advisor Support for Academic Goals

In support of the institution's and the chapter's academic mission, the chapter advisor should work with the campus professional fraternity / sorority advisor to maintain a detailed record of group and individual member academic performance. Particularly when the chapter advisor is a faculty member, who normally has access to student academic records, meetings can be arranged with individual students to clarify their academic and personal goals, encourage them when they do well, and support them when they do less well. The chapter advisor has a direct role in knowing all the members of a chapter, encouraging their classroom work, and getting them involved on campus and engaged in class. Campus involvement is more than just belonging to the group, but being involved in at least one additional student organization. Engaged students have well defined academic goals and are able to state meaningful reasons for being in college. Their connection to both campus and organization supports their success. With student advising loads between 400 to 600 students, campus academic advisors have little time available to listen to the voices of the students they see in a twenty-minute rotation on a daily basis. Campus student affairs administrators principally encounter students who are leaders, and students who require developmental interventions. The vast majority of students in the middle—most members of fraternities and sororities—seldom receive the undivided attention of any campus officials. These students can receive individualized appreciative encouragement from diligent chapter advisors, whether via email messages at the end of each semester based on the advisor's knowledge of a student's semester and cumulative GPA, during chapter meetings when praise for individual contributions of any kind can be offered, or in private appointments to address more sensitive matters. The role of the chapter advisor as mentor must not be underestimated. Both young men and women seek affirmation. They want to hear, from a trusted older person, that they have or can acquire all the skills necessary to be successful in their future endeavors (Kimmel, 2008).

To be an appreciative advisor to undergraduate members, the same pedagogical skills useful in the classroom are useful as a chapter advisor. Listening skills are paramount. Young men and women need to know that their feelings are acknowledged and their thoughts are heard. Many faculty members may not realize the sheer number of human relationship and administrative issues that a group's executive committee must face and solve. A large proportion of executive committee meetings are not focused on planning for events or paying the bills, but wrestling with interpersonal relationship issues among members, and in relationships outside the group. Moral issues cannot be avoided, accountability deferred, or mental health challenges minimized without jeopardizing the future of the entire group.

Fortunately, most members sitting on executive committees really do know the "right thing to do" rather than the "popular thing to do" without the chapter advisor directing the group about

what to do. The advisor's mere presence shows interest, encourages mature reflection, and reinforces thoughtful debate within the committee. Asking an open-ended question for clarification purposes at the end of a discussion is a powerful means of asserting one's influence. Waiting to speak until the end of a discussion to ask a clarifying question also shows respect for the student members' thinking about a topic. One sign of maturity is anticipating the consequences of behavior. Using the Socratic Method as a means of asking for clarification reinforces the development of critical thinking. The job of a chapter advisor is not necessarily to prevent a group from making an error in judgment, but to let a group come to its own considered decision, let them learn from their mistakes, and directly intervene only when there is a clear and present danger to the group's survival.

The same approach is useful in chapter meetings before the entire fraternity or sorority membership. The physical arrangement of the room is different from that of a classroom, but the advisor's role as a teacher remains the same. Listen carefully to the language chapter members use with one another. Is the language respectful? Do speakers acknowledge the right of others to hold a different position on an issue? Is a difference of opinion met with a personal attack on one's character? What expectations for personal and group behavior underlie the verbal statements? Are people, both men and women, respected as worthy human beings? Is equal time given to introverted members as is taken by extroverted members? The advisor, as a third party observer, has a responsibility to make an informed intervention when a forum for civil debate becomes an opportunity for a brother's humiliation. Never speak in negative terms, and avoid the temptation to make light of member concerns, even when one's additional years of maturity confirms the topic being taken so seriously is just a momentary challenge. The members deserve the opportunity to reason together until they arrive at their own resolution to the problem. And remember, once one group comes to a solution, that solution is difficult to maintain with new members annually elected to the executive committee and new members initiated into the chapter. The lessons taught one year must be repeated again and again across following years.

Typically, in both fraternities and sororities, chapter advisors have a time allotted to speak at the end of a meeting. Keep a running record of the meeting's progress and the topics addressed. Reinforce opportunities and reframe challenges. Then, add a personal thought that encourages members to reflect on the ritual meaning of their organization. Insert language from the chapter's Ritual into what is said and focus on the application of the Ritual to daily lived experience. Understanding young men's, and women's, development is requisite for great teaching in higher education, and that understanding applies universally out of class just as it does in class. A chapter advisor is always a mentor, a teacher, and a listener. The advisor has an important role in setting expectations for group and individual behavior among chapter members.

A crucial moment for the chapter advisor to set expectations for membership behavior in the organization is during new member recruitment. Does the group emphasize social activities over academic and leadership opportunities? Are intramural sports emphasized beyond other forms of student involvement? What do the group norms, both spoken and unspoken, reinforce as worthy of value? Each campus chapter is a unique sub-group within all fraternities and sororities with its own very specific set of behavioral expectations.

If a chapter advisor is to have any impact on those group behavioral expectations, the best opportunity to do so is the moment new members join the group, before they assimilate the

unspoken messages into their daily experience. An advisor's presence during recruitment events, before new members join, can affect who joins the organization. The activities involved in recruitment seem shallow to many outside observers, but to those within the organization, the interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions help to sort those who are invited into membership from those who are not invited. An older advisor can be used as an unobtrusive behavioral test for recruits. If the recruit treats the advisor with respect due to a faculty member, is polite and open to conversation, the members learn something about the recruit's interpersonal attitudes and respect toward authority they could not have observed otherwise.

Be present to meet with the new members immediately after the brothers and sisters welcome them into the group. Now is the time to be explicit about behavioral expectations for scholarship, class attendance, no hazing, good personal behavior, dress, the use of alcohol and other substances, and the treatment of the opposite gender. Lift up the chapter's traditions of scholarship and leadership, campus involvement, and class engagement. Explain expectations for new members to live in the chapter facility, and be explicit about new members not signing off campus leases until all beds within the chapter facility are assigned for the next academic year. Make certain new members understand the scope of their financial commitment. In many chapters the financial expectation includes much more than just paying semester dues. Students, and their parents, need to know that there will be expectations beyond dues to pay for t-shirts, participate in philanthropies, and social events. Not all the chapter advisor says in the first meeting with new members will be remembered or taken with equal value. The important fact is that you provided the information, and the chapter can draw upon what you said to reinforce both their stated and unstated expectations for membership participation.

New chapter advisors can draw upon many detailed resources to help them become comfortable with their role. Each national organization maintains printed advisor and officer manuals that are available for the asking. Campus fraternity / sorority advisors should hold group training meetings for advisors that include handouts on many pertinent topics. Books on contemporary student development issues are easy to locate just by consulting the campus librarian. Before long, the advisor will become the group's institutional memory. A tradition within a student organization is basically what was done the prior semester, and someone has to remind both individual members and the executive committee that what was done last semester is best left as a one-semester experience when the event detracts from the group's ultimate mission.

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