

The Student Organization Advisor's Handbook

***A Resource Guide for the Advisors of
Recognized Student Organizations***

***A Publication of Student & Campus Life
Student Leadership Center***

 **Prairie State College**
202 S. Halsted Street
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Dear Advisor:

The Office of Student & Campus Life would like to thank you for your willingness to advise a student organization during this academic year. This hand book was developed to help new and continuing student organizations' advisors understand their roles and how they can serve students.

Student involvement during college is a tremendous opportunity to gain numerous skills that provide a framework for a student in whatever career he or she chooses. However, being involved in extracurricular or co-curricular activities causes a student to need to utilize strong time management skills to balance both academic and non-academic work. Students must stay *"in good standing"* to continue their involvement or hold an office in a student organization. The Prairie State College Student Handbook states the following:

"Co-curricular activities are provided for student and leadership development as well as the enhancement of classroom learning...In order to participate in any student organization, the student should be 'in good standing.' Students who are 'in good standing' are defined as those who maintain a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 or better, who are current in their financial obligations to the College, and who maintain personal and social behavior which is respectful of others and appropriate to the pursuit of higher education."

Please monitor students' performance outside class to avoid their ineligibility for involvement. As an advisor, it is our responsibility, along with the students, to see that they are maintaining this grade point average or above.

Although our primary mission is to assist students and their organizations, we are also here to assist you with advising your organization. If there is any service or consultation with which we could assist you, please call and we will do our best to assist you. Thank you again for advising your student organization this year.

Sincerely,

The Coordinator of Student & Campus Life

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ROLES OF THE ADVISOR

The advisor is a vital part of every campus organization. As a member of the faculty or staff of the College, the primary function of the advisor to student organizations is to actively advise, counsel and serve as a resource person. By asking questions that allow the student to search through possible alternatives and by making appropriate comments and suggestions, the advisor can assist the organization in achieving a degree of mature thinking and considered action that will strengthen the organization and help it fulfill its goals and objectives.

Student activities at Prairie State College embrace a wide range of student groups. This wide variety allows students to find a group whose goals interest them. The same holds true for someone interested in advising a student group. It is important to find a group whose interests are similar to yours to ensure that your experience will be both beneficial and rewarding for the organization and for yourself.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF ADVISORS

It is difficult to define the specific role of an advisor. The pattern of teamwork between an advisor and the organization must be individually tailored to the personalities and needs of both parties. Listed below are descriptions of common responsibilities that should direct the advisor toward appropriate behaviors and roles within the group.

- * The advisor will perform his/her greatest service by providing opportunities for the students to exercise initiative and judgment, and to enjoy a proper measure of autonomy in self-directed, social, educational, recreational or cultural activities. The advisor should remember that it is the task of the active members to operate the organization. Removing them from this responsibility deprives them of an important educational experience.
- * The advisor should provide support and guidance insuring that participation by students presents opportunities for educational and personal development, but not at the expense of their academic responsibilities. The advisor should seek to assist students in maintaining a balance between their academic and co-curricular life.
- * The advisor should be well informed about all plans and activities of the group. This may be achieved through regular attendance at meetings and frequent consultation with the organization's leaders. Regular consultation with leaders allows the advisor to discuss goals and objectives, programs, financial status and interpersonal difficulties.
- * The advisor should discourage domination of the group by any individual. This distracts from the educational process and individual involvement in the organization.

- * The advisor should be familiar with the policies of the College, the Student Government Association Constitution, the Student Organization Handbook and the Student Handbook.
- * The advisor provides continuity within the group and assists with the orientation of new officers.
- * The advisor should provide direct assistance in the planning and evaluation of its overall program and should offer counsel and experience when it is deemed appropriate.
- * The advisor attends all events sponsored by his/her organization, both on- and off-campus to show support for the group. If the advisor cannot attend, he/she should secure an appropriate replacement to cover the event. Furthermore, the College could be considered negligent if a problem of any kind were to occur and an advisor or other faculty and/or staff members were not present.
- * The advisor should assure, with the organization's treasurer, that funds are being used in accordance with College policy.
- * The advisor should confer periodically with the Coordinator of Student & Campus Life regarding contract negotiation with speakers, performers and contracted facilities. In many cases, the contract must be signed by the Office of Student Life & Multicultural Affairs to secure the backing of the College.
- * Utilize the Student Leadership Center (SLC) for resources on talent agencies, publicity and promotion, and many other resources for organizations to produce effective programs.
- * The advisor should stress the importance of participation in leadership training, workshops and resource materials provided by the Office of Student Life & Multicultural Affairs.
- * The advisor encourages the group to complete an evaluation after each program and activities.
- * The advisor should realize that students may not accept as fact all advice given. This should not be interpreted as an indication that his/her services are not needed; rather, it is an expected occurrence indicating that students are working on developing independence and self-reliance. As the year progresses, students will become more independent and it may appear that guidance is no longer necessary. Instead of becoming less involved as the 'orientation phase' passes, view it as an opportunity to provide more group process, interpersonal work and goal setting.

I. STUDENT OFFICER-ADVISOR RELATIONSHIP

A. Student Officer's Expectations of the Advisor

1. The advisor assists the group in formulating long-range goals and in planning and initiating short-term projects.
2. The group will find the advisor invaluable as a resource person. Often the advisor has had previous experience and can provide the officer and members with background information.
3. The advisor may suggest ways by which the group meetings can be improved.
4. The advisor should assist the officers with College procedural matters.
5. The advisor represents the organization and its interests in faculty and staff meetings.
6. The officers and members will find the advisor able to assist them in evaluating organization projects, performance and progress.
7. The advisor is generally able to make suggestions that will improve their leadership skills.
8. The advisor is available when emergency problems arise.

B. Advisor's Expectations of a Student Officer

1. The officer should keep the advisor informed as to all organizational activities, meeting times, locations and agendas. The advisor should receive all minutes of meetings and correspondence.
2. The officer should meet regularly with the advisor and utilize him/her as a sounding board for discussing organizational plans and/or problems.

II. WORKING WITH THE STUDENT OFFICER

A. The Officer's Influence

1. The officer can make or break an organization. The officer's influence is, and should be, greater than that of the advisor.

B. Regular Meetings with the Officer

1. These meetings serve as opportunities for discussion of the officer's role within the organization. Additionally, regular meetings allow the advisor to build a personal relationship with the student officers. It is here that the primary responsibility of the advisor is discharged.
 - a. **Preparing the Agenda**
A good vehicle for discussion at meetings with the officers is the planning of the agenda for the next meeting of the organization. This will not only provide structure for conducting the organizations' meetings, but also serve as a point of departure for discussions of the areas of mutual concern.
 - b. **Basic Objective of Advising**
Discussions with the officers should be based on genuine concern for the creative and personal development of the officers and the members of the organization.

C. Different Approaches to Advising

1. The advisor will want to point out factors bearing on the ideas presented by the officers without imposing his/her own ideas.
2. If an idea is inappropriate, the advisor should try to encourage the students to consider other alternatives.
3. Informal meetings are conducive to open and worthwhile discussion.
4. If the officers ask, "What should we do/" or, "What do you think?" the question should be rephrased and stated back to them. The advisor is there to assist the officers, not to solve the problems for them. The advisor should not be ultimately responsible for problems and/or failures.
5. The officer should be encouraged to take an occasional chance on some less proven members in delegating authority.

6. The advisor may wish to periodically evaluate the students in their effectiveness as an officer.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GROUP PROCESS

By attending the meetings and observing the group process, the advisor will be able to assess how the group is handling its communication. Observing the pattern of communication helps us to see the group in new ways.

Who talks?

Who talks to whom?

For how long?

How often?

Who interrupts others?

Who ignores whom?

Who is looked to as the "expert"?

These kinds of observations give us clues to other important dynamics going on in the group, such as who leads whom, who influences whom, and who is most led and influenced.

Frequent observations of group process, including non-verbal communication and body language, allow the advisor to seek out those who "block" effective process and discuss with them how their behavior is affecting the group and how that behavior might be changed to bring about more positive outcomes.

IMPROVING GROUP PROCESS

Break the ice and build a team.

The better the people in the group know, understand and accept each other, the more productive the group will be. The group should engage in low-risk structured experiences designed to get members to know each other. As the depths of the relationships increase, exercises involving sharing about each other's lives, families and experiences might be appropriate to employ. Also, the group will need to socialize in unstructured and informal ways, i.e., a pizza party after the meeting on occasion.

People support what they help create.

All members of the group need to be included in the decision-making. Having a say, allowing discussion and giving all members opportunity to contribute will not only develop a good idea, but will motivate the organization to turn an idea into a program or activity.

Cohesion emerges from participation.

Shared leadership, shared decision making and a spirit of cooperation help the group to become more effective, feel good about itself and achieve more success.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONDUCTING SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS

The manner in which an organization conducts its meeting can often determine the success of the organization. Few people enjoy having to sit through long and drawn out meetings where little is accomplished. The particular nature of each organization should dictate the degree of formality used in conducting its meetings. Whether your group needs formal business meetings or informal discussion meetings, a good advisor assists the leader in striving to facilitate maximum participation in the meeting in order to keep members interested in the organization.

While you, as advisor, will not be completing the meeting tasks outlined below, they are included so that you might insure that your group is practicing these skills.

The Student Leadership Center (SLC) can provide booklets and advice on conducting meetings and using parliamentary procedure. Workshops are also available for organizations by appointment if further assistance is needed.

Planning the Agenda

- * Planning an efficient agenda is the best way to insure that meetings are expedient, yet thorough. It is strongly suggested that each member have an agenda (or write it on a chalkboard or posterboard so all members can see it).
- * The agenda should be developed by officers and the advisor if possible. It should be completed within a few days of the meeting. This will allow the obtaining of any materials, resources, or information that may be needed. Ideally the agenda should either be posted or given out in advance to members to prepare them for the meeting's discussion.
- * In planning an agenda, consider what has to be accomplished and what should be done in light of the group's goals.
- * Request that the organization assign the advisor a space on the agenda either at the beginning or end of the meeting. This time allows the advisor to formally address the group. This can be a time to make suggestions, offer praise, or

highlight some important issues. In addition, it makes the advisor visible to all members of the group, not just the executive board.

- * The most commonly used format for an agenda is as follows (Note: This can be modified to the organization's needs):

Agenda

- 1) Call the meeting to order
- 2) Minutes of previous meeting
- 3) Report of officers
 - a) President
 - b) Vice President
 - c) Treasurer
 - d) Secretary
- 4) Committee reports
- 5) Old business
- 6) New business
- 7) Adjournment

Pre-Meeting Planning

The work of most organizations is actually accomplished between the meetings, not in them. Meetings are generally for planning, reporting and decision-making.

Where and when the organization holds its meetings are very important. The meeting should be scheduled to accommodate the students' schedules as much as possible. A convenient meeting time can be achieved by having all members and officers fill out a schedule form available in the Student Leadership Center (SLC).

To reserve a meeting time and space on campus, a *Program Reservation Form* must be completed. These forms are available in the SLC.

Follow-up

After the meeting, discuss with the officers any problems encountered during the meeting. Be sure to give feedback, both positive and constructive criticism, regarding the running of the meeting.

Encourage your leaders to hold members accountable for follow through on any assignments made at the meeting. Offer them your assistance in initiating the task or overcoming any stumbling blocks. This should ideally be done after the meeting.

Minutes

Decisions made at your meeting will have an impact in coming months, the entire academic year and even in coming years. It is extremely important to keep a thorough and accurate record of all organization meetings and have them maintained.

Minutes are a record of what is done and what is said. Generally, the personal opinion of members and the discussion of others should be avoided.

The minutes should be signed by the secretary or his/her designee. A copy should be retained by you and distributed at the following meeting to all members for approval.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EVALUATION

Evaluation of your organization is crucial to its continuing success. As the advisor, you should initiate a mini-needs analysis or review of the group's activities of the past year and also check to see if the goals set at the beginning of the year were met. The following can be used as a guide in your evaluation:

Success of programs held

Number of programs held

Consider whether too many or too few activities were held

Consider the growth in membership over the previous year

Consider your role within the group. Did you give too much or too little feedback? Did you feel you were too passive or too active?

Some important points to remember as an advisor:

- *Provide advice when called upon or when you feel appropriate*
- *Teach techniques of good leadership and followership*
- *Provide community for the group by being aware of its tradition and history*
- *Help members to abide by College policies*
- *Help members to develop self-discipline and responsibility*

- *Supply information, expert knowledge, and insights gained through experience
- *Help make their co-curricular experience enjoyable

LEGAL ISSUES TO ADVISING

In recent years, concern over liability has made some faculty and staff reconsider involvement with student organizations. There are some key considerations to know to limit potential liability. They are the following: Torts, contracts and statutory and constitutional issues.

Torts

An advisor can be found responsible for the negligence of the student organization if the advisor does not act as another “responsible competent person” would.

Common negligence law says that liability can be established when the following conditions are found:

- *there is some duty of care to the person or situation
- *that duty is breached
- *the breach results in injury, harm or loss and
- *the breach is the proximate cause of the damage

Under these circumstances, legal responsibility can be established. As the advisor, you may have a duty and a special relationship. If so, you could be liable for committing, directing or supervising activities that breach duties and cause harm.

To reduce risk, you should promote two principles within the organization. Understanding and applying the principles of “reasonable standards of care” and “due warning” can help advisors avoid loss and related liability. Advisors should be aware of the principles and work to incorporate them into organization activities.

“Reasonable Standards of Care”

This requires those responsible for a program or activity to know and adhere to guidelines and standards of safe conduct. They are expected to ensure that they and others behave in such a manner as to reduce risk. These standards are based on what others would do in the same or similar circumstances, with appropriate education and experience.

Advisors are expected to know what other advisors elsewhere are expected to know, and to act accordingly.

Developing an understanding of existing guidelines and attempting to conduct activities in a prudent and safe manner are the keys to providing reasonable standards of care within a student organization, protecting both the group and the advisor!

“Due Warning”

As the advisor, you should provide notice of foreseeable risks to those likely to come in contact with hazards.

The warning could be through a sign promoting caution, or through use of a formal waiver of liability detailing possible risks. The type and level of warning should reflect the nature of the risk and the likelihood of loss or harm.

An advisor can help the organization provide due warning that meets reasonable standards of care by conducting a thorough risk assessment before each activity:

- *What are the possible risks involved?
- *How can they be avoided?
- *What are the established guidelines?
- *How will they be implemented?
- *What risk should participants be aware of *before* participating?

Contracts

All organizations need to understand basic financial structures and responsibilities. Guidelines and budgets need to be established and followed. Everyone involved needs to know who is authorized to make transactions in the name of the organization and to understand the personal consequences of exceeding their organizational authority.

To avoid individual financial liability, advisors generally should not enter into agreements on behalf of their group, unless absolutely necessary. If signing something in your role as group advisor, make sure that your relationship is noted clearly on the document. Don't just sign your name or your name and the school name. That could lead to unwanted individual and even institutional liability.

Statutory/Constitutional/Institutional Issues

Student organizations and their events, activities and programs must operate within the boundaries established by government and the College. Advisors should be particularly aware of how some constitutional issues can affect student organizations. Elements of due process may also be required of the organization.

Particular attention should also be paid to nondiscrimination and sexual harassment laws and policies. Within the campus environment, student organizations must adhere to the law. Membership practices or activities that could be perceived as discriminatory or harassing must be ended.

Advisors should work with groups to ensure that their members understand the law and the principles that the law promotes. Advisors must also remember that the student groups have some rights and that their rights to be recognized and to use facilities must be understood and respected.

What Can Be Done?

The following steps can be taken to reduce the potential liability:

- * Secure well-written position descriptions from the College indicating duties, authority and institutional protections.
- * Review professional organization standards to assure a full understanding of the organization and operating principles.
- * Review insurance policies. Would you be covered under a campus policy?
- * Establish a good risk management program within the organization to provide for reasonable standards of care and appropriate due warning.
- * Understand the law as it relates to student organizations and their rights and responsibilities.
- * Make sure there are good financial policies in place. Sign documents to clearly indicate group obligations, not individual or institutional.
- * Understand that alcohol is a significant risk factor; develop plans with students to prevent underage drinking and service to those intoxicated.

Financial Training

The Student Leadership Center will provide assistance to any recognized student organization which needs information and/or assistance with applying for matching funds from the Student Government Association, or which needs assistance with fund-raising or bookkeeping.

Retreat Planning Assistance

Planning a retreat can be a great learning experience for any student leader. Any student leader or advisor of a recognized student organization may request assistance from the Coordinator of Student Life. The type of assistance available ranges from selecting a retreat site to assisting in the development of the retreat agenda.

Leadership Newsletter

The Student Leadership Center will publish, on a regular basis, a Leadership Newsletter targeted toward student leaders and advisors. It will contain information developed from the staff of the Student Leadership Center and other relevant information on leadership and similar topics.

Leadership Skills Workshops

This is a series of workshops designed to provide leadership education to the leaders and future leaders of student organizations. Topics such as time management, goal setting, how to run a successful meeting and many others will be offered throughout the year.

Publicity and Promotion

Recognized student organizations have the opportunity to have flyers and other types of publicity and promotion duplicated by bring a master copy of the item needed to the Student Leadership Center.

For more information on any of the above services, please call (708) 709-3910 or 3921.