

# Shape Up or Ship Out

## How to handle a lame advisor

By Ana Ribero

Faculty advisors can fall anywhere between two extremes. On one side, there's "The Slacker." He doesn't show up for meetings or events, never has any input to give, and dodges your questions whenever possible. "Even though our advisor has experience in the field, he rarely shows his face in or around our newsroom," says a **Middle Tennessee State University** student who's having problems with the newspaper advisor.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is "The Control Freak." This advisor forgets that she's advising a student group and not her own. She won't let student leaders get a word in at meetings and likes to single-handedly pick the goals and events of the group.

A good advisor falls somewhere in the middle. Dr. Margaret King, associate vice president of student affairs at **Tulane University** in Louisiana, says advisors should serve as leadership coaches. "They should know when to stay out of the way and when to step up to the plate." King says advisors are there to mentor student leaders, answer questions, and provide guidance in how to follow specific university policies.

### The Warm Up

A way to avoid conflict with your advisor is to spell out up front what your expectations are. Sit down with your advisor and officers at the beginning of the term, and set a clear list of the missions, goals, and limits of each party. Kristen Contos, editor-in-chief of the *Lone Star Lutheran*, the student newspaper at **Texas Lutheran University**, says that keeping a written record of these expectations helps the advisor and officers stay on track and serves as a guide if problems arise.

### Train the Trainer

You don't have to settle for an inexperienced, ineffective, or even worse, incompetent advisor for your campus group. The American Student Association of Community Colleges (ASACC) offers the "Advisors Certification Program" through its Advisors Institute.

"Often, the SG advisor is assigned and it may be the vice president's secretary or a dean's assistant and they have absolutely no training," says Phil Clegg, director of student activities at **Utah Valley State College** and executive director of ASACC. Clegg says the Certification Program hopes to create national standards and expectations for any SG advisor, as well as way for new advisors to network with more experienced peers at similar schools.

For more information contact Clegg at [cleggp@uvsc.edu](mailto:cleggp@uvsc.edu) or visit [www.asacc.org](http://www.asacc.org).

Sometimes, student leaders have different ideas for the group than the advisor does, so expect to run into disagreements when discussing your goals. "This kind of disagreement is fine as long as respect for each other is maintained and as long as the relationship is maintained," King says.

By the end of the meeting, each party should have a basic idea of what's expected of him. Phi Theta Kappa's National Director of Programs Jennifer Stanford says the advisor must understand his role in the group. "Advisors must be there for the students in terms of giving them enough room so they can have a substantial leadership experience

rity, just their particular actions," King says.

Contos says to keep a list of grievances so you can bring up everything you need to at the meeting. "Keep a list of the meetings the advisor misses or a list of things the advisor says that are inappropriate," she says.

### Share the Load

If confronting your problem advisor doesn't work the way you hoped, it's time to seek help from a third party. Find a colleague or dean and have her speak with the advisor about the specific problem. An experienced faculty member can give your advisor tips for improvement or provide some training. "We really make sure that advisors receive resources from our national headquarters and that they have the choice to attend advisor training," Stanford says.

### Switch It Up

Make sure you've exhausted all your resources before trying to oust an advisor.



but not letting them hang themselves with too much work either."

### Tackle the Pain

At **Drew University** in New Jersey, Associate Dean of Student Life Gerry Muir says that dealing with a problem advisor should be done as soon as possible to keep things from escalating. "You can think of it as the analogy of a Band-Aid—do you want to pull it off quickly and get it over with, or do you want to do it slowly and carry that kind of tension with you all year?"

It's important to figure out what the problem is and how to solve it. Ignoring the advisor or going over her head will cause her to either take over more control of the group or remove herself altogether—two actions detrimental to the group.

### Sweat It Out

Confronting the advisor is the first step in conflict resolution, but remember: always praise your advisor in public and confront him in private. "Don't attack the person's integ-

Replacing an advisor is uncommon and may not even be possible for your organization. When a **Mississippi State University** student was having problems with his group's faculty advisor, other faculty members suggested finding a new one. Unfortunately, there wasn't one available. "There were very few willing and able people to advise that group," he says. Faculty members usually are not given any extra time or money to serve as advisors. So, you may be lucky just to have an advisor—even a lame one.

Advisors play a vital part in keeping student groups moving toward their goals. With a little work and a lot of support, your advisor will be in tip-top shape and ready to help you face the challenges ahead. **SL**

Contact Contos at 830-372-8073 or [lonestarlutheran@tlu.edu](mailto:lonestarlutheran@tlu.edu), King at 504-865-5107 x2217 or [miking@tulane.edu](mailto:miking@tulane.edu), Muir at 973-408-3391 or [gmuir@drew.edu](mailto:gmuir@drew.edu), or Stanford at 601-984-3532.



See expanded coverage about lame advisors at [www.studentleader.com](http://www.studentleader.com)