

Advice for Advisors

A "Top Ten" list for SG advisors

Compiled by Ahmed Samaha

Being the SG advisor can be one of your most rewarding and challenging professional experiences. Students who are elected to represent their fellow students' views, ideas, and concerns to university administrators and faculty are quite different than your typical student leader. Often they're a mix of extremes: either they're leaders with definite political agendas and ambitions, or they believe the process is a joke and that students' views won't ever be taken seriously by the university. Of course, there are elected representatives who fall in the middle and try to represent the student population to the best of their abilities. In the tradition of David Letterman's famous top 10 lists, here's a "TOP 10 for Advising Student Governments."

10. Rome wasn't built in a day...So know how to tell the difference between long-range and short-range goals.

One of SG's biggest challenges is that many of their goals often are long term and the Senate gets frustrated when they see that most goals won't be accomplished by the end of the year. As an advisor, make sure your Senate has a good balance of long- and short-term goals. This helps your Senate not get frustrated with a lack of progress and allows them to celebrate when they do accomplish something.

9. Communicate honestly and openly.

This seems obvious, but many students automatically bring a distrust of administration and advisors to Senate. To break down that wall, immediately communicate honestly. Include Senators in campus-wide discussions on issues where student input would contribute to the decision-making process. Answer questions honestly, even if it's an answer students may not want to hear. Keep an open-door policy for all Senators, not just the executive board. Have one-on-one meetings every semester with each Senator. Your credibility will be destroyed if students don't think you're being honest or open.

8. Understand the political role of SG on your campus.

Understand where SG stands in the campus political structure. Ideally, your campus values student input in administrative

decisions and looks for SG to contribute and organize that input. But if your campus administrators don't respect your SG or treat it like a necessary but not valued member of the policy-making team, figure out ways to get SG involved. Here are some suggestions for getting your SG a chair at the table.

- Invite upper administrators to meetings to hear student concerns.
- Once a semester, set up a meeting with the Senate and the college chancellor (president) to talk about issues.



- Encourage faculty and staff members to include one student on all search committees for new hires.
- Have a student representative on appropriate faculty and staff committees which directly relate to students.
- Hold open faculty/staff forums to hear their concerns about students.

7. Understand your role.

The advisor should be a role model. Be a mentor, not a friend. Challenge them when appropriate and support them when needed. Make sure the student leaders know what your role is and be consistent.

6. It's not rocket science...It's people science.

Sometimes advisors get so worked up about SG issues that they lose sight of what it's really about—the student leaders. Learning how to effectively deal with different types of people is crucial. It sounds

like common sense, but an advisor has to be able to motivate, challenge, cooperate, and listen in numerous different ways. Don't get trapped into lumping groups of people together (athletes, Greeks, etc.). Get to know your Senators. It'll make your job much easier.

5. Build bridges with faculty leaders and administrators.

SG will need allies in other areas on campus to accomplish their goals. It's important that they make "friends" with important faculty and staff leaders.

4. Build bridges with your execs.

Often, the key to a successful year is the relationship you build with the executives. Hold weekly executive meetings so that issues, problems, and concerns can be addressed quickly. Have a summer executive retreat to work on goals, team building, and communication. Most importantly, build personal relationships with the execs and make sure they trust you.

3. Have you hugged your leaders lately?


Sometimes advisors get so busy they forget something very important—saying thank you and giving encouragement when times are tough. A simple "thank-you" note, a card encouraging a Senator to continue fighting for what she believes in, or a simple smile during a close election can make all the difference. One can never underestimate the need for personal attention many of our student leaders want and need.

2. Remember whose Senate it is.

Don't get personally wrapped up in the issues—they should be students' issues, not yours. Focus on the process, not the end result. The process is what the students learn from, not whether their side won or not. As advisors, we should give options and guidance about issues and not focus as much on the end product. Ultimately, it's not your Senate.

1. Keep it in perspective.

Student Affairs professionals sometimes forget about perspective. SGs are fickle, finicky creatures. Your best-laid plans may go astray, but life goes on. Help students learn from the experience (you should too), and then move on. Dwelling on a failure won't solve anything. Be positive, enjoy the experience, and remember that things could be worse.

Advising is a difficult job. There isn't one sure-fire path to being successful. However, if you keep your perspective and remember where your responsibilities lie—with the students—you're much more likely to have a positive impact. 

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