

Passing the Torch

Tips for smooth staff transitions

By Ryan Greenbaum

Transition—it can be one of the hardest things for an organization to overcome, whether you're changing one person or an entire staff. Switching leaders can be especially tough when dealing with two-year institutions, with high turnover rates and students either just trying to get through school or simply focused on getting into a four-year program. No matter what type of staff or organization you represent, a few things are necessary to transition successfully.

Leadership, the foundation

After winning the Pacemaker, the "Pulitzer Prize" of college journalism, over two of the past four years, Joe Gisondi, former advisor to *The Valencia Source*, the campus newspaper at **Valencia Community College** in Florida, knows first-hand that leadership is the key to getting the job done. "If you don't get the right people into leadership roles, you aren't going to be able to innovate," Gisondi says. "You aren't going to be able to integrate into the things you want to do. If you don't have those right people, you're asking for disaster."

Gisondi outlined exactly what he looks for in a leader when the time comes to fill an important position. At the top of the list is "servant leadership." "The people in charge need to be able to serve those who work underneath them," Gisondi says.

Communication, a building block

To get students to leap into leadership roles, they have to know what they're going to be doing. The most important way to direct someone on the correct path of leadership is through proper communication. Whether it's introducing successors to quality advisors or giving them a manual detailing the intricacies of the job, communication can make the difference between an organization flying high or not getting off the ground.

Let the successors know exactly what is expected of them through a transition manual. Transition manuals should include everything the job will entail, from contact information to any small tricks you may pick up along the way, says Anne Marie Olsen, secretary of the Non-Traditional Student Organization at the **University of New Hampshire**. "The information that past members provided me was invaluable and many were happy to hear that projects which they had

Acclimating to a New Position

◆ **Transition manuals.** They can be your best friend when dealing with changing staffs. These should include contact information, timelines of events and projects, a list of priorities, and anything else pertinent to the job.

◆ **Meetings.** A team that talks together succeeds together. When starting, talk to as many people as possible, advisors as well as prior leaders.

◆ **Leadership workshops.** Workshops are useful tools in exposing your organization to new and innovative ideas. They also can serve as a bonding experience.

◆ **Retreats.** Taking a trip with key staff members will help you get to know each other. Understanding your fellow workers better always improves the work environment.

started or had been working on were still progressing as they hoped," Olsen says.

Start with contact information. Your successor may need the phone number or e-mail address of a person who was integral in the success of a past project. Also, make a list of the everyday people you talk to and confer with, including yourself, just in case the next person needs some advice.

Next, supply background on current and past issues. Include a timeline of your events and projects. Give the new officer starting point and some helpful hints on how to get past some obstacles, including a list of priorities for his first few weeks in office. Once complete, the manual can be used in two forms: on the web as an archival resource that can be looked at semester after semester, and as a hard copy the advisors can keep and update.

One more aspect of communication is delivering ideas to those who aren't yet involved with your organization. Former Phi Theta Kappa International Vice President Jackie McEuen of **Blinn College** in Texas uses membership benefit brochures to educate eligible students about the benefits PTK has to offer. The communication process is furthered by the orientation sessions to answer any questions students might have.

Planning, the blueprint

Know exactly what to expect for the time you're in office. Deborah Waldron, former Student Government president at **Ouachita Technical College** in Arkansas, says that one of the best things she has seen, both when she stepped into her role as president and when she stepped down, was that the SG activities were planned out two semesters in advance. "The new officers don't have to worry about things for the current semester," Waldron says. "Instead, they can look to the future and learn for themselves how they're planned or carried out."

Waldron says that when new senators and officers are inducted, they have a lot to learn about their new responsibilities. Before taking office, they should study what the job entails and thoroughly read over the constitution. Meetings between the outgoing and in-coming administration are key to maintaining the same level of productivity throughout a transition.

Just as important a part of the planning process is time management. For former PTK International President Warren Jackson of **Shawnee Community College** in Illinois, time management takes on extreme importance. "The most challenging part of changing staffs is the fact that you only have 12 months to serve," Jackson says. "With the time it takes to learn your duties, your term is almost gone."

Plan retreats, both on and off campus, so the new staff can become better acquainted. The more comfortable they feel with one another, the easier it'll be for them to step into their new roles.

Setting high standards, the finishing touch

Gisondi always sets the standard higher for each new staff that writes for *The Source*. "When you set the bar high, they are going to feel more obligated to fulfill it," he says. "You have to treat it like a professional publication."

Although serving as a student leader is a learning experience for you, don't forget that you're supposed to help the student body. The smoother the staff transition, the more time you'll have to address student concerns. **SL**

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Former Editor in Chief Leslie Lorenz helped Thomas Stout transition into his new role as editor of *The Valencia Source*.



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