



# ***What Kind of Advisor Are You?***

**It's Crucial to Know Your Roles and the Challenges and Rewards that Come with the Job**

**By Jason A. Chapman  
Southwestern University (TX)**

During my first year as a student activities professional, I was given the role of advisor to the University Programming Council at my school. Unfortunately, I did not understand how difficult this role was going to be and figured I would be a great advisor. Halfway through that year, I began to realize I was doing things all wrong and I needed to change my view of what an advisor is and what an advisor does. Luckily for me, and the students, I now have a better understanding of my role as their advisor and the time and effort it takes to be good at it.

Whether the role of advisor is one we choose freely or one assigned to us, it is important to understand the function and roles involved, as well as the challenges and rewards that come with it. The role of advisor is never the same; different groups require different types of advisors. It's hard to create a unified blueprint for being an advisor, but there are a few things every advisor needs to know.

A large part of being a good advisor is finding the style that best fits that organization. Many advisors are comfortable with the traditional role of advising: attending meetings and organizational functions and providing a signature when necessary. However, a good advisor provides assistance beyond the needs of the organization and provides personal development, as well.

## Four Primary Roles

An advisor plays numerous roles while working with a student organization. It is important to understand all of these roles and the importance of them. They include: Mentor, Supervisor, Teacher and Leader (Dunkel and Schuh).

### **Mentor**

Every advisor serves as a mentor to those in their organization. They role model proper behavior and have dialogue with their students. Mentors are characterized as individuals who:

- **Have a knowledge of their profession.**
- **Enthusiasm for their profession.**
- **Warmth and understanding with students.**
- **A high, yet achievable standard of performance.**
- **Honest emotional rapport.**
- **Many other characteristics.**

There are five qualities that characterize good mentors (adapted from a citation in Schuh and Carlisle, 1991, p. 505):

- **Good mentors have been successful in their own professional endeavors.**
- **They behave in ways worthy of emulation.**
- **They are supportive in their work with subordinates; they are patient, slow to criticize, and willing to work with those who are less well developed in their careers.**
- **They are not afraid to delegate tasks to colleagues and are not threatened by others who exhibit talent and initiative.**
- **They provide periodic, detailed and honest feedback to the protégé.**

### **Supervisor**

A good advisor also serves as a supervisor to their organization. There are six areas in which a supervisor is most helpful:

- **Team building**
- **Performance planning**
- **Communication**
- **Recognition**
- **Self-assessment**
- **Evaluation**

A good supervisor works with group leaders to create team building activities. These could include team building retreats or workshops, which help establish trust among members of the organization.

Performance planning includes setting goals and expectations, as well as writing position descriptions. This helps members realize what is expected of them and what they expect from their advisor, as well.

The supervisor's role in communication is to make students aware of different types of communication they can use, both verbal and non-verbal. A good advisor teaches their students to use memos, letters, agendas, minutes, resolutions, Web pages, discussion boards and e-mail.

Recognition of members is also important within an organization, so members know they are doing a good job and are being noticed. A good advisor not only recognizes students for positive work, but also recognizes student behavior, emotions and characteristics.

Self-assessment consists of asking students to complete verbal or written self-assessments of how they are doing. This allows students to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. It's also important for a good advisor to complete their own self-assessment every once in a while.

The final stage is evaluation, in which the students are asked to complete a formal evaluation. This provides an opportunity for everyone to provide feedback to the organization about an event.

### **Teacher**

A good advisor knows that learning does not take place exclusively in the classroom and that being a part of a student organization can be one of the best learning experiences a student can have. This puts the advisor in the role of teacher; they teach students how to:

- **Handle budgets.**
- **Be part of a team.**
- **Communicate effectively.**
- **Develop many other skills they will use well beyond their time in school.**

### **Leader**

The advisor also plays the role of the leader of an organization. This role requires the advisor to not only lead by example, but also provide leadership opportunities for the students in the organization. Kouzes and Posner (1987) identify the five fundamental practices that are found in leaders. They:

- **Challenge the process by seeking ways to improve the organization.**
- **Inspire a shared vision by creating an image of what the organizations can become.**
- **Enable others to act by involving students in activities on committees and task forces.**
- **Model the way by setting standards and assisting other students through their problems and concerns.**
- **Encourage the heart by recognizing members for their achievements and by motivating members to achieve their goals. It is important to understand that no matter what the motives of the student organization might be, students require guidance and direction in order to succeed.**

## Another Important Role

### Motivator

Perhaps the most important role an advisor may play is that of motivator for students. Student motivation can be divided into two categories: extrinsic and intrinsic.

#### ● **Extrinsic Motivation**

There are three types of extrinsic motivation for students:

- **Recognition**
- **Money**
- **Achievement**

It is important to recognize students for the hard work that they put in, but it is even more important to realize that using one type of recognition will not work for all members. In order to best recognize members, it is essential to get to know them and what they enjoy. Recognition is the category of motivation that most advisors use.

Many advisors struggle with the question of whether or not to pay students, but many organizations do not have that ability. However, if an organization does make the decision to compensate students, it can take several forms:

- **Conference cost reimbursement**
- **Summer jobs**
- **Room and board**
- **Academic credit**
- **Salaries**
- **Parking**
- **Other stipends**

Students who are motivated by achievement are driven to take on more responsibility and authority. They will be willing to take on tasks other students may not because of their difficulty. It is important to work with those students to find a role of increasing responsibility or authority for them. These students can often lose motivation, get frustrated or refuse to involve others, so you must work closely with them.

#### ● **Intrinsic Motivation**

The three types of intrinsic motivation are:

- **Desire**
- **Value**
- **Approval**

Students become involved in activities and organizations that provide a desirable outcome for them. If a student knows that being part of an organization or holding a specific role is desirable, they will be more likely to consider it.

The student who perceives value in participating in an organization, attending a conference, or holding an office will be motivated to become involved. Advisors can work with students to determine the particular value of being involved and holding an office.

Some students may get involved because earning a sense of approval from others motivates them. It is imperative to identify the students motivated by approval and give them a pat on the back, a kind word or another form of approval.

Motivating students will help keep them happy, which will keep the organization running smoothly.

## Challenges and Rewards of Advising

Being an advisor brings many challenges, but also great rewards.

### Challenges

The greatest challenge for any advisor is managing their time and not becoming overcommitted. You may be asked to do several things for the organization on top of your job and other commitments. You need to set expectations early as to your ability to attend organization meetings and events.

Another challenge many advisors face is defining their role with the organization. Students may have their own ideas as to the advisor's role, so you should discuss your role as soon as possible following the election of new officers.

*Whether the role of advisor is one we choose freely or one assigned to us, it is important to understand the function and roles involved, as well as the challenges and rewards that come with it.*

Yet another challenge is to avoid becoming overly controlling of the organization's business. A student organization is "for the students and by the students," so advisors need to stay out of it as much as possible. An advisor should serve as a supervisor and step in only when needed.

Being aware of all the decisions and actions taken by the organization is also a challenge. Sometimes advisors are not able to make meetings and, consequently, miss some of the decisions being made. However, it is the advisor's responsibility to be aware of the actions of the organization so they may respond to questions, ensure that any legal and financial issues are properly addressed, and better understand the climate of the organization and its members. Weekly meetings with the president and making sure to read minutes are two ways to stay informed.

Additionally, an advisor can be challenged to be patient with students and the organization. It may seem easier to make a decision for the organization and provide solutions for students. However, if you allow students the opportunity to solve problems for themselves, they and the organization will benefit.

### Rewards

There are many rewards of being an advisor, and one of the most gratifying is being able to observe the development of students during their time in college. You may have the opportunity to work with many students during their first year and it is rewarding to watch them move from membership to leadership, or from being reserved to fully participating.

Another reward for advisors is to be recognized by the institution, organization, students or professional organizations for a job well done. While this reward is seldom sought, it is a nice perk.

You should feel flattered in serving as a reference for students. If asked by a student to be a reference, that means they respect you and you have developed a relationship with them.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of being an advisor is serving as a mentor for students. Advising also provides an opportunity to teach, lead and coach students involved in organizations.

Yet another reward is the opportunity to participate in an organization whose purpose you truly enjoy.

Finally, there is the opportunity to form networks with colleagues who serve as advisors for similar organizations. Traveling to conferences or meetings allows the opportunity to visit with colleagues in similar situations. These trips not only rejuvenate you, but also help you create a network to rely on for information and support.

## Two Types of Motivation

### Extrinsic

- Recognition
- Money
- Achievement

### Intrinsic

- Desire
- Value
- Approval

## Being the Best Advisor You Can Be

Advisors can be separated into three different categories:

- Those that don't
- Those that wish they could
- Those that do (Rotz and Pesco)

**Those that don't** will never attend meetings, don't know what actions or decisions the organization is making and are hard to find. The students don't know who their advisor is and have to search for their contact information.

**Those that wish they could** meet with the organization every once in a while, support only a few of the programs, are contacted only when it's time to sign paperwork and show up only at budget and election time.

**Those that do** meet with the group weekly, attend events on a regular basis, contribute to the legacy of the organization and offer support and guidance when needed. If you are not the advisor that does, there are steps you can take to become a better advisor.

The dream advisor is one who has a vested interest in the organization. They attend meetings and events, participate in retreats and trainings, offer advice and counsel students, and support the effort of the organization.

### Here are 10 steps to become a great advisor:

1. Discuss your role with everyone in the organization.
2. Attend all meetings possible.
3. Attend all events possible.
4. Schedule weekly one-on-one meetings with the president or executive board.
5. Get copies of agendas and minutes of all meetings.
6. Be involved in all financial areas, not just signing check requests and reimbursements.
7. Be involved in all constitutional or charter rewrites.
8. Make sure to be included in the election of new leaders.
9. Have fun with your committee members.
10. Finally, recognize your members for their good work.

It's never too late to be a dream advisor. Start now!

## References

- Dunkel, N.W., Schuh, J.H. (1998). *Advising student groups and organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Kouzes, J.N., and Posner, B.Z. (1987). *The leadership challenge*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Rotz, M.J. and Ilaria R. Pesco, I.R. (2002, Back to School). I dream of...a great advisor. *Campus Activities Programming*, 35(2), 8-11.
- Schuh, J.H., & Carlisle, W. (1991). Supervision and evaluation: Selected topics for emerging professionals. In T. K. Miller & R. B. Winston, Jr. (Eds.), *Administration and leadership in student affairs: Actualizing student development in higher education* (2nd ed., pp. 495-531). Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development.

*The greatest challenge for any advisor is managing their time and not becoming overcommitted. You may be asked to do several things for the organization on top of your job and other commitments. You need to set expectations early as to your ability to attend organization meetings and events.*

## About the Author

Jason A. Chapman is Student Affairs coordinator at **Southwestern University (TX)**. In NACA, he has served on the 2005 NACA Central Regional Conference Committee and as the NACA Central associate member registration coordinator in 2005. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science and English from Southwestern University and is pursuing a master's degree in organizational leadership from Gonzaga University (WA).

