

Advising Student Organizations: Penance or Privilege?

Kay C Dee
Tulane University

Often, the first form of departmental or university service experienced by new faculty members is the role of a “faculty advisor” for a student organization. New educators tend to become student organization faculty advisors for a number of reasons: it can be an excellent way to meet many students outside the classroom and to establish a reputation in your new institution; advising a student organization can require less institution-specific knowledge than (the more traditional) committee service; and, frankly, some faculty members can view advising student organizations as a distasteful chore or as “penance” to be paid as you climb the academic ladder - as a result, this job can tend to fall to the newest person in the department.

Advising a student organization can be a rewarding experience, but can also be nerve-wracking for new engineering educators. Our first years as faculty members are often spent learning about one-on-one student advising through trial and error - accepting the responsibility to advise an entire student group can be overwhelming. Enthusiastic new educators can easily fall into the trap of over-advising, or micromanaging, a student group. Conversely, well-meaning and laid-back advisors can adopt a “hands-off” attitude which can significantly lower the morale and/or productivity of a student group. As new faculty, we often search for balance; we struggle to balance the demands of teaching and research and to balance our personal and professional obligations. Balance is probably also the key to effectively advising student organizations.

Five Principles of Advising Student Organizations

1. Be Accessible.
2. Be Quiet.
3. Behave.
4. Be Supportive.
5. Be Smart.

Table 1. Short List of Advising Principles.
Of course, seeking balance is still a worthy goal.

Developing balance (and wisdom, which seems to be associated with balance) requires time and patience. Since I am still questing for balance (and wisdom, and time, and patience) and yet am already serving as a faculty advisor for student organizations, I have assembled a short set of advising principles (Table 1) derived from teaching techniques¹⁻⁴. This paper will present and expand upon the principles in Table 1, which have been very useful during my time as the faculty advisor for the Tulane student chapters of two professional societies and one honor society.

1. Be Accessible.

If your students don't mind, you should attend the general meetings of the organization. You could also attend officers' meetings, if the officers would like to have you there. You don't have to be an active participant in the meetings, or sit in the front row. Your presence at meetings (wherever they are held: the student union, classrooms after hours, *etc.*) sends a message that you consider the organization important enough for you to leave your office and meet students on "neutral territory." Your willingness to leave your own "turf" and venture into their world will often be appreciated as a marker of accessibility¹. Arriving a few minutes early for, and lingering a few minutes after, meetings helps you be accessible since this gives students a chance to talk with you informally (just as arriving early for class gives students a chance to ask you questions^{2,3}). You can use these informal interactions to learn the names of as many students as you can. Learning and using students' names promotes rapport and makes you personally accessible without being overly forced or intrusive³.

The suggestion to attend meetings may worry faculty, for whom time is a precious commodity. It is certainly valid to be concerned about using your time appropriately, especially consider all of the demands placed on junior faculty. However, calculate how much time you will actually spend at student organization meetings – likely only two to three hours per month. You probably spend more time per month in the shower. The student organization is worth your investment of time and energy.

2. Be Quiet.

Of course you want to be a resource for students, and of course you want to give them the benefit of your experience. On the other hand, you aren't running the organization, you're just *advising* the people who are running the organization. Student organizations must be directed by students. This means that sometimes you will have to bite your tongue and let students make mistakes (and learn from those mistakes). Be aware that you may find yourself under pressure to influence activities of the student group. For example, the local professional chapter of a society may have ambitious hopes/plans for the student section of that society, and might ask you to push the students in particular directions. If this occurs, remember that students need to learn to interact with professional people, and put the professionals in direct contact with the student officers. Let the students make their own judgements, and then support the decisions of the students (see "4. Be Supportive").

Principle #2, "Be Quiet," does not mean "be uninterested" or "don't get involved." You should feel comfortable making suggestions to the student group, but you should gracefully accept the idea that not all of your suggestions will be taken. So how do you provide guidance without overpowering the students with your own opinions? How do you maintain an attitude of interest and support without micromanaging the group? Deliberately using positive body language in conjunction with active listening techniques, as summarized in Table 2, will help you demonstrate interest and enthusiasm without being overbearing. Two particular active listening techniques (paraphrasing/summarizing what you are hearing and asking relevant questions), are very effective mechanisms for encouraging students to critically evaluate their own ideas – and for helping students to arrive at their own conclusions (instead of just telling them what to do).

Most importantly, actively *listening* to what students have to say is often more valuable, more important, and more appreciated than talking to (or at) students. So hush! Listen.

Climate	Open and Supportive - non-judgmental and non-evaluative - problem oriented - non-dogmatic - not superior
Focus	On Speaker and Topic
Non-Verbal Cues	Attending - open posture - look directly at speaker - lean forward
Verbal Cues	Encouraging - minimal verbal messages (“uh-huh,” “yeah”)
Dialogue	Reflect and Summarize; Clarify - “What I hear you saying is...” - “So what should we do?” - “Tell me more.”

Table 2. Active Listening Behaviors.

Adapted from Wankat and Oreovicz, 1993, pg 194.

3. Behave.

By advising a student organization, you have the opportunity to be a mentor and a role model to a number of students. Take advantage of that opportunity. Consciously work to model professional behavior, and realize that students will view you as a representative of your department, your school, your research field, and professors in general. Talk with students about the challenges and opportunities of your professional career¹. Share some of your personal interests¹. Communicate the importance of mentoring to the students, and encourage them to assume mentoring roles within the organization or elsewhere¹. People emulate behavior which they understand and respect, so make the most of your role as faculty advisor and represent yourself (and your department, school, research area, *etc.*) well.

You will almost certainly be called upon to model professional conflict resolution skills. Usually, students will try very hard to resolve conflicts within the organization before they come to you for help. It’s important for you to give this kind of situation the time and patience it deserves. Ideally, *you will not decide the issue*, but you will be able to help the students reach a compromise. One facilitation/conflict resolution scenario I have successfully used in the past is presented here: first have both parties state their point of view (without interruption); next have each party re-state and summarize the other’s point of view (clarification is allowed); next have each party propose a compromise situation, listing the benefits and disadvantages for everyone involved; and finally (if a suitable compromise hasn’t been reached already), have each party suggest incremental steps toward a “meeting in the middle” which is not completely satisfactory for anyone but is acceptable overall.

4. Be Supportive.

You can't be supportive if you're not accessible (principle #1), and you can't be supportive if you aren't listening to and aware of what is going on in the student organization (principle #2), so this principle of advising is certainly linked to others. One important type of support you can supply to a student organization is honest and generous praise and positive feedback. Share positive news about the student group with your colleagues, department chair, and dean, and let the students know that you are championing their cause on multiple levels.

If providing "support" only consisted of providing positive feedback, it would be relatively easy. Be aware that different members of the organization will want and need different kinds of support from you. It is a good idea to read about different cognitive styles and personality types²⁻⁴, and to watch for situations where you may need to alter your own style to enhance communication with students. As one example, consider the different communication styles and mentoring needs of impersonal and interpersonal thinkers presented in Table 3.

Interpersonal

Wants to exchange ideas with others
Seeks rapport with instructor
Resolves uncertainty by personal judgement

Impersonal

Wants to debate ideas with others
Seeks challenge from instructor
Resolves uncertainty by logic and research

Table 3. Some Aspects of Interpersonal and Impersonal Patterns of Thinking.

Adapted from McKeachie, 1994, pg 233.

published/printed on university letterhead. Consider whether or not planned student fund-raisers conflict with university interests. One student organization I worked with had developed an ambitious (and probably financially sound) plan to sell books as a fundraiser – which, if acted on, could have caused serious legal problems due to certain exclusive contract arrangements of our university bookstore.

Honest mistakes and seemingly good ideas can escalate into larger, legal issues. Find out how to contact one of your institution's lawyers. Don't hesitate to call them and ask questions, even if it makes you feel silly, if you develop a gut feeling that something is just "not right". The lawyers' job is to help you protect the students, yourself, and your institution.

Promotion: Promoting the interests of the student organization is part of being a supportive (Principle #4) advisor. However, don't forget to promote yourself where it counts. Consider adding a section about advising students (both one-on-one and as a group) to your teaching portfolio. List successful guidance of a student organization as one of your yearly accomplishments, and talk with your department chair about the mentoring skills you are developing. If the group undertakes impressive projects, include some relevant details in your

5. Be Smart.

There are two elements to "being smart" about advising student organizations: protection and promotion.

Protection: They may not know it, but the students are counting on you to provide enough wisdom (and balance, and time, and patience) to protect them from potentially serious situations. You also need to protect yourself and your institution. For example, be very sensitive about the language and tone of organizational announcements which are

curriculum vitae (Does the group participate regularly in outreach efforts? Have they managed a particularly large budget or prestigious project? Have they won awards?). Including some details about the achievements of the student group as part of your personal portfolio of accomplishments does not mean that you are using the students to further your career – instead, you are giving yourself fair credit for the time and patience you have invested in the student organization, and are providing documentable evidence of student mentoring/advising skills.

Very few new engineering educators receive training on mentoring and advising students, and yet we are expected to perform in an advisory/coaching capacity. Therefore, techniques for effective advising of students (as individuals and in organizations) are certainly “tricks of the trade outside the classroom” that we need to share with each other. Advising a student organization allows a professor to interact with students in a totally unique venue. Take advantage of the opportunities presented by your position as a faculty advisor to get to know your students (and your department and institution) on a whole new level; to develop your mentoring skills; to be a role model – to inspire! By investing time and energy in these opportunities, you can make a positive contribution to the student community *and* you will certainly develop your own patience, balance, and wisdom. Advising student organizations is undoubtedly a privilege, not a penance. Don’t let people convince you otherwise.

The advising principles discussed in this paper were condensed from a few excellent books about teaching¹⁻⁴, listed below.

Bibliography

1. *Adviser, Teacher, Role Model, Friend: on being a mentor to students in science and engineering*, (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine), National Academy Press, 1997.
2. P. C. Wankat and F. S. Oreovicz, *Teaching Engineering*, McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York, NY, 1993.
3. W. J. McKeachie, *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, MA, 1994.
4. J. Lowman, *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA, 1985.

KAY C DEE

Kay C Dee is an Assistant Professor and the Director of the Cell and Tissue Engineering Laboratory in the Department of Biomedical Engineering at Tulane University. She has served as the faculty advisor for the Tulane student chapters of the Biomedical Engineering Society, Alpha Eta Mu Beta, and the Society of Women Engineers (who hosted over 220 attendees at the record-breaking, student-run SWE Region C Conference in New Orleans, November, 1998). Kay C gratefully acknowledges support from the GE Fund “Faculty for the Future” program (1997-1999).