“Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.”

– Richard J. Light
Advisors are crucial in supporting the activities of student organizations and in encouraging and facilitating the holistic development of students. According to Dr. Alexander Astin, director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, “students learn by being involved.” His research shows that student involvement in co-curricular activities, such as student organizations, correlates positively with persistence, achievement, satisfaction, career advancement and educational development.
The Purpose of Student Organizations

Studies, such as Dr. George Kuh’s at the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, reveal that involved students:

- Develop advanced critical thinking skills
- Take a greater interest in the well-being of others
- Are more self-confident
- Build stronger decision-making skills
- Are better prepared for post-collegiate life

Advisors are critical in helping promote these areas of development. Because they often work on the “front lines” with students, advisors serve as conduits to the university, connecting students more closely with education and campus life. The most effective advisors are those who take the time to think about their own philosophy of advising and then put it into practice.
A number of methods work for effectively advising a student organization, however, not all methods work at all times. View each situation independently and choose which role is appropriate while interacting with students, keeping in mind that some roles are more effective than others for encouraging student development. In his research, Paul A. Bloland identified three distinct roles a person can adopt when advising a student organization: the role of an educator, a coach, and an advisor.
**Educator:** Provide students with an educational experience that will complement or supplement their co-curricular education. This could include individual conversations with students, organized educational programs, or working through a conflict. This area is much broader and occurs both formally or informally. The more time you can devote to such activities, the more your students will likely grow.

**Coach:** Work to improve the effectiveness of the organization and assist with achieving goals. Coaching activities might include working with officers, helping with retreats or setting goals, developing procedures to limit risk, or strategizing ways to achieve the purpose of the organization. While not as effective as the Educator's role in developing individual members as leaders, the Coach's role is vital in furthering organizational success.

**Advisor:** Keep the organization on track and heading in the right direction. Advisor activities may include working with the budget, ensuring bills are paid, and bringing consistency to the organization. Such operational activities tend to exist at the most basic level of your role, but often take up the majority of your time. It's important to remember that student organizations will very likely be imperfect. Use the Advisor role whenever necessary and prioritize your activities as a Coach and an Educator.
In an out-of-the-classroom environment, it's important to articulate and practice a student advising philosophy. You will often need to make intentional choices regarding which role you will take on at any given time – Educator, Coach or Advisor. Your role as a student organization advisor also includes different functions, and you might need to utilize more than one at the same time. These functions may include Mentor, Conflict Mediator, Reflective Agent, Motivator, and Policy Interpreter.
Mentor – Oftentimes, a student will see an advisor as a mentor. For example, a student could approach you for assistance in her/his professional development or for advice about an academic program. You may be asked to review a student’s résumé, write a letter of recommendation, connect a student with resources on and off campus, or be a sounding board for ideas.

Conflict Mediator – When conflict occurs in a student organization, it may be necessary for you to step in and mediate. At times, it may even be necessary for you to facilitate a dialogue between two students who have come into conflict. Many resources are available about how to mediate such situations. The Student Involvement & Leadership Center can help.

Reflective Agent – Student organizations are “living laboratories” where students learn and develop through active participation. You can serve as a reflective agent, encouraging students to think about what they’re doing and learning, their strengths and challenges, their successes and failures.

Motivator – Advisors are also motivators, encouraging students to be actively involved, try new things and excel, even when they are discouraged. Become a “cheerleader” for the organization, keeping students excited about the future and the ongoing potential for success.

Policy Interpreter – Student organizations operate under policies and procedures, but sometimes the students may not be aware of them. The more you know about policies and procedures, the better you can advise students regarding their plans, goals and activities.

* Text adapted from the Advisor Manual published by the American College Personnel Association Commission for Student Involvement
Creating a Healthy Balance

It’s often helpful to view student organizations not as entities whose purpose it is to produce perfect products, but instead as tools for the advancement of cognitive and practical skills among college students. In these living-learning environments, students will make mistakes, and it’s not your responsibility as an advisor to prevent them from happening.

You are not responsible for the actions of student organizations; it’s the students who are solely responsible. Rather, advisors accept responsibility for offering a healthy balance of challenge and support, along with a commitment to student empowerment and accountability.
Given the diverse purposes, activities and objectives of student organizations at Boise State University, your role as an advisor will vary in some degree between organizations. Because of this, it’s important to develop an understanding with the organization you support as to the nature of how you’ll be involved.

To help maintain a consistent relationship, you and the organization should agree on a set of expectations for one another from the onset, possibly even writing a list as a binding agreement. Be clear with the organization about how you wish to be contacted, what other commitments you have, and what organization events, activities and meetings you can attend.
Sources:


