We have thousands of alumni; where are our advisors?

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A question that plagues many Greek-letter organizations, is often asked by our campus-based partners, and frequently desired and needed by undergraduate members, “Where are our advisors?” For many fraternities and sororities, the *boots on the ground* mature-adult-guidance is provided by alumni and friends of the organization who dedicate their nights and weekends to creating an ideal experience for the members of the chapter(s) they advise and the students who attend the programs they facilitate. We recognize the vital role our advisors play to organizational success, but we inherently have created roadblocks to recruiting, and even more importantly retaining, top talent who will selflessly give their time, treasure, and talent to our students.

Four questions to consider as we answer this question include:

1. How can we successfully onboard and train our new advisors?
2. What ongoing opportunities for education and development do we offer?
3. How can we steward and support our current advisors?
4. What roadblocks do advisors face, and how can we reduce them?

For two years, I have worked as the Director of Chapter Volunteers for a national men’s organization to recruit chapter advisors for our 185+ chapters nationwide. Some new appointments are low-hanging fruit and are simply just the ascension of an advisory board member who has already been advising in one capacity moving into the chapter advisor seat. In other instances, our campus-based partners have recommended stellar faculty and staff looking for the opportunity to help shape an undergraduate fraternity or sorority experience. Some of the best volunteers I have had the pleasure of connecting to chapters have found me, through our website, and indicated their desire to volunteer. Finally, and certainly with the most difficulty and sometimes mediocre success, an *all call* is used, where alumni of our organization within a reasonable radius of campus are contacted, asking if perhaps they would like to give their time and talents to advising a chapter near them.

No matter which method an advisor comes to work with our chapters, the training, attention and support for them certainly does not stop the moment they are appointed. Regrettably, these are the areas where we have the most room for improvement but have the least amount of bandwidth and resources. Advisors who feel ill equipped and unsupported will sometimes figure things out on their own, but they often experience burnout before having tremendous success.

How can we successfully onboard and train our new advisors?

Within a year of a chapter advisor's appointment, we aim to have them trained at our Chapter Advisor Symposium, a two-day immersive educational experience, similar in structure to our chapter officer training. This opportunity is subsidized by our organization's budget with the hope to keep the cost as minimal as possible for our advisors. While not every scenario they may face can possibly be covered in two days of curriculum, our hope is to provide them with the toolkit necessary to provide guidance and support to our students, and to know whom to contact when they need help.

What ongoing opportunities for education and development do we offer?

On a monthly basis, our staff conducts a video call through Zoom with our chapter advisors where we talk through initiatives, current events, administrative processes, and even a *Closed Door with the CEO*. This platform allows our volunteers to engage and ask questions, and we can also send a video recording of the call to those who were unable to attend. Thirty minutes a month is my opportunity to reach every advisor and equip them with more knowledge of the current landscape of our field. At our convention, we offer Chapter Advisor Convocation, an ongoing educational opportunity for our advisors to sit on and hear from panels of their peers regarding trends and issues they are facing in advising. Again, we subsidize this valuable opportunity for our advisors.

Many of our successful advisors speak highly of the conference calls, roundtables, and in-person meetings with the fraternity/sorority professionals on campus, and as a national headquarters, we believe that the more touch points and discussions that are occurring, the better equipped our advisors will be to support the students we serve.

How can we steward and support our current advisors?

Stewardship of our advisors is also a large function of my role. It is a disservice to an advisor if the only touch point they receive, from either our headquarters or from a campus based professional, is a thank you card during National Volunteer Week. Phone calls to check-in, see how things are going, and to find what resources could best equip them to carry out their role are the main purpose of my calls, but often times the calls center on the advisor and their experience. Pi Kappa Phi is blessed to have many advisors who have been in their roles for the better part of a decade, but many of them are tired. Not because they do not enjoy the students or feel unqualified and untrained, but sadly because they often are overworked and underappreciated. Coupled with the one-person show that make up far too many advisory teams, and our advisors' roles suddenly feel like a full-time professional role.

What roadblocks do advisors face, and how can we reduce them?

Many of the roadblocks our advisors face, whether written in black and white, or through functional practice, are our own making. Written performance evaluations and weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly written reports are extra time and energy our advisors expend. The once well-intentioned agreement to serve as an advisor morphs into resembling a professional employment role, which creates stress, and in my opinion, little value-add for the students they serve. What is truly done with performance evaluation data, and the volume of reports being created? Could this information be gained, and engagement evaluated by picking up the phone and talking to the volunteer, and through discussions with students, campus professionals and traveling staff if it ever comes into question whether they are still performing their volunteer role?

To tackle this issue, Pi Kappa Phi has shied away from collecting so many data filled reports from our volunteers and have shifted our focus to qualitatively supporting our volunteers, and in two years, we have seen success. Our volunteers are staying in their roles longer, are attending more meetings and conferences, and they are more willing roll up their sleeves and attend events with the students they advise. We, as an organization, have fewer metrics to point to, but sadly, much of the data we were collecting was not being used to enact changes to our processes.

In my organization, our chapter advisors are empowered to find and appoint the other nine members of their advisory team. Easier said than done. For most, their first priority is the students. Chapter meetings, executive council meetings, advisor roundtables with their peers on campus, and once, or twice, a semester meetings with our traveling consultants fill their schedules and quickly consume valuable bandwidth. Each meeting and interaction has a valuable place, but each also chip away from the time our advisors have from finding more individuals to share the advising load. If we know of other individuals in close proximity to a campus, we need to connect them with our current advisors, and spread the workload. My campus-based peers have helped so many chapter advisors identify scholarship and faculty/staff advisors who in turn open their office doors to our students and make themselves available on campus.

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In revisiting the original question, “Where are our advisors?” one must also think of the life cycle of an advisor. Much like a three to four-year traditional undergraduate experience, the sweet spot for many of our volunteers in any given role is three to four years. We have several who have held their roles for decades, and others who are able to commit for a semester or two, and we certainly value and see great impact in any amount of time dedicated to volunteering, but we also have to recognize that we can never get too complacent in our recruitment, appointment, training, and support of advising.

Whether your organization by written regulation or in-practice dictates the age of a volunteer, I must ask, “Why?” What about that 24-year-old alumnus, who upon relocating to a new city, and who has the time and bandwidth to volunteer, should prohibit them from giving back to an organization that shaped their undergraduate experience? What research or findings have shown that the age of 30 is when an alumna is ready to join an advisory board, nearly eight years after her undergraduate experience was completed? I recognize that many fresh-out-of-college members of our organizations are not mature enough, nor have enough practical life experience to solve many of our issues, but nonetheless, many of our alumni are well equipped and are just never given the chance.

Upon taking on my role as Director of Chapter Volunteers, not a single chapter-level volunteer was younger than I at the age of 23. Our unspoken five-year moratorium on advising partially contributed to nearly forty percent of our groups having no advisory team or chapter advisor, and many others having individuals listed on paper, but without any true connection to the current members of the undergraduate chapter.

Within a month, a few chapter advisors around my age were appointed, with a “let’s try it and see” mentality. Within a year, our campus partners and communities had recognized some of these advisors as *Chapter Advisor of the Year* and our groups were thriving, finally having a chapter advisor with whom they could relate. Again, while not every young alumnus or alumna is ready to advise, through vetting, coaching, and pairing young advisors with their more seasoned colleagues, we can fill many of our vacancies, not just with warm bodies, but with agents of change.

In circling back to the subject of this article, “We have thousands of alumni; where are our advisors?” I will say that they are out there. Many are in-waiting, already volunteering at another level and will one day move up in roles. Others are working on the campuses we serve, waiting for an organization to ask for help. More are our young alumni, still as passionate as the day they signed their bid and looking for ways to find their place in the lifelong commitment they made and yearning for a way to contribute to their organization, whether it be with their home chapter or another. Through intentional recruitment, onboarding, training, and support, we can find incredible advisors willing to give their resources to our groups and continue to build our communities. Sometimes, all we have to do is ask, and have confidence in the abilities of our brothers and sisters.