

## Volunteer Advisors as Valued Partners

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For every quality fraternity or sorority chapter, there is a group of dedicated volunteers. If you're a campus-based fraternity/sorority professional or work at a headquarters, you know this to be true. Good chapters have a board of advisors who guide and mentor our undergraduates, helping them to have a quality fraternal experience. When we start new chapters we're pretty good about finding volunteer advisors who can do all this and more. But somewhere along the way, we end up with chapters with only one advisor and sometimes this advisor is just a name on paper. Many colleges and universities require a campus advisor, but oftentimes, this is a person who simply signs the recognition form annually. We know our best chapters have good advisors, so how do we ensure all our chapters do?

We start with three basic premises:

1. Spending time with volunteer advisors is in place of, not in addition to, your regular duties, whether a campus-based or headquarters-based staff.
2. Anyone who has an interest in helping a chapter succeed can advise a chapter.
3. Don't forget they are volunteers.

Too often, we look at volunteer advisors as one more thing to do because we really focus all our attention on our undergraduates. To be clear, our focus *is* our undergraduates, but spending all our time with them will not likely get us to where we want to be. Spending some time with volunteer advisors will pay off in the end, but like any investment, you have to be patient.

And too often, we call our advisors "alumni advisors" which implies you must be an alumni of that fraternity or sorority to advise them. In the narrowest sense, some think you have to be alumni from that chapter to fully understand the chapter. Not only is this shortsighted, but it severely limits the pool of potential advisors.

As campus or headquarters' staff members, we work hard to get our undergraduates to understand our policies and philosophies with the hope they will adhere to them. What we sometimes fail to realize is when the students leave our conferences/retreats/offices they usually have conversations with their advisors, who can either reinforce what we say or not. Ideally our volunteer advisors will not only reinforce what we say but go beyond to support our efforts.

In my three decades of both being a campus-based professional and a volunteer advisor for my fraternity, and now serving as a regional volunteer, I have found that far more often our volunteer advisors mean well but sometimes are not up to speed on things. Rarely have I found they want to do harm to their chapters or relive their undergraduate experience. I remember clearly many years ago attending a chapter volunteer board meeting when discussing alcohol-free recruitment, where the advisor let the guys know they should not be buying the PNM's alcohol. While I appreciated this, I pulled them aside after the meeting and said that alcohol-free recruitment involves a bit more than that. To be fair, when they were undergraduate members, alcohol-free recruitment did not exist, so some education was in order. The next meeting when discussing this issue again, the advisor made clear the members could not have alcohol in the presence of any PNM at any time, thus reinforcing my stance.

If I could waive my magic wand to create the ideal situation, here's my list of what we would be doing when working with our volunteer advisors:

1. Treat volunteers as a valued partner, not an after-thought.
2. Do not blindside them, they are volunteers.
3. Copy advisors on all correspondence sent to the chapter.
4. Hold regular meetings with volunteer advisors (sometimes a summer meeting or institute works better).
5. Educate, educate, educate advisors.
6. Call advisors as soon as you hear of problems and include them on any discipline decisions.
7. Chapters should have a volunteer advisor attend their regional meetings with the undergraduates (the students' experience will be enhanced greatly).
8. Recognize and reward volunteer advisors whenever you can (there's no such thing as too much recognition) since it's easier to keep an advisor than recruit a new one.
9. When an inter/national headquarters consultant visits a chapter they need to meet with the volunteer advisor(s) (this takes advance planning since volunteers need more notice than undergraduates).
10. Have the undergraduates select a parent who can sit on their volunteer board (it's an easy way to get another board member).
11. Make use of technology (conference calls, WebEx, etc.) so you can engage volunteers remotely (volunteers don't need to live within 10 miles of the campus).
12. If you're a campus based professional, realize advisors have different needs depending on which council their chapter is part of (IFC, Panhellenic, NPHC, or MGC).
13. Realize if you get 3-5 years of quality advising from an individual you're doing well.

The key to having successful volunteer advisors is simply spending time with them. As campus-based professionals, we need to make a concerted effort to schedule time with our volunteers. As part of headquarters staff responsibilities, someone needs to be dedicated to volunteer advisors (adding these responsibilities to a Director of Chapter Services job is not helpful). Like most things in life, if you pay attention to them, they grow!