

## Assuming the Role: The successful advisor-student relationship

Sean Ferris, Clifton Johnson, Aaron Lovitz, Sarah Stroud, & Justin Rudisille

"You're an advisor at the university? That's pretty cool. Do you help students get classes? No? Oh, so you must help them find jobs when they are done. No? So what is it that you do?"

Advisors who work with student leaders have probably had this line of questioning at some point while they tried to explain their work. The scary reality is that while there is extensive research on leadership and leadership development, little information exists about the role the advisor plays in student leadership development. What is even more worrisome for advisors of student leaders is that in a recent ACUI/EBI College Union/Student Center study, student participants identified that they were not fully satisfied with the leadership opportunities and the leadership development training available to them in college. With that in mind, a study was conducted to understand advisors' most important roles, behaviors, and attributes, as perceived by both students and advisors, in creating successful student leadership learning experiences. The following two questions guided this research:

- According to student leaders, what is it their advisors do that leads to their success as a student leader and their growth as individuals?
- According to advisors who work with student leaders, what is it they believe they do to contribute to the success of their students and their growth as student leaders?

By understanding what is happening in these high-quality relationships, those roles, behaviors, and attributes can be shared and replicated in other advisor relationships and ultimately improve the student learning experience.

### What is known

Much literature exists related to the development of college students' leadership capacities, such as the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership Development and the Student Leadership Practices Inventory. However, research on the specific roles, behaviors, and attributes of advisors that promote student learning and development is lacking. As John Dugan noted in the 2011 "Handbook for Student Leadership Development," while faculty interactions and mentoring are significant predictors of educational outcomes and leadership capacity, "further research is needed to unpack the specific types of interactions that are important."

Some research has been conducted on why individuals choose to become student organization advisors. In a [study](#) published in the September 2010 *Bulletin*, Deepti Vanguri found that faculty and staff became advisors because of their "jobs, passion for the organization, and desire to help students through their college developmental process," and that mentorship was one of the most beneficial components to being an advisor. In a 2010 *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* study, Robert Meyer and Michael Kroth discovered that while the social functions of meeting people, being recognized, or joining interest groups were motivators for all student organization advisors, there were different motivations for advisors between institution type, organization type, employment type, and advisor age.

Other research has helped to give perspective on the connection between student learning and leadership, students' experiences with their advisors, and the activities faculty and staff facilitate. In one such study in the 2003 *Journal of the Indiana University Student Personnel Association*, Kristen Bardou, Shannon Byrne, Victoria Pasternak, Nikki Perez, and Amanda Rainey found "positive relationships between the feeling that one's advisor encourages leadership development and leadership self-efficacy" and that the "perception of support by an advisor seems to have stronger impact than general university support."

In a 2008 *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* article, Darin Eich outlined a grounded theory that included 16 attributes of high-quality student leadership programs in higher education. One of these was the importance of learning from experienced practitioners who helped to give clarification and breadth to students' understanding of leadership and who provided examples of being a leader in real-world practice. Another related attribute was the opportunity to observe educators in action—demonstrating exemplary leadership practices during student interactions, sharing personal stories and experiences, and building supportive and mentoring relationships with students beyond the program. Finally, one cluster of attributes in Eich's model was student-centered learning experiences, which included students engaged in

practicing and applying leadership, reflecting, making meaning through discussions, encountering difference, and participating in service and self-discovery retreats.

While previous research has helped to explain how college students develop leadership capacities and the practices that can be utilized in student leadership programs, little has identified what organization advisors do to contribute to the process. In "Advising Student Groups and Organizations," Norbert Dunkel and John Schuh provided an overview of the competencies and functions that are important for advisors to display, which include understanding group dynamics, providing academic and career assistance, budgeting, understanding legal issues, and addressing conflict. The authors also described the five essential roles of advisors: mentors, supervisors, teachers, leaders, and followers. Additionally, the ACPA-College Student Educators International's "Advisor's Manual" built upon this information by providing an overview of responsibilities and recommendations for student organization advisors. This study sought to provide a deeper description of what these roles, behaviors, and attributes look like in practice and how they might be effective in supporting student learning and leadership development.

## **What was done**

The study's population was undergraduate students and their advisors involved in campus leadership positions at ACUI member institutions. To develop the sample group, ACUI members were asked to nominate student-advisor pairs involved in lasting and successful relationships in which the student experienced leadership development. Definitions for lasting and successful relationships and leadership development were provided to nominators. In total, 108 participants (54 students and 54 advisors) were solicited as the sample.

A mixed method approach was established for data collection. This approach allowed researchers the ability to understand both what advisors did and why what they did was important to students' leadership development. An online survey was created to collect the quantitative and qualitative data regarding the student leader-advisor relationship of each participant with particular focus on advisors' behaviors and actions. The survey was distributed to the preidentified sample via email. Data collection occurred for one month. There was a final response rate of 76.9 percent, with 38 eligible student and 42 eligible advisor participants. While complete pairs were not required for participation, of these respondents, 30 pairs completed the instrument.

Student leader participants were full-time students, with a majority enrolled in their fourth year (60.5 percent) and an average age of 21. They were involved in varying types of campus leadership. All of the participating organization advisors were full-time employees at their institution, with a majority being staff (92.9 percent) with at least five years of advising experience (76.2 percent) and having a primary job responsibility of advising student leaders (64.3 percent). The 80 participants represented 42 different institutions, which were fairly representative of the ACUI membership, with a slightly higher number of institutions in the Midwestern United States and of institutions with enrollments of 20,000 or more.

All participants completed the same questionnaire, but logic established in the survey directed them to the appropriate questions based on their responses. Questions focused on a variety of areas for both the student leaders and faculty/staff advisors including general demographics, purpose and behaviors of the advisor, overall relationship, and students' development. To qualify for the study, advisors had to agree that they experienced a successful student leader-advisor relationship. For students to qualify for the study, they had to agree that they experienced two things: a successful student leader-advisor relationship and a successful learning experience.

## **What was found**

Once data collection was complete, three major themes emerged during analysis of both student and advisor responses. These were: the roles assumed by advisors; important attributes for success; and other valuable behaviors and resources.

### **Roles**

The data analysis led to emerging themes and definitions of the various roles advisors took on in the relationship that supported student learning and leadership development. While participants were provided definitions of these roles in the survey instrument based on "Advising Student Groups and Organizations" and the "Advisor's Manual," participants defined what roles looked like in practice. The most prominent of these were mentor, teacher/educator, motivator, and university

policy/risk agent. Both students and advisors rated mentor and teacher/educator as being among the most important and coach/team builder and conflict mediator as being the least important roles, while a higher quantitative rating was placed on the motivator role by students and on university policy/risk agent by advisors.

### **Mentor**

Participants classified the mentor role as the advisors letting students learn along the way; having the knowledge of and working to integrate the students' personal, academic, and professional interests; and making the relationship more personal by sharing advice and stories, asking questions, and reflecting with the student leader. Both students and advisors described these types of mentoring behaviors similarly. In terms of students' holistic development, one advisor stated: "I think one of the biggest keys to successful development is to truly understand the students—why did they become part of the organization, what are they interested in doing with their life, and how [can advisors] help mold those two elements together?" One student related this role to how the advisor "helped me better understand how the skills I've gained in my leadership position translate to skills that will be useful in the outside world," and another student stated: "[She] is one who knows my dreams and goals and helps me achieve these things while maintaining a relationship where I can always count on her to guide me in the right direction with words of wisdom." As for the relationship's personal dynamic, one advisor discussed a "Willingness to relate to him on a 'real' level," while a student explained, "She is always willing to sit down and talk with me—not only about what is going on with the organization but also about what is going on in my life. ... We also talk about what is going on in her life."

### **Teacher/educator**

Advisors and students helped to define another role—teacher/educator—as being characterized by the sharing of knowledge, promoting critical thinking about decisions, and developing new understandings and skills related to leadership and the position. Several skills were mentioned as being developed through the student-advisor interactions. These were captured in one student's response: "She teaches me and others skills such as conflict management, organization, economics (with the budgets), time management, and to look at the positive, etc." Other behaviors in this role included asking "questions to provoke thoughtful consideration of issues," as one advisor put it, and engaging in reflection about practical experiences. Two students described the latter with: "She has allowed all of us to use our own experience to reflect on leadership," and "Our advisor is great at letting us learn by doing, but is also very good at following up with reflection after decisions are made, especially [those that] may not have had positive outcomes." With components of the mentor role being described with a more personal, informal touch, the teacher/educator role reflects the more structured, formal learning that took place within activities associated with the relationship.

### **Motivator**

While the quantitative data showed students rating the importance of the motivator role higher than advisors, qualitative responses from both groups included the functions of providing encouragement, demonstrating a belief in the students' abilities, and setting and helping to achieve goals. The phrases students used to define this role included that the advisor "makes you feel like you are doing something worthwhile," "encourages me to reach my goals and be the best student leader possible," "keeps me wanting to achieve bigger and better aspirations," and makes "[us] energized." Several advisors discussed this role as encouraging students to "seek a leadership position" or take on "more responsibility." Another element of the motivator role advisors mentioned was the validation of their talents and contributions, making statements such as: "She just needed someone to believe that she could do it" and "I guess my role was to help cultivate what I knew she could be but she didn't necessarily see in herself." Responses from both groups made it clear that it is important to student leaders that their advisors play a role in keeping them motivated and on track.

### **University policy/risk agent**

Finally, the advisor is seen as a university representative who can give guidance on event planning, institutional policies, and risk management, as well as provide knowledge of the college's history, people, and politics. While advisors ranked this role as more important than motivator, few spoke of this role in their qualitative responses; one who did define it said: "by knowing a lot about policies and procedures on campus, I became a resource." Student responses provided more specificity to describe this role. For example, one student said: "My advisor has much more experience planning events that I do, which means that he's seen a lot more problems than I have. ... He can foresee risks that never cross my mind." Advisors also offer stability; as one student described: "Our advisor provides great historical resources and helps us navigate these policies." Finally, one student described another element—the advisor's desire for "making a campus a better place" and "actually making change on campus"—which suggests the role of university policy/risk agent is not only about policy and risk, but also about demonstrating an investment in the quality of campus life for students.

## Attributes

In addition to the specific roles played, students and advisors were asked what was valued most in the relationship, and three main attributes became prevalent: the honesty between advisors and students; the autonomy advisors provide students to make their own decisions and do their own work; and the ways in which advisors challenge and support student leaders.

### Honesty

Both students and advisors spoke frequently about the importance of having an honest and open relationship. Honesty was demonstrated mostly through interpersonal communication. For advisors, honesty was often described in terms of providing critical feedback or having difficult conversations with the student. One advisor described it by saying: "She could tell me anything, and I always gave her honest feedback, even if it was tough to hear." Students also recognized the importance of this critical feedback in their relationship. As this student explained, "My advisor is always honest and pushes me to be as successful as possible. She does not tell you what you want to hear—she tells you what you need to hear, whether it be good or bad." For both students and advisors, honesty also involved a willingness to discuss issues beyond student leadership. An advisor to fraternity men had this to say about interactions with a student: "Our conversations are always based in what is actually happening in the lives of college students and fraternity men, not just the administrator's idealistic view." While there was no specific outcome that resulted from their honest relationships, advisors and students often referenced "trust" and "respect" as they spoke about the honesty in their relationship.

### Autonomy

Interwoven in almost all the roles and attributes that advisors demonstrate was the freedom and autonomy they provide students to determine their own path and make their own decisions. Self-determination was important to the student leaders in this study. However, as this student recognized, they also valued the presence and work of their advisor: "It allows the students to feel as if they really have ownership of what they're doing without feeling alone." Clearly while advisors provided autonomy, they were not absent from decision making or programming. Advisors viewed it as important for them to contribute to the students' thought process while allowing students the room to create for themselves as captured by this advisor: "[I] act as a sounding board for her. She is a very independent worker, but often bounces ideas off of me. I let her make her own decisions in her leadership roles, and I think she asks me for advice because I will not micromanage her." Student respondents recognized the work advisors did to help them shape their own decisions. For instance, one student said: "[My advisor] guides instead of decides. She never gives me an answer and expects me to just go with it; she helps me find many solutions and challenges me to pick the one I think will be most effective." In addition to helping students make their own decisions, advisors identified the importance of being there for students after decisions were made to help them make meaning of the results: "[I trust] her to make the right decision, and support her no matter the decision she made. Then, work through whatever came from it." Overall, the findings show that students and advisors both knew autonomy in decision making was important to the relationship and to student leaders' development.

### Challenge and support

As introduced in 1962 by Nevitt Sanford in "The American College," student affairs professionals use the concept of challenge and support to describe the way they aid in student development. This concept also emerged as a theme in this study. The advisors described two ways in which they commonly challenged their students. The first happened through dialogue with the student and involved reflecting on skills, experiences, interactions with other students, program development, etc. One advisor said: "I have helped develop her as a leader through challenging her to be a critical thinker. Through that, many other outcomes such as confidence, dedication, and organization came out." In addition to challenging students through reflection, advisors also challenged students with new opportunities and responsibilities, as described by this advisor: "Throughout the past 2.5 years, I have continued to provide him with new challenges that he has handled very well. I have been purposeful in the sense that although he has been in the same program for over two years, I regularly give him new experiences and new opportunities for development so that he doesn't feel like his work is stagnant." The challenges that the advisors presented were not invisible to their students and, as this student expressed, were even valued: "I value that he understands me, and as a result, challenges me. He has challenged me to become a better friend, sister, daughter, mentor, role model, and student at various points along the way."

Coupled with the concept of challenge, advisors recognized the need to support their student leaders. Advisors described support in two main ways. First, they demonstrated support by being present and available for students. Simply put by one advisor: "He can come to me anytime, about anything, and I will do my best to help." In enacting this type of support, advisors mentioned being available through multiple forms of communication as an important display of support. The

second way advisors described support was through their encouragement of students. One advisor described this type of support as "Always believing they could achieve and being their biggest cheerleader."

Students also spoke of finding support in their advisors. Students recognized the importance of having someone to turn for personal things and for the knowledge and expertise an advisor provided related to their leadership responsibilities. The following quote outlines the multiple aspects of advisor support student participants described: "It is important for me to have someone to go to whenever I have questions or concerns. We work well because I can go to him with all sorts of problems, not just the ones concerning our organization. [It is also] important for me to have someone who can help me move through whatever task I have at hand if it is one that I am struggling with. ... It is [also] important to know that even though I should know all the policies and procedures, I know that he knows all of them like the back of his own hand."

This statement provides insight, but two additional concepts emerge from the data. First is the motivational support advisors provided, as another student described: "Leadership is not easy, especially when you have to lead other students that may not be as engaged, invested, or as excited for the program; having an advisor that motivates the chair/student is a great way to fire up that student to lead others." Finally, students simply valued knowing someone was on their side and believed in them. As one student said, "If you do your job, he'll back you up completely."

## **Communications**

In addition to the themes related to roles and attributes, other findings emerged during the analysis, such as the communication behaviors that occurred within the relationship. The most frequent type of communication rated by both students and advisors was "in-person." Nearly 60 percent of advisors and almost 80 percent of students reported communicating with each other in person very frequently. One advisor stated: "[I] employed regular communications including 1:1 meetings where we discuss goals, professional development, and performance." Another advisor said: "Our office holds monthly student leader gatherings with appointed leaders we advise." The same advisor went on to say they talked about a different topic each month. A student responded that their advisor "always uses encouraging words during our 1:1 meetings. It really gets my blood pumping and gets me excited about the road my organization is taking." Many students said they valued their advisor's open communication and availability. In addition, the longer that a student had reported working with the advisor, the greater the frequency reported in overall communication between student and advisor.

In addition to communication, advisors' behavior was also assessed through the frequency of attendance at meetings and activities, providing guidance to the organization, and assisting in the decision-making process. Both students and advisors said these behaviors were demonstrated frequently, which is similar to the findings of the 2010 ACUI/EBI Student Organization Leaders Assessment.

## **Resources**

Responses from the participants also highlighted the types of resources or tools used to support student leaders. Advisors reported both informal and formal resources and tools they would regularly use. One advisor provided articles (including the ACUI Bulletin) to the student. Others used experience and theory to help develop the student leader, with 90.5 percent of advisors either agreeing or somewhat agreeing that they applied student development theory in their work. Several advisors reported using various types of assessment with the student, including StrengthsQuest. Students reported many of the same resources or tools, while they more specifically mentioned policy manuals, bylaws, leadership books, conference opportunities, and various articles. One student remarked: "[He] has provided me with materials over time, including booklets on icebreakers and other things which I have collected as I know they will be useful in the future."

## **Academic interests**

Finally, student leaders and advisors were asked about their perceptions regarding how the students' academic interests factored into their leadership positions. Findings in this area showed significant discrepancy. While 62 percent of the students said their academic interests played into their leadership position, only 36 percent of the students believed their advisors helped integrate their academic interests. However, 72 percent of the advisors responded that they incorporated students' academic interests into the advising process, showing that there is a difference between how students and advisors define this integration in practice.

## Limitations and future research

During the processes of both data collection and data analysis, a number of factors arose that limit the validity of the results and how widely they can be applied. Given the mixed methods approach to data collection, this study required a large number of participants to validate the quantitative data, as well as participants who were able to give rich descriptions of their experiences to substantiate the qualitative data. In the end, the study could have benefited from a larger sample to improve the significance of the quantitative information. The results also could have been improved if researchers could have verified with participants the interpretations of their qualitative responses.

Furthermore, the majority of the student participants were traditional-aged undergraduates at four-year institutions, and therefore do not necessarily represent the experiences of graduate students nor experiences of those at community colleges, technical colleges, online colleges, etc. Conducting additional studies on specific populations may shed new light on how experiences differ based on age and institution type.

Additionally, this study was not able to identify at what point in the students' leadership development the various roles, attributes, behaviors, and resources should be utilized to best aid in student learning. Additional understanding of how growth as a leader is impacted by the advisors' approach could be of significant benefit to leadership advisors.

Lastly, the results for the integration of academic interest in the student leadership experience showed a significant disconnect between advisor and student perception. Additional exploration of this issue may be important to understand if this disconnect negatively affects student learning and development.

Given these limitations, the study's findings still expand what is known about the how advisors contribute to student leaders' development. Students' and advisors' responses provide additional depth and understanding to the roles advisors play, the attributes and behaviors they demonstrate, and the resources they provide. There is also hope that the concepts, questions, and findings presented here can be used to further future research to better understand this important relationship in the leadership development of college students.

## Conclusion

What has emerged through this study is a better understanding of a complex relationship between an advisor and student leader. The students and advisors in this study were in relationships considered to be successful and that have led to student learning and development. The experiences they shared have been interpreted and turned into themes. Given the mixed methods approach to this research, it is up to readers to determine if these findings are applicable in the work they do with students. What has been revealed from this study is that in successful student leadership development and advising relationships the advisor plays specific roles, displays unique attributes, uses multiple forms of communication, and serves as an important resource. By applying these findings, advisors are likely to find they improve their relationship and enhance the learning and development of the student leaders with whom they work.

Previous literature identified a variety of roles for advisors; however, the findings from this study indicate four key roles present in successful advising relationships where students reported leadership development. Advisors were found to mentor students and provide guidance in a way that allowed their students to learn through independent and unique experiences. They were teachers/educators and served as experts on important topics that they were able to communicate in a way that led to student learning. Advisors motivated their students, pushed them to achieve more, energized them when they were low, and encouraged them to take on new and difficult challenges. Lastly, advisors were university policy/risk agents and understood how to get things done within the policies, procedures, and culture of their institution. While other roles may be more important from an institutional perspective, these four roles were identified to be the most important in the development of leadership abilities in students.

In addition to these roles, these advisors displayed critical attributes, which allowed students to grow as leaders. The advisors in this study were open and honest with the students they advised. They were willing to explain behaviors and approaches that students should and should not demonstrate. Advisors provided students the autonomy to make decisions and follow their own paths and ambitions. In doing so, advisors were never far behind their students and were always there to either praise students or help them pick up the pieces. Furthermore, advisors challenged and supported their students. They believed in them, provided them with new learning opportunities, encouraged them to try difficult things,

recognized their victories, and were there to help glean understanding from failure. Relatedly, students greatly valued knowing their advisors cared for them. These attributes intertwined with the roles that advisors play and were critical in the advisor-student leader relationship, and this study provides description and examples from both students and advisors to understand these factors.

Beyond the roles and attributes, this study found that advisors in these successful relationships were readily available to speak with not only the student leader but also other group members. They communicated in person and through email on a regular basis and frequently attended meetings and activities of the student leaders' organization. Furthermore, it was found that advisors and students who worked together longer were likely to communicate more often and with greater variety in their communication format. Many advisors also provided guidance during meetings and assisted in decision making. This would indicate that it is important for an advisor to be accessible to students in a variety of ways and to be present at activities and meetings.

While it was found that many advisors provide students with resources such as articles and leadership inventories, students placed high value in the advisors themselves as the resource. This indicated that for advisors to be successful in developing student leaders they must have extensive knowledge of important organizations, topics, as well as the structures and norms of their institution.

Lastly, there was a disconnect between students and advisors when it came to how students' academic interests were incorporated into their leadership efforts. While advisors claimed to integrate academics and students reported that they believed academics played into what they did as leaders, most students did not recognize that the advisor did so. While this may be intentional, advisors may want to be more overt in how they address students' academic interests.

Through this study, significant roles, attributes, and behaviors were identified that student leadership advisors should incorporate into their work to better manifest and foster successful relationships with student leaders. The need for improved advising practices is exemplified in a recent NASPA NetResults article in which Phyllis McCluskey-Titus wrote: "If current student affairs practitioners rely on standard methods they learned or were taught to advise student organizations, it may be difficult for them to visualize or even conceive of a different style of advising that could be more effective in working with student leaders." In a time when student populations are changing, means of communication are evolving, and the need to demonstrate success is becoming more pressing, advisors must adapt to ensure their success. This study's results provide student organization advisors important concepts so they may enhance their advising styles and approaches to effectively promote student learning and leadership development.

For charts and graphs related to this article, see [here](#) (pdf).

The Bulletin Staff  
**MANAGING EDITOR:** Elizabeth Beltramini, 812.245.8059  
**MARKETING DESIGNER:** Andrea Langeveld, 812.245.8057

One City Centre, Suite 200  
120 W. Seventh St.  
Bloomington, IN 47404-3925 USA  
812.245.ACUI (812.245.2284) Fax 812.245.6710  
[www.acui.org](http://www.acui.org)