

# STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADER

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## Student Leaders Struggling: When the Best and the Brightest Need Help

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There is no group of students immune to the apparent epidemic of significant mental health issues on our campuses. Honors students, athletes, nontraditional students, and any other group that can be named have among their members students who are struggling to succeed despite mental illness, psychological disorders, and less-specific but still worrisome adjustment difficulties (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004).

Student leaders, those who are elected or appointed to run organizations or programs, do not often come to mind when we think about at-risk students. These students have clearly demonstrated a level of maturity and an ability to manage responsibilities that more often evoke our admiration than our concern. They have enjoyed a track record of success stretching back, in many cases, to high school. And yet, anecdotal reports from advisors and professionals in student activities, residence life, community service, and other student affairs areas tell us that these students are in fact among the many students who are, according to recent literature, struggling.

### Student leaders are especially vulnerable

Anxiety-, mood-, and stress-related disorders are among those we see affecting student leaders on our campuses. There may even be traits in our student leaders that make them particularly vulnerable to psychological crises. Successful student leaders often thrive on involvement and activity, leaving little downtime for self-care and rest. They have a high degree of motivation that can derive from both internal sources and external pressures and relationships. Their track record of success may signal a lack of experience with failure and disappointment and a strong familiarity with parental pride and encouragement.

Student leaders tend to be perfectionists who strive to do everything well. A college setting is like a buffet of attractive offerings, and saying no to any offering is difficult. Leaders' success breeds more opportunity, as advisors and staff members who need reliable students for important roles on campus often go back to the same students multiple times. The external motivation, a desire to please their mentors and supporters, makes it difficult for them to set their own limits, and they may soon find themselves caught in a downward spiral of overcommitment exhaustion that leads to disappointing performance in both academic

and cocurricular tasks.

There are also some student leaders who experience something akin to a "savior complex," believing that they are the only ones, or the best ones, to take on a major task, to organize and run a large group, or to salvage something gone amiss. They don't trust their peers to be as responsible (which is often the case) and are not skilled at delegating tasks to others.

A particularly vulnerable group, in our experience, is students whose service involves helping others in need. Students who are leaders in community service groups and deal regularly with the harsh realities of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and other social ills can become overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems they see and the relatively small impact made by the groups they lead. Resident assistants are also vulnerable, as they see on a regular basis the most troubled and troubling students, who can sometimes seem like bottomless pits of need.

The difficulties of a very full schedule also leave student leaders particularly vulnerable. Many students sleep erratically or not much at all during the week, using weeknights to study and weekends to catch up on sleep. But student leaders' weeknights are often taken up with cocurricular responsibilities; as a result,

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the weekend then becomes a time to catch up on academic obligations, and they don't physically recover from the lack of sleep during the week. This kind of consistent physical deprivation has the potential to raise their stress and anxiety and can lead to serious episodes of emotional crisis.

**Common responses to personal crisis**

According to advisors and staff who regularly work with student leaders, certain responses to personal crisis are typical. These students may become uncharacteristically and inexplicably irresponsible. They may miss a meeting or not fulfill a responsibility.

When confronted, even gently, by a bewildered advisor or peer, they may feel embarrassed and disappointed in themselves but demonstrate a defensiveness that masks those emotions.

They may also abruptly resign from the organization, claiming they have to focus on their academics. This may be true (and a recent or pending academic failure may be the precipitating event), but student leaders often find it difficult to simply scale back or ask for assistance. They approach this moment of crisis with an all-or-nothing attitude: "If I can't be a good president, then I should just quit the organization totally."

While reprioritizing their time in order to succeed academically may be a wise decision, they have now done something they feel is irreparable and, in their minds, unforgivable—let down those who depend on them. They have also cut themselves off from a critical support network of peers and advisors at a time they may need that support most.

This is a particularly vulnerable time for student leaders, and a time for professional staff and advisors to take action.

**Responding to the crisis**

Advisors and professional staff have two critical and immediate responsibilities

when a student leader is in crisis: to respond to the student and to respond to the group. A third responsibility can wait until the immediate crisis is past: to evaluate the environment, including the structure of the organization, and how it may have contributed to the student's crisis.

Response to a crisis has two phases: intervention and postvention. Intervention begins with a rapid recognition of the crisis. The missing student may claim to "want some downtime," but an advisor needs to always be aware of the potential for serious emotional crisis and risk of self-harming behavior. A student who is uncharacteristically absent from a meeting needs a follow-up phone call with a request to meet for an informal conversation. Even if a student is resistant, an advisor needs to consider the possibility that the student is in a seriously depressed or anxious state, and the advisor should persist in arranging an opportunity to "lay eyes" on the student.

In that conversation, if there does indeed seem to be a high level of stress, depression, or anxiety, the advisor can provide some guidance on maintaining perspective. Statements like "Remember that you do things well, and you can manage this situation well, too, with help from people who care about you" can provide solace for the struggling student who has lost all perspective. Techniques of mindfulness (awareness of one's thoughts, actions, and motivations—see John Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go, There You Are* for more) can be helpful in restoring a sense of balance to a student in crisis.

Some student leaders, though, will require more assistance than an advisor can provide. All professional and graduate staff who work with students should be skilled in the art of referral to counseling services. This may include picking up the phone in the presence of the student and making an appointment to walk the student to the counseling center.

It is important to remember that not all students will be comfortable with the idea of professional counseling. Some might prefer to be referred to a faith-

based mentor, to family, or even to responsible friends if the crisis does not seem severe. The critical task of the advisor is to "activate the network" of support a student already has or has access to on or off campus. Asking a student, "Who are your supports? Who helps you best when you are feeling like this?" might elicit some suggestions that the advisor doesn't know about.

Postvention work assumes the student has gotten some assistance and has made some appropriate changes in his or her life that will alleviate the stress that led to the crisis. Too often, students who have left a group abruptly at a moment of crisis, especially if it was a somewhat public event (a suicide attempt, a "meltdown" in front of the group, a hospitalization for mental health reasons), are too embarrassed to consider returning to the group.

But such a return is a vital part of their growth as adults who need to learn to handle disappointment and difficulty. Advisors can play a vital role in encouraging students to pursue some sort of personal redemption and closure by rejoining their group. They might not be in leadership roles, but part of learning about themselves may be coming to understand that they don't always need to be in charge.

The advisor needs to work with the group as well—to prepare the members for the return of a former leader and to encourage them to be honest, but compassionate, in their response. There might be time set aside in a meeting (or in addition to a meeting) for an open conversation about the crisis, during which perhaps the student leader shares what she or he has learned or apologizes, if appropriate, and the group acknowledges its own role, if it had one, and offers to accept and support the return of the student. This is a vital connection for these students, and a classic teachable moment, and should not be left to chance.

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### How can we prevent student leader crisis?

Intervention and postvention are important but might be less necessary if we can provide effective prevention techniques for student leaders who are vulnerable to personal crisis. Advisors and professional staff spend a tremendous amount of time training student leaders and preparing organizations for their work. We need to exploit this opportunity to include crisis-prevention efforts.

Wellness training, which could include mindfulness techniques, sleep hygiene, nutrition, and time management, should be incorporated into both preservice and in-service training for students. Utilizing the skilled professionals at the campus counseling center as well as other professionals on campus and in the community can offer students the chance to develop lifelong skills of stress reduction and self-help. Some basic "affect management" training can be provided to help students recognize anger, anxiety, and depression and learn how to respond to these emotions appropriately. For many student leaders, this recognition and response may come as something of a revelation.

Informal conversations with student leaders in which advisors predict the challenges ahead, both organizational and personal, and outline some of the common symptoms of stress and burnout may prompt student leaders to seek help before a crisis becomes serious.

Advisors are skilled at utilizing the best traits of student leaders to do excellent work on behalf of the organization. Employing those same skills (high motivation, tenacity) to provide *self-care* and develop healthy habits can be extremely useful. An example might be to require all student leaders to participate in some sort of exercise regimen, even a 30-minute walk, every day, and then report to the advisor that they have completed this task.

Additionally, all advisors and professional staff, including graduate students

and support staff, should participate in formal suicide prevention training.

Counseling centers can often provide this, or an outside organization can be brought in for assistance. The Jed Foundation and Suicide.org are particularly useful resources.

### Evaluating the student leader environment

Our student leaders do not operate in a vacuum. They are drawn to student organizations because they thrive on meaningful activity and want to be part of something larger than themselves. Engagement with cocurricular organizations is a predictor of academic success and retention, as evidenced by years of research on student involvement. But some student organizations, and some campus cultures, can encourage overinvolvement. It is critical, then, to ask ourselves how what we do contributes to the personal crises our student leaders experience.

A significant student leadership role, such as resident assistant, student government executive, programming board chair, or sorority or fraternity president, can become an almost full-time job, requiring 20, 30, or more hours a week. Coupling this with a full academic schedule and other obligations (relationships, family, faith or religious community) can make it untenable for a student to succeed. Colleges and universities can be proactive by limiting students in the roles they may assume, and some do this effectively:

Student government presidents cannot also be resident assistants. RAs cannot also be executives in their Greek organizations.

Each individual position also is worthy of an "audit." If a student government president is spending 30 or 40 hours a week attending to responsibilities, the institution needs to find ways to restructure the position, or it will face the likelihood that many of these students will be severely compromised academically. Copresidencies, or more significant roles of other executives, can help ease the burden on the president. But the institution needs to do things differently as well,

including ceasing to see the president as the sole or best representative of the students. If faculty and staff request that only the president participate in their committees or projects, that puts an unfair load on one student, where others could perform that role just as well.

It is important, too, to critically examine the culture of each organization. Some organizations, just like some professional offices, are more team oriented in nature, and it is quite common for one member to ask another member to take on a responsibility, even one that is clearly the responsibility of the first member, when other obligations are pressing. But other organizations have a culture that promotes criticism of such requests. Advisors need to recognize this kind of culture and strive to change it, through training and team-building activities.

Last, advisors need to look critically at themselves. Our students see us as role models, whether we intend to be or not. Advisors who wear their stress and overwork as a badge of honor do no favors for the students who are in the process of learning how to achieve a healthy balance in their own lives. Modeling balance, healthy habits, self-care, mindfulness, and perspective in the face of challenging situations may be the most effective prevention technique of all, and may help shape the culture of a student organization into one that takes care of, rather than overwhelms, its leaders.

### References

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