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Starting a Local Graduate Student Organization

Local student organizations can be a vital part of the school psychology training experience for graduate students, and an important source of feedback and program support for faculty. Broadly defined, local student organizations in school psychology consist of officially recognized groups of graduate students, organized according to a constitution, and working towards a commonly defined and agreed upon set of goals. This fact sheet should give interested students ideas about beginning a local student organization, or, for those who are already fortunate enough to have one, new ideas for organizational development.

Starting the Organization

It is important to recognize that it takes time to establish a successful student organization, as well as to develop a long-term commitment for organizational leadership and development among the student body. As a starting point, recruit an initial group of students who are dedicated and who want to be involved in more activities beyond the typical course of study. Students can form a planning committee along with faculty to brainstorm ways of generating interest in a student organization. It is also helpful to ask other leaders of campus organizations, as well as NASP Student Leaders, to share their tips. The NASP Students e-Community is a great place to connect with your colleagues and learn more about what works – as well as what doesn't!

In addition, surveying the student body within your graduate program can help identify student needs (e.g., professional development in particular topic areas, support completing research projects, etc.). Being able to develop an organization that is tailored to the specific program and current students' needs and interests is a good way to get an organization started. Many organizations also utilize listservs or message boards to facilitate communication among students.

Developing a Constitution

A constitution is an organization's framework and foundation. It provides operating guidelines in years to come, and will assure that your organization continues to thrive. Writing a constitution is not as complicated as it may seem. Your constitution should be general in nature, to allow some flexibility to future officers, but should be specific enough to lay important ground rules (e.g., mission statement).

It is also a good idea to consult with your university's student association representative for guidelines and to learn about any existing university requirements. If you are planning to organize as part of a national association, such as APA Division 16's Student Affiliates of School Psychology (SASP), be sure to consult the appropriate officers for guidelines (e.g., <http://saspweb.info/>).

Organizing the Executive Committee Structure and the Election Process

Every student organization has a set number of officer positions created to meet the individual organization's needs. When recruiting officers, be sure to include a couple of beginning students, so that they will grow with the organization and ensure that it continues to develop. If elections are necessary, require candidates to present a speech and /or written statement to voting members. Advertise the elections and encourage participation in voting! Consider encouraging those not elected for a position to contribute in other ways, such as by serving as a cohort representative or head of a committee. It is helpful to hold elections at the close of each spring semester so that events can be planned during the summer for the beginning of the fall semester.

Gaining Recognition from Your University

Use your local Student Association to become officially recognized as an organization at your school. Benefits vary by university, but can include:

- Enhancing communication with other university organizations;
- Posting on your university's bulletin boards;
- Hosting a web page for your organization on your university's server;
- Accessing funding opportunities; and
- Using school vehicles to attend out of town conferences and events.

Seek support from the Dean's office for the following initiatives:

- Bringing in speakers that are of interest to multiple programs within your university, as well as the greater community.
- Offering to present proposals for big name speakers at a Chair's meeting to gain school wide support.
- Procuring funds for students traveling to events (such as the NASP Annual Convention) as a representative of the school.

Creating a Budget

Once you are officially recognized, set up a time to meet with your assigned student association representative (if applicable) to review budget guidelines and complete the necessary paperwork. Most university budget committees require you to detail events you plan to host the following year as well as the approximate cost of these events. This is also a good time to begin researching additional student travel funds that may be available to individual members of the student organization. If your university is unable to provide funding, consider collecting dues from members and holding fundraising activities to cover initial operating costs (see the section on fundraising below).

Getting the Community and Local Professionals Interested in Your Organization

Networking with community and local professionals increases practicum, internship, and job opportunities. Additionally, professional attendance at your student organizations' paid events can increase fundraising opportunities. To increase the participation of community and local professionals in your organization, consider the following ideas:

- Create an email list that includes professionals from local schools, internship and practicum student supervisors, state organization members, related service providers, and alumni to spread the word about upcoming events.
- Allow site supervisors and student members to attend events at reduced or no cost.
- Poll local professionals to see what events are of interest to them.

- Collaborate with larger organizations such as your state association of school psychologists and offer to host these events at your university.
- Advertise events in local papers. Many communities have newspapers that contain free advertising sections.
- Advertise at surrounding universities.
- Post flyers at local schools to reach related service providers, teachers, and parents.

Meetings

Student organization general and executive committee meetings should be strategically planned. To the maximum extent possible, try to make sure that meeting times do not overlap with any class, practicum, or graduate assistant hours. For general meetings, pick a regular time and ensure that all students are aware of the meeting dates at the beginning of the semester (e.g., the first Friday of every month from 9:00-10:00 a.m.). Have your program director strongly suggest attendance at meetings and events; the director can set this tone during orientation activities for new students.

At meetings, it's always a good idea to provide food! Some programs rotate which cohorts are responsible for bringing refreshments every month. Be sure to respect your classmates' time by setting an agenda that sticks to the meeting time limits. One organization emails a newsletter to all school psychology students a week before the meeting previewing information that will be discussed. Other programs have developed student organization web sites to help share information (see examples below). Meetings can serve many purposes, including opportunities to do professional development, outreach, program feedback, student support, and networking activities.

Timeline for Developing a Local Student Organization

Year 1 – Fall Semester

1. Develop a planning/steering committee consisting of school psychology faculty and students interested in creating an organization.
2. Contact your university's student association representative (and your national association representative, if applicable) to learn about the required steps for becoming a recognized organization at your school.
3. Draw up a list of officers your organization wishes to support, as well as a detailed list of their required duties.
4. Hold a general interest meeting to inform your colleagues about the new organization and announce elections for officers.
 - a. Distribute a copy of the officer descriptions to all in attendance.
 - b. Generate a list of topics of interest or ideas for speakers (you may want to make contacts now so you can start hosting speakers and events as soon as you are approved and officers are elected).

Document the number of attendees to show student support and interest in your organization. Your student association representative may ask how many students are interested in becoming members when deciding on your approval.

5. Hold elections to determine officers.

It is important to do this prior to writing up your constitution and submitting it to your Student Association. In some universities, your constitution is more likely to be approved if you have officers determined ahead of time.

6. Draw up a constitution for your association.
7. Submit completed constitution to your Student Association and follow-up.

Year 1 – Early Spring Semester

1. Once you are officially recognized, set up a time to meet with your assigned Student Association representative (if applicable) to review budget guidelines and complete necessary paperwork.
2. Hold your first meeting as an organization and set dates for speakers and social events. Events typically occur once a month.

Year 1 – Late Spring Semester

1. Submit a summary of budget expenses for the year and request additional funds for next year (if applicable – not all universities fund student organizations).
This will probably require you to detail events you plan to host the following year as well as the approximate cost of these events.
2. Evaluate your first year as a student organization. What worked, and what didn't? What goals will you set for next year? These can be documented in a brief annual report, to be passed along to future officers.
Hold elections for next year's officers and schedule a transition meeting with all outgoing and incoming officers.

STUDENT ORGANIZATION ACTIVITIES

Professional Development and Speakers

An important function of local student organizations is to connect students with NASP (via NASP Student Leaders www.nasponline.org/students/studentleader.aspx) APA, and state associations. Officer positions often include at least one Professional Development Coordinator who is responsible for representing the local student organization within these broader associations, and circulating association news, opportunities, and advocacy alerts.

Many student organizations also host monthly speakers, often through a brown bag forum. Examples of recent speakers who have addressed local student organizations throughout the country include a Parents, Friends, and Family of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) representative, a gang specialist, a crisis interventionist, the director of a program that does anti-bullying plays in schools across the country, and the director of a local rural outreach mental health program. One organization recently organized a panel of current school psychology interns, who shared their experiences interning at local school districts. Local school psychology intern supervisors were also interviewed to provide information about becoming an intern within their district. Other organizations have invited faculty members (particularly from other disciplines) to discuss their research, and organized visits to related state and/or local associations and institutes. It is helpful to have participants at professional development events evaluate the event, so that their feedback can be used to plan future events. Finally, local student organizations have provided opportunities for students to attend relevant workshops, trainings, and conferences (such as the NASP Annual Convention), and have organized social and networking opportunities at such events.

Mentorship

Mentorship programs can connect new students with experienced students. Mentors may provide advice about classes, the campus, professors, assignments, practicum, and any other subject related to the graduate school experience. Some programs also match incoming students with “veteran” students the spring before they arrive on campus, so that incoming students will have a contact for questions as they transition (geographically and/or psychologically) to graduate study.

Recognition of Student Accomplishments

It is undisputed that graduate students need a lot of positive reinforcement! Student organizations play a critical role in providing this to members. Through bulletin boards and listservs, student organizations can announce thesis or dissertation proposals or defenses, acceptance for conference presentations, publication of articles, and other important student milestones and accomplishments.

Collaborating with Faculty

Local student organizations are often called upon by faculty to participate in various aspects of program development and refinement, including:

- Representation on program faculty meetings and graduate student government meetings;
- Service as reviewers and “decision thinkers” in program curricular and policy matters;
- Participation in accreditation reviews, applicant interviews, and new student orientation; and
- Representation on faculty search committees.

Social Events

Fostering a sense of community and providing fun “breaks” are a good complement to the hard work undertaken during graduate training. Happy hours near campus are a common social event planned by student organizations. Other social event ideas include bowling, golfing, attending school athletic events, picnics, holiday parties, end of the year parties, and organized “study breaks” during finals week. Be sure to include some “family-friendly” events, as students who have children may not be able to attend events without them.

Fundraising

There are many benefits to fundraising for your student association, such as developing a stronger, more cohesive organization, developing leadership skills, increasing public relations for your organization, and attaining goals and a sense of accomplishment. Fundraising can serve a number of important purposes, including:

- Covering operating expenses;
- Completing specific projects, such as outreach or legislative campaigns;
- Creating a small reserve, or cushion for the future;
- Providing speakers, field trips, and professional development activities;
- Donating to a charity;
- Funding for conference attendance; and
- Creating a resource library including references and PRAXIS II study materials.

Many organizations raise money through bake sales, selling school psychology T-shirts or other products to students, faculty, interns, and alumni, and charging for attendance to speaker events.

Outreach

Student organizations spend a considerable amount of time educating others about the profession of school psychology. Students present to undergraduates, sit on career panels, and set up school psychology information tables on campus, often using NASP brochures and presentation materials. Student organizations also organize outreach events in honor of School Psychology Awareness Week (visit the School Psych Week Activities Document Archives on the NASP Students e-Community for more information). Students also contact their undergraduate institutions and volunteer to serve as alumni contacts for the field of school psychology.

In addition to providing information to prospective school psychology students, student organizations provide support to their state and national professional organizations. They volunteer for state school psychology conferences by putting together conference packets, helping with check-in at conferences, and other needed activities.

Volunteering

Many student organizations find giving back to their communities through volunteering to be a very rewarding experience. One student organization raises money via donations to support a family during the holidays every year. Others participate in AIDS walks, Autism Walks, Relay for Life, Run for a Cure, etc. Another student organization helped pack books at a literacy non-profit for one activity. Finally, one local student organization is attempting to arrange a "school psychology tutoring relationship" in local schools providing academic assistance to students.

Sample Web Sites of Local Student Organizations

Central Michigan University, SASP:

www.chsbs.cmich.edu/Psychology/SASP/

Kent State University, SASP:

www.educ.kent.edu/efss/programs/sp/sasp/index.htm

University of Arizona, SASP:

www.ed.arizona.edu/sasp/

University of Central Florida, SASP:

<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~spsa/>

University of Maryland, College Park, SASP:

www.education.umd.edu/EDCP/SchoolPsychology/SASP/

University of Nebraska, Omaha, SPUNO:

www.unomaha.edu/psych/schoolpsychspuno.php

This fact sheet was developed by Emily Cook Graybill a school psychology student at Georgia State University; and 2005-06 Regional Leader for the NASP Student Leader program. She compiled the information for this fact sheet in conjunction with the 2005-06 NASP Student Leaders and Faculty Sponsor Reviewers, as well as the Leadership in Practice: The Importance of Local Student Organizations panelists.