How to Advocate for ... a Student Organization on Your Campus

Blaine Marshall and Amanda Lebrun, Graduate Students
Texas Women’s University

Describe your process for advocating for a student organization on campus.

We’re pretty proud of our school psychology program’s student organization, the School Psychology Graduate Student Organization (SPGSO). This program was started on campus by previous students and continues to be a way for students to connect, find professional development and volunteer opportunities, and host fun events during the semester.

While our campus has excellent process documentation on starting an organization, it still took multiple individuals and extended effort to establish it. Creating a chartered organization on our campus involves attending an informational meeting, creating a constitution, securing a faculty advisor, submitting an application, securing members, and completing officer training. If one person chooses to take this on in addition to a full course load, the process can be overwhelming. We recommend having two to three people divide the work while communicating with each other and other interested members. Our campus also has set guidelines for each organization to maintain its status as a chartered organization. Having at least one officer who is knowledgeable about these guidelines is crucial to ensuring you are in accordance with university policy. A knowledgeable advisor can help answer questions about the establishment process. However, we’d recommend that students try to understand this process themselves and reach out to university resources where possible.

If you haven’t already, start now on developing your program’s own student organization. This is often an arduous process, which can take up much precious free time. However, if you’re able to recruit the help of some of your classmates and at least one faculty member, this process can be made much easier.

What are some important considerations when advocating for a student organization?

Be vocal! There are a lot of competing priorities for the attention of any decision-maker in a university. If you have the opportunity, make sure what you’re advocating for stays on their radar. The more an idea comes up, the more likely it is that someone will remember it. Having an organized approach to advocating for changes within your program and community can be more
efficient and effective than individual efforts. For us, SPGSO serves as the vehicle for this. The faculty’s respect for our organization and its ability to serve the graduate program has tremendously helped with our success.

Advocacy work takes time and commitment! Our success would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of the students before us. We all work among various systems with different processes for advancing causes, but you have to start somewhere. Even if you don’t feel prepared or have enough time to do it, starting conversations with classmates and faculty members can get the ball rolling quicker than you expect. Your start can be built on by the momentum of incoming cohorts, who bring fresh perspectives and can carry on your hard work.

What were some helpful resources for reinvigorating a student organization?

As with many things, COVID-19 severely affected students’ ability to participate in our organization. This was understandable, as we all had to radically alter our lives to ensure the safety of our communities.

After students returned to campus, there was a noticeable difference in the incoming cohorts’ feelings of connection to their program when compared to pre-COVID cohort years. That year, we became the NASP Student Leaders on our campus through SPGSO. We were determined to bring our program together again, using National School Psychology Week as an impetus. We met with department leaders, such as our program director, and recruited our classmates’ help. With their support, we were able to put together an entire week of events: reaching out to special education departments in area school districts, promoting the field to undergraduates through the NASP Exposure Project, and hosting speaking events featuring prominent school psychologists from NASP leadership. Faculty and students told us how connected they felt to people within our own program and the larger community.

We have since taken on official roles in SPGSO, Blaine as President and Amanda as the Student Organization’s NASP Representative. It’s early in the year, but we are working with the rest of our SPGSO members to bring our program back to what it was before COVID-19.

What advice would you give to students for maintaining and growing their student organization?

Recruiting incoming students is the best way to grow a student organization. They benefit the most from the guidance and connection of an organization such as SPGSO. Once they have a good experience with the organization, it makes them more likely to dedicate time and effort to maintain it for future generations. Being part of an organization, in addition to all the other competing responsibilities of being a graduate student, is a huge commitment. If the commitment is worth it, people will gladly give their time.

Our last piece of advice is to keep ideas fresh. Just because something has worked in previous years doesn’t mean it will continue to work for current students. It’s easy to forget that you are tailoring your organization to a few dozen people versus hundreds of people like in undergraduate organizations. If you reach out to your fellow graduate students and ask them what activities they want to do and what organizations they want to volunteer with and donate to, that can make joining the organization more appealing and sustainable.