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## Creating a Handbook for GVSU Community Council Education and Development

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*Grand Valley State University*

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Creating a Handbook for GVSU Community Council Education and Development  
Brendan Miller  
Grand Valley State University

Residence hall governments are common among colleges and universities through the United States. They are designed to allow a residential student to play an active role in contributing to their living community. Successful residence hall governments are able to actively work towards the betterment of students living on-campus while in the process advancing the leadership abilities of those students involved in the organization.

Residence hall government has a long tradition at Grand Valley State University, which features individual Community Councils in each living community and a campus-wide Residence Housing Association. Currently at GVSU there are 12 community councils. Six of the community councils completely consist of first year students. However, almost every Community Council has first year students that are active members, thanks in large part to the living-learning communities that are prevalent in the apartment communities.

The purpose of creating this Community Council guide is to help improve the consistency of Community Councils across campus. Success rates of each community council vary from year-to-year. A primary reason for this inconsistency is the lack of resources geared specifically towards the organization itself. Community Councils have more turnover than almost any other student organization at the university, with new groups of residents coming into the organization every year and advisors who only stay in the community for around two years. Improving the resources available should be able to help improve the consistency and overall success of Community Councils and residence hall governments throughout campus.

### **Theoretical Basis for Community Council Guide**

While there has been significant research done on student organizations, not much is done on residence hall government. For the purposes of this guide, I wished to base it off some of the more prominent student development theories.

Central to many modern scholarly research on college student development is Alexander Astin's theories on student involvement. According to Astin, the involved student takes an active role in their learning by being engaged in the classroom as well as spending time on campus, being a part of student organizations, and forming strong relationships with fellow students, faculty, and staff members. (Astin, 1984, p. 518) Key to this development theory is the role of the student investing themselves personally in their college experience. This aligns very well with the "Laker Values" of Grand Valley State University, which fall under three major values:

"As a Grand Valley State University student, I will take responsibility for my learning...

...As a Grand Valley State University student, I will be an engaged member of the university community...

...As a Grand Valley State University student, I will give back to my community..." (GVSU Office of Student Life website)

By encouraging student to take personal responsibility, be engaged, and give back, GVSU heavily promotes the idea of students heavily interacting with their physical environment while here at the university. The challenge that the university faces from a faculty and staff level is making sure that these opportunities to be involved are plentiful and worthwhile.

Astin holds the college residential experience as an essential part of determining academic success. By living on campus, students are more likely to join student organizations, interact with faculty outside of the classroom, and have a stronger friend base than their commuter counterparts. Residential students are also more likely to have a better overall satisfaction of their undergraduate college experience, making them more likely to pursue graduate degrees. (Astin, 1984, p. 524) In addition, students living on-campus are more likely to engage in co-curricular activities and have more diverse interactions. (LaNasa et al, 2007, 960)

Residential housing plays a vital role for the college student, especially during their first years in college. It is an environment that promotes overall success and it is the job of a housing staff member to maintain and improve the overall residential experience.

On student government, Astin claims that by being a part of these such organizations, students develop stronger friendships with their peers, further enhancing the changes that occur during the college experience. (Astin, 1984, p. 526) A successful Community Council member should be able to reap those benefits by being an active part of the organization. It is the job of the advisor and the university as a whole, to provide those resources to create an environment where student government can be prosperous.

Many advisors will use the terms “hands-on” or “hands-off” to describe their advising style, but both styles can be considered one of two extremes. A key to successfully advising a student organization is providing an adequate balance of challenge and support, as first proposed by Nevitt Sanford. With not enough challenge and too much support—which a “hands-on” advisor may be guilty of—a student leader may become disinterested and not find their time in the organization to be of value. But with too much challenge and little to no support—a characteristic of many “hands-off” advisors—the student leader may become overwhelmed and lose the belief that are able to be successful. In order to successfully cultivate the success of the students one is advising, the amount of challenge and support given must be balanced. (Dalton and Crosby, 2008)

## **Discussion**

This guide was designed not to be a rulebook or a set of bylaws, but rather as a collection of resources to help guide Community Councils throughout the year. Knowing that the guide is

to be accessible by Community Council members of all kinds, including advisors, the guide had to be formatted in a manner that keeps this idea in mind.

The primary challenge with the guide moving forward is making sure that it is utilized in future years. As a graduating senior, I will unfortunately be unable to directly encourage Community Councils to use the guide. For this reason, I will be relying heavily on Residence Housing Association and the Office of Housing and Residence Life to promote the use of the guide in the coming year. I would greatly like to see the guide be revised after the next year, after there has been some evaluation of what aspects of the guide were most useful. Because this is the first guide of this kind at GVSU, one can assume there will be significant trial-and-error in creating the perfect resource for Community Councils.

Considering the diverse array of residential communities at GVSU, it is expected that each Community Council will utilize the guide in different ways. This guide is admittedly more geared towards first year living communities, as they are the Community Councils most in need of additional resources. This guide hopes to provide these communities with the transition materials that are currently non-existent because of the student leaders all leave for other communities the next year. However, the guide still does not exclude non-first year communities, as many do find themselves with a regular influx of new student leaders with no previous Community Council experience.

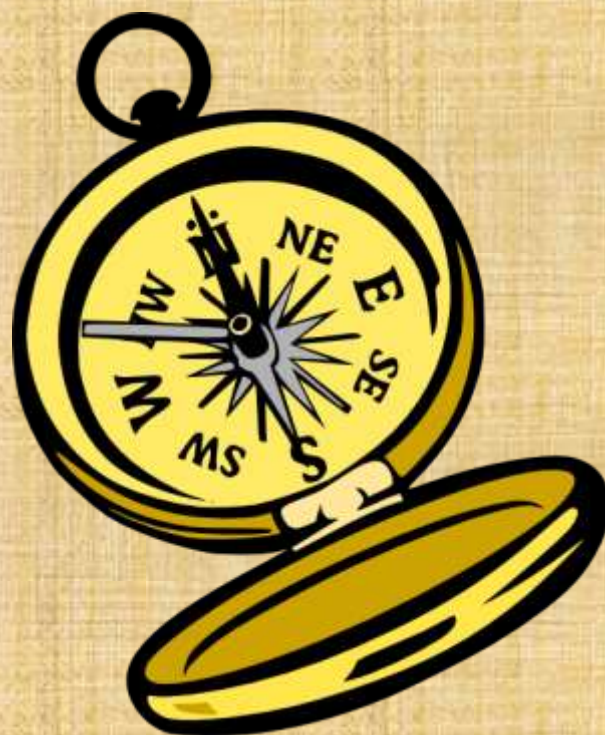
More than anything, providing a standardized guide that is available for all Community Councils to use will help improve the overall consistency of these organizations across campus. If the majority of Community Councils are prosperous, there will be increased opportunities for co-programming between Community Councils as well as an increased in the effectiveness of

Residence Housing Association. In this manner, Community Council can be the ideal place for the creation of true student leaders, as the organization is meant to be.

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# **COMMUNITY COUNCIL**

## **Your Guide to Success**

# Welcome to Community Council!

Congratulations on being a part of Community Council!

Community Council is truly the most relevant organization you could be a part of, as everything you do affects you and the people you live with. Community Council provides an early leadership opportunity early in your college career and also provides excellent experience that will benefit you greatly in the future. Whether you are simply a member of the organization or an advisor, you have begun a journey that will surely reap many rewards down the road.

The purpose of this guide is to provide Community Council members and advisors with the resources that they need to be successful in all of their endeavors. This guide takes you step-by-step throughout the entire academic year, offering tips and tricks to ensure that your Community Council is as successful as it can possibly be.

There is not one way to run a successful community council and this guide is not aimed to force you to run/advise your Community Council in one particular way. The ideas and suggestions have been taken from successful community councils at GVSU through the years to help you find a direction to take your organization.

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# Advertising Community Council during Move-In

With residents eager to move-in to their living centers and begin their college experience, collecting contact information for students interested in community council interest during check-in is a great way to begin advertising the organization. It is almost a certainty that residents have no idea what Community Council is, so the job of the Resident Assistant working that part of Check-In is to give an "elevator pitch" so as to not overwhelm them and also move them along the check-in process.

It is very important to send a follow-up email to those who signed-up very soon after move-in. This email should include a statement of gratitude for the resident's interest, a brief description of community council and the benefits of being involved in community council, and the time and date of the upcoming informational meeting.

Also remember that just because a resident chose not to sign-up for community council that they might not be interested later. The move-in process can be very stressful for the resident and they may not be very receptive to signing up for every opportunity they see right away. Continue to advertise the informational meeting throughout Move-In week as well as during orientation.

## Sample Elevator Pitch

"Community Council is very similar to your High School's Student Government. Throughout the year, they plan social events in the buildings as well as service projects. This isn't a sign-up sheet, but if you want more information, write down your email and you'll be kept in the loop on upcoming meetings and events."



# The Informational Meeting

Held within the first couple weeks of the semester, the Community Council Information Meeting is vital to explaining to residents what Community Council is all about and why they should get excited to be a part of it. Chances are, there will be very high attendance at this meeting thanks to the fact that other student organizations have not started recruiting and because of advertising by RAs.

## The Dangers of Over-explaining Community Council

There are a lot of details behind the intricacies of Community Councils, so it is important not to cover each and every detail about it during the first meeting as to not overwhelm the residents in attendance. During this first meeting, continue with the elevator pitch, give some examples of what community councils have done in the past, talk about the benefits of joining community council, discuss how the executive board election process will work, and have some of the RAs on staff who have been involved in Community Council in the past share their experiences.



# Community Council Elections

Electing a Community Council Executive Board is the first step towards creating resident-ownership in the organization. In first year communities, this will likely be a resident's first opportunity to serve on an executive board. The students elected in these positions will set the tone for the rest of the year.

## Election Styles

### **External Elections**

An external election is seen as a community-wide election, similar to the Presidential election. There will be a campaign period, where candidates will promote themselves through hanging up posters, creating videos, and utilizing other social media. External elections will usually have Candidate Meet-and-Greet before the election. Voting will then be done online via Blackboard, OrgSync, email, or another online method.

#### *Pros of External Elections*

- Gets entire community involved
- Election format more recognizable to residents
- Election can be used to further advertise Community Council

#### *Cons of External Elections*

- Election could seem like a popularity contest
- Candidates may run for the wrong reasons (to win competition, to have a title, etc.)
- Campaigning may discourage introverts from running

### **Internal Elections**

Internal Elections are more in-line with elections for most other student organizations. Only those in attendance at the election meeting will be able to vote. Campaigning is lessened (although it still can exist), and the process is much shorter, as the candidate Q&A, discussion, and voting is all done in one meeting.

#### *Pros of Internal Elections*

- Better encourages introverts to run since campaign phase is not as intense
- Lessens the popularity contest that elections can have
- Process is similar to most student organizations

#### *Cons of Internal Elections*

- Closed-off nature of election could discourage outsiders from running or make Community Council seem like a clique

# Roles of Community Council Members

## **President**

As one might guess, the Community Council President is the highest position on the Executive Board. The President creates the agendas and runs all meetings, including both General Assembly and Executive Board Meetings, if applicable. The President maintains regular communication with the Advisor(s) and is responsible for holding other community council members accountable.

The President is the face of Community Council. The President represents the Community Council at programs as well as to other Housing Staff. While not a positional requirement, it is strongly encouraged for the President to attend weekly RHA meetings along with the RHA Representative so as to get additional leadership development and to become aware of what other Community Councils are working on.

## **Residence Housing Association (RHA) Representative**

For advisors, this may be the most difficult position to advertise, as it is difficult to explain the intricacies of RHA to first-year students. However, the RHA Representative position may in fact be the most important position on the Executive Board with exception of the President.

The RHA Representative acts as a liaison between Community Council and the rest of the campus housing community. They are responsible for informing RHA and other community councils on the many things their community council is working on. They represent their living areas by bringing their community's needs to the RHA and speaking and voting in their community's best interests. The RHA Representative should also encourage other Executive Board members to attend the weekly RHA meetings. While they are the only people required to attend the meetings, all Community Council members can benefit from being in attendance.

The RHA Representative must keep Community Council informed of things that occur during RHA meetings, including any upcoming programs or volunteer opportunities, legislation or funding requests that are being discussed, and information on bidding for awards at the end of the academic year. The RHA Representative should be given ample time on the meeting agendas to give the General Assembly and Executive Board updates from RHA.



### **Role of the RA Liaison/Advisor**

The RA Liaison acts as a secondary advisor to Community Council, providing members with a fellow student to be a mentor to the group. Just as with the Graduate Advisor, the RA Liaison's role will be greater at the beginning of the year, lessening when the students in the organization find their footing.

The RA Liaison should have a constant presence in Community Council. Like the Advisor, they should guide, but not take over. The RA Liaison should keep Community Council members informed of upcoming RA programs, so that Community Council programs do not overlap. The RA Liaison should also keep the rest of the RA Staff informed on what Community Council is working on, especially during Staff Meetings.

The RA Liaison can help the Community Council in collaborating for major campus programs such as Homecoming and Relay for Life. Combining resources, the RA Liaison and Community Council can work together to create a strong team to represent their community on the campus-wide level.

### **Role of other Executive Board Members**

Other positions on the Executive Board vary from community to community. There is almost always a Vice President of Finance, as every student organization is required to have some sort of finance officer. Most communities have an Executive Vice President as well. Beyond those two positions, other Executive Board positions usually cover a specific need in the community, such as programming, philanthropy, sustainability, or public relations. Refer to your Community Council Constitution for more specific information on these positions.

# Handling Difficult Situations

## **Resignation of an Executive Board Member**

Executive Board resignations are not uncommon. Many times in Community Council residents are elected without full understanding of the duties and time commitments of the position. Advisors should make sure that the reasons for resignation are justified and support the student as they make this difficult decision. Once the position is vacant, the President should work with the Advisor in creating a process for filling the vacancy. Options for doing this include having a whole new election (this might especially be the case if there are multiple vacancies), creating an application, or simply appointing a member of your general assembly that has shown exceptional promise and would be ready to step up into this leadership role. Consult your Community Council Constitution, which should be updated annually and submitted to the Office of Student Life, for more information on the process of filling vacant positions.

## **Resignation of the President**

The resignation of the President can be an especially trying time for the Community Council as the President is the one who gives direction to the organization. It is also an executive board position that needs to be filled in order for Community Council to exist as an organization. The most common practice for filling the vacant president position is to follow the order of succession (ex: the Vice President becomes the President). However, this might not always be feasible. In that case, the community council may want to look into holding a new election to fill the position.

## **Ineffective President**

Since the President is the figurehead of the community council, when the president is not effective in their role, the whole organization suffers as a result. It is possible that a President may not be fulfilling the duties of his or her position and yet chose not to resign. The Advisor should be in constant conversation with the President and bring up the issues directly to them. It is likely that other executive board members may approach the advisor with their concerns. The Advisor should encourage the board members to address these concerns directly with the president, but should also be aware of the difficulty they may have with addressing these concerns to someone in a higher position to them. Impeachment procedures are in place, but they should be used as a last resort. Good communication is the key to resolving these issues.



### **Ineffective Executive Board Member**

An executive board member may stop fulfilling their positional duties (ex: not completing assigned tasks, missing executive board meetings, missing general assembly meetings, etc.). The reasons for this ineffectiveness can vary from unexpected time commitments to a loss of interest in the organization. The President, along with the Advisor, should address their concerns directly to the executive board member in question. Together, all parties can work together to develop a resolution to the issue. For example the board member resigns, assigned duties are lessened, or another solution.

### **Ineffective Advisor**

Executive Board members must realize that Community Council Advisors have varying levels of experience of working with community councils. In some cases, the advisor is learning along with the community council members. They must also realize that the advisors have a myriad of other responsibilities in their position and community council is not always the priority. On the other hand, executive board members may feel that their advisor is doing too much hands-on advising and is not letting them run the organization. Many times, the overzealous advisor is not even aware that they are doing this.

In either case, if a community council member has an issue with the way community council is being advised, they should address this directly to the advisor. Making them aware of the community councils concerns will help the advisor rethink their advising style and work to change things in the future. If the concerns are not being heard by the advisor or the concerns are of a severe degree (ex: misuse of Community Council funds, unprofessionalism, etc.), then the executive board should contact the advisor's immediate supervisor.

### **Personal Issues between Executive Board Members**

One of the first steps to dealing with conflicts among executive board members is to be able to separate personal life (friendships, relationships, etc.) and professional life (co-workers, colleagues, professional responsibilities, etc.). It's likely that one will not get along with every person they work together. But just because one does not personally like someone does not mean that they are unable to successfully work with them. But one has to set aside these personal issues for the betterment of the organization. A positive working relationship does not necessarily equal a friendship and vice-versa.

Advisors should pay attention to the working dynamics of executive board members. When they see that a personal conflict is occurring, they should be able to recognize it and mediate the conflict if necessary. The advisor should remain neutral, relying on conflict mediation tools similar to those used in roommate conflicts.

## **Low General Assembly Attendance**

It is highly unlikely that the general assembly attendance at the beginning of the school year will stay the same throughout the year. Expect numbers to dwindle down, especially during the first semester. You will quickly see which members of the general assembly are committed to the organization and are likely to be at every meeting.

It's possible that a community council's attendance numbers dwindle so significantly that only the executive board members remain. If this occurs, the executive board should not be discouraged. If the group that is present is capable and driven, they will be more than able to be successful in putting on quality programs in the community. Having more student leaders in the organization can only benefit the community council, but successful community councils can be run with only a handful of people.

A Community Council may want to consider doing a "reboot" at the beginning of the second semester. This includes holding another informational meeting to gauge renewed interest in the organization. If there are vacant executive board positions, the council may also consider holding a new election to fill the positions. Consider working with your advisor at the semester break to invite any new residents that recently moved into the community after the fall informational meetings, thus missing the chance to get involved in Community Council the first time around.

## **Programming Pitfalls**

As with many programs in residence life, some will be highly successful and others will not meet the expectations of the programmer. This can be very disheartening for the people who planned the program, especially when a significant amount of hard work was put into it. When a program fails to meet expectations, it is important to look intently at both the strengths and weaknesses in the planning process of the program and then creating an action plan for future programs.

*Questions to ask when evaluating a program:*

- Did the overall attendance meet expectations?
- Was the advertisement for the program sufficient?
- Did the program itself run smoothly?
- If the program was done again, what should be changed?

# Community Council and Residence Housing Association (RHA)

A community council is not alone in the mission to benefit the residents in their living area. Residence Housing Association, or RHA, represents all of the community councils on campus and acts as the student government for the residential community.

At the beginning of the year, RHA hosts a community council retreat that helps community council members learn more about what it means to be a successful community council and also develop their own personal leadership skills. It is invaluable that as many executive board members as possible are in attendance. In addition, RHA brings in a variety of guest speakers throughout the year from departments across campus, many of which have information of ways to better community councils. Perhaps the greatest resource RHA provides is the opportunity to network with other community councils, sharing ideas and resources.

## **RHA and Community Council Funding**

Another benefit of being active in RHA is the ability to request additional programming funding. While each community council has a budget in place at the beginning of the year, there are restrictions on what that budgeted money can be spent on. The amount of community funding a Community Council receives varies from community to community, so this should be a discussion to be had between the Executive Board and Advisor. By requesting funding through RHA, a community council can put on larger programs without having to limit their grand vision for the program.

## **RHA and its State/Regional/National Affiliates**

Just as all community councils are united under RHA, RHAs throughout the country are united by being affiliated with certain state, regional and national organizations. By being involved in RHA, community council members have the opportunity to attend conferences across the country in order to network and share ideas with other student leaders, bringing back these ideas and experiences back to the GVSU community.



# Advising Community Councils

As an advisor to any student organization, one has the opportunity to work with a variety of student leaders in developing the organization that they are passionate for. Advising community council is different than advising other student organization in that in most cases the community council begins from the ground-up with a whole new group of students each year. Thus, the advisor's role is more hands-on at the beginning in order to mentor and assist the student leaders who will then work to make the organization a success.

The Advisor should be able to pull from the classes that they take in their first year of graduate school to aid them in their advising role. Classes such as Theories of College Student Development, The American College Student, and Administration of Student Affairs Programs will be particularly relevant in advising Community Council.

## Shifting Roles of Advisors Throughout the Year

The Advisor will be most involved in community council during the first months of the school year. Significant time will be spent working to recruit residents to become members of community councils and maintaining the election process. Even when the executive board is elected, they will still need significant assistance as they begin to plan their first programs and initiatives.

Ideally, once the community council members find their footing, the advisors role will become more of a support role. While at the first meetings of the year the advisor may speak up often, it may come that the advisor speaks rarely as the executive board members take more control of the meetings.

## Good Reading Material for Community Council Advisors

- Advice for Advisers, 3rd Edition. Association of College & University Housing Officers (ACUHO-I).
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(Adapted from *Advisor Reading List*, Great Lakes Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls, 2012)

## Hands-On vs. Hands-Off Advising

Most evident in first year communities, it is highly likely that many community council members will have little to no experience working in student organization (with the exception of involvement in high school). The Advisor must keep this in mind and work towards providing the community council members the resources they need to succeed. Do not expect community council members to always come to you to ask questions about ways to make their programs or initiatives a success. Rather, look at their programs and initiatives and suggest to them ways to improve them that they would not have even thought of.

It is important to maintain a balance of supporting community council members and providing them ample challenge. If an advisor chooses to do everything for the community council members may over-rely on the advisor or lose interest in the organization because of the lack of challenge. However, not providing enough support can be equally as detrimental as community council members may feel overwhelmed and may quit over feelings of it being impossible to complete the tasks they have to accomplish.

## Working with RAs

It is important for a community council to form a positive relationship with all members of the RA Staff. Both the RAs and Community Council work towards the betterment of the community, with the primary difference being that the RA does it as a job while the community council is voluntarily run by the residents for the residents. In programming, RAs must provide a mix of social and educational program, but a community council is not constricted by this. Because working with community council is only a small part of a RA's larger job, some RAs will not be as involved in community council as others. Co-programming with RAs is a great way for community council members to work directly with an RA, who may provide extra resource and insight to help make the program a success.



# General Community Council Timeline

## **August**

- GA/RA Training
- Advisor assign role of RA Liaison to Community Council
- Collect Resident Contact Information during Move-In
- Send follow-up email

## **September**

- Informational Meeting
- Community Council Elections
- RHA Community Council Leadership Retreat
- Begin Preparations for Homecoming
- Begin to think about bidding to host Haunted Halls

## **October**

- Form Homecoming Team and prepare for Homecoming events
- Bid for Haunted Halls
- Participate in Homecoming Events

## **December**

- Begin preparations for next semester
- Take Final Exams

## **January**

- Hold second informational meeting if Executive Board feels it is necessary to increase attendance
- Fill any vacant Executive Board Positions
- Begin to think about Relay for Life

## **February**

- Begin fundraising for Relay for Life

## **March**

- Fundraise for Relay for Life
- Begin to think about bidding for end-of-the-year RHA awards

## **April**

- Bid for end-of-the-year RHA awards
- Attend RHA Recognition Banquet
- Participate in Relay for Life
- Take Final Exams



# Wise Words from Community Council Members

## What was your Community Council's biggest success this year?

- Getting our community to come to events
- Programs that brought publicity to our community like Haunted Hall, and anything with free food such as pancake brunches
- The Humans vs. Zombies Run this past fall. We had such a great turnout.
- Making cards for children in DeVos Hospital, we got over 50 cards!

## What was your Community Council's biggest challenge this year?

- Raising money for Relay for Life
- Getting upperclassmen involved
- Recruiting volunteers for Community Council programs and philanthropy projects
- Getting high participation in events
- Fundraising
- Getting people to actually participate in events!

## What is one thing you wish you knew at the beginning of the year that would have benefitted you in your position or your Community Council as a whole?

- How cool RHA is. I didn't hear about it until we were in need of an RHA representative.
- As president, you have to learn to delegate. It's hard at first with this position because you think you have to do it all, when in reality your Community Council members can handle most anything.
- I would've liked to have known how to successfully recruit volunteers for lesser-known projects/events
- To get funding from RHA more often.
- The benefits of RHA, like funding and collaborations
- I wish we would have had a few weeks before we had to elect people because the people that got elected do not actively participate.