Best Practices for Leadership Succession

With any successful group, a thoughtful plan for leadership succession will help ensure the longevity of the group and allow for new ideas and perspectives to be introduced to the group. Here are some suggestions and recommendations for ensuring smooth succession planning and transitions.

When should transitions take place?

Groups are advised to set term limits to prevent group leaders from burning out and to provide opportunities for new leaders to be involved in the group. Typically, one to two-year term limits appear to be most effective but Rice understands that the size and interest level of volunteer leaders may make longer or shorter terms more desireable. The end of the calendar year or the academic year tends to be natural times for leadership transitions.

Preparation for leadership transitions typically begins 4-6 months prior to the transition, with formal identification of new leaders occurring approximately 2 months prior to the transition. It is important that both outgoing and incoming leaders have adequate time to adjust to the role and transition important group information and knowledge.

Recruiting Leadership Volunteers

- Put yourself out there. Work the room at events, introduce yourself, and discuss your role.
- Look at those who have participated in or attended multiple programs but haven't volunteered.
- Encourage other volunteers to do the same. Volunteers should be aware that recruitment and succession planning are ongoing goals.
- Task current volunteer leaders with identifying and recruiting potential successors as they know the role and its requirements better than anyone else.
- Cultivate your active volunteers, ensuring they have a positive experience and are gaining the experience and training necessary if they are going to take on a larger role.
- Remember that not every volunteer wants to be or has the capacity to be a leader. Some alumni prefer assisting with events or serving in other, less visible capacities.
- Once alumni are engaged as volunteers, determine their motivation and goals so that you can attempt to identify roles that will enable them to fulfill their own goals while helping the group.
- Be sure to develop roles that are focused on more than event planning in order to enable more alumni to engage and leverage their strengths.
- Make specific, one-on-one asks rather than relying solely on general calls for leadership volunteers as these lack a personal touch that often helps to motivate volunteers.
- Be clear about the time commitment of the position and the time the volunteer is able to give.

Transitioning Volunteers into Leadership Positions

- Partner with the Office of Alumni Relations to create a sustainable transition plan to help ensure the success of your group during a transition.
- Set attainable, measurable goals and communicate these to volunteers in order to enable new leaders to continue to work toward common goals.
- Create a basic job description to assist in communicating the requirements of the position to new and potential leaders.
- Have a clear and open discussion with your successor and staff liaison in the Office of Alumni Relations about the transition process, including timeline and individual responsibilities.
- Plan in advance and cultivate your successor. For example, begin copying each other on emails prior to the transition.
- Communicate with other volunteers about the transition and considering sharing information with the larger group to prevent confusion, highlight the fact that the group is volunteer-run, and encourage others to participate.
- Consider introducing co-chair and/or emeritus roles so that responsibilities can be divided and the historical perspective of the group is not lost in a transition.