

# Student Leader Burnout & How to Avoid it

Burnout amongst student leaders is not an uncommon phenomenon. Especially as we near the middle to the end of the semester. Many have been in their positions for three to six months. The euphoria of being a student leader has begun to wear off, and in many cases, they are approaching or are already in the storming phase outlined in Tuckman's stages of team formation. This can be a challenging time for students, and a challenging time for advisors as we work with our students to navigate this period while also continuing to keep them focused on their goals.

According to Freudenberger, burnout is "The state of fatigue and frustration arising from unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources and leading to physical and mental exhaustion." For many students, the burn out is a result of a "yes I can, yes I will" mentality where they feel a need to take on more than they might be able to. At UNL, this is not uncommon amongst our student leaders. So what causes this and how do we help our students move past it?

The challenge for advisors, is understanding how we help our students understand when to serve others, and when to focus on their own needs. The dissonance created by this challenge is one of the leading causes of student leader burnout. Burnout can also be caused by role conflict or role overload, where students struggle to understand their role, leading to stress. This is often seen in students entering new roles, where they are still seeking to understand what to do or what to expect from their new positions. Another cause can be when students place unrealistic expectations on themselves, and then become exhausted when they are unable to meet these expectations at the level they want, or perceive others want. Students might also experience burnout as a result of continued, stressful events. For some student groups, they regularly have events, requiring continuous planning and coordination. This repetitive stress can build up and lead to burnout of our student leaders. The last cause, and probably one seen frequently is students becoming so overwhelmed that they lose their sense of purpose in all that they do. They become disoriented, and the challenge of refocusing becomes overwhelming, leading them to stress even more. In the end, the stress is exhausting and leaves them unable to perform in multiple areas of their life.

So what can we do as advisors to help our students when they begin to burnout? As the advisor, you are often the only one in the room that can see what is taking place. Here are few tips:

- 1. Return to Center:** In yoga, after different movements, an individual "returns to center." This is their starting point, their resting point, it is more or less the place where one feels balanced. By helping students return to center, you help them refocus on what matters most. From an organization standpoint, this might mean asking them to reflect on why they applied for the position they are in? Why did they join the organization in the first place?
- 2. Recognition:** Another great tool is to work with chief student leaders to help them share why they selected others for the positions they did. This not only gives recognition to those selected for those positions, but also helps leaders understand and reflect on their role in the overall organization vision, the value they bring to that role, and the expectations others have of them.
- 3. Reflect:** Frequently advisors and student leaders feel overwhelmed with how much they have going on in their organization. This is a great opportunity to look at what the organization is doing, evaluate if it aligns or supports the organization's overall mission, vision, and values. If it does not directly tie in, the organization might consider eliminating the event, postponing it to a time when more resources can be dedicated to it, or consider reducing the complexity of the event to reduce demand on everyone.
- 4. Re-energize:** Think about ways you can help your students de-stress. Scheduling a day of fun, or just spending some down time together can be a great way to re-energize your group and build community. Another idea is to schedule a self-care session during a typical meeting time. There are a ton of great resources and folks from around UNL that would be happy to come in and teach everyone about wellness holistically!

In the end, there is no one size fits all approach to helping students and student leadership teams coping with burnout. Each student leader needs different things, but as an advisor you have the opportunity to help them recognize burnout, and provide them tools to cope with it. This post shares just a few ideas, but speak with colleagues and do your own research to find what is best for your students. Everything shared here today can also apply to our role as advisors and professionals. Despite more experience than our students in life, we are still susceptible to burnout.