Adapted from "Interviewing Strategies That Search Committees and Chairs Need to Know"

The stakes are high when trying to appoint a student leader who can effectively perform the duties of shared governance and student representation/service. When appointing such a critical component, the need to invest time in the preparation of your interview and report back to the Board of Directors is important. Because much interviewing is done by the executive members, their ability to help select new appointees may be only as good as their skills at interviewing. The following steps will guide you in how to interview prospective members and how to adhere to the basics of interviewing.

Behavior-based interviewing is designed to address the skills, expertise, and experience of candidates. Also called behavioral interviewing, it is built on the premise that past experience is the best predictor of future performance (Doyle, 2010). Gone are the days when interviews began with "Tell me about yourself." and ended with "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Step 1: Identify the specific skills needed by the new member.

Identify the specific skills and expertise of the new member. For example, if the member is to represent the student body on a committee, include this is on the list. If he or she will coordinate and assess events, list that. Obviously, the candidate is to actively, efficiently, honorably serve the organization; still, strive to make duties and position requirements more specific for the interviewee.

Step 2: Write behavior-based questions for the specific skills listed.

Behavioral questions (or sentence starters) begin with phrases such as, "Tell me about a time when…," "How have you…," "Which methods have you used for …," and "Describe your experience with…"
Sample questions include:

* How have you planned and executed projects/events/initiatives?
* Tell me about an enterprise that went well and why it went well.
* How have you involved other students as resources or collaborators?
* Where have you executed or participated in student development programs in the past?
* Describe your goals and how you have developed a plan of action.
* Describe group or committee work you have been a part of or directed as it relates to this position.

Step 3: Fair use of questions.

Once questions are written, they must be used in each interview, in the same order, by the interviewer. This includes both telephone and on-campus interviews. The interviewer will have the printed list in front of them and should be taking notes and evaluating candidate responses during the interview. This consistency is important to demonstrate fairness to all candidates.

Step 4: Decide on an evaluation instrument.

It really does not help to ask candidates questions that cannot be evaluated. After all, what is the right answer to "If you were an animal, which one would you be?" A simple evaluation instrument asks raters

to mark unacceptable, acceptable, or target for each response. Those preferring to set up their evaluation instrument on a numeric scale may choose a scale of 1 to 5 or 1 to 7, where 1 indicates a weak answer and 5 or 7 a very strong answer.

A rubric goes a step further in evaluating responses, as a rubric has criteria for answers. For example, if the question addresses past leadership experience, the criteria for assigning the rating of unacceptable, acceptable, and target must be described for the evaluator. A specific example might be that the interviewer has agreed that the candidate must have experience in programing or event planning:

* Unacceptable: Candidate has had no experience programing or event planning.
* Acceptable: Candidate has had some experience programing or event planning and has been responsible for assessing and evaluating those projects.
* Target: Candidate has had more than three quarters of programming or event planning experience at the university level and has assumed responsibility for assessing and evaluating those projects.

These criteria would be listed on the evaluation rubric and circled by the interviewer, with space for comments.

Step 5: Learn to listen for answers.

Candidates trained in how to answer behavioral questions may have learned the acronyms of PAR and STAR. Evaluators need to remember these acronyms as they listen to answers. PAR represents Problem, Action, and Result, and STAR stands for Situation, Task, Action, and Result (Clement, 2008). After a question is asked, the listener can focus on the candidate's response by following the steps of the acronym:

* Example: Tell us about your experience sitting on a committee and what you have learned that you would bring to our organization.

* Response: Last academic year, I sat on the Environmental Policy Committee. I learned to be an active listener and was able to represent the interests of my constituency. By actively seeking student input about current and proposed policy I was able to represent progressive ideas and lobby for policy refurbishment/change and new campus focus on environmental and sustainability efforts and initiatives. As a committee we were able to recreate a student garden in partnership with the university administration and facilities. Currently, the campus is working on creating signage that would caution drivers as to the presence of cyclists utilizing the roadways around campus. This next year, I'm hoping the committee will consider updates to the campus smoking policy.

The listener should hear that the candidate is familiar with the situation, can describe tasks, action, and results. This is a target answer.

Step 6: Training in inappropriate questions.

Be reminded that questions about race, color, sex, religion, national origin, birthplace, age, disability, and marital/family status cannot be asked of candidates in any situation. Some organizations choose to distribute a list of these protected questions to all interviewers as a reminder.

In addition, these questions may not be addressed in informal conversations. This gets a little trickier, as a candidate may begin to reveal some personal information. Even when a candidate shares personal information, such as "My girlfriend already works with the organization, she says it's great, so I thought I would seek a position as well." An interviewer may not address any questions about personal or family relationships. It is not small talk to say, "Oh, your girlfriend already works with us, what position are they in?" This is an inappropriate question. Also, comments about jewelry and attire are also off limits as they may be construed as asking about religion or culture.

Step 7: Apply the steps.

All interviews need to be structured. The questions should be prewritten and delivered in the same order to all candidates. Evaluation is critical, as bringing in a candidate who would never be hired costs time, energy, and morale.

Step 8: Make the interview information rich.

The purpose of interviewing is to find the best match of candidate and position, ensuring that the new member can perform the duties needed by the organization. New members who are happiest with their positions are ones whose expectations are met. A new member who says, "This is not at all what I expected" will probably not stay long and will give minimal effort to the position until leaving.

One way to help candidates understand the job is to provide as much information as possible during the interview (the information-rich interview). This includes explaining all the intricacies and nuances of the position. A clear explanation of how this members operates within the organization apparatus.

Conclusion

Retention begins with appointment, as candidates are evaluating your organization from the first communication received. If the interview process seems businesslike, it instills in the candidate a confidence in the administration and in future colleagues. If treated professionally during the interview, the candidate feels that he or she will be treated professionally after appointment. Every interview is about two things: you finding the right person, and the candidate deciding that the organization is a good match. An interview is a recruitment tool as well as a selection process. Behavioral questions will aid in determining the skills and experiences of the candidates. Interviewer training will always help to make the interviews more effective.

References

Clement, M. C. (2008). Recruiting and hiring effective teachers: A behavior-based approach. Alexandria, VA: Educational Research Service.

Doyle, A. (2010). What is a behavioral interview and behavioral interview questions and answers. Retrieved from http://jobsearch.about.com/cs/interviews/a/behavioral.htm