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# ADVISE

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# WORKING TOWARD

# EQUITY

BY SHARI BENITES

Breaking down barriers for the betterment of your students

School clubs and organizations provide important experiences for students, helping them develop their passions, practice their leadership skills, and feel connected to the school community. School staff must be intentional and proactive when considering ways to break down barriers that may prevent some students from participating.

As the coordinator of Equity and Excellence and the director of our Center for Leadership and Public Service at a large suburban high school in northern Virginia, I am consistently focused on equity and justice in relation to how we educate our students. I often approach my work by thinking, “What are the barriers students might face, and how can we remove those barriers?”

These are useful questions for NHS or student council advisers to ask when considering who is participating in your organization and what the requirements are for participation. As one of the advisers to our NHS chapter, I ask myself these questions with each decision we make. The answers are the gateway to improving student access and continuing participation, especially for underrepresented groups.

Of course, there will always be standards that are nonnegotiable, such as the GPA requirement for NHS, but there are other barriers that we can mitigate. Consider evaluating these questions that help our NHS group break down unnecessary barriers as we work toward equity:

## WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO ACCESS?

### **A lack of knowledge of NHS and the benefits of membership.**

In my first year in my equity job almost 16 years ago, I asked the NHS advisers for a list of all students who qualified to become members based on their GPA. I decided to meet with each student of color on the list to make sure they understood what NHS stands for and why membership could be beneficial for them. Many of these students

had never heard of NHS, especially those who were prospective first-generation college students.

### **An understanding of how to complete an application, especially how to describe experiences.**

When I met with students to explain NHS, I offered my help with their submission packets. Many students were unsure how to describe the service they had done or explain their leadership, and they didn’t have family at home who could assist. I also found that students who had demanding responsibilities at home did not view these things as service or leadership—I had to help them describe what they saw as normal family life in terms that relate to NHS expectations. One student who met the GPA requirement was in our life-skills program for students with intellectual challenges. He expressed an interest in being in NHS but struggled to complete the packet and was worried about fulfilling the service requirements. With a little assistance, he was able to complete the packet and be a proud member of NHS.

## WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION?

### **Access to opportunities to complete service requirements.**

At my high school, NHS members have to complete 30 hours of service each year, with 10 of those hours sponsored by our chapter as a group. For students who have family or work commitments that prevent them from staying after school or having weekends free, this can present a real challenge. We also have some students who struggle with transportation to events.

As a result, I have worked hard to create in-school service opportunities for students facing these situations so they can get at least some of their service hours done during their lunch periods. I have had several students



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volunteer to spend some of this time collecting and packaging toner to be recycled, and some of our members volunteer at lunch to help their peers recycle and compost appropriately. We started a lunch group called Club Cafe, and some of our leaders volunteer to have lunch once each month with peers who are working with the speech therapist to improve their social skills. These opportunities help create equity for NHS members who would otherwise be unable to complete their service hours.

#### ***Appropriate opportunities for students with disabilities.***

We have had a few members of NHS over the years with intellectual or physical disabilities that have made it more challenging for them to complete the required service hours. We try to keep the high expectation of the requirements while working closely with these students to help them find appropriate outlets for service. For example, the student who was in life skills was able to volunteer in our adaptive PE class during his lunch period. One of our students with physical challenges was given an extension over the summer so he could complete his hours. The key to working with these students is to be flexible and creative while maintaining the integrity of NHS.

#### **WIDESPREAD APPLICATION**

Taking the time to consider any barriers to access and participation is useful in all school activities, not just NHS. For example, years ago our student government association (SGA) adviser was concerned about the lack of diversity in the student government leadership. We worked to encourage students representing a wide variety of our student population to run for office, but even when students from some of these historically marginalized groups did run, they often did not win. The adviser decided to add “at-large” positions to the SGA leadership team, so students who represented diverse populations at our school could be asked to join the team. These students bring perspective and experiences that help the SGA plan and implement activities and events that more appropriately represent the whole student body.

Another example of providing equitable access is our Minority Men United (MMU) program. While our school has had active Latinas Leading Tomorrow and Sister Circle clubs for our young ladies of color, we struggled to get our young men of color to join after-school clubs. When we surveyed these students, we often heard that they would be interested, but because of sports, work, or other obligations, they could not stay after school on a regular basis.

Based on this information about the barriers to participation, we got permission from our school leadership to begin hosting

events for our young men of color during the school day. We invited our black and Hispanic young men to apply for leadership in the organization, and these leaders planned quarterly events. Each event occurs during a different class period, so the boys are not missing the same class each time. We have hosted some fantastic events, including roundtables with local professionals speaking about their careers, panels of MMU alumni sharing their college experiences, “dress for success” events, and service projects. With this format, our MMU events generally have more than 75 young men of color in attendance.

Of course, there are still challenges as we work toward equity. One constant challenge is providing equity for students who are English-language learners. We often translate documents into Spanish and try to provide interpretation when we can, but we are much less successful with languages other than Spanish. In Latinas Leading Tomorrow, we speak both English and Spanish at our meetings, but this same accommodation does not work for every club and organization.

Extracurricular activities, such as NHS and NatStuCo, are an integral aspect of student development. Just as faculty members work to create equity in academic access and achievement, we must ensure we remove possible barriers for students to participate in school outside of the classroom. While some of the specific solutions to breaking down barriers detailed here may also be effective at other schools, there are concerns and resources unique to each community. I encourage all advisers to ask, “What are the barriers students might face, and how can we remove those barriers?” whenever they make a decision that affects students. Critically viewing student participation with this equity lens is a first step in increasing participation of marginalized groups and creating a truly inclusive school community. ●

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