



Starting student societies

By Leana Meiring and Angelo Fynn

Things to consider when starting up a student society:

Starting with an idea...

1. You need to be passionate about starting up a student society. Think about the reasons why you are taking on this task. You will have to be willing to put in hard work.
2. Share your vision. Starting up a student society requires work. It will be beneficial to get other people to buy-in to the idea. Get a core team together (consisting of people who are equally passionate about the idea). The core team will do most of the initial work. A small core (3-4 people) works more efficiently (too many cooks in the kitchen may spoil the broth).
3. Do your homework. Find out from the Student Representative Council (SRC) what the requirements are for starting up a student society. This will require administrative work. You will have to compile a constitution for the society.

Recruitment

4. Departmental support is instrumental in the successful launch of your society. Canvassing is vital in getting students to join and asking a few minutes of a lecturer's time to present your society to psychology students before a lecture is a great way to get exposure—present the society and the benefits of joining and invite students to the launch meeting. Remember to respect the lecturer as you are using their time. Keep your presentation short and do not go over the allocated time. Thank the lecturer for the time before you leave.
5. Look out for university events where the societies at the universities are given an opportunity to market themselves to the students. If there isn't an event like this, put together a proposal to the chair of the department to host a session where you can speak to the students. Start small; ask for a 1-2 hour session with various groups before going for the big seminar. A trick to attracting a big audience would be to invite a prominent guest speaker (maybe even one from your university) to speak about Psychology as a career. This will help generate interest for your launch meeting.

Getting the infrastructure in place

6. Office space. If you can arrange office space within your department it would be great. It will allow you to be available for consultation and to deal with enquiries face-to-face. If you are not so fortunate to be allocated an office, you can always work around it. You will just have to deal with the students via email or other forms of social media. If you need any documents submitted and you do not have an office, you can always arrange with the departmental secretary to collect the documents. This is why departmental affiliation and support is important. And you never know, bugging the secretary might motivate your department to allocate you an office space at the end of the day.
7. Put together an executive committee (EC) and sub-committee members. The sub-committee is basically a trainee to take the place of the EC member when they resign. It is a way to provide a support team to assist the EC members in performing duties and tasks while preparing the future EC member to take over the duties. This way you always have a competent EC member to take over. You will have to create application forms and do interview with the applicants. Also keep in mind that you will have to appoint your EC based on a democratic voting system. Make it fair and official.
8. The importance of communication. Ensure that the Secretary is someone you can rely on to communicate with the EC, sub-committee, and the society members. Do not underestimate the importance of communication when it comes to the success of launching and maintaining your society.
9. Think long term. When you launch your society, keep the future in mind. Many societies fall when the founding members of the original EC members leave the university. Put structure in place that will ensure your legacy carries on long after you are gone. After all, you are doing this for the benefits it gives to students (and your CV of course).

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Things to consider when starting up a student society (continued):

Keeping the momentum going

10. Plan events where you can gather your members to work to a collective goal. One example could be to set up an arrangement with a community partner where your members can volunteer to gain experience.
11. Seminars are also a great way of keeping the momentum going in your society. Bring in speakers on topics that your members are interested in. Be creative; think outside of the curriculum you cover in class. Interested in how psychiatric wards are run? Why not invite a resident psychologist from the local hospital; you could even invite interns who recently graduated from your university.
12. Set up days where your senior students have the space to share their experience of studying psychology. This gives a great space to find a mentor for the undergraduate students and helps create a sense of continuity in your society by giving senior students the opportunity to give back.

Affiliate to other Psychology Associations

13. Joining with other student and professional associations helps your society stay connected to events and trends in the discipline as a whole. By being part of an affiliate network, you will give your members the opportunity to build their networks and expose them to future colleagues from other universities.

A note on PsySSA and the student division

The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) is the professional body representing psychologists in South Africa. PsySSA was formed in January 1994, uniting the various bodies that existed until then. PsySSA has since its inception been dedicated to making a significant contribution to solving the pressing human development problems in South Africa. PsySSA has dedicated its work to the reconstruction and development of post-apartheid South African society. The Society is also involved in ongoing negotiations with government, other legislative bodies, and the private and civil society sectors to contribute to issues affecting South Africa's rapidly changing environment. As the representative body of psychologists in the country PsySSA operates as a trade union for the discipline.

The PsySSA student division is focussed on addressing students' needs within the discipline by providing opportunities to network with professionals, potential internships and community placements. One of its focus areas is on exposing psychology students to the discipline through the annual congress where students gain the opportunity to meet professionals, share their own work and to participate in debates within the discipline. The annual congress is also a great space where students have the opportunity to meet students from other universities and create their own networks. The student division aims to further the development of organised psychology by supporting the development of student divisions on all South African university campuses.

The student division also acts as the representative for students who may experience unfair discrimination at training institutions or who require assistance in finding the next step in their career path as a developing psychologist.

Additional resources to help you get started:

Steps to start up a student society:

www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/university-societies/starting-a-society

Information of the structure of the EC:

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/mar/17/university-society>

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