

BEFORE YOUR FIRST COUNCIL MEETING

A GUIDE AND PREPARATION SHEET

For community and associate council members

BRING THREE THINGS

- 1** A clear responsibility

- 2** A useful question

- 3** A realistic contribution

ABOUT THE EXAMPLE

The associate council scenario, students and dialogue in this guide are fictional teaching material. Confirm your actual council's role and procedures with its host.

YOU HAVE A SEAT. WHAT COMES NEXT?

An invitation gives you a place in the conversation. Preparation helps you understand what you are being asked to contribute.

Use this guide when joining a nonprofit associate council, community advisory group or young-professional committee. You might be advising staff, supporting an event or helping a group hear from people it has missed. Start by confirming the role rather than assuming the title explains it.

Leave with three things

- ☐ A confirmed description of your responsibility,
- ☐ a question worth bringing to the meeting
- ☐ and a contribution you can realistically follow through on.

Check which body you joined

An advisory council and a nonprofit governing board have different responsibilities. Public bodies can have additional rules. Ask the host to identify the actual body and the documents that explain its authority.

Scope

This guide supports preparation for advisory and associate roles. It does not replace required training, governing documents or legal advice. If you are joining a governing board or public body, obtain its role-specific guidance.

AN INVITATION LEAVES QUESTIONS

What is this group here to do?

Ask for its purpose, current priorities and the expected result of your involvement. Find out who receives its recommendations and how members learn what happened afterward.

[Purpose, priorities and response route]

What am I agreeing to?

Confirm term length, meeting frequency and preparation time. Ask directly about fundraising, personal giving, travel and other costs if they apply. Discuss access or scheduling needs before committing to a task.

[Term, time and costs]

Who can speak or decide?

Ask whether members vote, advise, organize or represent the group publicly. Confirm who approves public statements and external commitments. Do not treat membership as permission to promise the organization's money or support.

[Decisions, statements and approvals]

Where can I ask privately?

Identify a staff liaison or chair for questions about unclear expectations, sensitive information and problems participating. Request the relevant confidentiality and conflict procedures rather than guessing what they require.

[Liaison and private reporting route]

BRING A PERSPECTIVE

Scenario

An associate council is discussing an evening volunteer event. You know several students who work at that time, but you have not heard from everyone the event is intended to reach.

WHAT YOU COULD SAY

“A few students I spoke with have evening shifts. I don’t know how common that is across the group. Could we ask about availability before confirming the time?”

A BOUNDED NEXT STEP

“I can draft a short availability question for the staff liaison to review. Who should receive it, and who will decide the event time?”

Notice the difference

You named the source and limits of what you know. You suggested a way to learn more and offered a bounded task. You did not speak for every student or take over a staff decision.

When someone asks for a promise

Try: “I can bring that request to the group. I can’t confirm its support today.” Follow up through the agreed process and let the person know what you can share.

Example Record	
Task: Draft an availability question	
Review: Staff liaison	Decision: Ask who decides

PREPARE ONE USEFUL CONTRIBUTION

Use this sheet beside the agenda. Replace the prompts with your own notes. Store confidential material only where the host permits it.

The agenda item

What is being discussed? Is the group advising, deciding or receiving information?

What I can contribute

A relevant experience, observation, question or skill

What supports it

Where did this information come from? What are its limits?

Who is missing

Whose experience would help the group understand this better?

My question

What needs to be clarified before the group moves forward?

A task I could accept

What could I complete, by when, and with what support?

LEAVE WITH A CLEAR AGREEMENT

1 Read back the next step

Before leaving, confirm your task, the person reviewing it and the date it is needed. Ask what a usable result would look like. If it requires an introduction, file or approval, identify who will provide that.

2 Name a realistic limit

“I can review the draft by Friday. I can’t organize the event this month.” A smaller clear commitment is easier for others to plan around than an uncertain yes.

3 Keep a short contribution record

Record what you contributed, what the group decided, the next action and where to find the approved meeting record. Distinguish your personal notes from official minutes.

4 Check back

At the next appropriate check-in, ask how your work was used. If the role remains unclear or the expected workload changes, discuss that with the liaison before accepting more work.

KEEP GOING

A USEFUL ROLE NEEDS SUPPORT

For council hosts

Provide the purpose, member expectations, meeting materials and a named point of contact. Explain how advice reaches a decision-maker and how members receive a response. A new member should not have to infer these arrangements from who speaks most often.

Task	Reviewer	Due

Source 2

SOURCES AND LOCAL CHECKS

BoardSource, The Role and Purpose of a Board of Directors, updated 29 June 2026; Advisory Councils: Nine Keys to Success, 2023; A Nonprofit Board's Dynamics and Processes FAQs. NYC Civilian Complaint Review Board, Youth Advisory Council. Checked 2 October 2026. These are professional and public-agency guidance sources; this guide has not been evaluated for learning outcomes.

- 1 BoardSource The Role and Purpose of a Board of Directors**
Governing and advisory distinction; nonprofit-specific, not a public-body legal rule
- 2 BoardSource Advisory Councils Nine Keys to Success**
Role clarity, orientation, materials, communication and review. Original paraphrases; no reproduced framework or artwork
- 3 BoardSource A Nonprofit Board's Dynamics and Processes FAQs**
Member expectations and common advisory-role problems; no generalized legal assertions
- 4 NYC Civilian Complaint Review Board Youth Advisory Council**
Specific illustrative public council, not endorsement, affiliation or universal role standard

Different councils do different work

For example, New York City's Civilian Complaint Review Board describes its Youth Advisory Council as advising staff, connecting with communities and participating in regular meetings. That is one defined advisory role, not a universal description of youth or nonprofit councils.