

Advancement Night

Every first Wednesday of the month the troop meeting program is Advancement Night. Although there may be short programs aimed at other topics during Patrol Corners, the Activity segment is dedicated to advancement activities.

- The Scoutmaster is available for SM conferences and introducing Scouts to the Board of Review.
- The ASM for Experienced Scouts meets experienced Scouts individually for counseling and issuance of blue cards.
- The New Scout Patrol meets under the supervision of the ASM for New Scouts and the Troop Guide to work on any advancement issues that have not been covered elsewhere.
- Experienced Scouts should have invited merit badge counselors to meet with them at the meeting in order to work on merit badges.
- The Board of Review sits on Advancement night, but only with at least one week's advance notice to the chairman of the board. The SM should be alert to the need to schedule a BoR after conducting a Scoutmaster conference, but the individual Scout should specifically request that the Scoutmaster schedule a BoR, thereby making a commitment to attend the meeting for which the board has been called.
- Similarly, a Scout should request a Scoutmaster conference at least a week before advancement night. The typical cycle is that a Scout
 - finishes his requirements,
 - requests a Scoutmaster conference at least a week prior to advancement night,
 - meets for the Scoutmaster conference on advancement night,
 - requests a BoR at least a week before the next advancement night,
 - sits for the BoR on the scheduled advancement night.
- Each meeting includes a Ceremonies segment right before the Closing. We use that segment to award any rank advancements as soon as they occur--which will generally be on advancement night. At the ceremony, the Scout is awarded the cloth patch, so he can sew it on his uniform immediately. We recognize the Scout again at the following parents night, at which time we present the rank certificate (a card) and the parent's pin. We do not present the rank pin to the Scout.
- For each advancement night we invite a counselor for an Eagle-required badge to make a brief presentation and meet with any Scouts interested in starting that badge. (Twelve badges required for Eagle; twelve months in a year. Coincidence?)

Notes:

1. An ongoing problem is what to do with Scouts who do not arrange for advancement activities on advancement night. The original idea was that they would meet with the ASM for experienced

Scouts, but this approach has not always been successful. Scouts at loose ends is not a Good Thing.

2. Keeping up with invitations for Eagle-required MB counselors to present at advancement night has usually turned out to be onerous for the ASM for experienced Scouts.

Merit Badge Procedures

- The ASM for experienced Scouts is responsible for conducting the merit badge program. He maintains a notebook with a dossier on each Scout showing advancement history, current advancement status, and all blue cards issued.
- The Advancement Chairman is responsible for processing all completed blue cards as required by BSA and the council, and maintains official records of advancement status.
- The ASM for experienced Scouts recruits counselors, solicits application forms from them (adult application and MB counselor application), and maintains a database of active and available counselors.
- The ASM for experienced Scouts meets regularly with experienced Scouts to review their advancement progress and offer appropriate counseling.
- The SM, during Scoutmaster conferences, will generally spend some time setting advancement goals for the Scout, including identifying merit badges for Star and Life.
- Once a Scout decides that he wishes to pursue a badge (whether as a result of SM counseling, ASM counseling, or independent action), he follows this procedure:
 - Procure a blue card from the ASM for experienced Scouts. The ASM should review the decision with the Scout offering counseling as appropriate. (What about these other badges you're already working on? Is this a good choice for this time of year? Would you be better off working on this one at camp? How does this fit with your advancement objectives? Etc.)
 - Using the counselor database and his judgement about things like personal compatibility, counselor workload, current counselor availability and the like, the ASM for experienced Scouts selects a suitable counselor.
 - If no counselor is currently available, the ASM should attempt to recruit one or identify one from the district MB counselor list. It is very important that the ASM make contact with external counselors before making an assignment.
 - If necessary, the ASM will teach the Scout how to fill out the blue card, emphasizing the importance of neatness and accuracy. In general, however, he will only fill out the Scout's name, the badge, and the counselor contact information, leaving the remainder to the Scout.
 - The Scout then goes to the SM for an approval signature on the face of the application panel. A Scout may not begin a merit badge without this signature.
 - At this point the Scout should contact the counselor to make plans to pursue the badge, following the counselor's instructions on how to proceed. In general the counselor has considerable latitude in how to conduct meetings with the Scout and how he intends to

teach the badge. Most counselors expect Scouts to do much of the preparatory work independently, but only *after* an initial meeting (or phone call) to make expectations clear. A Scout should *never* approach a counselor having already completed the requirements for the badge and with the expectation that all he needs to do is meet with the counselor to recite and receive a signature.

- Once the badge is completed and the counselor has signed the blue card, the Scout leaves the Counselor's Record panel with the counselor, and submits the remaining two panels to the advancement chairman. The advancement chairman may sign the signature of unit leader on the Applicant's Record panel and return that to the Scout, retaining the Application for Merit Badge panel for processing. (The Scout may secure the "signature of unit leader" from the SM or ASM for experienced Scouts.)

Notes:

1. The question of the division of labor between the advancement chairman and the ASM for experienced Scouts should be examined. I believe that it is important to have a single source of blue cards and counselor assignments.

2. Recruitment of counselors is an ongoing challenge not to be underestimated. The magnitude of that challenge will doubtless increase with the new YPT requirements. It might be useful to find a way to divide this load among several people while still retaining single point coordination of the issuance of blue cards and assignment of counselors.

3. This is probably a good place to reiterate the policy objectives outlined in the minutes of the June troop committee meeting:

- Merit badge counselors must be properly registered, trained, and authorized to counsel specific badges.
- The troop must accept the responsibility of insuring that counselors are accessible to Scouts. Often the hardest part of earning a merit badge is contacting a strange adult (or even a familiar adult). We need to be able to assure the Scout that the merit badge counselor will be reliable about returning phone calls and keeping appointments.
- Scouts seeking merit badges should receive appropriate counseling about what badges to pursue (and which not to pursue), and should not be permitted to pursue badges without Scoutmaster approval (that is, without an signature on the face of the blue card).
- The process of assigning counselors should take into account a sensitivity to the specific needs of specific Scouts (matching personalities, for example) and should balance the workloads of different counselors for the same badge. Merit badge counselors are to be assigned by the troop.
- The procedure must be clear to all involved.

4. The district merit badge counselor list is nearly useless. I have only rarely succeed in finding counselors from that list. In the past we've advertised that a Scout can work on any badge—we'd

find a counselor for even the most esoteric. But I have not been able to live up to this standard, and with the new YPT rules it will be even harder to find counselors. We may need to think about

- not offering all badges
- accepting as counselors individuals who are only marginally technically qualified to counsel the badge
- making more use of Merit Badge Powwows and other activities.

5. The troop library of merit badge pamphlets needs serious attention and a policy for its use. Nick has suggested that we *require* Scouts to procure a pamphlet before meeting with a counselor. This is not a proposal without pitfalls, but I think we should consider it favorably. The question in my mind is how to provide pamphlets. We could insist that scouts purchase them. At \$4.50 apiece, 21 required for Eagle, that's less than \$100 spread over, say, five years. Twenty bucks a year. Any Scout can earn that selling popcorn.

On the other hand, a requirement to purchase pamphlets a monetary and procedural obstacle to benefitting from the program.

Another approach is to maintain a genuinely comprehensive and up-to-date library with effective checkout procedures. We've tried this approach in the past, but with limited success because it requires either a very effective troop librarian, or a very effective adult supervisor. Both are hard to find.

Another approach is that we maintain a library, but lend books with a \$4.50 deposit. Return the book for a refund, or keep it. We hope you keep it, but we'll be glad to buy it back. Maybe we should actually sell previously issued at a discount, and the troop can absorb the difference. My guess is that most books will never come back, but still, someone needs to mind the store.

6. We also have a challenge with the buddy system for merit badges. Scouts are not permitted to meet with a counselor alone. The traditional approach to this requirement is that a Scout always takes a buddy to a counselor meeting. I suspect that a lot of parents are acting as buddies—or that the principle is conveniently ignored. One of the reasons we instituted advancement night was that a Scout would not need a buddy to meet a counselor. I've often tried to urge pairs of Scouts to work on a badge together, but generally to little avail. Not that they don't want to—more that they just can't coordinate their schedules.

One thing I definitely want to avoid, however, is teaching merit badge classes in troop meetings.

Eagle Projects

There currently exists quite a lot of confusion about how the Eagle Project process takes place. We have had instances of Scouts proceeding with the preparations for their projects without guidance or approval from adult leadership. I strongly believe that in order for a Scout to derive

maximum benefit from this experience he should be coached intensively by a Scouter who understands the enterprise and is committed to both helping the Scout succeed and insisting that the Scout to do his very best. During the Scoutmaster conference for Life I discuss the process to the Scout and I send the following to Eagle candidates as they start the process:

Troop 45 Steps to Eagle

1. With the assistance and approval of the Scoutmaster, the Scout chooses a mentor who will be responsible for coaching him through the process of attaining Eagle. Typically the mentor is the Scoutmaster or an assigned ASM.
2. Scout identifies a project.
3. Scout proposes project to the mentor for approval and advice. At this point the Scout should be informally discussing potential projects with sponsoring agencies. The mentor should be attentive but circumspect about these discussions. Ultimately, the mentor clears the proposed project with the Scoutmaster and advancement chairman.
4. Scout prepares a written proposal (first two paragraphs in the Eagle Packet) and submits to the mentor for approval (and possibly a few rounds of revision).
5. The mentor secures approval from the troop committee.
6. Scout discusses written project proposal with agency rep and gets permission to proceed.
7. Scout prepares a detailed plan of action following the guidelines in the project workbook. The mentor should work closely with the Scout to secure a quality plan and give the Scout a strong learning experience.
8. Scout submits the Eagle Project Workbook to the troop committee chairman with proposal and plan.
9. If the committee chairman approves, the Scout gets an approval signature from the agency rep, and the mentor secures approvals from the troop committee chairman and the district advancement chairman.
10. With *approvals in hand* (BSA is very strict about this!) the Scout can then proceed with executing the project.
11. After completion, the Scout then prepares the last section of the project workbook and secures a final approval signature from the agency representative.
12. The Scout submits the completed packet to the mentor or troop committee chairman for final signature. The packet will be returned to the Scout.
13. With guidance from the mentor, the Scout prepares a response to requirement 6.

14. With any necessary assistance from the mentor, the Scout completes the Eagle application form. The troop advancement chairman will assist with verifying dates.
15. The Scout and Scoutmaster complete a Scoutmaster conference, which should include a review of the lessons learned from the project experience.
16. The Scout submits the application package to the troop committee chairman, who secures necessary signatures and submits the application to the council. The project workbook is *not* part of this submittal.

This procedure sounds kind of bureaucratic all written out like this, but there's much method in the madness. Each step is a valuable learning experience, and provides safeguards against disaster. (What happens if a Scout builds a bridge on Dartmouth property without permission? Or thinks he has permission, but builds something different than the college expected?)

Notes:

1. This procedure isn't as complex as it looks all written out. Most of it is common sense if you accept the premises that (a) the Scout will benefit from attentive guidance, and (b) the Troop really does need to insure that projects are properly coordinated with agencies, and (c) it is important to urge Scouts to a high standard of personal accomplishment in order to achieve the rank of Eagle.
2. I've found that most Scouts who are sincere about having an Eagle project they can truly be proud of welcome the details of this process—although there are certainly challenges and frustrations associated with achieving a higher standard than they expected or even thought possible. Problems arise with Scouts (or their parents) who are simply trying to gain the credential and be finished. Having a formal standard and procedure will surely help with the latter.
3. I think the process as described above has worked well in the past, and I seek endorsement from the committee to continue. If the committee wants to enhance this process further, it would make sense to me to require that project proposals be formally presented to the committee or to the Board of Review for approval. I don't think committee approval of final plans is necessary, but I definitely wouldn't complain if we decided to insist on that step as well. From our point of view, it could be pretty pro forma; from the well-prepared Scout's point of view it could be a very educational experience.

A Final Thought

One of the challenges we face continually is parents and Scouts who perceive the advancement method as the heart of the Scouting program. That is, they see a well-developed set of progressive tasks and requirements that frame the program, and they conclude that they will gain

the value of the program by completing each of those requirements in turn. If advancement indicates success, then success means pursuing advancement. The result is Scouts who come to meetings just long enough to meet with a merit badge counselor, and then leave. Scouts who work on advancements instead of contributing to the life of the troop. Scouts who race to complete requirements as quickly as they can, to advance in rank as soon as possible. Scouts who seek the minimum effort to complete a requirement. And ultimately, Scouts who finish Eagle and then drop out of Scouting.

The ideal program is one in which the Scout engages in all ways and at all levels, and then as a natural result of his participation, effort, and genuine achievement, receives concrete recognition in the form of advancement awards. This ideal may be impossible or impractical to attain fully, but it should still shape our approach to advancement and the ways in which we influence Scouts to approach their own advancement. Our policies should mitigate against “box checking” and reward initiative and effort with genuine accomplishment and the pride that goes with it. Advancement is the means, not the end. It will be easier to create meaningful program activities if Scouts see those activities as the central experience of Scouting; and it will be easier to have a meaningful advancement program if we create high-quality program activities.