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## Advisory Councils in Executive Education: Insights from Practice

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# **Advisory Councils in Executive Education: Insights from Practice**

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## **Abstract**

Various units within higher education rely on an advisory council to help guide policy, practice, and strategy. These boards usually consist of external business contacts or subject matter experts. In this article, we present a review of the use of advisory councils in higher education, with particular attention given to business education. We then provide advice and information based on our own experience with developing and maintaining an advisory council for an executive education unit. While there is no single best way to engage an advisory board for productive academic benefit, we provide several ideas for consideration in the hopes that executive education practitioners might be able to draw upon them for their own advisory council.

## **Introduction**

Increasingly, various units of the modern university are relying on business or community advisory boards. These boards (or councils as some are known) are formed by colleges or schools, academic departments, community outreach centers, or other divisions within the university. They serve a variety of purposes and are structured in different ways according to their mission. While we desire to focus this article on the use of advisory boards for executive and continuing education units, it is nonetheless profitable to understand the wider context of their use and formation in higher education generally.

For public universities, the involvement of community members in the institution is nothing new. Perhaps the most visible and pronounced involvement in this regard is the all but ubiquitous board of trustees. Known by different titles at different institutions and in different states (board of regents, e.g.), this group of individuals is generally a board with a fair amount of governing responsibility for the institution. For example, the stated purpose of the Board of Trustees for the University of Central Florida (2013) is to “set policy and serve as the

institution's legal owner and final authority responsible for efficient and effective use of resources" ("About the Board," para. 1).

Moreover, executive education is positioned at the intersection of the business world and the educational world, drawing from the unique perspectives of each environment and incorporating strategies and tactics from both. Though we recognize this confluence of paradigms for the executive education practitioner, we chose to focus solely on advisory councils in higher education because of the unique governance and accountability structures in place (Birnbaum, 1988). Thus, the purpose of this article is to provide a review of relevant literature regarding advisory councils in higher education, executive education's position in the higher education landscape, and our own experiences with creating and maintaining an executive education advisory council.

### **Use of Boards in Non-Business Academic Disciplines**

Some units within the university desire to remain connected to the community in a similar way, but seek advisors rather than governors. Thus, advisory boards or councils are created to fill this niche. As Olson (2008) described, "although advisory boards, by definition, possess no authority over your department or college, treat them with the same attention and deference that you would a governing board" (p. C3). A variety of units and disciplines have begun utilizing advisory boards for many purposes. Conroy, Lefever, and Withiam (1996) reported advisory boards are widespread in the hospitality education discipline, and they are "important but generally overlooked" (p. 86). They also provided guidelines for others considering establishing a board including advice on board composition and the role of members, among other issues.

Similarly, Dorazio (1996) reported on the experiences of a technical communication program at the State University of New York in establishing a board of advisors. Many benefits were gained from this relationship for students, faculty, and the board members including an updated curriculum, increased student job placement, and the development of a learning community among board members. Not unlike Dorazio's work, Benigni, Ferguson, and McGee (2011) turned their attention to advisory boards in the communication discipline. They found a little over one-third of the respondents they surveyed had advisory boards in place. Of those that did, boards were used for enhancing the visibility of the program, providing curricular guidance, and mentoring students. Having active advisory boards in the communication discipline has generally created positive experiences for all stakeholders.

Advisory boards are largely present in library education as well. One study indicated 66% of accredited programs in library education had an established advisory council at the time that article was published (Sykes & Roper, 1994). Their study revealed several purposes of advisory councils as reported by respondents, including: building relationships with professionals, planning, giving advice, and, to a certain extent, policy-making. They also note, however, some programs admitted to underutilizing their advisory board and these boards existed as "merely window dressing" (Sykes & Roper, 1994, p. 38). In the physical education discipline, issues are very similar. Advisory boards assisted with the development of new programs, created greater visibility of program faculty, identified opportunities for research partnerships, and interacted with students (Hicks, Hancher-Rauch, VanSickle, & Satterblom, 2011). Noted costs of maintaining an advisory board were logistical and material supplies as

well as the time investment required of faculty. However, the authors also noted the investments of money and time were far outweighed by the beneficial return to the program.

In engineering education, the situation may be similar. Aside from commonly noted benefits of advisory boards, Coe (2008) reported on a number of other benefits, namely in the areas of fundraising and accreditation. Boards can be direct sources of funds, equipment, or other resources, or can be advocates for the department or program seeking funding. This could be especially beneficial to student organizations with limited resources. Additionally, boards can assist in the accreditation process by giving input on curricular changes, programmatic outcomes, and overall objectives of the program. While all units that maintain advisory boards may not share these benefits, they are nevertheless considerably impactful.

Carnicom and Mathis (2009) reported on the establishment of an advisory board in an honors college that operated as a major tool for fundraising. This board was also invited to give guidance on the college's mission and vision and promote the honors college to the community. Their experiences, however, lend credence to the notion that advisory boards can be simply *advisory* or they can provide benefits such as tangible resources to the benefitting unit. Olson (2008) furthered this idea when he concluded:

A well-managed board can be an effective advancement tool, in the largest sense of the term: it can help you publicize your unit's accomplishments, cultivate potential donors, nurture existing ones, and extend your program's influence and support (p. C4).

### **Use of Boards in the Business Discipline**

Much of the available literature on advisory boards in higher education seems to indicate a higher presence of advisory boards in the business discipline as compared with other areas (Benigni, Ferguson, McGee, 2011). Perhaps this is due to the nature of the discipline itself and the idea these schools prepare future business leaders – the very people who come to serve on advisory boards. While the purpose of this article is not to speculate on why business-related disciplines tend to utilize advisory boards more often than other academic disciplines (if empirical evidence even supports that conjecture), it is beneficial to examine the practice specifically in the business education context. This should provide perhaps a clearer understanding for executive education professionals as well since business schools by and large provide the home to executive education initiatives.

Flynn (2002) wrote her advisory board was able to provide opportunities for student internships as well as publicity for the school. She cautioned, however, that a board must be “perpetually cultivated” (p. 44). This may include regular, in-person visits with board members or engaging them through specific assignments and requests. Others have noted that these visits (or other communications) should be spearheaded by a unit's dean, department head, or director (Conroy, Lefever, & Withiam, 1996; Flynn, 2002). Advisory board members can and should also be cultivated by providing them with recognition of their contributions (Newman, 2010). This may take the form of certificates of appreciation, small gifts, or hand-written notes of gratitude (Sykes & Roper, 1994; Hicks, et al., 2011; Newman, 2010).

Although college-level advisory boards may be a common sight, department- and program-level boards are also being put into practice. Andrus and Martin (2001) proposed a framework for managing an advisory board at the departmental level, specifically a marketing department. Their framework incorporated many common best practices, but they also stressed that “developing an advisory council is an evolutionary process in which the council functions

become more sophisticated” (p. 219). Those without existing advisory boards should note that careful consideration should be given to the role of members, board composition, and other issues, but these may change over time as the board members and university officials each become more adept in their respective roles.

Departmental advisory boards should involve members of the department’s constituency, such as marketing and business professionals, but some have opted to include alumni as well. Penrose (2002) suggested convening an advisory board comprised of the department’s influential alumni. This provided the benefit of members who were already familiar with the department’s programs, circumstances, and faculty. Surveys to board members proved especially helpful to faculty in evaluating and revising curriculum and overall the board was seen as a “terrific success” (Penrose, 2002, p. 82). Further, advisory boards may be able to influence a dean to make curricular changes though faculty members still play a larger role in this area (Athavale, Myring, Davis, & Truell, 2010). In fact, data suggest that curriculum issues are at the top of an advisory board’s list of responsibilities with program ideas and mission-related concerns also an important concern (Kaupins & Coco, 2002).

While the existence of an advisory board can be a boon to a college, department, or unit, these benefits do not come without effort and investment. Kilcrease (2011) noted that faculty identified a number of major challenges in working with advisory boards. First, boards must be involved in producing something meaningful such as tangible curricular changes or student internships. Second, boards must be diversified in terms of geography, business size, and level within the organization for example including regional and national companies as well as local non-profit organizations. Third, the faculty and the board members must have a positive and good working relationship. These issues may be barriers to an effective advisory board and can dampen the overall positive aspects of a board’s presence.

## **Executive Education in Higher Education**

An understanding of the unique position of executive education is important if inferences are to be drawn from other areas of practice in higher education. Thus, a short review on the purpose and importance of executive education for higher education is warranted.

As the global market becomes more competitive in talent growth, strategic innovation, and business intelligence, executive education programs are positioned to provide development opportunities for corporate and general public clients designed to enhance quality in leadership and management practices. This creates a perfect alignment with organizations that are looking for ways to build skills, capabilities, and competencies in their workforce. At the same time, employees are seeking to enhance their skill sets in order to build their capacity to learn, grow, and compete in an ever-changing marketplace (Conger & Xin, 2000).

Programs in executive education are designed to provide today’s professional with innovative experiences to enhance abilities in facing a demanding and dynamic workplace. Faculty, subject matter experts, seasoned-practitioners, and corporate partners deliver programs designed to increase the performance of both individuals and organizations. The executive education centers can become a potentially important venue to create research-practice relations between companies and colleges (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2004). Whether it is a company on-site delivered program, a web-enhanced program, or a program delivered at the university, executive education brings business professionals educational experiences that can have an impact both personally and organizationally. This interaction between research and practice can

then be seen as interdependent activities that engage faculty and practitioners to create knowledge and practice when linking program content to organizational outcomes (Huff, 2000; Weick, 2004).

The relationships created in executive education and professional development builds the relationship between the scholarship and practice and has been an underleveraged tool within business schools (Walsh, Tushman, Kimberly, Starbuck, & Ashford, 2007). As the landscape for providing educational services becomes more competitive, it becomes increasingly important to focus not only on the quality of the research, teaching, and service offered at institutions of higher education but also the corporate education that is delivered. Higher education institutions are finding more effective ways to deliver this impact through executive education by partnering with the brightest minds for customized learning opportunities to create educational experiences that focus on real-world solutions. Those brightest minds can be found in corporate partnerships, with faculty expertise, and through advisory council members who lend their knowledge and support to executive education programs and centers (Kilcrease, 2011).

Of those three areas mentioned, perhaps the advisory council is the least prominent and most underutilized model for capturing external expertise in departments of executive education. Executive education advisory councils can be utilized to enhance integrated developmental opportunities that fulfill the company requirements for talent recruitment, development, engagement, promotion and eventually retention.

### **Use of Executive Education Advisory Council Model**

In establishing our own advisory council, we relied on much of the information gleaned from the relevant literature as well as substantive input from knowledgeable key stakeholders. In true practitioner form, however, we also adapted available best practices to suit our unique operating environment. In many ways, our experiences reified many of the conceptualizations presented in the literature. Yet, in other ways, new modes of thinking were necessary for a good fit in the executive education environment. Before discussing our practice, it is important to uncover our core assumptions and mental models that informed our approach.

Developing strategic alliances between executive education centers and advisory council members often leads to creating executive programs that align the college's greatest strengths with the corporation's or industry's greatest needs. The ultimate goal would be to establish a process for integrating professional development programs, research, and the consultative needs of those council members as well as the constituents they represent (Dorazio, 1996).

Typically, council or board members would have no legal responsibilities, no vested obligation to serve, no protection from removal, no fiduciary responsibilities, and would serve as volunteers or representatives of their organization. Also, advisory councils are not typically an official component of the governance structure of a college within a college of business because it would not be responsible for overseeing the performance of the college of business and its executive leadership team (Olson, 2008).

So what are the benefits of creating an advisory council for an executive education program? Advisory councils can help executive education programs focus on advancing the mission of the college by providing ways to view rigor, research, relevance, and relationships in the pursuit of excellence in the development and delivery of corporate education. This relationship of the advisory council and executive education can provide a fresh approach to collaboration between organizations and businesses by developing optimal thinking and dynamic

processes for successful future business endeavors. The collective dialogue between these leaders and their organizations engenders ingenuity to develop compelling programs that invite innovation, shared knowledge, and integrated experience (Conger & Xin, 2000). Common sense and experience are the ingredients that produce insight, expanded imagination, and paradigm breaking activities for the council member organizations.

The relationship between the college and council members can create a safe environment for organizations to learn, plan for the future, and integrate ideas, innovations, and insights. The introduction of advisory council members to unique and stable partnerships will enhance the productivity and innovation of each member. Moreover, these partnerships, which integrate an outside perspective, will serve to facilitate the demands of member organizations by developing methods designed to create innovative and strategic business practices. Another value to member organizations is the opportunity to benchmark and network with the other members of the council. This creates an opportunity to “give back” to the college in a non-financial way.

Executive education centers can benefit by having an advisory council because of the association with the member companies and the peer-level-leader advocates. With their involvement in the business community, members of the council can also provide connections to other business leaders, human resource managers, and business groups that might not otherwise be available.

### **Executive Education Advisory Council in Practice**

To summarize much of the literature, advisory boards in higher education are varied and unique. A board serving a library will not look the same as one formed for a marketing department. Though many more insights are available, we found the following summative points to be particularly useful in the establishment of our board:

- Be clear that counsel, not control, is sought.
- Be purposeful in cultivating lasting relationships with board members.
- Utilize the board for assistance in updating curriculum, creating new programs, and staying relevant to the business community.
- Actively engage the board in meaningful, purpose-driven activities.
- Diversify the board, but do not lose sight of its purpose and what individuals can best contribute to the mission of your unit.
- Seek the board’s assistance in crafting your mission, vision, and goals; this engenders a sense of co-ownership.

Based on these insights, we present our experience with establishing and maintaining an advisory council for an executive education unit. An advisory council was established in the Center for Management and Executive Education at the Sam M. Walton College of Business in 2006. The center was being reinvented and re-established with the idea was that by adding an advisory council the members could help provide the framework for how the center should move forward as it identified its area of distinction, its focus, and the metrics to gauge measurement of success.

When the center began to bring together the council it wanted representation from leading state corporations, community minded volunteers, a diverse array of industry leaders, and faculty and staff from the college. The total membership was 15-20 members. It was important to establish a connection between cutting edge research and professional development.

Relationship building with organizations was important in order to design programs that focused on the learner and were adaptable to the learner needs. The center needed those experts to help with this process. The best possible avenue for this was the establishment of an advisory council.

The premise was the council could provide an understanding of how their employees would respond to program content, availability, and follow-up. One of the important areas identified as extremely important to the developing advisory council concept was an understanding of competitive pricing for executive education programs in the marketplace.

It became apparent there was no shortage of business executives wanting to increase and diversify their skills and the skills of those around them. The location of the executive education center in Northwest Arkansas provided access and marketing potential to Fortune 500 companies. Also, there was the potential for repeat customers; an increasing demand for higher level education and certification programs; and corporations with the desire for proximity to research experts. An opportunity for the companies to build stronger relationships with Sam M. Walton College of Business and the faculty existed. The center was offering an opportunity for practitioner experts from the business community to be a part of the development and delivery of programs. As we were building the council, our executive education center staff also realized there was a large group of retired executives in the area who could provide expertise and experience in developing a base for a distinct brand of programs that support initiatives focused on learners, the needs of organizations, and the needs of local communities

We then began to create the model for their advisory council. The mission of the advisory council was to assist the executive education center in achieving the center's vision and mission. The advisory council served as a link between the business community and the center by providing a forum for interaction and communication among stakeholders, community members and organizations, government, education, alumni, and faculty. The council was comprised of individuals representing these aforementioned stakeholders.

Operation of the council provided three core functions:

1. Providing access to people, resources and networks of strategic support. This was to become an expansion of the center's network of influential contacts and potential customers.
2. Building an awareness of the center by propagating success stories of the current programs and services.
3. Contributing advice and guidance on potential strategic direction for the center.

Each of the members donated their time to serving on the council and so it was very important to create a definition for the role of the council members in order to establish expectations. The role of council members was to:

- Provide high quality, cost-effective advice, insight, and with the center's strategic direction and challenges.
- Provide center with effective advice on improving performance
- Provide ongoing strategic advice as the center grows and evolves
- Help to deepen the understanding of changes within existing markets and assist with moving to new markets
- Provide information on the needs and views of customers.
- Provide feedback and advice on programs and curriculum.



- Communicate, endorse and advocate the center's interests to external constituencies, such as the community, business and the local, state, and federal government
- Provide a link to businesses, organizations, and government.

It was important to establish an advisory council chair who was a member of the corporate community and not from the university in order to make sure the discussions were based on corporate needs and not academic agenda. It was decided the ideal chair would have the following characteristics: good leadership skills, the competence to handle brainstorming and problem solving, the ability to regulate dominant personalities, and the capacity to stay objective during the council meeting. The chair worked with the staff of the center to create the agenda for the advisory council meetings.

Members of the council were asked to serve a two-year term but were informed they could continue as a member of the council upon mutual consent of the chair and council. The advisory council's term was based on the university fiscal year of July 1 to June 30. The final June meeting would be an annual wrap-up workshop to review the activities of the past year, and set goals/priorities for the coming year.

Council members were expected to attend two meetings per year. It was pointed out that as members of the council, in order to contribute effectively, they must be familiar with the center and its programs. Because of this, attendance and active participation in meetings were the most important commitments sought from council members. The council chose to meet more often when they desired.

The advisory council was comprised of a group of community minded volunteers from a diverse array of backgrounds. The council included 12 external members from business and industry in the state. Industry sectors represented included banking, service/government, manufacturing, healthcare (insurance), healthcare (hospital administration and operations), retail/wholesale, suppliers/vendors, supply chain logistics, consulting, and education. The council also included a faculty member from the Walton College, one college outreach center director, and staff members of the Center for Management and Executive Education.

The advisory council members were expected to attend all meetings with no substitutes being allowed in their place. They must be available for phone conference meetings between the regular meetings and they were expected to provide their own travel expenses. Additionally, they were asked to serve willingly on a committee.

The advisory council was made up of three committees: the assessment committee, the curriculum committee and the marketing and communication committee.

The assessment committee facilitated participation in the design and implementation of the outcomes assessment component of programs. They promoted quality and excellence in the identification and measurement of participant learning outcomes. It was important to establish an effective and efficient assessment process for each open enrollment and customized programs offered (open and custom) to help support and grow curriculum, to help instructors revise and update content, to provide insight into long-term educational effects, and to help market the outcomes of the programs. Creating a strong assessment system assisted in meeting corporate accountability expectations and helped to implement continuous improvement processes. Providing proof through assessment processes helped to document excellence in contributions to participant learning, showed the value of programs and services, and established accountability to the institution and stakeholders.

The curriculum committee provided guidance, advocacy, and supervision by ensuring the curriculum was professionally sound, comprehensive, and responsive to the evolving needs of the constituents. Areas of focus included talent development to include recruitment, engagement, development, promotion and retention; business intelligence; strategic innovation; diversity and inclusion; ethics and integrity; culture and generation; and global, multinational, regional issues. The council decided that it was important to build skills as well as performance driven behaviors.

The marketing and communication committee helped plan, develop, execute, and evaluate the overall marketing communications strategy. This was based on consumer insight, their company needs, and their constituent needs. The committee explored various approaches for developing the most effective integrated marketing strategies and the tactics necessary for successful implementation. There were many areas of marketing and communication that were important to manage and monitor. These areas include social media, webinars, podcasts, website, emails, and client management systems. The committee was asked to be proactive in recruiting new clients and use existing clients as lead generators/new business development. They were also asked to leverage relationships in trade associations and professional organizations. The committee created ways to establish value by offering certificates of completion for executive education programs. They also believed it was imperative to capture the branding and reputation of the college on all materials and website. They also created ways to establish price breaks for multiple courses/multiple enrollments, which also included sliding scales, and thresholds for non-profit rates.

It was important for the executive education staff to engage advisory council members by providing them periodic updates on activities, programs, initiatives, and college news. It was also important to show the members how their ideas were being implemented through strategic planning and with program development and evaluation. Sharing personal information (weddings, graduations, births, promotions) with staff and council members helped all members of the council to bond on a personal level.

It was vitally important for the council members to know they were extremely valuable members of the executive education center and the college. In the end, these members and their respective companies became participants in programs, provided center branding and strategic direction, facilitated programs, gave testimonials for success, sponsored events, became community advocates, remained loyal customers, and developed long-term mutually satisfying relationships with college personnel and their peers.

## **Conclusion**

Advisory councils for executive education bring unique knowledge, skills, and experience and can help create real-time solutions for professionals in a dynamic business environment. Their outside perspective is crucial building programs that are rigorous and relevant to today's leaders. Based on others' successful implementation of an advisory council as well as our own experiences, we urge others to consider how an advisory council might be beneficial to their own operations. Costs of time and money should be carefully weighed with the potential benefit to an executive education program. With successful implementation, there could be increased enrollments, revenue, and contract funding. At the very least, a well-managed council provides a phenomenal relationship building opportunity and yet another mechanism with which executive education can interface with the business community.

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