

Addressing the Challenges of Growing an Effective Advisory Committee

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Abstract

Career and technical education programs are required by federal legislation to employ advisory committees (Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, 2006). Unfortunately, many educators do not yet have the relationships, confidence, or experience necessary to make the most of such opportunities. This article was written to identify and address several of the challenges that educators face when working to grow an effective program advisory committee. Developing strategies for committee recruitment, organization, and involvement will help educators better support local students and employers.

Introduction

Career and technical educators are respected for their content area expertise. While many offer strong pedagogy, knowledge, and technical skills, the support of a program advisory committee can add value to any program. Properly managed advisory committees can ensure that instructors remain engaged with local stakeholders and active industry professionals. Furthermore, the committee can help instructors stay abreast of notable industry trends. These benefits are likely why the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (2006) mandated that career and technical education programs employ local program advisory committees. While there are many benefits to operating a successful advisory committee, some educators find it difficult to network outside of their school environment. This article was written to address several of the challenges that educators face when working to grow an effective program advisory committee.

Forming Effective Advisory Committees

Developing a career and technical education advisory committee can be a challenging assignment. The work of creating connections to industry and organizational partners can be both time consuming and intimidating. However, the benefits of developing school-community partnerships are undeniable. Partners have been known to provide guidance on current industry practices, mentorship for students and staff, program donations, and more. By identifying and addressing the challenges of creating an effective advisory committee, educators can learn to make the most of such relationships.

Teitel (1994) defines an advisory committee as a group of volunteers that meets regularly on a long-term basis to provide advice and/or support to an institution or one of its subunits (p.5). When forming an effective advisory committee, it is important to consider the intended scope of the program. Take time to identify the state standards, articulation agreements, and local employer demands that should be satisfied by program graduates.

While committees should include postsecondary, student, and community representatives, most members of the advisory committee should have expertise in a related career field. For example, if a Landscape Management program offers dual credits in agribusiness, horticulture, and landscape design, then members of the advisory committee should be recruited from each of these areas.

When deciding whom to recruit, one should consider a candidate's place of business as well as their position within the company. It may be insightful to hear from someone who is new to the industry, but if one of the program goals is to increase graduate placement with local employers, then it may be helpful to bring in an HR representative or a hiring manager. It is not essential that all committee members are corporate executives, but it is important that members are willing and able to help accomplish program goals.

Arrants (2011) believes that, "former students and employers provide the most valuable feedback when it comes to determining what your program delivers and what graduates need" (p.9). Many programs have found success by recruiting graduates who are working in related fields. Program graduates can serve as passionate and well-informed contributors. They may also offer impactful testimony regarding the effectiveness of the program.

Committee members may be recruited through current networks of guest speakers, student employers, etc. However, it is likely that educators will need to recruit some members from outside of their existing contacts. Outreach efforts may include cold calls, referrals, and/or introductions at industry specific events. Given our nation's current emphasis on the technical "skills gap" and college and career readiness, many technical training programs have experienced increased attention from employers. It may seem intimidating to meet with industry professionals face-to-face, but such a format is often more effective than a phone call or email invitation. Arrants (2011) suggests letting potential committee members know who you are and why you value their input (p.9). Educators who do not feel confident calling on community members are advised to partner in their outreach efforts with other instructors, existing community partners, and/or school administration.

Industry professionals are more likely to serve on advisory committees if they understand the benefits of participating. DiMattina (n.d.) suggests that benefits could come in the form of positive public relations, networking opportunities, and a higher quality workforce (p.2). Before approaching a potential committee member, it is important that educators develop a clear recruitment message that includes benefits to both students and committee members. If possible, recruiters should also be prepared to discuss time commitments, planned activities, and committee structure.

Schaeffer & Rouse (2014) noted that, "The major functions of advisory committees include those around assessment and counsel, assistance, promotion and advocacy" (p.3). Not only should advisory committee members be well informed of industry expectations, but they should also be passionate individuals who are interested in promoting the value

of the program. Meeting personally with potential committee members will help to determine whether or not the individuals have the confidence and communication skills necessary to effectively represent the program. It may also be beneficial to seek the counsel of someone with experience in advocacy and/or advertising, whether or not they join the committee full-time.

For those who work in geographic areas without much local industry, educators are encouraged to reach out to postsecondary partners, larger businesses in the state, and/or associations that support the targeted industry. It may also be possible to engage industry professionals using virtual tools such as Google Hangout, Skype, or GoToMeeting.

Advisory Committee Management

Once committee membership has been established, organizers must work to ensure that meetings address the needs of the program. Worth (2008) noted that “Advisory councils can make important contributions – both financial and otherwise – but they must be managed well to realize their full value to the institution” (p.49). A leadership structure, with roles such as chairperson and secretary, should be established. This structure will help to ensure that meeting dialogue is both efficient and well documented. The program instructor should not serve as the advisory committee chairperson. It is best if this role is held by a business or industry partner, so that the instructor can be free to contribute without the distraction of managerial responsibilities. Collaboration is vital to the success of an advisory committee, so the identified leader(s) must encourage cooperation among all participants. If conversation is routinely dominated by one or more members of the group, it may be useful to employ written questionnaires or post-it notes that are submitted anonymously and read aloud by the chairperson.

It is important to be sure that the entirety of formal meetings is purposeful. This can be accomplished by writing agendas that center on priority topics. Meeder and Pawlowski (2012) suggest that, “The number one priority is to focus on the quality of the program, its effectiveness in meeting the needs of students and employers, and creating a culture of action and excellence” (p.31). Time may be afforded to topics such as student goals, curriculum, equipment needs, upcoming activities, etc. Committee meetings should be scheduled regularly so as to allow for timely feedback throughout the year.

Advisory Committee Retention

Researchers Nagai & Nehls (2014) found that, “Focused expectations will help prevent feelings of disappointment or low satisfaction with board service” (p.13). It is also important to plan for advisory committee involvement in student related activities such as recognition ceremonies. Providing opportunities for members to get to know one another is worthwhile. Relationship building can occur at informal meetings or when attending student-focused events. Some educators struggle with advisory committees that have high turnover and/or low meeting participation. Member retention and engagement are strongest when individuals feel connected, and when they feel that their efforts are having a positive impact on others.

Addressing Ineffective Advisory Committees

CTE advisory committees are meant to provide guidance and support to educational programs. If a committee is no longer considered to be productive, then goals, activities and membership should be evaluated. It is important for the educator to define challenges facing the committee. If committee goals relate to program enrollments, and the enrollment numbers remain low, then it may be possible for the group to design more effective recruitment activities. If committee members regularly fail to show up for meetings, then a discussion with said committee members might resolve the issue. If the committee directs the program in a way that does not align with the program goals, then the committee may have a focus that is too broad or narrow. The educator has a responsibility to help address performance issues within the committee. Over time, it may be necessary to add, subtract, train, or replace committee members.

The Role of School Administration

CTE administrators play an important role in establishing and supporting program advisory committees. Administrators can show their support by participating in networking efforts, offering professional development related to advocacy and community engagement, and by allowing release time for committee activities. Administrators are strongly encouraged to participate in committee meetings, and to assist in accomplishing committee goals when appropriate. Instructors and committee members will be more likely to devote resources to program activities when they see that school administrators are also invested in helping to grow the program. Individual recognition, such as thank you notes, can also be used to show committee members that their participation is appreciated. In the event that an advisory committee is not operating effectively, either in the opinion of administration or the views of committee leadership, administrators should support instructors in rectifying the situation.

Conclusion

Growing an effective advisory committee can be a challenge. It takes time, effort, and strong communication skills to recruit a qualified advisory team. Following recruitment, detailed planning, goal setting, collaboration and follow through are required to make committee efforts fruitful. Investing in a strong advisory committee can pay dividends in the form of professional advice, mentorship, and classroom supports. While effort is required, an effective advisory committee can make the difference between an outdated program and a world-class training experience that inspires college and career ready graduates.

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