

Advisory Groups: A New Model

By Trenton Hightower

Few would argue with the concept that “two heads are better than one.” Forward-thinking organizations—including many community colleges—often seek the recommendations of a group of individuals to complement the knowledge of staff members and their boards of directors. Called an advisory group, this cadre of professionals is selected for experience and skills in a given subject area. In the case of community colleges, the existence of an advisory group is sometimes mandated by the terms and conditions of a grant. Other times, however, creation is driven purely by the institution’s desire to learn more about an issue from the perspective of community and industry leaders.

A well-chosen advisory group brings a fresh, informed perspective to the college as it attempts to shape programs, solve problems or determine a direction. Unlike a board of directors, however, an advisory group does not have formal governance authority. Rather, the advisory group serves only to make recommendations and provide opinions.

Recently, a poll was conducted among all 23 community colleges in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) regarding advisory groups. The feedback we received regarding the handling of this important function ranged at each college from “no advisory groups in place” to “one advisory group for each program area.” Some were very structured in their approaches, scheduling meetings formally and standardizing training procedures and expectations into manuals and handbooks. Others met infrequently or on an *ad hoc* basis, recording proceedings through informal notes.

The Focus Group Approach

In my 16-year career, I have watched many advisory groups come together enthusiastically, only to dissolve quickly and



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with frustration. Some estimates from a follow-up to the first survey say that by the third meeting of a 10–12 member advisory group, 30–50 percent of the participants will have stopped attending. Why? After reading the results of the VCCS poll, I believe part of the answer lies in how these groups are formed, and the structure they are given—or not.

While it is flattering to be selected as an industry expert, providing one’s opinions can easily be perceived as passive by the busy CEOs, human resource managers and business owners who typically make up an advisory group. In the absence of a list of tasks to accomplish, or goals to achieve, this group may quickly lose interest after the first meeting. Faced with the prospect of a year’s worth of “just talk,” these valuable volunteers could exercise their option to “just walk.”

To ward off advisory group attrition, I suggest a new model. Rather than the standard, ongoing advisory group structure, I suggest taking more of a “focus group” approach. Inviting professionals to participate in a very structured, two–three meeting series designed to elicit their best recommendations and keep participation fresh and ever evolving.

1. **Invite** up to 10 individuals from the

identified subject area, with different skill sets. Ask your entire team, as well as any other key individuals, to attend.

2. **Convene Meeting 1**, at which each is asked for thoughts, opinions and recommendations on issues related to the subject matter. Take care not to address perceived problem areas; don’t be defensive in any way. Carefully and thoroughly document everything that is said on flip charts. Brainstorm.

3. **Apply** the advisory group’s feedback to problem areas. Keep their recommendations front and center while you and your team seek to create new curriculum or initiatives. Document statistics, data and results.

4. **Convene Meeting 2** and deliver a presentation to the advisory group, letting them know what your team is doing with the feedback they have given. Mention existing programs. Give them information on new curricula. Use the opportunity to educate them, inform them on what your team is doing and thank them for their participation.

5. Two Months Later: **Optional Meeting 3**. If there are significant or impressive statistics, data or results to report, ask the advisory group back for a third session. Communicate the success stories, and thank them once again for their participation. Ask them to recommend industry professionals and community leaders to participate in future efforts—both inside and outside their fields.

Using this model, convene 3–4 advisory groups during the year. Depending on how well the group’s recommendations are implemented and the outcomes of these efforts, consider having an annual summit at which all past participants in any of the advisory groups held that year would come together for a final time. In addition to providing another forum at which to inform and educate industry leaders about your program, such a summit also benefits public relations.

Trenton Hightower is assistant vice chancellor for workforce development for the Virginia Community College System, Richmond, Virginia.