

Teaching Tip

Forming an Effective Information Systems Advisory Board

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of accreditation agencies are requiring institutions of higher learning to have program specific advisory boards. This paper describes a systematic approach that administrators can strategically use for recruiting, nurturing, and strengthening relationships with targeted advisory board members. This systematic approach was successfully implemented at universities where the author has held administrative duties.

Keywords: Advisory Board members, recruiting and retaining board members

1. INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of accreditation agencies are requiring institutions of higher learning to have program specific advisory boards. While it is fairly easy to meet this requirement, recruiting and retaining effective board members is easier said than done. Individuals who are committed in their civic duties often have multiple responsibilities in their communities. To obtain the most contributions from these individuals, administrators and faculty members must view this requirement as a process that requires vision, strategy, resources, and assessment that can produce lucrative returns. Specifically, it must not be merely considered as an annual compliance activity that is carried out in order to meet reaffirmation processes.

According to existing research, one of the biggest motivators influencing individuals to engage in partnership and collaborative relationships with institution of higher learning is access to a skilled work force and applied technology (Santoro and Chakrabarti, 2001; National Science Board, 1996; Geisler, 1995; Frye, 1993; Deutch, 1991). Given the shortage of skilled labor in the information technology sector during the last decade, this factor has indeed played a key role in helping universities in their recruitment of advisory board members. However, an effective advisory board that is focused primarily on the hiring needs of its

members rather than the advancement of the discipline may result in outcomes that are limited in their usefulness and could even hinder the institution in its advancement efforts.

2. THE SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

This paper describes a systematic approach that was used by the author for recruiting, nurturing, and strengthening relationships with targeted advisory board members. The systematic approach was implemented at universities where he has held administrative duties. It consists of seven components and they are presented in sequential order in this section.

2.1 Starting with a Shared Mission, Goals, and Objectives

Program mission and objectives represent the first set of critical component because they are the fundamental pieces of information that must be clearly communicated to prospective advisory board members. It is extremely important that every advisory board has a clear understanding of the mission of the program. Most of all, great care must be taken to ensure that the individual recruited truly identifies with the mission stated because this attribute affects the level of commitment and involvement in subsequent activities. Ideally, the individual should not have any reservations about the mission focus of the program. This condition

does not mean that new directions are censored or discouraged. Rather, this requisite is needed because new ideas and directions should always be consistent with the institutional mission. As a matter of fact, any reservations should always be openly discussed and weighed because if not it can result in harm to board harmony. For example, having an influential advisory board member who does not fully believe in open admissions to an information technology program that caters to an urban “high risk” clientele is most probably going to result in unnecessary disagreements in the future.

At the beginning of each appointment period, the individual solicited should be provided with a limited number of goals and objectives that will be executed during his/her term on the board. The individual should be interested in helping the program attain those goals and feel comfortable with the challenges inherent in the objectives. An understanding of the desirable goals and objectives on the front end is particularly important because it allows the individual to assess his level of commitment, understand the institution’s expectations of board members, and determine the degree of involvement he or she must allocate to the program.

2.2 Developing the Recruiting Package

To minimize misunderstanding, sufficient efforts should be placed on the development of a recruiting package for advisory board members. The items in this package can be sent to the prospective member in the form of hard copies, in electronic media, or can be placed onto a Web site. Typically, the package should consist of, but is not limited to, the following items:

- Letter of invitation. This document should be limited to one page, if possible. The duration of involvement or term of office should be included in this document. This document should always be a hardcopy that is generated using official stationary.
- Job description. This document should clearly state that advisory board members serve the program in an advisory capacity. In other words, suggestions and recommendations provided by board members are not obligations on the institution or the program. Such a clarification is extremely important because it provides the individuals with a proper understanding of their degree of influence and the limit of control on the program. A list of the areas where board members can render assistance to the program is also included here. Examples include student recruitment, placement, and fund-raising campaigns.
- Mission, goals, and objectives. This document should be consistent with those of the institution and the goals should be realistic and attainable. The individual should be able to infer from this document the involvement expected of board members.

- Institution, unit, and program description. This document should consist of a brief description about the institution, the department (faculty and their expertise, staff and student composition), and a listing of the program resources and descriptions (hardware and software as well as degrees and courses offered).
- Tentative meeting dates and times. This document should include a listing of the board meeting dates for the year. Ideally, the advisory board should not have more than two physical meeting each year. An excellent way to keep everyone informed throughout the year is to have periodic (quarterly preferred) meetings via the Internet.
- List of benefits for serving on the advisory board. Both personal and corporate or institutional benefits should be listed on this document.
- List of items needed from advisory board members. Such items may include a current curricula vitae for possible review by the reaffirmation team, a corporate or institutional portfolio for the unit library, a personal picture for display in the computer laboratory, and hyperlink information to the board member’s personal and corporate Web site.

2.3 Recruiting from Diverse Entities

A common method used by administrators and faculty members is to target executives from companies or agencies that hire the majority of their graduates. While this is a reasonable way to recruit needed board members, it is not a wise practice. Using this method, it is common to have a board that is filled primarily by individuals from large companies. Individuals from large companies may have computing needs that are different from those in mid-size and small businesses. By having an advisory board that is dominated by executives from corporate giants, it may result in the formulation of a curriculum that is biased towards them. In the event of a move by the major corporations to outsource or to relocate to another city, the placement of graduates may become a major problem. For this reason, it is always advisable to have a diverse advisory board that is composed of persons from as many industry sectors as possible as well as of diverse race, class, and gender orientation.

A diverse advisory board can also be helpful to the institution in a variety of ways. First, the presence of minorities on the advisory board can be a major recruiting tool. Female students and women faculty members are often drawn to institutions that show demonstrated commitments to diversity. Similarly, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Indians are also more receptive to enrolling or working in institutions where they can see first hand that people of their own race are already there.

An important observation that must be pointed out is

that every committed board member, irrespective of industry sector, can always bring something to the table. While it is true that individuals from the corporate sectors may be able to provide more donations in cash and kind to the program, administrators in public institutions can also render governmental services that are equally valuable. For example, when the author was in South Dakota, the Chief Information Officer of the State (one of the advisory board members) provided the broadcasting capabilities to help promote a major symposium and exposition.

2.4 Allocating Support Resources

While it is true that companies are willing to invest time and resources into institutions of higher learning because of their need for skilled labor, it is a major mistake to assume that the relationships with advisory board members can be nurtured or strengthened without any institutional cost. Sufficient money, people and assets must be allocated by institutions into the processes of creating an advisory board. Expenses needed can range from the obvious, such as money to pay for travel to board member job sites, to the costs for the food and drinks that are provided at physical board meetings. Other money and resource needs may include secretarial support that is needed for generating awards to outgoing board members, providing recognition plaques for corporate donations or agency services rendered, and purchasing frames that are used for placing pictures of advisory board members in the conference room. Web storage spaces and e-mail benefits afforded to advisory board members are two other examples of benefits that do require institutions to allocate resources for this relationship.

2.5 Using Innovations to Retain and Strengthen Relationships

Good advisory board members are hard to come by. To minimize the attrition rate among board members, sufficient attention should be focused on making sure that both parties are fully convinced that the relationship is mutually beneficial. Access to skilled labor may not be a sufficient reason for a highly effective individual to remain on the board. An effective advisory board is a coalition of individuals who offer more than a jointly developed idea. Board members must have opportunities to explore and nurture other opportunities that can benefit each other and their companies or agencies. All it takes is a new administrative paradigm that promotes other advisory board members as new resources, a creative mindset, and some innovative strategies. With the shift in paradigm, advisory board members will quickly see that the many obstacles are actually opportunities for new and equally important secondary relationships among themselves.

Some institutions have special support and access to governmental leaders and officers. This access can be a powerful leverage for retaining and strengthening relationships with board members. When the author

was at Southern University of New Orleans, the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs' husband was a highly respected Congressman. On occasions when he was in town, his presence and willingness to have lunch with targeted board members has greatly influenced their level of participation. At Dakota State University, the author was able to influence the faculty to nominate the Governor and a company (Gateway) represented on the board for an award. At the annual conference and exposition hosted by the institution, all advisory board members were present at the Award Banquet because the opportunity provided them with access to the Governor and selected members of the legislature that evening. During the annual board meeting the following morning, the discussions were filled with enthusiasm and offers for additional help and requests for onsite program delivery.

2.6 Assessing Contributions

An important characteristic of a successful advisory board is that individuals have different strengths. Complementary strengths, when combined, can enable individuals to make invaluable contributions to the institution and to each other. One way to assessing that potential is to have an inventory of every person's strength showing how he or she can enhance the value of the advisory board. Having this proper perspective of each one's strengths, board members can also better assess and predict their level of success on projects and recommendations made to the institution. Most of all, this comprehensive assessment can set the board relationship to a strong start, setting the stage for managing future issues affecting the institution.

Caught in the chase of recruiting top executives, administrators sometimes forget that some of the board members may have other long-term self-serving secondary motives that may actually harm the institution. Still others may have accepted appointments on the board with self-deceiving beliefs and incompatible interests. Individuals that do not meet deadlines, attend meetings, or participate in providing needed resources for recommendations made by the advisory board can hurt the morale and enthusiasm of the group. Feedback from the assessment of individual and corporate contributions throughout the individual's term of office can thus provide the needed data to administrators for making retention and separation decisions.

2.7 Charting Out Separation Provisions

Some advisory board appointments will not work out no matter how strong the reasons are for forging a relationship in the first place. Certain relationships are designed to be transitory because executives can be transferred to other geographical locations. Whether the termination is a natural step in the evolution of a relationship or is necessary because of certain unforeseen situations, it makes sense to plan ahead of time for an orderly separation. Otherwise, conflicts can

arise and the effort can end up in a bitter situation. It must be pointed out that disclosing transitory and exit provisions on the front end are not conveying a lack of confidence in a relationship. Rather it is an indication that the institution has the foresight to establish clear boundaries and has a comprehensive plan that can enhance the longevity of the relationship.

For relationships that are transitory in design, the institution may want to leave the trigger for terminating the relationship entirely in the hands of the corporate partner in order to convey its confidence in the success and value that is created in the partnership. In situations where the termination is necessary, it is extremely important to have explicit exit provisions. In particular, the provision should include examples of cases that may result in separation. Bottom line, the primary idea is to make the separation easy by minimizing entanglements and misunderstandings. With the exception of cases that may cause harm to the institution and the cohesiveness of the advisory board, sufficient efforts should be made to recognize the value and contribution made by the individuals at the time of separation.

3. CONCLUSION

When used strategically, the seven components provided above can greatly increase the participation rate of advisory board members and the effectiveness of their contributions to institutions of higher education. It is true that the guidelines indicated above appear simple. However, the key to success is inherent in the administrative attitude and commitment to the processes discussed. Most executives already understand that corporate participation in higher education is a must if they want access to a quality labor force and applied technology. Again, these factors alone do not maximize their interests and contributions in the institution. Administrative strategies and activities that can unlock the door to boost relationships and afford other indirect secondary competitive advantages are needed to seal their commitment.

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