

Function and Value of Advisory Boards for Academic Programs

Types and Functions of Advisory Boards

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Benefits of Advisory Boards for Students, Faculty and Board Members

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Faculty and administrators at colleges and universities are accountable to stakeholders for the relevancy and quality of academic programs. Advisory boards can support academic program accountability by providing guidance and feedback and serving as partners in research and community collaborations. This symposium will address the roles of advisory boards in academic programs. In four presentations, we will examine: 1) various types and functions of boards; 2) effective board construction and functioning; 3) examples of how a board participates in assessment; and 4) benefits of an advisory board. We will weave lessons learned throughout the symposium and will allow for 30 minutes of discussion with audience members. Participants in the symposium will receive a packet of information that includes a summary of the points covered in the presentation, a graphic display of how an advisory board fits within an assessment plan, and a resource list.

The first presentation will define the types and functions of advisory boards, with further description of those in use in departments of family studies and family and consumer education. The goal is for audience members to consider which type of board and what functions fit the needs of their respective academic programs.

The second presentation will use the twelve-year history of the Family Studies Advisory Board from Western Michigan University (WMU), from inception to the current effective board structure, to illustrate factors to consider when developing and maintaining a board. Emphasis will be placed on lessons learned and acknowledging the contributions of board members.

The third presentation will identify the role of a board in assessment of student learning outcomes. Four examples of how an advisory board can assist in setting student learning outcomes, assess student learning in field experiences and internships, and guide curriculum enhancements will be reviewed.

The last presentation will examine the benefits of advisory boards, including benefits to students, faculty, and board members.

Types and Functions of Advisory Boards

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Higher education is increasingly using university-community board partnerships to support and strengthen fundamental missions (Seifer & Carrier, 2003). This presentation will define, describe and provide a few existing examples of the types and functions of advisory board collaborations.

Definition

An advisory board is comprised of a group of university and community stakeholders from various local or regional institutions. In general, boards tend to have multiple labels, flexible structures and different foci. However, a well-selected board will align around common interests in active participation, shared mission, and direct influence with students, faculty, and other board members (Taylor, Marino, Greenhalgh, & Hudak, 2010).

Board Varieties

Since board types are differentiated by their institutional position in the organization's hierarchy (governing, advisory, and line), their functioning (working or workgroup), and their economic charge (profit, non-profit and governmental), their structures and responsibilities vary (Carver, 2006). In this presentation, the functions of governing, advisory and working boards will be highlighted.

Board Functions

A **governing board** has authority to lead the organization from the top (Carver, 2006). They are responsible for articulating the organizational mission and executing institutional plans as well monitoring the effectiveness of programs, and serving as a fiduciary for the fiscal health of the organization (Kezar, 2006). Hiring employees and CEO's, accounting oversight, establishing policies for personnel and staff evaluations fit under the governing board's responsibilities. In contrast, **advisory boards** are not expected to lead an organization. Their main function is to offer support to institution administrators and faculty (Conroy, Lefever, & Withiam, 1996). Advisory boards are comprised of accomplished experts offering innovative advice and dynamic perspectives (Stautberg & Green, 2007). Meeting quarterly or biannually, boards can provide strategic direction, guide quality improvement, and assess program effectiveness (Taylor et. al, 2010). Members' diverse range of knowledge(s), skills and abilities inform boards that are receptive to the 'culture of accepting outside ideas' (Stautberg & Green, 2007). **Working boards** can govern or advise. Their function is to "stay busy" at multiple levels within an organization, making their institutional position the top, middle or bottom (Carver, 2006). Sometimes called "workgroup boards", these boards function as governing and/or advising boards without the staff (Carver, 2006). This requires a high level of voluntary, uncompensated participation and underscores the 'work' in working boards.

Focus & University Models

In higher education, advisory collaborations have different emphases and foci. There are advisory boards that inform **research**, prevention and informed consent (Straus et. al, 2001). Others seek advice with **curriculum content** and job placement (Conroy et. al, 1996). Some more visible advisory boards, present in Family Studies are (Western Michigan University, Boise State and Kansas State), Family Therapy (Fairfield) and Family Consumer Sciences (Carson-Newman). University websites showcase advisory member organizations, faculty profiles, mission statements and recent university initiatives that originate from advisory board collaborations.

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Creating and Maintaining a Family Studies Advisory Board

Bryce Dickey, MS, CFLE

This presentation will use the twelve-year history of the Family Studies Advisory Board (FSAB) to illustrate effective board construction and functioning. Attention will be given to the board's increasing role in the assessment process.

The desire of the faculty to improve professional experience requirements and connect with employers of graduates led to the start of FSAB. Awareness of optimum board size (Conroy, Lafever & Withiam, 1996), and the importance of recruiting members with prior professional relationships (Pinto, Spector & Valera, 2011; Taylor, Marino, Rasor-Greenhalgh, & Hudak, 2010) helped the faculty generate an appropriate list of representatives of local human service agencies. Continuity of membership that prior relationships create (Pinto, et al., 2011) has enhanced FSAB functioning. Based on the need for members to agree on responsibilities (Pinto, et al., 2011), the FSAB mission and objectives was drafted by the faculty, and revised by members at the first meeting.

Two years of quarterly board and various sub-committee meetings generated valuable initiatives. However, time commitments were significant. Recognizing that members wanted to serve on an advisory board but not a working board, faculty recreated an appropriate board structure (Taylor, et al., 2010) currently followed by FSAB.

The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC, n.d.) states that co-curricular constituencies are important sources of evidence of student learning. Four years after inception, FSAB was placed in the assessment feedback loop for the family studies program. Formalizing the FSAB contribution to curricular assessment created improvements to the program, such as strengthening the professional experience requirements (Johnson & Heath, 2011).

FSAB has followed four fundamentals that support successful boards: 1) communication regarding program development; 2) student representation; 3) implementation of board recommendations when possible; and 4) continuous review of board objectives (Taylor, et al., 2010). FSAB meetings include updates regarding programmatic changes, the mission and objectives are regularly reviewed, and the student organization president is a board member. Because members value a sense of accomplishment, (Taylor, et al., 2010) implementing board recommendations, when appropriate, has been a prime focus.

Supporting a successful board includes making the meeting experience enjoyable, establishing realistic time commitments, and showing appreciation (Taylor, et al., 2010). Easing meeting participation includes supplying parking passes, strong email communication, providing snacks and making the environment comfortable and conducive to open discussion. Name tents, introductions, following the agenda and keeping within the scheduled meeting time are valued. Appreciation must go beyond the quite genuine "thank you for your time and effort" expressed by faculty. FSAB members identified the following as significant forms of appreciation: 1) faculty listen to and make positive program changes on the basis of board input, 2) formal letters of appreciation to the members' supervisor or agency CEO, 3) certificates of appreciation for placement in the foyer of their agency, 4) tickets to university sporting events, and 5) the university president or college dean attending a meeting to demonstrate administrators' value for the community-university partnership.

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The Role of Advisory Boards in Assessment

Karen Blaisure, PhD, LMFT, CFLE

Advisory boards can play an important role in assessment and in improving academic curricula (Penrose, 2002; Henderson, 2004). Student learning outcomes and curricula that reflect community needs and employer expectations can prepare students to succeed as entry-level professionals (Taylor, Marino, Rasor-Greenhalgh, & Hubak, 2010). Assessment centers on two questions: what do we want students to know and be able to do, and how will we determine the level of their knowledge and skills. These questions are answered through setting learning outcomes and using direct and indirect methods of assessing student learning. The answers then guide improvements in instruction and curriculum development (Robertson & Beck, 2003).

For 12 years, family studies faculty have actively sought Family Studies Advisory Board (FSAB) members' input about curriculum and preparation of interns and graduates to assume professional responsibilities. FSAB members have engaged in extensive conversations about these topics during regularly scheduled meetings and in follow-up correspondence. As a result, faculty have adjusted teaching strategies, modified content of courses, and emphasized to students what potential employers are expecting from interns and successful job applicants. This presentation will highlight a model of how an advisory board fits into an assessment plan and how the board features prominently in setting and assessing student learning outcomes. Four assessment initiatives will illustrate FSAB's role in assessment.

Initiative 1: Tracking Experience

Through discussions and task group meetings, FSAB members designed a matrix for supervisors and students to track the family life education content areas and behavioral competences associated with students' field experiences and internships (Dickey, Farrer, Smith, & Blaisure, 2003). This matrix led to the development of an online portfolio used to assess student learning. The behavioral competencies portion of the matrix led to the construction of a grant-funded project evaluation tool for supervisors (Western Michigan University, 2011).

Initiative 2: Strengthening Communication Skills

As a result of FSAB members' indirect assessment of students' communication skills, strengthening their writing skills now begins in the 1000-level introductory course, continues through 2000 and 3000 level courses, and culminates in the 4000-level writing course. In addition, the introductory course was changed from two to three credits and students are required to take a public speaking course.

Initiative 3: Confirming Professional Standards

In 2003, all field experience and internship supervisors began using an FSAB-generated tool to evaluate students' professional behaviors, attitudes and skills. In 2011, FSAB members confirmed the importance of these professional behaviors, attitudes, and skills. In response, faculty are holding students accountable for professional conduct in courses and are developing assignments that address such professional attitudes as integrity.

Initiative 4: Adjusting Course Topics and Requirements

Recently FSAB members provided feedback on two courses by indicating the level of importance of the topics covered in the courses and describing what they expect an employee to do related to a topic (e.g., presentation to clients, in-services, newsletter article, one-on-one conversations). Faculty are modifying course topics and requirements to align with FSAB input.

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Benefits of Advisory Boards for Students, Faculty and Board Members

Linda Dove, MS, ZA

Academic programs report multiple benefits from active advisory boards (Penrose, 2002). This presentation highlights the benefits for students, faculty, and board members themselves.

Benefits to Students

Students benefit from an advisory board in many ways. When FSAB members are guest speakers students hear examples of how their degree program prepares them for a range of positions. An improved curriculum ensures students receive an education responsive to community needs (Taylor, Marino, Rasor-Greenhalgh, & Hudak, 2010). Board partnerships contribute to “community-responsive, culturally competent” professionals (Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2012, ¶1). Board members’ discussion of the successes and needs of their agency and clientele affirms curriculum choices and decisions to enhance the rigor of coursework. As a result, students graduate from a program that is viewed as credible and useful to community organizations and agencies.

Benefits to Faculty and the Program

Assessing the quality of student learning is a priority in higher education (Robertson & Beck, 2003; New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, 2012). Because of FSAB’s involvement in assessment, faculty have modified assignments and learning outcomes, and adjusted teaching strategies. Faculty model how to involve community members in curriculum development, an established practice in family life education (Andrews, Bubolz, & Paolucci, 1980; Bruss et al., 2010). Faculty have gained additional credibility with students as FSAB provides an efficient mechanism for learning about changes in licensing, procedures, community services, program funding, and data on the local community.

Benefits to Advisory Board Members

Relying on our advisory board is one way we are ensuring a vibrant academic program that prepares successful entry-level professionals. Interns and graduates enter organizations and agencies more appropriately prepared to work in the community without agency staff taking time to “teach” basic skills (Taylor et al., 2010). At the 2012 FSAB meeting, members reported that our students and graduates were better prepared to enter their organizations and agencies than five to six years ago. Members express satisfaction with contributing to the program, recently stating: “we are listened to and see change because of our input.” Witnessing their contributions resulting in program change and student improvement has kept board members returning to serve on the board year after year.

Another benefit for board members is that they report what is occurring in their agencies or organizations. Board meetings and subsequent emails with minutes and updates provide vital ways for members to share materials, programming updates, and community events. Information on important family services are dispersed “thus adding a richness to what we are doing” and enhancing collaborations among community agencies and organizations.

Finally, a mutual benefit is that all parties are ambassadors for one another. Board members promote our program to prospective students and stakeholders in the community. Faculty guide students to community agencies that will fulfill their interest, passion, and skills in working with families. Students and alumni carry with them knowledge of varied agencies and services.

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