



Advisory Groups: A New Model

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 their 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, their 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 they attempt to shape programs, solve problems or determine a direction. Unlike a board of directors, however, an advisory group does not have formal governance authority. In other words, they cannot issue directives which must be followed, nor are they responsible for the implementation of a strategic plan, the development of procedures or policy oversight. 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 WDS regarding advisory groups. The feedback we received regarding how this important function was handled at each college ranged 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 their training procedures and expectations into manuals and handbooks; others met infrequently or on an *ad hoc* basis, recording proceedings through informal notes.

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

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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 comprise 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 and "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, 2-3 meeting series designed to elicit their best recommendations will keep participation fresh and ever-evolving.

1. **Invite** up to ten 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 are asked for their 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. Document everything that is said carefully and thoroughly 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. Two Months Later: **Meeting #2.**
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. They will learn about the college and your programs during this meeting.
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—inside their fields, and outside. Celebrate and thank them for their time!

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