MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR ADVISORY COMMITTEE

by

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1. Why Advisory Committees?

They work.

Advisory committees are a widely accepted strategy for gaining maximum relevance for students in educational programs. Such committees are especially important for keeping career or vocational education realistic and closely related to the world of work in a specified region or location.

The investment in such advisory committees for career and vocational education is often considerable. The time and energy of the members is a substantial contribution. The effort to recruit members and to develop the committee's usefulness is a major effort by career or vocational educators.

To provide for an economy of investment for such advisory committees and to insure their maximum effectiveness is a major problem. This special paper discusses some dimensions of this problem, some solutions and a set of priorities for developing and using advisory councils for career or vocational education.

They are sometimes required.

Annual New Jersey guidelines for vocational-technical education funding applications, the New Jersey State Plan for Vocational Education and the Federal Vocational Education Act Amendments of 1968 require that applications for funds be developed in consultation with and be reviewed by a local advisory committee prior to submittal. A "Statement of Assurance" that an advisory committee has been formed as well as a list of names and affiliation of the members, must be maintained on file in the office of the local educational agency. Such a statement is not submitted with the application but the State reserves the right to request it for review at any time.

According to the guidelines, this advisory committee should be appointed by whatever official body is responsible for the proposed program. The committee should consist of at least five members, none of whom are employed by the local educational agency, and be broadly representative of employers, organized labor and the general public. The committee members should be persons whose job responsibilities and experience are appropriate for the particular program being proposed.

In addition, the guidelines require that a Special Needs Advisory Committee must be formed where disadvantaged and/or handicapped programs are being developed and conducted. Members of the committee must be knowledgeable in dealing with the characteristics of handicapped and disadvantaged students.

2. Advisory Committees That Work Well

New Jersey's experience — borne out by the experience of other states and the Federal government — is that there are definite features characterizing effective advisory committees for career or vocational education.

Advisory committees are effective when:
- the advisory committee's duties and purpose are made clear [These should be worthy of the members, not cumbersome, clerical or beyond the capability of the group.]
- the advisory committee's authority is made clear [The more responsibility a committee is given, the more responsibly it will act.]
- the members are selected to assure achievement of the stated objectives. [The members should also know how and why they were chosen.]
- the appropriate procedures for prompt and meaningful action are accepted
- the most capable chairperson is appointed or elected

- the problems that are dealt with are real
- the interchange of ideas is free and members consider themselves to be co-equal partners in a worthwhile endeavor
- the agenda is based on concerns which members consider important
- the members get support from staff
- the members have or get firsthand familiarity with the program operation they are advising
- the sub-committee work is handled smoothly
- the problems that are faced require a wide divergence of information and careful judgment unavailable in any single individual
- the individual members have ample opportunity to participate. [Such participation will generate greater interest. When a person helps formulate a plan, he/she becomes more concerned that it is implemented.]
- the results are interpreted to the members [Feedback fosters a sense of accomplishment and assures a steady course.]
- the advisory committee evaluates its work periodically.

3. Objectives of Advisory Committees Concerned with Overall Vocational/Career Programming

Some advisory committees study and recommend improvements to the entire program of vocational or career education. Such a group is usually made up of community leaders. They recommend general policies in relation to the total vocational-technical or career education effort of a school, school district, or region.

This type of advisory committee has an important role to play, despite the broadness of the educational program involved. Maximum use of community resources, realism of training, and assisting with teacher-employer contracts are values built into this type of advisory committee by the representativeness of its members.

4. Objectives of Advisory Committees Concerned with Specific Vocational/Career Areas

In addition to advisory committees concerned with general policy, there are more specialized advisory groups for specific trades, crafts or clusters of occupations. There are also separate advisory groups for special needs students.
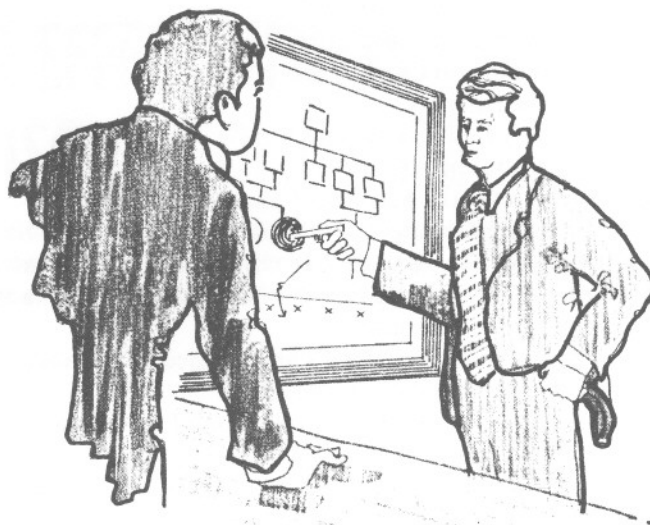
Effective advisory committees are needed in every major vocational area. They often have functions as follows:

a. To speak on behalf of employers and employees from specific occupational areas.
b. To serve as a communication channel between the school and occupational groups in the community.
c. To list the specific skills and suggested related and technical information for the program and courses required for entry into and promotion within a career area.
d. To advise on the type of skills, knowledges, and attitudes needed to prepare students for entering into a specific occupation.
e. To recommend physical facilities and types of equipment needed for a specific occupational program.
f. To make suggestions which will promote and assure the highest quality program.
g. To recommend standards of competency and achievement which are necessary for entry into employment and promotion within an occupational area.
h. To recommend competent personnel with appropriate educational, business and industrial experience as potential instructors or administrators.
i. To assist with an evaluation of the program of instruction.
j. To suggest ways for improving the dissemination of program information to potential students and employers.
k. To assist in recruiting potential students, providing internships, and in locating appropriate jobs for qualified graduates.
l. To keep the school or college informed on current specific needs and changes in the labor market.
m. To provide a means for the school or college to inform the community of needed occupational programs.
n. To assess program needs in terms of the needs of the community.
o. To assist in long-term program planning.

5. Finding Effective Members

Considerable attention should be given to the careful selection of members of advisory committees. Some will want to be involved because they have valuable expertise. Others will want to participate because they have some special interest at stake. Still others may see membership as a step up the ladder in terms of prominence in the community. An advisory committee includes persons who are involved because of their membership in other groups.

Care should be taken to select informed and capable individuals. Their representing other organizations should be secondary to being effective members. Here is a list of desirable characteristics for advisory committee members:

- present or potential competence for understanding the program to be improved
- personal interest
- available in terms of time, health, and location
- cooperative approach to complete tasks
- ability to view matters objectively
- respect and tolerance for the views of others
- when members come to think highly of the group's responsibility, they are likely to be most productive. Look for people who can assume such an attitude.

The funding application guidelines suggest these persons participate in the advisory committee:

a. Educators, preferably not employed by the school or district, who are involved in vocational-technical or career programs.
b. Community leaders (associations, organizations, groups.)
c. Business and industry representatives.
d. Labor representatives.
e. Consultants from outside educational agencies or from other local educational agencies who have had experience in planning or conducting educational or other programs and projects which require planning efforts. Examples: State staff representatives, teacher educators, professionals from area or from other local districts, members of planning boards, etc.
f. Student representatives.
g. Alumni of vocational-technical or career programs.
h. Representatives of government community agencies.

6. Finding An Effective Chairperson

There is probably no more important step in developing an advisory committee than the selection of its chairperson.

This person must maintain calm, balance, and order. The best must be drawn from everyone. Things must be kept moving at a reasonable speed and in the right direction. He or she must remain as objective and task-oriented as possible.

A solid knowledge of committee functioning, human relations skills, and the program being studied would be helpful for the chairperson. Just as important is a constructive approach and a positive appreciation for the contributions of others.

Frequently, the chairperson's role will be that of discussion leader. Therefore, he or she should be able to recognize good ideas and be able to draw more from the people who have them.

The chairperson will need to work formally at times and informally at other times. But mainly, he or she should keep before himself/herself and the advisory committee:

- the total purpose of the advisory committee
- the immediate task at hand
- the potential contributions of various members
- an urgency for responsible decisions and follow-through

7. Steps for Insuring the Effectiveness of Advisory Committees

The effectiveness of an advisory committee for vocational/career education is no accident. It is the result of careful preparation and follow-through.

The following steps are recommended as a solid approach to insuring their effectiveness:

(a) Develop a clearly written statement of the objectives, duties and authority of the advisory committee, including the authority of its subcommittees and the roles of the staff persons to work with the advisory committee; many committees use a prepared notebook including by-laws.
(b) Limit the maximum size of the advisory committee to 12 to 15 members.
(c) Arrange for a written agenda for each meeting, to be distributed to members before the meeting, including:

Roll Call
Introduction of Guests
Approval of Previous Minutes
Financial Report

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR ADVISORY COMMITTEE

This instrument can provide for the self-evaluation of advisory committees for career and vocational education in terms of functions they typically fulfill. It also can assist in the setting of future goals, looking toward future assessment.

Typical Functions	ESTIMATED PERCENT OF UTILIZATION				
	0	25	50	75	100
A. Represents a broad selection of appropriate advisors:					
* Workers now on the job					
* Educators					
* Community organizations and groups					
* Business and industry					
* Labor groups					
* Students					
* Recent graduates					
* Local and State government					
* Senior citizens					
B. Assists in short and long range planning:					
* Assessment of student needs, interests, and abilities					
* Assessment of labor market needs and conditions					
* Assessment of community resources					
* Assessment of local educational agency priorities and policies					
* Responsive to regional, State and national conditions, goals and objectives					
* Recommends priorities					
C. Communicates important information to the community:					
* Newsletters					
* Radio					
* Television					
* Publications, such as pamphlets, posters, reports					
* Press releases					
* Recommendations to key agencies					
* Speakers' bureau					
* Formal events such as luncheons and dinners					
* Workshops					
* Exhibits					
* Personal communication					
* Program information widely disseminated to prospective students					
D. Communicates important work-related information to the school:					
* Provides information on the labor market					
* Makes appropriate recommendations concerning course objectives (including needed worker competencies), content and procedures					
E. Recommends competent personnel to meet program needs:					
* Maintains an inventory of capable instructors					
* Personal contacts with potential instructors					
* Personal contacts with present instructors to discover the currency and relevancy of their instruction					
* Recommends a screening policy for new instructors					
F. Assists with evaluation of the instructional program:					
* Facilitates follow-up activity					
* Studies placement results					
* Makes recommendations for increase relevancy of programs					
* Visits some programs for first-hand assessment					
* Assures compliance with necessary regulations (e.g., affirmative action)					
G. Other functions:					
* _____					
* _____					
* _____					

Special Presentations
Communications
Reports of Committees
Old Business
New Business
Adjournment

(d) Arrange for the keeping of minutes and other records as appropriate.

(e) Organize short term or long term subcommittees as appropriate to simplify and improve the work of the total advisory committee.

(f) When committee members are assigned tasks, make the assignments clear and specific.

(g) Arrange for appropriate evaluation of the advisory committee's work on a periodic basis.

(h) Arrange for follow-through to the work of the advisory committee.

(i) Give public recognition to the members: at public meetings; through press releases; through personal letters of appreciation or a special certificate of appreciation; it would also be a good idea to include the list of members on advisory committee stationery or publications.

8. Mistakes to Avoid

Experience has shown there are some major mistakes which should be avoided in the utilization of advisory committees:

(a) Avoid meeting for the sake of meeting. Advisory committees are expensive in man-hours.

(b) Avoid giving a decision to the advisory committee which could better be made by a staff person or which is not particularly important or when execution rather than decision is really the problem.

(c) Avoid compromises when they are not productive or adequate to the problem faced.

(d) Avoid alienating those with unpopular opinions.

(e) Avoid having a chairman who unduly dominates the group.

(f) Avoid manipulation of members as the secret agenda to your meetings; avoid anything which resembles a "rubber stamping" of decisions already made.

(g) Avoid a complacent attitude in relation to the advisory committee. When attendance drops, morale sinks and the level of discussion stays at the trivial or superficial level, the advisory committee is in trouble and requires improvement.

9. Suggested Readings

The "ED" documents listed below can be secured by New Jerseyites in microfiche form without charge from the N.J. Occupational Resource Center, Building 871, NJJCC, Plainfield Avenue, Edison, New Jersey 08817.

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