

Advisory Committees Provide Job Insurance



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By George Arrants

MANY OF US HAVE HEALTH, life, car and home owners insurance, but how many career and technical education (CTE) educators and administrators have job insurance? Over the years, I have worked with schools across the country and whenever I hear about a program that is closing or has closed, I only need to ask one question: “Did the program have an active advisory committee?” One hundred percent of the time, the answer is “No!” If the industry does not know you are there, then they won’t know when you’re gone.

An active and well-represented advisory committee is like having job insurance. Unlike you, the educator, they have no chain of command to work through. They are the taxpayers in the community and in some cases they are very powerful taxpayers. They can request information as well as demand support for the program all the way to the superintendent or school board.

Looking at it from both sides, Janeen Hackney, associate dean at Odessa College, in Odessa, Texas, says: “As a secondary CTE educator, my advisory commit-

tee not only helped my program become one of the best in the nation, it was like having a highly fortified stronghold protecting the very existence of my program. Now that I am an administrator for a Texas community college, I see that the quality of our CTE programs depends on the quality of their advisory committees.”

The Importance of Advisory Committees

Three years ago, a local school board in Texas was considering closing the automotive collision program. The advisory committee members, along with other local employers, attended the board meeting and spoke on behalf of the program to communicate its value to the community. The program is currently alive and well and working to achieve National Automotive Technician Education Foundation (NATEF) accreditation.

Technically, CTE programs only have two customers: the students they are training for the workforce, and the businesses and industries that will hire them. Like any successful marketing program, you have to determine the needs of your customers and make adjustments accordingly in your product or services. If you do not, your customers will go somewhere else.

“Effective program advisory committees represent a bridge between the program and the industry and they are instrumental in sustaining, renewing and revitalizing training programs,” said Bill Kersten, president of NATEF.

Perkins and certain program accreditations require two advisory committee meetings a year. These meetings should not have to be required. They should be a desired partnership between education and industry. In many cases, however, business and

education have been islands unto themselves; as a result, student retention and job placement have not been as successful as they could be. Your program’s success, to a great extent, will depend on how these partnerships are developed. Don Gray, former CEO of Automotive Youth Educational Systems (AYES), said: “You can’t manage what you don’t measure.” How do you measure your program’s success? You have to ask your customers.

Getting Advisory Committees Involved

The advisory committee at Cypress Ridge High School, located in Houston, along with SkillsUSA officers created a letter jacket for automotive technology. The criteria for earning a letter was developed by the officers and presented to the committee. The committee reviewed and revised some of the requirements and forwarded it to the school district. Once approved, the committee agreed to pay for all letters and jackets earned and have continued to do so for the last seven years.

The committee members believe that this was an excellent way to market and promote the program. Annually there are between 65 and 80 applications for the program; this year there were more than 200. The committee sponsors an annual awards banquet for all the students and their families, pays for the meal, and distributes awards to high achieving students. Instructor Joel Mooneyham states, “The advisory council should be a driving force in the career program. There are other perks that can surface in these types of councils. For the school, donations of funds, technical information, equipment, etc. can also benefit the program. For the business partner, students who are

career-ready entering the workforce can be employed through an internship at a business partner's company."

The school's principal, Claudio Garcia, believes that it is invaluable to get feedback from business and industry about what they are looking for from graduates.

"It also gives us an opportunity to form strong relationships and partnerships with our area businesses. Another thing that I think is important is that it gives me, as a principal of a high school, a way to get information out to business leaders about programs and initiatives that we have on our campus."

Building an Advisory Committee

Getting people to serve as an advisory member seems to be a major obstacle for program instructors. There are always people to serve on the committee; you just need to know where to look and how to involve them. First, ask yourself, "Who is a good candidate to serve?" My answer is: employers, related occupations, suppliers, former students, manufacturers and consumer groups, and instructors who teach at the secondary or postsecondary level. The former students and employers provide the most valuable feedback when it comes to determining what your program delivers and what (the graduates) need.

Gayle Flowers, director of Career, Adult and Alternative Education at Caddo Parish, in Shreveport, Louisiana, said, "School board members listen to business and industry representatives differently than they do school administrators. Ideas and suggestions from area employers are taken very seriously by school board members who consider them as they set, change and adjust priorities that require the investment of financial resources, human capital and other forms of district leadership and program support."

Scheduling a meeting is very important. You have to be mindful of your committee members' schedules. Consider the "what's in it for me?" question when scheduling a meeting. Have you ever sat

through a meeting and when it was all over you said under your breath: "Why did they waste my time?" Well, it's the same with any meeting you have, especially when you are asking business and industry to provide you with their valuable time; when the meeting is over, they should not feel there was nothing there that benefits them. That's where planning and a solid agenda that stimulates discussion, advice and recommendations ensure that you've covered the "what's in it for me?" question.

Recruiting members and scheduling meetings that are convenient for people in business and industry is crucial to success. Recruitment of members requires more than just mailing an invitation or making a phone call. You will need to go out and meet the business community and build relationships. The date and time of the

meetings should not be what is convenient for people in education, but instead accommodate what works best for all of your members. Let them know who you are and why you would like their input and recommendations. Also, remember to ask the best way to communicate with them, and when it is convenient for them to meet.

All departments of government, large corporations, small businesses, organizations and school districts pay consultants to assist and guide them with important decisions. Your advisory committee is your consultant, and there is never an invoice to pay. **I**

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