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Advisory Councils in Higher Education

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Table of Contents

Section 1: <i>Introduction to Advisory Councils</i>	1
Section 2: <i>Purposes and Responsibilities of Advisory Councils</i>	9
Section 3: <i>Organization and Management</i>	18
Section 4: <i>Tips for Effective Advisory Councils</i>	32
Section 5: <i>Pitfalls to Avoid</i>	40
Section 6: <i>Conclusion</i>	42
Appendix A: Sample Bylaws	44
Appendix B: Sample Position Description	52
Notes	53
About the Author	55

Introduction to Advisory Councils

This book provides an overview of advisory councils in higher education and offers practical advice on how to establish, manage, and utilize such groups to advance the goals of an institution. Advisory councils serve different types of institutions, and their purposes and roles—which are often determined by presidents, deans, and other administrators, depending on the type of support and assistance that they need from the councils—vary widely. Advisory councils require some time, effort, and expense to create and maintain, but for most institutions, the benefits received are very worthwhile.

Each institution's circumstances and needs are unique, making it challenging to pinpoint an ideal model for advisory councils. Rather than identify universal *best practices*, this book provides examples of what various advisory councils are doing now and suggests *promising practices* for institutions to consider.

DEFINING ADVISORY COUNCILS

The groups discussed in this book have the following characteristics:

- *They are external.* The advisory councils that are the focus of this book may include faculty or other internal campus members, such as staff or students, but their membership is primarily made up of individuals from outside the campus.

- ***Their membership is selective.*** Members are elected or appointed. Membership is not an automatic result of making a gift—although it is common for major donors to be selected for service on an advisory council, and some groups do have a giving requirement for members.
- ***The entities they serve vary.*** Many serve an entire institution or a college or professional school within the institution. Others are related to specific academic departments or disciplines, research centers or institutes, or administrative areas—for example, student services or athletics.
- ***They do not have governing authority.*** They exist to provide advice, advocacy, assistance in fundraising, and other types of service to the institution. Some have formal bylaws and operate in a highly structured way, but others are informal and serve primarily as sounding boards for presidents and deans. Some have *influence* on important decisions. For example, some may provide input on searches for presidents and deans. But they are not the governing boards of their institutions. Nor do they have legal responsibility for a foundation or an incorporated alumni association.
- ***They are directed primarily by a president, dean, or other administrative leader.**** Unlike boards that have governing responsibilities and thus are accountable to the public or a particular constituency or membership, advisory councils exist only to assist institutional leaders in advancing the college or university. They have no employees and no formal authority to hire, evaluate, or fire any institutional officer.

The groups discussed in this book are known by many terms, including boards and councils. Some writers have suggested that it would be useful to maintain a distinction, reserving the term *board* for groups that have governing responsibilities and identifying those that do not have such responsibility as *councils*, but the terms are often used interchangeably. I use *councils* in this book, except where a specific example uses a different term.

BOARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Advisory councils are increasingly common in colleges and universities. Many institutions have numerous councils. For example, at Whittier College, the Poet Council provides strategic advice to the president. Many universities have councils working with the deans of colleges and schools and with the directors

* For simplicity, this book generally refers to “presidents and deans,” although some advisory councils support department chairs, program directors, and others.

of various other units. Tufts University has ten advisory councils—one for each of its schools, an international council, and one associated with athletics. Penn State has advisory councils that serve academic units on its main campus and also its regional campuses throughout the state. Advisory councils have been created to meet non-governance-related needs that citizen governing boards alone cannot address in an increasingly challenging and demanding environment.

Boards of both independent and public colleges and universities face public scrutiny and are called upon to exercise careful oversight of their institutions, addressing the expectations of students, government, alumni, the media, donors, and other constituencies. That calls for board members who bring specialized expertise in business and various professional fields and who can focus their attention on their governing responsibilities. But the operations of colleges and universities are complex, and many require expertise that the governing board alone may not provide.

For instance, all higher education institutions, both public and independent, are facing a growing need for philanthropic support to supplement or replace other sources of revenue and to generate capital for growth. For that reason, many boards are increasingly expected to provide leadership in giving and in the cultivation and solicitation of philanthropic support. These multiple demands and priorities require the involvement of individuals beyond those who serve on the governing board and, in public institutions, the board of institutionally related foundations. Advisory councils have been established to increase the range of volunteer expertise, energy, and commitment available to institutions in pursuing their goals.

TYPES OF BOARDS AND COUNCILS

Understanding advisory councils requires placing them in the context of the various volunteer groups that serve colleges and universities. These groups vary widely in their roles, responsibilities, and activities, and there are sometimes complicated relationships among them. These groups commonly include governing boards, institutionally related foundation boards, alumni association boards, and donor recognition societies.

GOVERNING BOARDS

The legally constituted governing board of a college or university holds full fiduciary authority and responsibility for the institution. In independent colleges and universities, the governing board is usually self-perpetuating, meaning that

Purposes and Responsibilities of Advisory Councils

What purposes do advisory councils serve? What value do they bring to their institutions? And what exactly do they do? There is no single answer to any of these questions. Unlike governing boards and their committees, which have responsibilities that are similar from one institution to another, advisory councils vary in their purposes, depending on the needs of the particular institution and the preferences of the presidents and deans with whom they work.

COUNCIL RESPONSIBILITIES

Although council purposes vary among institutions, four broad responsibilities are most often identified:

- providing advice to the president, dean, or governing board
- serving as advocates and ambassadors of the institution with external constituencies
- providing service to the institution, its faculty, and students
- participating in giving and fundraising

The description of the advisory council (called the Dean's Advisory Board) for the College and Graduate School of Arts & Sciences at Boston University reflects these broad roles (see sidebar on page 10).