

The Role of Program Advisory Committees

As you probably know, MATC is undergoing its initial accreditation visit from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools on March 13th – 15th of this year. During the course of the visit members of the team of consultant-evaluators can ask to speak to anyone who has any association with the College. As such, we feel it is important for everyone to “be on the same page” in terms of the role they play as members of Program Advisory Committees (PACs). In addition, it is always important for any committee to periodically take time to reflect on its role and make some type of determination about whether it is fulfilling its responsibilities. Towards that end, we have put together some information that addresses a variety of issues regarding advisory committees in general and their use at MATC in particular.

Advantages Provided by PACs¹

Advisory committees are effective ways to help connect Colleges to their environments. Interest in advisory committees has increased in recent years as institutions of higher education and their programs face intense challenges in adapting to and meeting today's needs. Driven, in many cases, by declining enrollments and/or diminishing budgets, institutions find themselves under increased pressure to do more with less. At the same time, demands and expectations for responsiveness and accountability have increased, requiring greater interaction with the world outside the ivory tower. Advisory committees represent a “bridge to the external public,” and advisory committees can provide mechanisms to help improve communication and interaction with the outside world. They can provide fresh insights, powerful connections, access to valuable resources, and excellent public relations. In conjunction with a strategic plan or total quality management, they can be key elements in renewing and revitalizing an institution.

What are PACs and What Do They Do?

The simple definition of an advisory committee is a group of volunteers that meets regularly on a long-term basis to provide advice and/or support to an institution and/or one of its programs. By opening a window of exchange with members of the broader society, advisory committees can help institutions with a host of important functions: strengthening programs, improving management, reviewing and evaluating mission, programs, and services, recruiting personnel, raising funds, promoting public relations, and improving relationships with other organizations. The first three functions, and sometimes the fourth, are truly advisory in nature, as the committee provides external input into internal processes; the last three fall more into the support category, with committee members serving the organization by helping in the outside world.

What is an Effective PAC?

The level of the advisory committee's work varies tremendously along a spectrum of involvement and activity. Some committees exist in name only and have never met or, after one organizational meeting, go on for years on paper. Others meet once or twice annually, for largely ceremonial purposes. Others are largely a collection of advisers who might individually provide advice or support but whose committees rarely, if ever, meet. At the other end of the spectrum are occasionally over-involved advisory committees. They provide advice where none is wanted, and they get involved in affairs that should be left for program directors, staff, or faculty. Effective advisory committees avoid both extremes. They are committees that meet regularly and work together to provide advice and/or support that contributes significantly to the program's or institution's improvement. Even within this definition of effectiveness, however, can be a broad range of activity. Some advisory committees serve mostly as boosters, raising funds, providing connections to outside resources, promoting public relations, and, in general, providing important support and service while offering little or no advice. Although not technically "advisory," they are included here because they are a common type of advisory committee and because they can make significant contributions to a program. Committees that do provide advice range from those whose focus and direction are carefully directed by the staff, administration, or faculty to those with significant independence whose advice covers a wide scope and range of topics. Some committees provide service as well as advice.

What Makes an Advisory Committee Effective?

An advisory group is more likely to be effective at providing advice and support when:

1. Institutional representatives (administrators, staff, faculty) genuinely desire the committee's input;

¹ Much of this information has been adapted from Clearinghouse on Higher Education Washington DC. | George Washington Univ. Washington DC. School of Education and Human Development

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2. The committee is comprised of knowledgeable, committed individuals whose interest in volunteering their own time is sustained by appropriate recognition and rewards;
3. The committee's group processes and procedures for governance allow for regular meetings, a sense of engagement and ownership, and sufficient access to information about the program or institution so that the committee can offer useful advice and support;
4. The expectations about the roles of the committee in providing advice and support are clear, consistent, and well communicated.

The potential benefits of advisory committees in a program's improvement are enormous, but for many advisory committees, the potential is not fully realized.

The Role of PACs at MATC

The Program Advisory Committees should fill a variety of functions at MATC. What follows is a list of those functions, each of which is followed by activities that can fulfill obligations in that particular area.

1. Curriculum and Instruction:
 - a. Identify and expand the use of new technologies
 - b. Compare content with occupational competencies and tasks
 - c. Analyze course content and sequence
 - d. Assist in developing and validating tests
 - e. Advise on labor market needs and trends
 - f. Review, recommend, and assist in obtaining instructional materials
 - g. Serve as evaluators during end-of-program testing
2. Program Review:
 - a. Review and recommend program goals and objectives
 - b. Participate in program evaluation and recommend evaluation criteria
 - c. Compare student performance standards to business/industry standards
 - d. Assess, recommend, and or provide equipment and facilities
 - e. Evaluate the quality and quantity of graduates and job placement
 - f. Conduct community and occupational surveys
 - g. Identify new and emerging occupations
 - h. Recommend new programs or elimination of obsolete programs
 - i. Participate in long-term planning
3. Recruitment and Job Placement:
 - a. Assist in reviewing teacher selection criteria
 - b. Assist in recruiting new staff and potential students
 - c. Notify instructors of job openings
 - d. Provide or obtain cooperative work experiences, internships/externships, or work-based learning opportunities for students.
 - e. Assist students in developing résumés and interviewing skills
 - f. Assist with career days or job fairs
 - g. Hire graduates/program completers
4. Student Organizations:
 - a. Assist in developing and judging competitive skill events
 - b. Sponsor student organization activities and assist in fundraising
 - c. Conduct leadership development activities
 - d. Assist students with career development
 - e. Evaluate student portfolios
5. Staff Development:
 - a. Provide in-service activities for instructors
 - b. Provide instructors with retraining, back-to-industry, and summer opportunities for technical upgrading
 - c. Review professional development plans
 - d. Support staff attendance at conferences
 - e. Conduct workplace tours

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6. Community/Public Relations:
 - a. Interpret the program to employers, community, and the media
 - b. Present programs to community groups
 - c. Establish programs to recognize outstanding students, teachers, and community leaders
 - d. Promote special college events
7. Resources:
 - a. Assist in budget development and review
 - b. Conduct fundraising activities and make or obtain donations
 - c. Establish scholarships and awards
 - d. Provide tours and field trips, job shadowing experiences, and speakers
 - e. Leverage community resources and broker community partnerships
8. Legislation:
 - a. Advocate for programs with legislators
 - b. Update programs on legislative actions

Determining Whether PACs are Fulfilling Their Role

There are several indicators to suggest whether PACs are fulfilling their role at MATC. Each PAC should examine the following process and outcome measures to determine where it stands in each of these areas.

Program Advisory Committee Structure:

- Is it representative of business and industry?
- Does it have selection criteria for membership?
- Does it conduct member orientation, development, and evaluation?
- Does it formally recognize member contributions?

Group Process and Procedures:

- Does it operate under published and reviewed policies?
- Does it elect officers on a regular and systematic basis?
- Does it meet regularly?
- Does it conduct well-attended meetings with purpose and agenda?
- Does it maintain a record of its recommendations?

If the responses to the questions above are in the affirmative, and the PAC is also fulfilling its role in the eight (8) areas enumerated above, then it should be considered an effective committee. As such, it should reflect the following indicators of effectiveness.

The following activities serve as indicators of effective advisory committees:

- Develops and carries out a yearly plan of action
- Articulates long-term and short-term goals and objectives
- Regularly reviews curricula
- Promotes and publicizes programs
- Reviews yearly outcome data from the program
- Assesses the impact of recommendations annually
- Hires program graduates

Is Your PAC Effective?

Determining whether advisory committees are effective is difficult for two reasons. First, not everyone agrees on the definition of effectiveness. Second, studies of advisory committees' effectiveness are very rare. As such, you are in a unique position to reflect on the performance of your committee, in consultation with the program faculty, to determine the extent to which your committee has been effective, and to develop strategies to make it more effective in the future. The faculty, staff, and administrators sincerely appreciate all of your support of MATC, and everyone is eager to work with you to make your Program Advisory Committee the most effective it can possibly be.