

Engaging Advisory Boards

Institutions that enjoy strong cultures of philanthropy almost always have some semblance of engaged advisory boards. The reason for this relationship between a culture of philanthropy and advisory boards is based on the nature of philanthropy itself. What research on major gift donors and experience tells us is that meaningful gift giving most often occurs after other forms of engagement. We hear the maxims, “investment follows involvement,” or “money follows time.” However one might articulate this truth, the understood reality of philanthropy is that engagement matters.

This edition of the *Bulletin on Advancement* explores one tried and true vehicle for increasing engagement among major donors and prospects – the advisory board. Our aim is to give you solid counsel on how best to start or strengthen an advisory board and how best to engage its members.

The Difference Between an Advisory Board and Governing Board

It is not uncommon for institutional leaders to be unmotivated when exploring the idea of establishing a new “board.” “We already have a board and that one can be a handful,” goes the thinking. However, it is important to realize that there are key differences between a governing board and an advisory board. A governing board of the institution is the board that sets policies, has fiduciary responsibilities, and is responsible for recruiting and evaluating the president or CEO. The governing board is frequently self-perpetuating for private institutions and for public institutions a governor, other elected official, or popular vote, appoints them.

As the name implies, advisory boards come with far fewer legal responsibilities. Typically, they are formed more organically and operate with less bureaucracy. The leadership of the institution can appoint them. It is important to note that while it may be good practice to evaluate future governing board members through their work on your advisory board, it is important to not blur any lines between governance and advice. In broad strokes, the purpose of advisory boards is to:

- ◆ Engage new individuals of influence and/or affluence with the mission of your institution

- ◆ Inform important decisions and directions for the institution through meaningful discussions
- ◆ Help the institution achieve its vision by building new partnerships and relationships

It is important for all institutions to have written position descriptions for members of both governing boards and advisory boards to ensure clarity around these differing responsibilities and expectations.

Identifying the Best Possible Members

While every institution can benefit from establishing and/or strengthening its advisory board(s), the benefit of advisory boards must be embraced by the executive leaders of the institution before moving forward. In other words, before endeavoring to start or enhance your advisory board(s), your institution’s leaders must buy-in to the helpfulness of these bodies. If the president, dean, or CEO owns the advisory board and its success, you can move forward with identifying and recruiting the best possible members.

It is important to ensure that potential members embrace your mission and recognize the value your institution provides to the world. In addition, when recruiting for an advisory board it is important to consider the traits of influence and affluence that each prospective member possesses.

All About Mission

When identifying prospective advisory board members the most important element is to find individuals who support the mission of your institution. These important advisors and counselors must, first, embrace your purpose, your values, and the services you provide. Without mission alignment, there are no other characteristics a potential member may possess that will be fully helpful. And, in fact, if they are not supportive of your mission, their service on your advisory board could be injurious to your cause and efforts.

Influence

Most every institution seeks potential advisory board members that have great affluence. However, it also is important for advisory boards to have individuals with strong and broad spheres of influence.

For instance, it may be important for your institution to have advisory board members with astute political connections and skills. Or, you may want to have leaders of a particular faith tradition serve on your advisory board. Having members who know how to navigate the political landscape of your community and region is important.

Membership diversity (in all ways, including influence), is important to consider. Often times an institution will recruit and ask a prospective advisory board member to serve primarily based on current advisory board members' knowledge and commendation of that prospect. If this type of recruitment practice happens often enough, the diversity of influence within the advisory board becomes restricted.

Because an advisory board is designed to bring creative and unique informing voices to bear on important issues, homogeneity of influence can lead to unhelpful group-think. So, while establishing a diverse board in more traditional ways (age, race, gender, geographic location, etc.) is important, do not forget to include discussion about the need to diversify influence within the board.

Affluence

Just as your institution screens its donor database to find the very best potential donors, it is important to do the same for advisory board members. As research from Bank of America and others recently have affirmed, major gifts and engagement with your institution are correlated.

Individuals of affluence also help to expand the potential pool of major gift prospects for your institution. Not only will their personal giving be an expectation during their tenure on the advisory board, the institution should also engage them in identifying others who may share the same values and interests.

In some instances, institutions will shy away from recruiting individuals of affluence for fear they will have a desire to exercise too much control. However, both the way in which a board member is recruited by the institution and the way in which the institution engages board members while serving will help assure that no one member or group of members becomes too controlling.

How Many Members?

In general, it is better to start with a smaller group of "good fit" members than strive to meet an arbitrary membership goal of, say, 30 people. Especially in the beginning, it is important for the leadership of your institution to have regular and systematic contact with your board members. A smaller group may allow this to happen more easily. Over time and as the board matures, you will, most likely, want to grow the number of board members. While advisory boards come with many different purposes and are developed in many different settings, a general rule of thumb is that mature, effective advisory boards will have between 25-35 members. This range is large enough to provide the basis for high-quality group discussions and small enough to keep the engagement of individual members compelling.

Orienting New Members

Before your new advisory board members begin their first meeting it is important to have a thorough orientation to prepare each new member. The orientation of your new advisory board members is a critical component of an engaged partnership. If the institution shows the board member that they take this role seriously, there is a better chance that the board member will take their role seriously as well.

So, what does a thorough and helpful orientation look like? First, it takes time. Orienting new advisory board members for an hour before their first meeting will not achieve your goals effectively. Second, it takes planning and creativity. Institutions should think through what information they want to convey to their new advisory board members and how best to convey that information.

As an example of an effective orientation process, some institutions will provide new advisory board members with the following four discrete pieces of information:

1. The "fact-sheet" of the institution – baseline information about the institution, its people, and programs, along with an assessment of strengths and weaknesses;

2. Information regarding the broad, societal or global issues and trends that are impacting the work of the institution;
3. The mission, vision, and strategic plans or aims of the institution;
4. Complete profiles and introductions to the current advisory board members.

It is not uncommon for this information to be sent in advance to the new board member so that the face-to-face orientation can focus on answering specific questions and discussing in more detail the mission, vision, and strategic aims of the institution. In other words, the orientation is an opportunity for the institution to energize the new advisory board members so that they begin their service excited about the many ways in which they can be helpful.

Meetings That Work

Economist and Harvard professor John Kenneth Galbraith is quoted as having said, "Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything." While most everyone has endured through meetings that seemed to have no observable purpose, your advisory board meetings shouldn't fall into this category.

Planning the Agenda

In our text messaging, drive-by strategy world, planning for effective advisory board meetings may appear to be a throw-back to an earlier era! To be clear, an institution will only have an engaged, effective advisory board if meeting planning is thorough and strategic.

Meetings of your advisory board should be infrequent, once or twice each year. Not only will this help create a sense of each meeting being an "all-call" event, holding meetings less frequently gives the institution ample time to prepare the agenda.

From a time perspective, each meeting of the advisory board should be substantive – a day or a day and a half. The agenda should be crafted around one key issue or themes with small group questions clearly articulated.

In putting an advisory agenda together there are three separate components that institutions should consider.

First, each advisory board meeting should provide the members with information and knowledge they don't already have. For instance, bringing in an expert to set the context and frame the discussion of your topic is not only helpful, but also provides the members with access to learn something new about your work. Second, each advisory board meeting should have dedicated time for your institution to communicate your current efforts in the area that is being discussed. Before asking the advisory board members how you can be better, they must first have a clear sense of what you currently are doing. Finally, each advisory board meeting should have multiple times in which you are asking for advice, feedback, and counsel from the members.

Getting the Best Advice

In order to get the best advice and counsel from your advisory board, you must first become expert at asking them questions. The questions you ask of your advisory board should focus on one theme or important institutional issue you are facing. For instance, let's say that you want feedback on how best to market a new program. You might share with your advisory board your current plans to market your new program and then ask them a series of 3-5 questions about constituencies or audiences to market to, how best to reach those audiences, and the messages that will most effectively resonate.

Crafting artful and helpful questions is not easy, however. What appears to be a simply-worded question can produce unhelpful responses if the chosen wording lacks clarity. For this reason, it is wise to take a few months to plan the wording of the questions you plan to ask your advisory board members.

Entertaining

As volunteers, advisory board members are giving of their time for meetings so it is important to make the meetings not only valuable, but also comfortable and enjoyable. For an all-day meeting it is important to have breakfast, lunch and dinner served. When it is served it should be in an area that is conducive to conversation. Part of the allure of being on the advisory board is the opportunity to meet other individuals of influence and affluence. So, it is smart to provide those opportunities to your members.



Social events and meals also are a great opportunity to showcase some of the entertaining talent present at your institution. Perhaps there is a vocal ensemble that could sing or an instrumental quartet that could play. You may also wish to share with your members some of the wonderful things occurring at your institution. Enlisting those you serve to share their powerful testimonies can be helpful.

Whenever possible, involve spouses and significant others in the social aspects of the meetings. Just as it is important for the board members themselves to know that they are involved with a dynamic institution, so, too, is it important to engage their partners. Each meeting should serve to encourage members and their significant others that their time is meaningful and well spent with your institution.

Working in Between Meetings

Since your advisory board is populated with mission-aligned individuals of influence and affluence, each of the members should be part of your advancement program's prospect management system. This means that like non-advisory board major gift prospects, your advisory board members should be assigned to a gift officer and visited on a regular basis by a member of the advancement team or institution's leadership. The staffing of the advisory board itself will be managed by the advancement office.

It is during these in-between-meeting visits that the institution becomes better aware of each advisory board member's specific interests in your institution. Just as with other major gifts prospects, institutional and advancement leaders should cultivate, solicit, and steward each advisory board member in strategic ways. Building relationships with these key advisors is a thoughtful way to enhance your institution's major gift prospect pool today and well into the future.

Key Points to Remember

As you plan to build and/or strengthen your advisory boards, remember that there are many components that contribute to success. First is an understanding of the purpose of advisory boards. Next is a clear sense of the qualities and characteristics of the best members. And finally, having a strategic plan for how to engage both during and outside of meetings will help ensure high quality engagement.

In summation, below are five points to keep in mind. We hope your advisory boards are filled with helpful individuals and that you help them engage more fully with your institution.

1. Advisory boards do not govern, so you can be creative with how you engage them.
2. The president, dean, or CEO must own the success of your advisory board.
3. Advisory boards should engage mission-aligned people of influence and affluence.
4. The size of your board is less important than the caliber and influence-diversity of the members.
5. Thoroughly planning your meetings is important; crafting clear and concise questions to ask is critical.