CTE Technical Assistance Center of NY
A Division of the Successful Practices Network

Building Strong Program Advisory Boards

An Introduction to a Powerful Partnership Resource

The Advisory Board is an essential component of any successful CTE program; it is a gateway to the business community, providing an easy way for business leaders to learn more about how your work relates to their needs (and support you accordingly), just as it serves as a way for you to learn more about their needs so you can better prepare your students.

This document will provide you with the information and guidance you need to design a board that works for your students, school, and community.

Why a board?

While an advisory board is not mandated by the current version of the Perkins Act, it is certainly encouraged, and many states – including New York – require that CTE programs have a board in place. But whether or not a board is mandated, it can offer tremendous benefits to your CTE program. Those willing to invest the time will get back:

- Real-time industry information that helps you set the right outcomes for your programs
- An increase in community support, including more volunteers and more resources
- Increased access to student and staff development opportunities, ranging from industry-led teacher preparation to site visits, job shadowing opportunities and internships for students
- Stronger community awareness and support, particularly within the business community

Types of boards

There is no one correct way to structure an advisory board. One school may have a single board assuming all functions, while another may have a more complicated structure, with committees and subcommittees focused on specific areas. To decide how to structure your board, consider the following common board and committee models:

- **Strategic Executive Board** – This is the "master board" on which all of your board members sit. It is responsible for high-altitude oversight, providing strategic guidance and community feedback and serving as a point of connection for the larger community.

- **Regional Industry Sector Committee** – A broader-level committee that helps you link your efforts to a specific industry cluster in your region, gathering information on current and future industry needs and workforce trends so you can align your efforts accordingly.

- **Program Advisory Committee** – A narrower committee intended to support specific programs with the insights and perspectives of employers in that field, allowing you to tailor learning objectives and curriculum to industry standards and needs.

- **Occupational/Industry Advisory Committee** – Distinct from the regional industry sector committee in that it is more tactical and program-specific. This committee is still focused on gathering industry information and trends, looking at changes in the market so you know what employers need now and in the future.

- **Other Committees or Subcommittees** – Depending on your needs, you may also consider the following as committees or subcommittees:

    - <u>Postsecondary Transitions</u> – Making sure your outcomes line up with postsecondary entrance requirements

    - <u>Recruiting</u> – If you need to attract students to your program

    - <u>Talent Development</u> – Focused on staff and student development opportunities

    - <u>Facilities and Equipment</u> – Concentrating on meeting major fundraising or acquisition efforts

    - <u>Communications/Advocacy</u> – Serving as the public face of your program

    - <u>Program Accreditation</u> – Aligning your programs to accreditation requirements

On strategy for designing your structure is to identify your board leadership, or at least your chairman, and asking them to participate in identify board functions and structure.

I. Building Your Board

When you hired staff for your program, you thought carefully about your needs and what kinds of people could do the jobs you needed to have done. Recruiting members for your board is no different: You'll need people with the right skills and experience to accomplish the goals that you set together. This section outlines what those people should look like, where to find them, and how to recruit them.

Finding the Right Mix of Board Members

You want your board to accomplish a lot, which means that your board members – collectively – must have the experience, connections, skills and drive needed to complete the tasks they agree to take on. *Collectively* is an important concept: No one board member must be able to do everything. Instead, different people will bring different skills and assets to the table. Just make sure that, as a whole, your board members cover the following bases:

- Connect you with key stakeholder groups like businesses, industry groups, and civic and political leaders to let them know about your program and invite them in as partners and supporters
- Provide an independent, industry-oriented perspective so they can tell you what opportunities exist, or will exist, for students and what skills and knowledge they'll need to attain them
- Provide management expertise to assist with oversight and planning functions

As a CTE program, you'll naturally want good representation from the business community on your board; this includes not only executives from the larger employers in your field, but also some from the small but fast-growing "gazelle" companies, and from business coalitions like your chamber of commerce or workforce board as well as any trade associations or unions relevant to your fields. You'll also want to add the voices of any stakeholders important to your success, such as someone from the postsecondary institutions that will be receiving and/or credentialing your students. You'll also want people who have special skills that you may need to call on, such as people with management expertise to co-lead your board, as well as those with skills in specific areas that may be relevant to your immediate plans (finance, social media, etc.).

What about school representation? Different programs treat this issue in different ways; some include representatives from the student body and/or the teaching staff, and perhaps parents or past students as well. The key here is to not let those voices overwhelm or tamp down discussion: Your board exists in part to introduce the community's voice, and you'll want to provide a receptive platform for that.

What to Look for in a Board Member

While professional affiliations are important, an effective board requires that members have certain personal skill sets and characteristics as well. You'll want people with the experience and skills to be able to represent their community affiliations; this means that you'll want people with at least five to 10 years of experience, not people fresh out of school. You'll want people with established professional networks, access to resources, and the personal skills to work in a board environment, including interpersonal skills, time, and passion.

How to Recruit

Where do you find the caliber of people you need to populate your board? Chances are, you have a much wider network than you think you do: You can put out the call to peers and colleagues, asking them for recommendations and introductions. Start with your school and district-level relationships then look to existing business partners and volunteers, vendors, postsecondary partners, and even parents and past students (many of whom, hopefully, have started careers with the kinds of companies you want to connect with).

To supplement your existing channels, you should get involved with local business organizations relevant to your field. This includes the chamber of commerce as well as any workforce development or industry sector groups. Once you've joined, get active: Attend meetings, join committees in your areas of interest, and offer to host meetings at your site. Finally, let the chamber or association leadership know what you're trying to accomplish, and ask them to identify and introduce you to people who might fight the profile.

Bringing Members on Board

It's an honor to be asked to sit on an advisory board; it's also a significant commitment. Both sides of this equation need to be considered when inviting others to serve on your board.

When you make the request, treat it with the importance it deserves. Invest in your new relationship by bringing along a senior board member, like your chairperson, and take the time to visit your prospective member's workplace to learn more about what their organization does. Some CTE leaders note that they can spend a few hours taking a tour and meeting others at these organizations (an investment that can pay dividends later in the form of new relationships).

Let your prospective member know what you're trying to accomplish, and why it's important for the students, the industry, and the community. They'll want to know they're being asked to invest their time in something worthwhile. At the same time, spell out specifically what the commitment is: How many meetings and when they're held, and what members are expected to do (spend additional time on committees, represent the program at area meetings, etc.).

You'll want to have a written description of the responsibilities of board members, and additional information for any key positions (chair, vice chair, committee head, etc.). If they're a good fit, the odds are strong that you'll soon be welcoming a new member to your board.

II. Board Operations

One of the great challenges in board management lies in avoiding the “dog and pony show” – having staff and administration line up for a show and tell, with members listening politely then heading home until the next meeting. The solution is two-fold: First, to set ambitious yet achievable goals, and let the board figure out how to accomplish them; and second, to minimize the amount of presentation time in favor of collaboration time. This section will outline how to make that happen.

Board Setup

The first step in creating a productive board is to assign leadership roles, including your president or chair; vice president/vice chair (optional, but good to have for backup and leadership development); secretary; and treasurer (not needed unless the board handles program finances or does fundraising). You will not need to set up committees until later.

Once your board leaders are in place, whether this is a first-time board setup or part of an annual reboot as part of the new school year, you’ll want to collaborate on setting major goals, both long-term as well as annual (and note that your longer-term goals can be broken up into a series of annual steps). You’ll want to set goals that advance your vision and contribute to your long-term strategy, and you’ll want to be as specific and measurable as possible – don’t just say you’ll be the best school in the state, set a goal that you can track against, like having the highest graduation rate or coming in first in a statewide competition. Finally, don’t get too far into the details of how you’ll achieve your goals; that’s something for your committee chairs to figure out.

After setting your goals, you’ll know which committees or task forces you’ll need to create, and they’ll have a clear sense of their purpose. You’ll also have a good idea of the focus of your larger board meetings.

Common Meeting Activities

Board activities vary widely from program to program, so it’s impossible to offer a typical schedule. However, there are some general categories you should address as you plan your meetings:

- **Progress Toward Goals** - If your board has set specific goals, it is incumbent upon task force or committee chairs to update the general board on what they’re doing to achieve those goals, and to ask for the group’s help in working through any barriers to success. An important element of this is to regularly and publicly reference the metrics behind your goals and highlight your current position in relation to your ultimate goal.

- **Industry/Market Reports** – You’ll want regular updates on the state of the industries in which you work, along with information on new developments and emerging trends that could affect the focus and operations of your programs. Board members will benefit just as much as you by hearing reports and analyses on their industries.

- **Discussions** – Discussions should be the heart of your board meetings. You've brought together talented individuals; put a challenge in front of them and let them work through it from all their diverse perspectives.

- **Upcoming Deadlines** – Make a point to remind everyone of key events and deadlines of interest to the board.

- **Acknowledgements** – While your board should be focused on challenges, it should also celebrate achievements, including those of the entire program and of individuals. Staff and students particularly benefit from being recognized for their work by the board.

- **Students Presentations** – While you want to keep "dog and pony show" elements to a minimum, it is worthwhile to allow students to come in and talk about the school and perhaps present winning competition entries to the board. This gives them a firsthand look at what you're accomplishing and more closely connects them to the school.

Running Productive Meetings

Like most things, planning and preparation are the keys to running effective meetings and to running an effective board. You'll want to schedule meetings well in advance, ideally making up a calendar for the entire year and distributing it at the outset. You'll also want to make sure people have all the materials they need well in advance if they're expected to have reviewed them prior to your gathering.

When it comes to the meeting itself, be sure you're the first to arrive, and that you check out the technology beforehand (nothing slows down a meeting more than a projector with a burned-out bulb) and put out refreshments. During the meeting, get administrative details out of the way quickly, and manage the meeting purposefully: allow discussions to go as long as they're on point, but redirect or shut down unproductive tangents (some use Robert's Rules of Order to help with this). Hold people accountable for their deliverables. And finally, leave time for socializing at the end, as for many businesspeople, board meetings like this can prove to be valuable networking opportunities with peers they may not see otherwise.

After your meeting, be sure to get meeting minutes out, and confirm assignment of any action items. If anyone was absent, do your best to bring them up to speed, sending out minutes and perhaps placing a phone call. And finally, confirm the date and location of your next meeting, giving everyone ample notice to plan for their participation.

III. The Strategic Review

It's easy for both program leaders and their advisory boards to get bogged down in the day-to-day details of managing a program. For that reason, it's good to occasionally step away and consider the big picture to make sure your program is doing what it needs to do, and that it's braced for the challenges and opportunities that they expect to face in the near future. This section will offer tips on planning for, and hosting, an annual strategic review of your efforts.

Elements of the Strategic Review

Your strategic review is a chance to revisit and revise the thinking that underlies your program. Some key questions for you and your advisory board to consider:

- **Theory of Change** – Your program operates under three key assumptions. First, that you know your students' starting point; second, that you know what end point you're trying to lead them to; and finally, that your intervention – what you do with them while you have them – is the best approach. Each of these assumptions should be checked each year. Your student population (your starting point) may change; industry or postsecondary requirements (your end point) may change; or current thinking on the best approach to instruction (changes to curriculum, teaching styles, etc.) may change.

- **Competition** – New schools and new private programs may open up, drawing students away from your program; alternately, other programs may shut down, giving you a surplus of students to server. In either case you need to be aware of what's happening with the competition and how that might affect your program.

- **Asset Mix** – If there are (or could be) major changes in the resource available to you, you need to consider your options. What impact will the sequester have on your school? What happens if you gain, or lose, support from a foundation?

- **Feedback** – Some time before your retreat, it's helpful to survey your stakeholders – students, staff, employers, etc. – to get their thoughts on your program, and present that information to board members at your retreat.

- **Staffing** – If you're anticipating changes in your approach or in the ways you serve your market, you might need to consider the staffing implications and plan accordingly.

- **Operations** – It's always good to take a periodic review of program operations, reviewing major cost centers and ways of doing business.

Holding the Strategic Review

Like any regular board meeting, the key to a successful annual review is in the planning and preparation. Make sure board members are notified well in advance of your plans, and distribute any needed materials well before the event takes place. Accommodate the needs of your guests, making sure technology works and that refreshments are ready (and in this case, you may also need to plan for meals and hotel reservations). And finally, follow up promptly, distributing notes from your session and letting advisory board members know of any expectations (additional research, follow-up meetings, etc.) that resulted from the retreat.

IV. Ensuring the Long-Term Viability of Your Board

After considering board setup and operations, it makes sense to conclude with a view towards the long-term success of your advisory board. This section will highlight some ways of measuring the effectiveness of your board and ensuring that you maintain a strong group well into the future.

Determining the Board's Impact

Just as you want to measure the effectiveness of your program, you want to know that the time and effort you invest in your board is paying dividends to your program. There are a few opportunities on that front:

- **Tracking Activity** – If you want to track the work of your board, you can start by tracking activity: While it won't necessarily reflect your outcomes, it will indicate interest and engagement, and show you whether the ingredients for board effectiveness are present. Start by tracking attendance, committee participation, personal commitment (donations, etc.), preparedness at meetings, and fulfillment of other board commitments (representing you at meetings, etc.).

- **Measuring Against Goals** – If your board is setting measurable annual and long-term goals, it should be possible to track the success of the board in achieving those goals.

- **Annual Report** – While it requires that you invest some time, you may want to consider an informal or formal annual report to the board on their impact. This is an opportunity to show them the impact they have (or have not made), and will remind members of their commitments and expectations.

Sustainability

In too many cases, a board starts out very strong, and the same group of members stays on year after year, losing their enthusiasm yet preventing others from replacing them. It can be challenging to keep your board fresh and engaged over time.

To that end, you may consider instituting a fixed term length, ensuring no member can stay on the board longer than three years or so. Additionally, you may launch a Talent Committee, tasked with identifying and recruiting new members. If your board is already running, it may be easier to connect prospective future board members with lower-level opportunities at first, such as engaging them in volunteering or guest speaking, or asking them to serve on a temporary task force. This sort of soft introduction to your work will make recruiting them to a board seat smoother in the future.

May 2013

This paper was prepared by the National Center for College and Career Transitions (www.nc3t.com), working in concert with the Career Technical Education Technical Assistance Center of New York (CTE TAC of NY) as part of a project to strengthen employer engagement in CTE programs across the state of New York. To learn more about

best practices in New York, visit the Business Partnership section of the CTE-TAC website at: http://www.nyctecenter.org/spn/page/Best-Practices.