DEPARTMENT OF MARKETING ADVISORY COUNCILS:
THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UNRULY

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ABSTRACT

For some time, colleges of business have been incorporating business and/or alumni advisory councils into their administrative structures. While these councils generally play an important role, they rarely deal with issues specific to departments or disciplines. Rather, they typically deal with broad college issues and may not have the time or specific expertise to advise a particular academic department. In fact, the people who might be most useful for participation on a college council may not be the same people who would be most useful to a department or discipline.

Consequently, at some schools, various academic departments, including departments of marketing, are beginning to establish their own advisory councils of business practitioners. While these councils may be very useful in providing a business perspective for academic planning in various business disciplines, their composition and role must be carefully thought out, their involvement in departmental activities must be controlled, and the faculty should be aware that, as with most ventures, there is a down-side to the use of advisory business councils.

The authors of this paper are the immediate past and present chairs of a Department of Marketing at a large Midwestern state university that has had an on-going Marketing Advisory Council for the past 7 years. The authors use that experience to discuss not only the need for such a council, but the ideal composition of such a group, the departmental activities for which such a council can play an important role, and some of the possible pitfalls to avoid with an advisory council.

NEED FOR AN ADVISORY COUNCIL

There are a number of reasons to consider the establishment of a marketing department advisory council. The most compelling reason is simply to provide a current business-world perspective to the faculty. Such a perspective is crucial for those who are attempting to educate tomorrow's business practitioners and, hopefully, leaders of industry. Furthermore, in some cases business practitioners lead rather than lag academe in incorporating new ideas and technologies.

For example, business was practicing cross-functional integration before it was even talked about in marketing or, for that matter, in most management courses. Similarly, business has certainly taken the lead in making community service an employee requirement and to be pro-active in valuing diversity in the workplace. An advisory council can help faculty understand both what new ideas need to be addressed within the curriculum of the discipline, and possibly offer advice on where and how it might be incorporated most effectively.

In addition to simply providing a business perspective, council members can provide a unique insight relative to the marketing of college programs to prospective students. The recent and continuing "bust" in undergraduate business school enrollments nationwide suggests that many business programs have either not been providing a "relevant" educational opportunity, or have failed to convince college students of the value, challenge, and rewards of careers in those fields. Marketing programs at most schools have not been an exception to this trend. Marketing practitioners can help the department review the relevance of its programs and/or offer ideas, or even participate in the effort to persuade prospective students to consider careers in marketing. Often times, current practitioners are more "believable" persuaders than faculty who have a vested career interest in enrolling sufficient numbers of students in classes.

Finally, advisory councils can play a role in the "continuous improvement" often sought by many administrative associations and grant-giving organizations. Increasingly, accreditation associations, university administrators, and even college councils are looking at how faculty for the various programs are providing for continuous improvements in their academic operations. They often look for, or even expect, a periodic, if not continuous, external review of programs. Advisory Councils certainly can provide continuity of external review and advice, and may help plan external review from other stakeholders such as employers, graduate schools, and graduates of the program. Similarly, many public and private grant-giving organizations are looking for the same kind of continuous external review and an advisory council of business practitioners may well serve this purpose. In
fact, the program focused on in this paper initially established its council for just such a purpose. As part of an Academic Challenge Grant Program rewarding "academic excellence" for state-supported universities, the department's successful grant proposal included the establishment of a Marketing Advisory Council.

THE ROLE OF THE COUNCIL

The department faculty should clearly determine what role they want the advisory council to play within their department prior to forming the council. As part of this deliberation, the faculty should decide the specific activities for which they want council participation. Based on the authors' experiences, the following primary and secondary council activities would warrant consideration.

Primary Activities

Long-Range Planning -- The council might participate in long-range planning which may be their most important contribution. Business practitioners at this level usually have a great deal of experience in this area and may be particularly helpful in reviewing and making suggestions regarding the

- mission statement
- development of goals and objectives
- developing a tactical plan of action to achieve goals
- establishing a timetable for implementation

Curriculum Planning -- The council's real-world business perspective may lead to useful suggestions for curriculum planning, at both the undergraduate and graduate level. This could include suggestions for content or skill emphasis within a course as well as what courses are needed in the curriculum.

Faculty Interaction -- The council might participate in round-table discussions with faculty on important current issues in the discipline to stimulate intellectual understandings of various problems from both the business community and academic perspectives. This should be mutually beneficial to both groups and might be expanded to include other external participants either as a service to the business community or, possibly, as a fund-raising activity.

A Faculty and Student Resource -- Council members might be asked to be available as a resource for students and faculty in such activities as:

- guest speaker in classes (where appropriate)
- speak to student organizations
- review student resumes

Fund-Raising -- The council may also facilitate the development of fund-raising plans. While some schools may also use this group as a prime target for fund-raising efforts, the advisability of this may well depend on the stature of the school and/or department within

COMPOSITION OF A DEPARTMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

The composition of an advisory council is critical if the department wants it to be more than just a cosmetic adjunct organization. Members of the advisory council should usually have the commonality of working in positions related to the marketing discipline. On the other hand, they should be as diverse as possible in terms of ethnicity, sex and expertise within the discipline in order to provide a variety of real-world perspectives from the business community.

In addition, if at all possible, council members should represent upper management positions, ideally, at the vice presidential or equivalent level. This is necessary in order to have the managerial experience and credibility to offer advice that faculty will find authoritative. While CEOs may be desirable, and our council has one such representative, they are usually too busy and may provide too broad a perspective for a departmental committee. In general, CEOs are better suited for membership on a college or university-level council.

Program alumni, while not necessarily critical to have on the council, are often the most active and involved, and willing to serve long terms. This reduces the need to find replacements, which is time consuming and results in a loss of continuity within this facet of departmental operations. However, it should also be noted that alumni may be less willing than others to be critical of the program. Similarly, they may not want to offend the faculty or may try to rationalize the quality of their own education. As a result, it is recommended the department advisory councils should not consist of all program alumni. While alumni clearly play an important role by the very nature of their commitment, loyalty and enthusiasm, a council with a diverse educational background is desirable. It should also be noted that it may also be possible to find alumni from the school, but not the department, who are now working in the marketing discipline and may be both interested in serving on the council and could provide the objectivity that is desired.
the business community. In order to maintain a more objective relationship with the council, this is generally not recommended but the authors recognize it is certainly an arguable position.

Secondary Activities

A departmental advisory council may also be able and/or willing to perform a variety of other duties as needed or desired by the department. For example, the council might:

- Aid in recruiting students to the program
- Help in placement of graduates and interns
- Participate in special events (such as annual conferences/symposia, etc.)
- Help faculty with access to practitioner databases for research
- Assist in faculty development programs
- Advise students in a variety of possible group formats on how to obtain entry level jobs and what they can expect as they advance in their careers

With respect to the last activity, an extremely successful format to involve council members and students has been an annual “career panel” in which council members comprise a panel. Each panel member provide career advise to students in a structured format with considerable time devoted to questions. It is recommended that the session last a minimum of 1-1½ hours with at least 5 council members on the panel. Further, a brief “reception” following the panel allows students to interact with council members on a 1 to 1 basis.

The specific activities of the council may well need to change over time (or what falls into primary or secondary activity categories may depend on the circumstances facing a specific program). Clearly, the specific duties need to be flexible and must be viewed by both council members and the faculty as being useful.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

While business advisory councils can be of immeasurable help to a department, their participation may not have all positive results. There are a number of potential pitfalls that can make a council ineffective, or worse. In some cases, advisory councils may become “make-work” projects (something few departments need) or even develop an adversarial relationship with some of the faculty in the department, becoming a dysfunctional arm of the academic unit. The following are some of the pitfalls that could occur and some suggested precautions and/or solutions to those pitfalls.

Pitfall #1: The faculty must not lose control of the council (i.e., the council must not be allowed to become - or even think of themselves as - a sort of “board of directors”). The faculty will resent the board and the potential value of their advice will be lost. You might also succeed in alienating an otherwise valuable “friend of the department” if they end up feeling their time and efforts aren’t appreciated.

Precaution/solution: The Council’s charge and activities must be made very clear at the onset. The charge should be written and distributed to council members and faculty, discussed at the first council meeting, and should be periodically reviewed. While the charge and/or activities may change over time, they must, at any given point in time, be very clear. Furthermore, faculty decision-making should never take place when the council is present, thereby, clearly keeping the meeting “advisory”.

Pitfall #2: The council should not be allowed to become a “make-work” project for the department. When council duties are not clearly delineated as previously suggested, the department may start “finding things to do with the council.” This is neither productive for the council or the faculty. In fact, it’s non-productivity will become clear to all involved and could easily lead to ill feelings toward the department and college.

Precaution/solution: Not only must the council’s charge and activities be clear, but the council and faculty should not meet unless there is something specific to do. If necessary, a meeting should be canceled rather than allowing it to be non-productive. It may also be useful not to think just in terms of full council-department meetings. For many projects, it may be more appropriate for a subset of that group to get together to work on a specific, defined task.

Pitfall #3: Expecting all council members to be available at all functions. Not all council members will be able to attend all meetings or participate in all functions. In fact, it will be the rare member who can. More importantly, not all council members will prove to be very useful.

Precaution/solution: The council should have a large enough membership so that all members do not have to be present to make the council work effectively. Also, the terms of membership should be clearly defined. Even if the faculty want some members to be reappointed indefinitely, finite terms will provide the opportunity to ease some members off the council.
**Pitfall #4:** The council should not become the department chair's personal advisory council. Many of the potential benefits of the council will be lost if a broad spectrum of the faculty are not involved.

**Precaution/solution:** As many department faculty as possible should be involved with the council from the start; from planning for the council, to selecting prospective members, determining the charge to the council and the desired activities for the council. It is a good idea to have the faculty, on a rotating basis, get involved in planning some of the specific functions in which the council is going to be involved.

**Pitfall #5:** Failure to remember that council members are not employees. Council members are typically extremely busy, hard working business people who are giving freely of their time and efforts, often at considerable expense that they or their company absorb.

**Precaution/solution:** Treat the council as special, albeit adjunct, members of the department. Make their visits appear to be special events, with all the proper trimmings (e.g., rolls and coffee for breakfast meetings; nice luncheons; and/or catered dinners). When possible, arrange their visits to campus to coincide with other events (a home football game, a concert, a play) and make sure they are escorted by a good representation of the faculty to such events. Some of the faculty may even want to take some students to visit council members’ places of business. Asking for a planned tour and presentation - this is the organization version of asking your date about themselves - it is always flattering and may be a very enlightening experience for students.

**CONCLUSION**

Department advisory councils can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, they can be a great addition to the operations of this level of academic unit. Business practitioners can provide a business-world perspective for a number of department activities, and may well participate in a variety of those activities, adding a dimension that academics alone can not provide. At the same time, it is important not to allow advisory councils to run amok; they should not be allowed to assume the role of an oversight board, nor to become involved in decision-making activities. The role and charge for such a council must be clearly written and understood by all parties involved (both council members and faculty) and all involved should recognize that the appropriate role and activities may need to change over time - they are not written in stone and should reflect the needs of the department as well as the specific interests and talents of the advisory council members.