In this issue:

A Guide for Establishing an Advisory Board for an Information Systems Department: Benefits and Lessons Learned

Thomas N. Janicki
University of North Carolina at Wilmington
Wilmington, NC 28403, USA

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Thomas N. Janicki
Information Systems Department
University of North Carolina at Wilmington
Wilmington, NC 28403
janickit@uncw.edu

Abstract

The volume of knowledge required from today's graduates in Information Systems continues to grow rapidly. It is valuable for faculty to form alliances with industry professionals in order that the faculty stays abreast of industry needs, technological changes and seek input about curriculum issues. This paper provides an overview of the process to establish an advisory board for an information systems department at one public university. The goals of this advisory board are to increase the quality of our students, encourage the hiring of IS graduates, increase the faculty's knowledge of employer needs, and provide a forum for faculty to stay abreast of current trends in the information technology profession. The paper will also discuss lessons learned and the benefits gained to date.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges Information Systems (IS) educators face is staying current with the technological changes in the profession and insuring that IS graduates have the knowledge and skill sets required by today's employers. Lee et al. (2002) note that in a dynamically changing industry (Information Technology) information systems instructors have a hard time coping with this rapid change in their course content.

There are various approaches to understanding industry needs from adoption of the IS 2002 Model Curriculum as proposed by the Academy of Computing Machinery to employer needs surveys (Bentley et al. 1999; Janicki et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2002; Woratscheck and Lenox, 2002).

Another potential avenue to assist faculty to stay current in the field is to establish and foster alliances between academic and industry professionals in the Information Technology (IT) arena. One method to create this alliance is for an IS department to establish an advisory board comprised of local and regional IT professionals.

This paper will review the process of creating an advisory board for an IS department of a mid-sized public university. This university has 12,000 students with 150 Information Systems majors. It is located in southeastern city of approximately 160,000 people. The major employers in the town are not IT related, but more tourism, service and medical organizations. The board was established in the spring term of 2002 and currently has 25 active members who are providing insight into curriculum issues; speakers for the classroom; internships for current students and full-time jobs for recent graduates.

The goal of this paper is to provide some guidance when establishing an advisory board for an information systems department. It should be noted that the primary purpose of the advisory board described is for advice to improve the quality of our graduates and the building of alliances for faculty to stay current in the field. This board was not created to be a fund raising committee. The paper will review the following issues: the benefits to all parties; structure of an advisory board; the solicitation of members; lines of communications; typical agendas for meetings; and lessons learned to date.

2. WHY CREATE AN IS ADVISORY BOARD?

Time is at a premium for all faculty members, so the idea of another board or meeting to attend might be considered to be a negative by some faculty members.

Thus "buy-in" of departmental faculty members in advance of the undertaking should be gained. If the preliminary mission, goals and benefits of the advisory board for the department are drafted in advance, getting faculty to participate will be a simpler task. The final goals and mission statement should be developed by both faculty and industry professionals.

Benefits to the faculty and department

There are many potential benefits to a department and faculty when establishing an advisory board. Among these benefits, may be providing:

- real world perspectives on the current and future technologies and trends (Board Seat, 2004)
- a non-binding but informed guidance on curriculum issues (Reiter, 2003)
- speakers from industry in the classroom
- consulting opportunities (Board Seat, 2004)
- donations to the department in terms of equipment, software, and cash
- a pool of individuals who may assist in research, surveys and case studies
- a team of professionals who may help recruit more majors
- prestige for the university as it acts as a catalyst to foster communication in the local IT community.

Benefits to students

Students have much to gain from a department advisory board, included may be:

- Speakers for student organizations and in the classroom
- Internships
- Job opportunities
- An opportunity to mix with industry leaders and learn from the experience
- Understanding of typical jobs in IT.

Benefits to the industry professionals

Finally, there must be some benefit for industry members to give of their time and talent. The inclusion of several of the following items into the overall goals of the board will assist in keeping the industry members involved. These benefits may be:

- Access to your best students for internships or full time positions
- Assistance in developing a better pool of quality graduates
- Opportunity to network with other IT professionals
- Exposure and sharing between industry and academics of 'best practices' in industry
- Civic involvement
- Learn from faculty of future and cutting edge ideas
- Their own professional development.

An item to establish in advance of recruitment is to define a mission statement for the board. We developed a one sentence mission statement to help all focus on the major objective. As an example, our mission statement is: *"The Information Systems Advisory Board works to improve the quality of our graduates in order that they are sought by employers"*

The previous lists detail but a few of the potential benefits to all interested parties in creating an advisory board. It is imperative to clearly define your goals and expectations when recruiting industry professionals to be part of the board.

3. STRUCTURE AND RECRUITMENT OF MEMBERS

Structure

The size of the advisory board is dependant of several factors. If the primary goal of the advisory board is a fund raising vehicle the larger the board the more successful it will be (Stengel, 2003). However if a primary goal of the advisory board is 'advise' a smaller board of less then 10 (Reiter, 2003) is recommended. The AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) in 2004, reported that 32% of advisory boards for schools of business are less then 20 members, with 40% of advisory boards in the 20 to 39 range.

From the mission statement stated earlier for this paper's advisory board the primary goals are seeking 'advice' to improve the quality of our students (with a high quality curriculum) resulting in increased job placement for our students. As a result of this mission statement we established an upper limit of twenty five members (from experience approximately seventeen are able to make any particular meeting). This level of membership has provided us high input at meetings as well as an opportunity for our students to meet members from the leading IT employers in the region.

To complement the advisory members at large, a 'steering committee' of four industry members and three faculty members meet quarterly to establish and review annual goals and the semester's activities for the board. This smaller committee also provides input into meeting agendas. This steering committee has been invaluable for a source of new ideas and a sounding board for industry member concerns. The steering committee members were chosen by the faculty based on their involvement in the first meetings and willingness to promote the mission and goals of the board.

One faculty member needs to act as the coordinator as someone needs to be held responsible for the organizational duties. It is recommended that this not be the chair of the department as they have multiple other responsibilities. A recommendation is to consider a faculty member who worked in industry prior to academics as the coordinator of the advisory board. This provides an individual who has a background of business and academics. This individual's responsibilities are to schedule meetings, schedule

steering committee meetings, prepare agendas, send meeting notes, replace non performing members (with steering committee consent), recruit new members, communicate frequently with faculty and industry members and act as a facilitator during meetings.

Costs related the advisory board is another consideration. Items to consider are meal expenses (i.e. a breakfast or lunch meeting), refreshments, office supplies and potential "thank you" gifts with the college logo. It was decided that initially we would not solicit any funds from our members. However, the steering committee recommended to the full board and received an affirmative vote that in year two of the advisory board to solicit voluntary dues from members to cover the operating expenses of the board would be requested. The corporate members of the steering committee made the request for voluntary dues ($100 was requested) to the general membership and over 70% of members made a donation in year two. We anticipate this level of voluntary dues to increase as all new members are told of the fees in advance of their joining the board and it becomes part of the standard expectations for board members.

Recruitment of members
Several steps will make the solicitation of members more successful. A recommended first step is the development of a recruitment packet (Koong, 2003). This packet should include the mission statement, a list of the goals (or anticipated goals), member responsibilities (i.e. attendance, dues, communication expectations) and an overview of the department, its students, faculty and curriculum (Koong, 2003). Also it is recommended to compose a cover letter formally asking them to become a member of the advisory board, including the name(s) of those who recommended them.

Another step is to develop a pool of potential members. Solicit names of potential members from department faculty members and college administrators. The higher up in the organization the better the odds of long term involvement (and giving). In addition, build a list of the key employers in the institution's service area who employ IT graduates. If the preliminary list does not have a contact at that firm, determine the names of the CIO or manager of IT and add them to the list. When establishing the list of potential recruits, look for people with diverse skills, expertise and sizes of organization. (Koong, 2003). An institution's own graduates may be excellent members to the board or provide the names of the proper individuals at their organization. All members do not need to be CIO's or from large size employers. In many areas, smaller firms are more on the cutting edge of technology, and have different needs from larger organizations. Finally don't overlook public agencies and non profits for potential members (Koong, 2003).

To seed the initial group, our faculty decided to make personal visits to the highest level members (CIO's) we were recruiting. It was believed that if we could get five to six high level IT professionals on the board, we would then ask if we could use their names in the recruitment packet we sent out to other potential members. This proved to be successful as these high level IT professionals provided us additional names for potential inclusion in the board.

Once the advisory board had commitments from five to six professionals, a recruitment letter and packet was sent to the other individuals on the list. This letter was followed up with a personal phone call to personalize the request, explain the purpose and value of the board and begin to establish a dialog for two way communication. From the initial list of 32 names, 19 industry professionals agreed to join the advisory board.

Finally, it is important to build within the faculty a respect for the industry members and their time, and to consider their opinions and advice. However in the job description for advisory board members it was clear that the board's role was advisory in nature and to provide input, but due to accreditation issues final decisions related to curriculum would be the responsibility of faculty.

4. ACTIVITIES

To respect the time constraints on many of the members of the advisory board, the actual 'formal' meeting time is kept to a minimum (formal meetings are approximately 75 minutes). Agendas are developed to minimize one way communications and maximize roundtable discussions, student involvement and 'best practices' from fellow advisory board members and faculty. It is important to structure every meeting to have a topic (and notify the board of this topic in advance) where the advisory board can have an input into improving the quality of students and curriculum.

Our members reported that they especially enjoy coming to meetings where we break into small roundtables to solicit their ideas on particular issues. In this format each member is given the opportunity for ample discussion and input on a topic. At the end of the roundtable time, one business member makes a brief (two to three minute) presentation to the entire group summarizing their discussions. Faculty members are included in the roundtables and act as note takers to bring back to the department.

Frequency of meetings was an important issue to both the faculty and advisory board members. The steering committee recommended one formal business meeting each semester with other optional activities. The formal meeting was originally a breakfast meeting but was suggested to move it to a late afternoon meeting to provide time for networking between members and faculty after the meeting. It was observed that there was very little dialog after the breakfast meetings as advisory

board members went off to work. The late afternoon (4:30 PM) meetings do have a little less attendance as some members get trapped at work, but it has been observed that members tend to stay later and socialize, network and continue to provide input into the meeting topics.

Typical Agenda Items
Table One provides a summary of the key agenda items for the first two years of the advisory board. This table is not exhaustive but meant as an example of the topics and level of roundtable discussions for each meeting. We have invited students to all but the first meeting. Our members have told us they enjoy meeting our students and have stressed that is why they are involved. "We are doing it for the students" is often heard after each meeting.

Key communication techniques to foster high attendance and dialog are sending an agenda in advance of the meeting, emailing minutes following the meeting and having a web site that members can access for future and past information. Members are sent 'thank you' notes following class presentations or extra advisory board duties.

In addition to the formal business meetings (once each semester) we have attempted to have additional functions to either expose our students to our corporate members or provide our members some additional knowledge for themselves or other employees at their organization. As a result of these voluntary meetings we have averaged a total of four events per year.

Student Presentations
A highly successful function suggested by one of the corporate members was to have our best students deliver presentations (five to eight minutes) about a project or task they had completed while a student or intern. This event has become competitive for our students as we only permit six teams of students to present any particular night. Advisory board members have invited co-workers and spouses to attend this evening function. At the end of the presentations, a mixer is held to permit one-on-one dialog between the students and advisory board members. Resumes are distributed in a book containing details about all the presenters, and at the mixer, advice on seeking employment is given to future graduates.

The presentations (three have been held in the first two years) have grown in quality and participation from our corporate members. This past year we awarded plaques and cash prizes to the top two teams. These prizes were funded voluntarily by advisory board members.

.Type of Meeting	Key Items	Student Involvement
Business (1st semester)	Introductions Brief overview of the department Discussion of key goals and mission Solicitation of steering committee members	
Business (2nd semester)	Steering Committee Report (delivered by corporate member) of specific first year goals Roundtable of employer needs by occupation to be used to create a formal survey of regional employer needs	Officers of Student IS Club
Business (3rd semester)	Review of survey undertaken since last business meeting on what employers' needs are by occupation for entry level employees Roundtable discussion of these needs and how they impact curriculum	Outstanding IS graduates
Business (4th semester)	Internships, how can we assist industry and how can they assist our students Roundtable lead by those firms employing interns Industry expert speaker on security issues	Officers of Student IS Club
Business (5th semester)	Review of core courses in the curriculum Roundtable by subject with course syllabi available for comment by members Industry expert speaker on e-Purchasing	Outstanding IS graduates

Table 1: Sample Business Meeting Agenda Items

Other Activities
Other events included a seminar on Microsoft.Net. This presentation was made available to advisory board members and their employers for a small fee. Over 50 participants from member firms were in attendance. We have also invited all advisory board members to "key note" speeches on campus from government and industry leaders.

Classroom Speakers
A final activity of the advisory board has been in the classroom. Members of the advisory board are very excited to be invited to speak to a class about their experiences in the real world. Students appreciate this involvement as they learn what a career in IT involves.

5. BENEFITS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The development of the advisory board for an IS department was a time consuming yet rewarding endeavor. It comprises significant effort from the faculty coordinator plus involvement of all faculty.

Benefits
The benefits to the department are starting to multiply quickly. Some of the key benefits that have occurred since the creation of the advisory board are:

- Input to faculty on the relevance of our curriculum
- Dialog on employer needs
- A lengthy discussion on 'training' versus 'education' including certification issues
- Increased understanding by the business community on the differences between an IS major versus a Computer Science major
- Increased Internships
- More IS graduates are getting full time jobs with regional firms
- Practitioners in the classroom
- Corporate members sharing best practices
- Consulting opportunities
- Increased prestige of our faculty in the business community
- Acting as a conduit between two firms in the city that needed each other's expertise.
- Self supporting board (financially) and providing funds for student awards

Lessons Learned
Some of the lessons learned include:

1) Don't require faculty members who don't want to be involved to attend meetings. Initially, faculty members were required to attend meetings, but it was observed they hurt the flow of information with their attitude.

2) Insure that there are more corporate members than faculty members in attendance.

3) Gently replace members who don't participate. Give them a way out by acknowledging how busy they are and invite them to participate in the future. Ask them to replace themselves with another person from their organization.

4) Invite potential members as a 'guest' to a meeting before offering a formal invitation to join the board.

5) Create an advisory board job description earlier. Let them know their responsibilities when recruiting them for membership.

6) Don't hold a meeting without asking them for input during the meeting. They attend plenty of meaningless meetings at their own firm.

7) Remind everyone that this is an advisory board to offer advice. Consider their advice but don't feel obligated to enact every suggestion. Let them know what is done with their prior advice.

8) Provide opportunities for them to meet and interact with your best students

This paper has described but one approach to forming an advisory board for an Information Systems department. There are other approaches that should be investigated depending on the overall goals of the board. It also summarized some of the methods to recruit and keep members as well as the initial benefits resulting from the having an advisory board for only a short time period.

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