

Developing A College–Industry Relationship: The Use Of Industrial Advisory Boards

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Abstract

Industrial advisory boards provide a vehicle to help educational institutions execute their mission and attain their goals. This relationship provides a way to monitor the effectiveness of curriculum by providing real-world assessment of coursework as well as scrutinizing the on-the-job performance of past graduates. Meetings and subsequent reports lay the foundation for understanding what's right – and what could be improved – throughout academic and non-academic departments. In addition, industrial advisory boards can contribute significantly to new program development while creating partnership with local business and industry.

This paper will provide an overview of the creation, development, and implementation of an Industrial Advisory Board for the School of Technology at Lafayette (SOT at Lafayette). SOT at Lafayette is the newest location of the Purdue School of Technology statewide delivery system, a unique partnership between education and business, industry and government. The Lafayette location was established in 1996 with an independent office created at Subaru-Isuzu Automotive (SIA) in 1999. In the summer of 2001, efforts were begun to institute an independent Industrial Advisory Board for this location. This paper will discuss:

- Assessment of the need and purpose of an industrial advisory board
- Composition and qualifications of advisory board members
- Challenges of implementation
- Perceived benefits from utilization of the advisory board

Introduction

Purdue University established the Statewide Delivery System to help employers meet the challenge of educating and continuously improving its workforce. The Statewide system facilitates partnerships between education and industry and extends Purdue's existing technology programs throughout the state to help meet Indiana's need for trained technologists in Indiana communities⁷ (Purdue 2001). Separate locations throughout the state allow Purdue to develop distinct technology programs designed with input from business and industry in the each community. The newest statewide location at Lafayette (SOT at Lafayette) was established in 1996 with an independent office created in 1999 at Subaru-Isuzu Automotive (SIA). SOT at Lafayette currently offers two programs of study Industrial Technology (IT) and Organizational Leadership and Supervision (OLS).

In order to fulfill the mission of the statewide system, each location relies on Industrial Advisory Boards to foster communication and encourage mutually beneficial relationships with faculty and professionals in industry and business. In the summer of 2001, SOT at Lafayette determined that an Industrial Advisory Board (IAB) needed to be implemented at this location to ensure its continued growth and provide the vital link between the educational community and business and industry.

Assessment of Need and Purpose

Two goals of the SOT at Lafayette are to offer programs and curricula that are current and relevant to the community and increase enrollment among non-traditional students. These two outcomes require continuous effort and support from organizations that could benefit by employing our graduates. The partnership with SIA allowed faculty and staff to interact with the automotive industry; however, an advisory board comprised of representatives from business and industry representing a cross-section of the community would enhance communication and provide diverse perspectives. These are crucial ingredients needed to successfully achieve the SOT at Lafayette goals. Interaction with an IAB would allow SOT at Lafayette to customize degree programs to meet community needs. Proactive advisory boards can provide leadership “in the development of educational structures and programs capable of meeting 21st century needs² (Industrial Collaboration and Technology Transfer Program, 1999, p.1).

In addition to program and curricula support, business and industry employ a workforce comprised of individuals who are potential students. This workforce is a huge, important, and often neglected population. These employees, if educated, are in a position to increase a company’s efficiency and productivity. An IAB could promote the SOT at Lafayette throughout the business and industrial community resulting in increased interaction with training and human resources departments. These relationships could improve the recruiting emphasis of the statewide location.

Finally, the IAB could assist in locating and securing equipment (hardware and software) as well as sources of external funding to develop a state-of-the-art educational facility. This role of an IAB is essential for a new location such as SOT at Lafayette during its formative years.

To assist the SOT at Lafayette in achieving its goals, the SOT at Lafayette developed the following purpose statement for the IAB:

The purpose of the Lafayette Advisory Board will be to advise the Director of SOT at Lafayette on matters related to (1) new degree programs and options, (2) long-range planning, (3) marketing/community relations, (4) development, (5) other local policy matters.

There are many ways that the advisory board can contribute to the goals of the SOT at Lafayette. The organization of the IAB will include three standing committees to assist in achieving these goals.

The Planning Committee can determine community needs and provide advice regarding strategic planning matters such as:

- Relevance of curricula and programs offered
- Determination of community needs by identifying skill sets needed by graduates

The Marketing/Communication Committee can provide support and suggestions for public relations activities:

- Promotion of academic programs through networking, newsletter, and publicity
- Suggestions for methods to recognize students through the media (graduation, projects, etc.)
- Assisting in preparation and review of brochures designed to promote academic programs

The Development Committee can assist in obtaining external resources by

- Identifying sources of grants and assisting in the developing of grant applications to provide financial support including funding for specific projects, funding for the general account, scholarships and establishing foundations for future contributions
- Identifying sources of equipment and technology resources including the loan of good used quality equipment or facilities

Composition of the Industrial Advisory Board

Today, more than ever, a powerful and influential advisory board is essential to the success of an educational institution. Educators value the knowledge, experience, and expertise of individuals from the private sector. Rapid changes in workplace technology drive the need for increasingly higher levels of knowledge and skills. It is essential that the programs and curricula prepare students for the workplace. An effective IAB can be the bridge from academe to the workplace. “Industry must take a leading role in the structure and administration of future training for that industry.” (Introduction to IITAB, 1998, p.2)⁴

Selection of participants for an IAB is critical. Members should be selected from business, industry, and government and should reflect the variety of business and industry in the local community. The broad functions of an advisory board are reflected in the breadth of its membership. “Much of the success or failure of an IAB will rest with the quality and motivation of its members. The goal is to select people who are generally on the upper end of the career ladder, who have a broad view of industry, who have control of their schedule, and who have a wide range of contacts in their segment or industry.” (Marshall, 1999).⁶

According to Marshall, there are three essential factors to consider when selecting IAB members: personal abilities and influence of the member; their organizations’ prestige, and resources; and industrial/business representation. Board members must be involved and committed to the organization. They need to “help forge consensus opinion and spirited commitment, and seek opportunities to apply their own areas of expertise to the benefit of the organization,” (Hinman, 1993, p.1).¹

Taking into consideration the above factors, a preliminary list of possible members was created. Once the potential list was finalized, a letter of invitation was developed and mailed to each

candidate. The primary message in the letter was to introduce the SOT at Lafayette, present its mission and persuade the reader to participate in the IAB. At this time, SOT at Lafayette was one of the “best kept” secrets at Purdue and in the Lafayette community. Educating potential candidates was essential to securing commitment from community leaders.

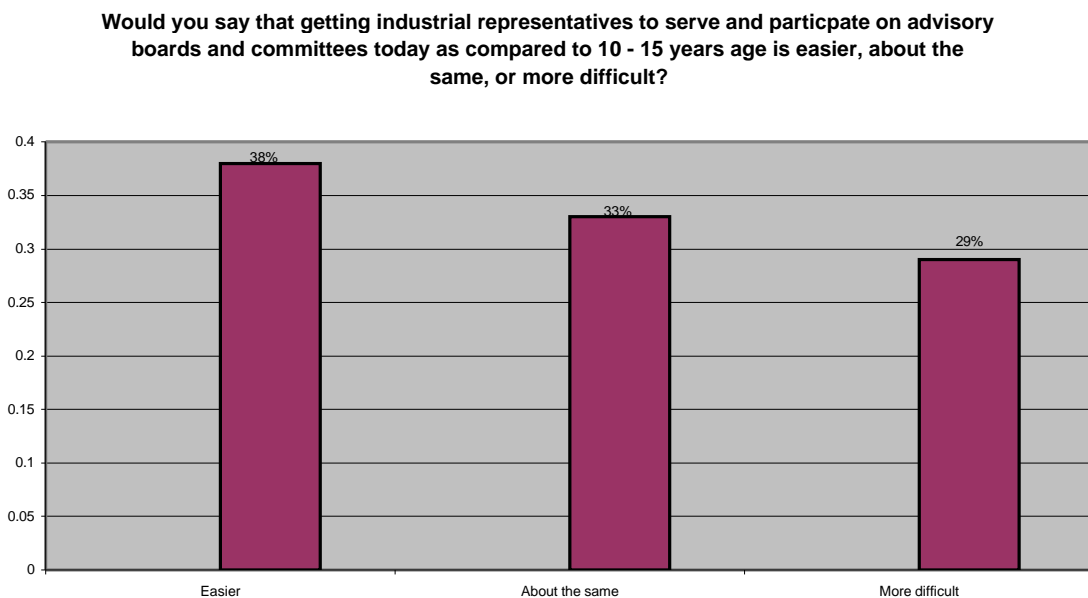
Needless to say, the letters required follow-up communication. Each candidate who was invited to participate on the board was contacted via telephone to confirm interest in participation. The goal was to create an active advisory board comprised of between ten to fifteen members. Initially twenty (20) community members were invited to participate and twelve (12) are currently actively participating on the IAB. Active IAB members include representatives from manufacturing, banking, health care, insurance, small business, state and local government, and the local school corporation.

Challenges of Implementation

As with any new undertaking, there were a few challenges during the implementation of the new IAB for Lafayette.

A major concern of SOT at Lafayette was getting business and industry representatives to serve and participate on an IAB. Because of the location (approximately 10 miles from the main campus of Purdue University), leaders in the community were already serving on advisory boards for different departments and schools for Purdue University. How could we invite different, yet influential, people to participate? Would individuals be willing to donate their time and energy to the IAB?

The results of an “Internet Survey on Listening to Industry”³ presented at the 2001 Engineering Technology Leadership Institute in Dayton, Ohio addressed the question of willingness to participate on advisory boards. The question asked to Engineering Technology Deans and Department/Division/Chairs/Directors/Heads showed mixed results.



Creating the first IAB for the School of Technology at Lafayette could be categorized in the more difficult category. When talking with Directors from other Purdue statewide locations, their response was that there were no difficulties recruiting member for the IAB; however, this was not consistent with Lafayette results.

The follow-up telephone conversations were challenging. Initial reaction to the recipients of the invitation letter were two-fold:

- First, what was the SOT at Lafayette?
- Second, and most important, why did this location exist. Was this location necessary? Was this a duplication of the educational opportunity offered at the main campus? Was this a duplication of the Community College of Indiana system with a location in Lafayette (approximately 2 miles from the Lafayette location)?

After talking with a majority of the invitees, thirteen 13 individuals committed to participate on the IAB. Negative responses to follow-up communication included:

Too busy (not enough time)	3
Already involved with Purdue in other capacity	1
Did not understand the value of the location	1
No response	2

At the initial meeting, eight (8) individuals attended, with five (5) individuals indicated that they could not attend due to scheduling conflicts. After the initial meeting one member decided that he did not have the time or interest to participate and subsequently resigned. The final challenge was obtaining commitment – would the members actively participate and attend all meetings?

The IAB has now met twice, and attendance has been sporadic. Not all twelve members who committed have attended the same meeting. The logistics of setting a meeting time is difficult. Participation in the IAB seems to be a low priority for members. Problems encountered in the implementation of the IAB at Lafayette mirrored the comments received in the Internet survey³ including:

- “But will not show up”
- “Only one of our campuses have had difficulty”
- “Everyone is a busier earning a living”
- “Getting folks together is difficult because of time constraints on the members. We also get a few last minute cancellations because of emergencies”
- “Many express interest in participating but getting full attendance is rare”

One of the remaining challenges is developing a sense of commitment by the board members. Feedback from the 2001 ETLI Survey³ indicated that it was easier to obtain commitment if:

- The goals were clear
- The board feels like they are actually doing something

How can SOT at Lafayette demonstrate that their goals for the IAB are clear? What can be done to convince the board that they actually can make a difference given the constraints of the academic system? The success of the first IAB for the SOT at Lafayette depends on responses to

these challenges. For the system to be effective, continuity and follow-up are essential. The SOT at Lafayette needs to be responsive to recommendations of the IAB. Implementation must become a priority for administrators.

At the start of the next advisory board (the third) meeting in February 2002, a progress report on the action items will be presented to the advisory board members. As action plans are implemented, the importance of the IAB to the SOT at Lafayette will be proven to the advisory board. Effective utilization of the advisory board to refine and refresh the goals and direction of the SOT at Lafayette will result in a proactive board and positive results.

Perceived Benefits from the Utilization of the Advisory Board

The IAB for the SOT at Lafayette represents a confluence of cooperative academic and industry/business interests. The following is a partial list of benefits to be obtained by both parties as perceived by the SOT at Lafayette:

Benefits to Business and Industry

- Opportunity to interact with faculty during meetings
- Ability to influence the academic curriculum and programs to better serve the needs of the community
- Network with other industry representatives
- Access to faculty for short courses on topics relevant to their organization

Benefits to SOT at Lafayette

- Opportunity to stay in touch with real world technical problems and solutions
- Validation of direction and value of SOT at Lafayette
- Donations of equipment, software, or funding to increase learning outcomes
- Increased enrollment
- Greater visibility and public relations

Although these are perceived, anticipated benefit, the final results are yet to be determined because this committee is still in the formative stage. The benefits that will be derived are contingent on the effectiveness of the committee.

Implications

A review of this real world case study (the creation, development, and implementation of an IAB for the SOT at Lafayette) shows that an IAB is essential because of the fast pace of change and the emerging technology utilized in business and industry today. An active, well-focused industrial advisory board will result in current and relevant curricula and programs for the community. A dedicated committee will help to identify sources for funding and equipment that is so essential to a new statewide location. The key to the success of this, or any, advisory board is the commitment of both the educational institution and the members of the advisory board. Both parties must be willing to commit time and energy necessary for program advancement. SOT at Lafayette must focus the IAB to maximize the success of the newest statewide technology location.

References

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