The Value and Use of the Advisory Board

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Abstract: Many university programs rely on academic advisory boards for a variety of reasons. In this program showcase, we look at some of the literature surrounding advisory boards to provide a background of what programs in the technical and professional communication field should consider when selecting board members and how programs may choose to use an advisory board based on the program's goals. Then, we present our specific context, with details about the history of our advisory board, our current expectations of our advisory board members, and how we recognize and appreciate our advisory board members. We also detail the specific way our advisory board members regularly interact with our students, advise our faculty, and contribute to our overall program. Finally, we share some key takeaways that faculty and administrators in other programs may find helpful and what they should consider when building or improving their own advisory boards.
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Students do not only learn through classroom instruction. They also make valuable connections and learn about their field through professional and co-curricular activities.

No matter how hard instructors work to mimic workplace scenarios in the classroom, students will always experience a gap between their studies and the work environment they will experience after graduation. And that's appropriate. The goals of the classroom are not the same as the goals in a workplace. However, we do want our students to be as prepared as possible once they search for and secure their first jobs.

There are many ways to demystify the workplace for students. Some programs seek real clients for classroom projects and bring in outside speakers that relate to the specific class topic. Many programs require students to complete internships to graduate (Meloncon & Henschel, 2013). Some students in our program work in writing jobs on campus, such as in information technology or the public relations

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office, giving them valuable experience in a familiar context (their current university of study).

But one popular method of helping students understand the workplace and industry is through academic advisory boards. While terms may vary (industry advisory boards, advisory boards, academic advisory boards), we use academic advisory board to mean a group of professionals in a discipline who serve an academic program, provide ongoing feedback to students and faculty with the goal of improving the program and building connections between industry and academia (Benigni, Gerguson, & McGee, 2011; Temmerman, 2022).

These advisory boards will look different depending on the context of the university and technical communication program. For example, while there are core courses that make up a technical communication curriculum, each program has its own distinctives and emphases (Meloncon & Henschel, 2013). Our professional writing program at a private, Midwest university has had an academic advisory board since 1991, meaning the board and its practices have had time to develop as the curriculum and faculty have changed. In this program showcase, we discuss what we've learned from working with our advisory board and how the board members contribute to the student experience. However, we first look at the literature to see why a program might start an advisory board in the first place.

Academy and Industry Divide

Even 30 years ago, there was scholarship stating that industry and academia had for decades been "suspicious of one another because of fundamental differences that seem to preclude cooperation" (Bosley, 1995). And that's putting it nicely. Chu (1998) recalls a letter to the editor where a "workplace professional lashed out against academia." The relationship between faculty and industry professionals has not always been rosy, and yet, even other industries recognize that "Industry-academic collaboration is a strategic necessity in today's fragmented and turbulent economy" (Mandviwalla, Fadem, Goul, George, & Hale, 2015).

Those fundamental differences include the dissimilarities in setting (academic vs industry), ways of communicating and collaborating, and views on power and research, just to name a few (Blumenthal, Campbell, Causino, & Seashore Lewis, 1996; Dicks, 2002). Entire books and plenty of articles have sought to address how to overcome these differences and explain how academia and industry can relate yet remain distinct (Kynell-Hunt & Savage, 2004; Kline & Barker, 2012; Mirel & Spilka, 2002). The two have tried to work together, with the goal of mutual benefit, for a long time through structures such as internships and client projects (Grabowski & Harden Fritz, 2007; Meloncon & Schreiber, 2018). These practices are meant to provide students with experience and better prepare them for industry work, but they also give organizations opportunities to complete tasks at little cost. We've also seen discourse on how academic research can inform industry practice (Cooke & Mings, 2005; Spilka, 2000).

This program showcase does not try to bridge every gap between academia and

industry. Instead, it focuses on one connection that our program has made that has benefitted students, faculty, and industry members who participate.

Purpose and Composition of Advisory Boards

For a long time, there has been a push for faculty in technical communication programs to connect with industry colleagues through the formation of industry advisory boards (Hayhoe, 1998). These boards have been around for decades and are groups of people "who meet regularly over a long period of time in order to advise academic programs" (Brockman, 1982). Distinct from governing boards of business entities, academic advisory boards "do not have a fiduciary, governance or legal responsibility and typically focus on offering advice, fundraising, program development and institutional engagement" (Mandviwalla, Fadem, Goul, George, & Hale, 2015).

We have good information on why programs create advisory boards and what makes them successful, especially from Lars Söderlund, John Spartz, and Ryan Weber's study (2017). In that study, the authors "interviewed both technical communication program administrators from universities across the US and members of a long-standing advisory board at a midsized, public, Midwestern US university." (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017). It is one of the most in depth studies of technical communication advisory boards that we've seen, and much of what we describe from our own program below overlaps with that study, though we do have some distinct elements. Below, we discuss how these boards are formed and how they often function.

Starting an advisory board requires support from leadership, most notably deans and chairs (Benigni, Gerguson, & McGee, 2011). There may be a financial component in bringing board members to campus, and those funds most likely come from a university budget. However, Benigni, Gerguson, and McGee (2011) got survey responses from 68 different department chairs and learned that administrators view these types of boards as prestigious, meaning they may see the value in financial investment without much persuasion. Deans and chairs are sometimes the people who coordinate efforts between faculty and the board, though this coordinator may also be a separate faculty member (Zahra, Newey, & Shaver, 2011).

While all boards have people from industry in them, some boards also contain faculty members and even students (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017). Programs tend to want a diversity of skill set and industry experience on an advisory board, but finding the right mix of individuals is a significant challenge (Kilcrease, 2011).

Most commonly, faculty call on alumni to serve on their advisory board (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017), which isn't surprising: graduates may have less of a learning curve because they already understand the curriculum, faculty, and academic practices of a program. Penrose (2002) explained that his faculty wanted alumni because those graduates are "familiar" with their "situation." They valued recent alumni who would know the current curriculum well.

Alumni also help faculty find board members who graduated from other institutions. Programs may also secure advisory board members through professional connections and organizations, such as the Society for Technical Communication (STC) (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017). Choosing the right people to serve will depend on what the faculty and their leadership want to accomplish with the board.

That process begins with crafting a clear mission and set of expectations for the board (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017). Without these elements, the group may be rudderless and accomplish little for the program, frustrating board members and faculty alike. Having a clear mission also helps faculty identify the kind of professional that will best serve the academic discipline's needs.

In determining their mission, programs may have many reasons to form advisory boards, including receiving feedback on curriculum and potential program changes, advocating for the program to university administration and the local community, and many others (Mandviwalla, Fadem, Goul, George, & Hale, 2015; Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017). They deliver another level of accountability for programs looking to grow and flourish (Schaeffer & Rouse, 2014).

A reason may also be specific to an academic discipline. Technical communication programs often seek guidance on curriculum (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017) while business programs rank "enhancing the image of the department through publicity" as the most important contribution of advisory boards, according to 1,642 completed questionnaires of business faculty (Kilcrease, 2011).

Even within the same programmatic context, advisory boards may differ. Mandviwalla et. al (2015) studied four different Information Systems' advisory boards and found key differences in function and role. These differences also exist within the technical communication context. For example, Patricia Dorazio (1996) notes that faculty at her institution didn't only want advice on curriculum, they also wanted to know how to recruit better and legitimize new programs for various stakeholders. The latter two arguably take more time than the former. Other majors may not rely on advisory boards at all to bring in new students but instead want their board to focus on helping current students get jobs by reviewing portfolios (Dillon, 1997). Still others rely on board members to serve as adjunct faculty or guest speakers in the classroom (Penrose, 2002; Sides, 1998).

Regardless of what goals a program has, advisory boards can help faculty keep up with changing professional environments (Mandviwalla, Fadem, Goul, George, & Hale, 2015). In technical communication, the technology and work processes change frequently. Advisory boards give programs insight into the changing landscape of the field, a necessity when faculty have a depth of knowledge about the related topics but do not practice those concepts on a day-to-day basis (Martin, 2008). If used well, professionals on a board can contribute their time and expertise to address a program's weak spots.

Even with all this good information, we don't have many case studies or examples

of how individual institutions use their advisory boards based on their context. These examples could help faculty members identify new strategies for their own advisory boards or provide a starting point for others as they consider creating their own board. Explaining specific tactics can also help readers see how faculty in other programs have implemented broader strategies. For example, what does it look like to seek advice on a potential program change of significance, like a name change? In this program showcase, we show how one small program has used its board to better prepare students to get a job and succeed in the workplace and how that board has influenced decisions about curriculum and programmatic matters.

University and Program Context

Our university is a private institution in the Midwest. It has over 4,000 undergraduate students and more than 5,000 total students. The *Wall Street Journal* recently ranked it as a top ten school in the nation for student engagement. The university has three significant cities within an hour and thus, a lot of local jobs available to our graduates.

Our professional writing program has existed in some form since the mid-1980s when an English department faculty member created the initial five courses. It originally began as an emphasis in the English major, but by 1992, had grown into its own major. The program requires 64 credit hours and has two primary faculty members, though students are required to take a few courses outside the department.

Professional writing currently resides in the Communication department where it has been for over a decade. For the previous 25 years, it had been in the English department. Enrollment has fluctuated between 31-37 students for the last five years. Notable places where graduates have worked include Meta (Facebook), The Washington Post, Google, Procter & Gamble, and IBM.

The program has gone through three name changes. The last switch occurred during a major rebranding effort that has increased the number of incoming students each fall from a range of 0–4 to 8–10.

Advisory Board History

In 1991, the founding faculty member established an Industry Advisory Board of professionals in various areas of the field. From founding documents, the mission of the advisory board was to "assist faculty as they seek to prepare students for a professional career in the field of professional writing."

The members have obviously changed over the years and so have their responsibilities. Originally, the board met once or twice a year to offer advice on curriculum, including what software and corporate strategies faculty should integrate into the classroom. Board members had little to no interaction with students.

But soon after, the founding faculty member created a pair of one-credit courses dedicated to helping students prepare for the job application and self-branding process. The first class was designed for sophomores and the second for seniors. In both courses, students created or updated a resume, cover letter, and professional portfolio of their writing, editing, and design. In the early years, students created print portfolios.

In conjunction with the creation of these classes, the advisory board's responsibilities changed, becoming similar to what they are today. Their responsibilities included the following:

- Conducting and evaluating mock phone interviews with assigned students.
- Conducting and evaluating follow-up face-to-face interviews on campus with the same assigned students.
- Conducting portfolio reviews on campus with assigned students; meeting with individual students to evaluate how they present their portfolio during a job search.

We detail these activities and others the board currently does below. Originally, the founding faculty member recruited board members from her STC contacts. She was an active member in the organization, and for eight years she served as an Assistant to the President of STC in charge of academic and research programs. As the professional writing program matured, she also recruited from alumni.

Current Advisory Board Practices

At the current time we have eleven board members, but it has historically fluctuated between 8–10. As the program has grown over the years, so has the board. Board members are volunteers and do not receive traditional compensation, though we do provide them with meals three times a year.

Because professional writing has never had more than two full-time faculty members, we value the advisory board immensely. Even though our faculty have had plenty of professional experiences and continue to develop relevant skills in a variety of professional experiences outside of the university, they cannot possibly speak to all the career opportunities that students have in a discipline like technical communication.

Selection of Board Members

The strategy for selecting board members may differ by program and institution. Our goal has always been for the board to reflect the core areas of our program, "finding members from a diverse representation of the local technical communication profession" (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017). As our curriculum evolves, we seek out new members that reflect those changes and who can offer guidance to students interested in those particular areas of technical communication or professional writing.

In the last eight years, we have added classes on the following topics:

- Editing in publishing contexts
- Writing for and managing publications
- User experience
- Content strategy
- Writing in various industries

Our professional writing program has changed significantly since its inception in the 1980s, and while all programs have common characteristics (Meloncon & Henschel, 2013), ours has some distinct elements as well. For example, we put a strong emphasis on editing and require four classes that we characterize as our editing curriculum relating to grammar, style, the mechanics of editing and editing in a publishing context.

The strong emphasis on editing needs to be reflected in the membership of our board, so we always try to have multiple members who are currently editors or do a significant amount of editing in their jobs.

Our curriculum also has multiple courses related to instructional design, and many of our graduates enter this field. Thus, we have several instructional designers on the board. As professional writing students have become interested in an even more diverse range of career outcomes, our board members have encouraged us to add professionals that reflect that diversity of interest. Some have directly stated that they don't always feel qualified to answer questions outside of their immediate expertise, even if in a related discipline.

When students interact with board members, they can either explore a career path they are unsure about or get a deeper understanding of something they are already pursuing. This strategy allows students to investigate both the breadth and depth of our field. This not only includes job descriptions but also the industries where these professionals work. We try to have board members from corporate environments, university settings, and nonprofit organizations because this reflects the environments where our graduates typically work. The current board has professionals from the following organizations:

- Local university
- Discover Financial Services
- Fifth Third Bank
- Kettering Foundation
- Medpace (2)
- Paligo
- Perforce Software
- Procter & Gamble
- Retired faculty member
- Yaskawa Motoman

Programs find board members from a variety of sources (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017). We find ours in common ways: Some are graduates of our program who we invite to become members when they have had five or more years of professional experience in their professional writing-related discipline. We find this strategy to be beneficial because graduates of the program know, understand, and

value the culture of the university. For the sake of diversity, not all board members have been graduates of the program, but infusing some alums into the advisory board has benefited our students. Some programs have student members and faculty on their advisory boards (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017), but while we have one faculty emeritus, we do not include any students on our advisory board because that approach would not support our mission.

Other board members are professional contacts the faculty have from current or past work opportunities or relationships in the community. Still others are referrals from current or past students or board members. Every one of them lives within an hour radius of campus because we require them to visit campus twice a year to work with our students and faculty.

Responsibilities and Expectations of Board Members

One of the more important elements to a successful relationship is that the board has clear responsibilities, knowing its role in achieving the program's goals (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017). Our board members do not sign a contract, but they are presented with clear expectations when offered a position. Each member should attend the meetings in the fall and spring if at all possible and return student evaluation forms by the established deadlines (more on the evaluations below). It's not uncommon for members to miss meetings because of prior engagements, but we expect them to communicate with us as quickly as possible when they cannot attend. Board members who do not meet those expectations are not invited to serve the following year. Thankfully, this rarely happens.

Our board serves the students, professional writing faculty, and the program more broadly in several ways. In the next two sections, we discuss their service to our program.

Service to Students

Throughout the years, going to various technical and professional writing conferences, we have observed that other programs do not always use their boards to directly interact with their students. We believe that direct interaction allows students to benefit more fully from our board members' years of experience. Professionals currently in the field are best positioned to provide students with information on what employers expect from recent graduates (Temmerman, 2022).

Board members meet on campus to work twice a year: once during fall semester (typically in November) and once in spring semester (typically in March or April). In the fall, our sophomores and seniors take a class that prepares them to enter the job market where they create a resume and cover letter for an entry-level job (seniors) or internship (sophomores), and a professional portfolio of their writing, editing, and design. Once they've tailored their materials to a specific, attainable job or internship (approved by faculty), we provide them with professional information about each board member, and they select two board members to go through a mock hiring process with. The goal is for students to select members whose work responsibilities best match their own interests. Students send the board members their resume and cover letter and set up a time to do a phone or virtual interview

for a job posting that is relevant to their interests.

A week before the board members come to campus for our meeting, they conduct phone or virtual interviews with students, filling out an evaluation for each one (Appendix A). Prior to coming to campus, board members typically interview four students each and send their evaluations to the faculty member teaching the course. Their comments allow the instructor to address common issues that occurred during this part of the process. The faculty member also shares those comments with the students so that they can focus on improving the areas in which they struggled. Board members also critique each assigned student's resume and cover letter.

On phone or virtual interviews, there will typically be a time where the board member is "in character," pretending to interview the student for the position he or she has selected and is pretending to have applied for. After board members ask all their questions, they often "take the mask off" and provide immediate feedback to the student on what he or she did well and what he or she should work on.

This approach has served the program well. Students must go through the process of researching an organization, identifying potential questions, and doing other activities to prepare for an interview. Then they need to answer questions well and present themselves in a professional manner. Students have the anxiety that often comes with interviewing during this process; however, instead of receiving little or no feedback on their performance, each student gets verbal and written comments that should help prepare them to obtain an internship or job and help alleviate some of that anxiety for the future.

Once on campus, board members meet for a face-to-face interview with the same students that they spoke with over the phone or virtually. Having the students perform both their phone or virtual interviews and their face-to-face interviews with the same board members allows board members to see how the students have improved from the first mock interview to the second. It also helps to allay some of the anxiety the students feel about going through the mock interview process.

For the face-to-face interviews students dress as if they are interviewing for the company where they are seeking employment, and once again, board members play the role of hiring manager for these companies. There is an evaluation form for this interview as well (Appendix B), and board members are given time to fill it out between interview sessions, sessions that last 30–35 minutes. It is another experience where students receive immediate feedback on their interviewing performance, and often, there is time for them to ask questions, not only about the process they just went through but also about the discipline in general.

During spring semester, the board members return to campus to conduct portfolio reviews. This is not uncommon for technical communication programs (Dillon, 1997). Unlike the mock interviews in the fall semester, the portfolio reviews in the spring are not tied to a course, but they are still required of all students majoring in professional writing who have taken the job market preparation course at some

point in their academic careers. The students again select two board members to meet with, and a faculty member sends the advisory board members the students' portfolio links through email prior to the meeting day. We encourage the students to avoid selecting the same board members every semester to ensure that they are receiving a variety of input. Board members evaluate the portfolios before coming to campus, often bringing notes with them on what to discuss with the student. While on campus they meet with individual students who present their portfolios, talking through exhibits, how they completed their work, and what they learned through the exhibit's development.

In these interactions, students learn if their portfolio is easy to navigate and designed well for a specific job, whether they have chosen appropriate pieces, whether they have presented themselves professionally, and if they need to update specific pieces to improve their chances of getting a job or internship. They leave with a clear direction of how to improve their professional image online.

Finally, at both the fall and spring meetings, board members give students advice on how to accomplish their professional goals. This advice typically occurs while critiquing a student's interviewing skills or the quality of his or her portfolio, but it also happens in the between times — after members have filled out their evaluations but before the meeting time for the next crop of students. Board members also make themselves available to the students to answer questions throughout the year through avenues such as email and LinkedIn.

The board's work with our students has been invaluable. Our graduates often tell us how important it was to learn about the interviewing process and speak with professionals about their long-term goals. Even though it causes some anxiety for our students, they typically understand and appreciate the value.

Service to Faculty

Advisory boards "provide valuable counsel about future tactical directions the faculty might take," keeping in mind the goals of the program and institution (Temmerman, 2022). In both the fall and spring semesters, campus meetings typically start at noon with a catered lunch in one of the more elegant rooms on campus. It is our way of appreciating the board for their work and catching up with them personally, but it also affords us an opportunity to discuss potential changes to our program and receive feedback.

For example, in a meeting during the spring of 2022, professional writing faculty were considering creating concentrations within the professional writing program. During the spring meeting, faculty proposed the idea to the advisory board, talking through the vision and potential options. The board responded with comments about the challenges and opportunities this proposition would create. Their feedback contributed to the decision to abandon the idea of concentrations and instead more clearly articulate the potential career paths for students in other ways.

In another example from 2013, board members provided feedback on a faculty proposal to change the name of the major. The response affirmed that in our

particular context, it made sense to go ahead with the change, especially considering recent and coming adjustments to the curriculum.

We have also sought their feedback on creating new courses and dropping others, adding specific assignments, and altering our classroom approaches to address changing work environments, like the increase in remote work following the pandemic and the current use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the field.

Their perspective on these matters is not taken as gospel as it is dangerous for academics to discount their own expertise and other sources of information when making decisions (Gilberson, 1987). But their opinions are an important factor as we decide the future of the professional writing program.

The board also provides perspective on individual coursework and curriculum, an often-stated purpose of these groups (Penrose 2002; Yee 1994). Students "benefit from a timely curriculum that prepares them to function effectively in an organizational setting" (Dorazio, 1996). Our faculty facilitates a thirty- to sixty-minute debrief session with the board after they have interviewed our students (fall meeting) or reviewed their portfolios (spring meeting). In this session, we discuss how faculty can better prepare students for the job seeking process and what gaps may be present in our curriculum. The board sees our students' best projects in their portfolios (Dillon, 1997) and gives feedback on quality and relevance of these projects to the current workplace.

In these ways, the board helps us keep our curriculum "at the forefront of latest developments and opportunities and, especially, future needs of the profession" (Temmerman, 2022). It also reinforces faculty perspectives on which students might need additional help from tutors or the university's Writing Center to produce professional level work.

In addition, the board provides input regarding the most important and up-to-date software skills needed to succeed in the field. For example, a few years ago a board member directed the faculty members to the scholarship program that MadCap FLARE offers and recommended that students learn this software to prepare them for working in a technical communication role. Because of this recommendation, in the program's Writing and Designing Documentation course, students now create an online help project using MadCap FLARE, and the university doesn't have to pay for the software because MadCap provides it to our students for free.

These face-to-face conversations allow for faculty and board members to explain their perspective and push back against each other in ways that a survey would not. They also engender further discussion when the advisory board members' opinions are at odds.

Also, the board is a resource for other program needs. When their expertise makes sense in particular classes, they are often asked to visit classes and share their experiences in the field. For example, we have a class called Copywriting and a current board member (and 1996 graduate of the program) has worked in that

context for many years. Most years, he visits the course and discusses writing for a brand, bringing with him examples of projects he has and is currently working on.

Another example of leveraging our board's expertise is in a class that helps students better grasp a corporate culture. Advisory board members are often invited as guest speakers to this class to discuss their experiences working in various cultures and provide the students with tips about how to navigate those various cultures. Topics have included how to effectively work remotely, how to manage your own personal social media while recognizing you are a reflection on your company, and how to live your personal convictions while respecting others in the workplace.

Service to Program

The administration at our institution has always struggled to understand the professional writing program. While they may have some concept of technical writing, they certainly don't grasp its depths or the more unique qualities of our specific major. During a recent tenure review, a university official asked clarifying questions about how the program differs from other writing degrees at our university. He wanted to understand, but maybe because the field is still relatively new when considering the vast history of academia, he had no schema to help it make sense.

While our advisory board has never advocated for something specific to the university or department administration directly (Soderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017), their presence and resumes have given the professional writing program more ethos with decision makers. Over the years board members have often worked for companies that the administration recognizes (HP, Procter & Gamble, Nationwide Insurance, etc.), showing that graduates in our discipline contribute to noteworthy organizations.

The advisory board has also helped our department chair better understand the program and how to support it. As noted earlier, professional writing moved from the English department to the Communication department in the early 2010s, and to be frank, the Communication faculty and chair had no idea what we did in our major.

To help with the transition, we started inviting the chair to our lunches with the advisory board. During these lunches, our chair has learned about the variety of jobs in the field, the quality of the current iteration of the professional writing major, and how the program prepared and helped board members who are now graduates. Those conversations have improved advocacy for professional writing from our chair to the administration.

While the board does not interact with prospective students, they indirectly help with recruiting. The professional writing faculty interact with prospective students and their parents frequently. A common question from both parties involves how the program prepares students directly to obtain positions in the field. Because our board is so active, we describe the process that students go through and highlight how it has benefited our graduates. It eases concerns about getting a job with a

writing degree and shows how serious we are about both the discipline and our students' job prospects.

Strengthening the Relationship with the Board

Professional writing faculty do not take lightly that our board members volunteer their time and expertise without financial compensation. We do several things to strengthen the relationship between the board and our program and to show our appreciation for them. As mentioned before, we feed board members lunch at each meeting, catered from a local establishment. While board members are interviewing students and filling out evaluations, we provide them with cookies, snacks, and drinks they enjoy at their pleasure.

At the end of each school year, we invite board members and their spouses or significant others to a year-end banquet where we celebrate the accomplishments of our students and reflect on the year's events. The banquet occurs in the evening, and once again, we provide food. We have the board members intermingle their seating with the students so that students have the opportunity to interact with the board members during the meal and get to know them on a personal level.

The members who attend receive a gift as a thank you for their work with our students and faculty. These are all small gestures that are essential to show the board how much we value their contributions to our students and the professional writing program.

Benefits for the Board

Recently, we asked board members how their membership benefits them beyond our small gestures, and they responded with four themes. First, our board meetings give them the opportunity to engage in conversation with other professionals about current trends in our field and to learn about how other professionals are navigating current obstacles or harnessing new technology to advance the field. Just as our program benefits from these discussions, so do the board members.

Second, their interactions with our students give them the opportunity to keep a pulse on the current maturity and skill levels of undergraduate students and soon-to-be college graduates. They are able to use those interactions to identify talent and recruit for their company's open internships or entry level jobs. When they interview students from other programs, they are able to compare what they've seen from our program and make better informed decisions about hiring.

Third, the board members appreciate the opportunity to give back to the next generation. They see their service to the board as a mechanism to invest in students, using their years of experience and the wisdom they've gained for a higher purpose. In addition, oftentimes their companies value this as a form of community service.

Finally, and in their opinions, most importantly, the board members see our board meetings as networking opportunities. They value the relationships they build with one another and rely on those relationships to increase their professional network.

They recognize that, were they not participating on the board, they would not otherwise meet the other professionals involved through their typical networking or working circles. For these four reasons, our advisory board members see regularly participating on our board as valuable for both the program and for themselves.

Key Takeaways

While this showcase is one example of how a specific program uses its advisory board, we believe there are some important takeaways that can benefit other programs.

Key Takeaway 1: A program's context influences how an advisory board is used. The direct contact between our board and students is only possible because of the relatively small size of our program and physical proximity of the members. For a larger program, having board members interact with most students during the year could be untenable, depending on the ratio of board members to students. Other programs may decide the benefits of having members from across the country outweigh the advantages of having them regularly come to campus.

With current technologies, faculty and administrators can more easily have students and board members interact over Zoom or like technologies, allowing for more professionals to live far away and still contribute to the program. As with everything, there are tradeoffs, so as we discuss in our second takeaway, goals are an important starting point.

Key Takeaway 2: Clearly defined goals and expectations benefit faculty, students, and the board. When a program creates an advisory board, faculty should know exactly what they want members to contribute. Then they need to articulate their vision to the members both individually and collectively so that everyone is on the same page. Faculty need to consider how busy professionals are and what's reasonable to ask of them.

In our case, board expectations changed as our curriculum and program developed. Faculty shouldn't be afraid of modifying the functions of their board members when those changes will benefit their students and their program. But those changes must be communicated clearly and ideally have the blessing of the board members who will act out those new functions.

Key Takeaway 3: Board members should reflect the scope of the program. Especially when board members are advising on curriculum and reviewing student work, they must have the collective experience to share wisdom with faculty about the state of the program and strengths of the students. If a program has a strong editing component, then editors should be a part of the advisory board.

It has sometimes been challenging to keep the board up to date with our own curriculum changes. As stated earlier, we have developed our curriculum significantly in the last decade, and the expertise of our board has not always reflected that. And yet, it is imperative that we match students with professionals

who can guide them toward their ultimate professional goals.

Implementing this takeaway will be easier for narrower programs. If a major focuses on traditional technical writing, it will likely need to seek a small set of professionals to represent its scope. Broader programs like ours will reach out to technical writers, editors, instructional designers, copywriters, and communication specialists.

Conclusion

Advisory boards are a great tool to help sharpen a program and prepare students for the professional challenges ahead. While the way we use our board would not work well for everyone, our board members' contributions have been instrumental in the success of our students and growth of our major. At each meeting, we ask our board members directly what we can do to improve the mock interview process and the quality of work our students create. Their insights have allowed us to keep up with changes in the field and address both our blind and weak spots as faculty members. In conclusion, we attribute the growth and success of the program, in part, to our advisory boards' contributions to our students, our faculty, and our program.

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Appendix A

Professional Writing
Phone Interview Assessment

Student's Name: **Evaluator's Name:**

Circle one:

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

Considering the characteristics listed below, check the most appropriate ranking for each characteristic (1= seriously needs work; 2 = needs work; 3 = average; 4 = above average; 5 = excellent).

Characteristics	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Comments**
Timely and professional communication before interview						
Adequately prepared for interview						
Resume and cover letter professional						
Effective response to interview questions						
Confident throughout interview						
Ability to sell himself/herself						

Appendix B

Professional Writing
Face-to-Face Interview Assessment

Student's Name: **Evaluator's Name:**

Circle one:

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

Considering the characteristics listed below, check the most appropriate ranking for each characteristic (1= seriously needs work; 2 = needs work; 3 = average; 4 = above average; 5 = excellent).

Characteristics	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Comments**
Made strong first impression (handshake, confident greeting, appropriately dressed)						
Adequately prepared for interview						
Effective response to interview questions						
Confident throughout interview						
Ability to sell himself/herself						

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