



BUILD the Best BAC

With the right care and cultivation,
a **business advisory council** can be one of a business school's



greatest assets.

As a former dean, I've worked closely with business advisory councils (BACs) and know how important they can be to the health, wealth, and well-being of a business school. With advisory councils so important to a school's development, it's surprising that so little has been written to help reduce the amount of "trial and error" and "reinvention of the wheel" phenomena associated with b-school BACs.

Handpicked by a business school administration, this group of business leaders can serve as a veritable wellspring of information. In fact, BACs can be so influential that programs or projects can live or die based on their counsel. A BAC can become an invaluable source of information, one that offers input on recruitment trends and curriculum; feedback on academic programs; networking opportunities; student internship and job opportunities; and even financial support for scholarships, buildings, and programs. It can be, in short, indispensable.

by Patricia M. Flynn

Whether an advisory council works wonders for a business school or simply wilts on the vine, however, depends on how well it is created and managed. Only with time, effort, and proper planning will a BAC fulfill its potential and purpose.

Select the Best

At the heart of any BAC is, of course, its membership. An institution's goals for the future should play a large part in determining who sits on its BAC. The first questions a dean must consider are straightforward. Why are you creating an advisory council? Do you want to form more business contacts or bolster your school's visibility? Do you need to find help for fund-raising or secure more internships and opportunities for students?

Although it may seem that a good BAC should include the best and brightest that the business community has to offer, that's only half the equation. The other half rests on what an institution wants to accomplish. If a school's goal is to become a leader in finance or technology, then its BAC should include CFOs or CTOs, in addition to some general managers. If fund-raising is a priority, then business leaders with a wide range of influence may make the best members. A BAC membership should be diverse, but it also should represent the needs of an individual school and its stage of development.

Diversity, too, has its limits. While it's important to avoid being too selective—a school risks hindering its goals for diversity and the scope of membership participation—it's also important to aim for members who will consider themselves "peers," in company sizes and titles. The chairman of an entrepreneurial startup and the vice president of a Fortune 1000 company could work well together; the CEO of a Fortune 100 firm and the senior vice president of a community bank may not.

I had the luxury of creating my BAC from scratch. I handpicked people with whom I had prior affiliations and whom I trusted. When a new dean comes to a school with a council already in place, he or she does not have the same option. In this case, it's important that the new dean and the former dean go through the membership, discussing the strengths of each person and what he or she contributes. But whether a dean is establishing a brand-new council or



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learning about a council already in place, doing the proper groundwork is essential to building a successful relationship between a business school and its BAC.

Minimize "Show and Tell"

I've had the opportunity to participate in several panel discussions about the "care and feeding" of BACs. In these discussions, most of the stories I hear are not from deans who don't have advisory councils, but from those who have them and want to make them work more effectively. Many deans believe they are not utilizing the expertise of their BAC members to best advantage, or that they're not getting the networking advantages that they had anticipated. They talk of dysfunctional councils they have inherited, of BAC meetings that went awry, and of conflicting expectations of the development and academic staff.

One of the biggest BAC blunders involves meeting management. "Show and tell" sessions in which faculty and staff give presentations and updates on the school's progress should not dominate the meeting. It's not that members aren't interested hearing about the school's progress. It's simply that BAC members are not there to listen; they're there to share their experience. If the dean and faculty do all the talking, neither they nor the school nor the BAC members themselves are able to take advantage of the high-powered people assembled in the room.

The BAC meetings that I've found most successful are those where the members do most of the talking. These meetings avoid "dog and pony" shows that sing the praises of a school, and they don't overcrowd their agendas with activities. Instead, a dean and his or her staff prepare members well in advance of the meeting for its topic of discussion; then, they allot significant time during the meeting for discussion and debate.

For those seeking ways to get members talking, try a personal favorite of mine—give them "homework." When I planned BAC meetings, I sent members a homework assignment, most often via e-mail, several weeks beforehand. These quick assignments included four to six questions related to the meeting's primary discussion topic. Members could forward these messages to the appropriate people in their firms and have answers ready for the meeting date. As a result, all members were well-informed and ready to contribute to a

well-balanced discussion at the meeting, even if the topic fell outside their expertise.

While the members on my BAC were initially skeptical about the homework assignments, they came to appreciate their value. In fact, BAC members who were unable to attend a meeting actually forwarded me their homework so we could benefit from their input. Through these assignments, BAC members not only gained new insights into their own organizations, but also they were better able to put into perspective the experiences of other firms.

BAC Membership

Just as no two snowflakes look alike, neither should the business advisory councils of different schools with different missions. It's up to a school's dean, staff, and faculty to work together to develop the right "look" for their BACs. Whether you're establishing a new BAC or restructuring an existing one, its form and function will be determined by your answers to the following questions:

How many members should you invite?

BACs can range from five members more than 100. A membership of 25 ensures a good cross-section of opinions for group discussion, while also being a manageable size for developing strong, personal relationships with members. A membership of 150, on the other hand, provides more extensive networking opportunities.

What are the criteria for membership?

Most BACs target the chairpersons, CEOs, CFOs, CTOs, presidents, and partners in for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. Your own "A" list may include people whom you already know, those who have relationships with the school, or those nominated by the development office. Throughout the selection process, however, aim high. Never underestimate the drawing power of your institution.

Must members be alumni?

Don't assume that BAC members must be graduates from your school. This, in fact, may be impractical, especially if your school is relatively young or aspiring to a "higher level." Instead, consider a heterogeneous BAC of alums and non-alums. Or, as some schools have done, form two sepa-

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Most important, from their discussion we gleaned information we would not have been able to find anywhere else. When we asked our members about their employees' reactions to our advertisements in various media outlets, we were able to target our marketing efforts more effectively. When our business school was considering the launch of an executive MBA program, we asked our BAC how many of their employees were attending an executive MBA program, what schools they attended, how the programs were selected, whether these programs were evaluated by the partici-

rate BACs, one consisting of alums, the other primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) non-alums.

What about geographic scope?

Whether your BAC comprises local, national, or international membership depends not only on your school's mission, but also its location and the geographical dispersion of its alumni. If your school enjoys significant international alliances or if it is located in an area with few corporate headquarters, your reach should be national or international in scope.

Should trustees, retired executives and faculty be asked to serve?

It depends. Trustees may bring clout to the table, but have too much institutional knowledge to be able to provide independent advice. Retirees may not be on top of current trends; on the other hand, they may offer a wealth of expertise and possible financial backing. Existing BAC members who retire are often asked to stay on as emeritus members; however, executives who have already retired are not usually brought on board. And while selected faculty, department chairs, and administrators may be appointed as internal, *ex officio* members of a BAC, the bulk of membership should be external.

Set the Parameters

In addition to selecting the membership, school officials must determine the parameters under which the members will serve. Some schools prefer a formal hierarchy, while others prefer a more informal approach. Either way, the expectations for the council members *must* be made clear to them before they begin their service.

Term limits—Establishing terms for your members' service is a necessity. Often extending for two or three years, terms can be renewable or restricted. Terms provide an amicable way for

pants or the firm, and what trends they had seen in this area in the last five years. From their answers, we realized that the market was already saturated. The BAC input heavily influenced our decision to abort the project.

We made these decisions based not on the advice of just one or two companies, but on discussions that spanned 10 to 15 industries. We were able, quickly and easily, to capture the trends in the marketplace at that moment, rather than waiting months for the results from a survey. Such feedback also helped shape our market research and outreach activities.

members to bow out if they find they can no longer honor the commitment; they also provide a diplomatic way for schools to remove a member if he or she lacks the time to participate or has poor chemistry with the group.

Fees—Membership fees—which can range from \$1,000 to \$10,000 or more annually—appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Some deans who have inherited a fee-based BAC are considering eliminating the fees, while others are dependent on the revenue.

Bylaws—Bylaws can be extensive, covering the council's purpose, membership criteria, committee structure, rules of voting, and expectations. Some deans avoid bylaws altogether, preferring a more informal structure. The extent of your bylaws depends on the size of your group and the complexity of your goals. In all instances, however, at a minimum you should have a brief, written statement of the BAC mission and member responsibilities.

Meetings—BAC meetings are usually held two to four times a year, with considerable advance notice given to members. If your members are local, a meeting may last a few hours; if your membership is international in scope, a multiple-day meeting, perhaps scheduled around a campus event such as homecoming or a major speaker, may be more appropriate. For local and regional BACs, scheduling meetings in the early morning rather than late afternoon can significantly increase attendance.

Access to members—Who, besides BAC members, should be invited to attend a BAC meeting can be a hot issue. Many on campus may want access to these high-powered individuals, but the dean should control who is and is not invited. A dedicated reception where members and select nonmembers can meet may be a good compromise. The rest of your meeting time can be reserved for the council's discussion.

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Rules of Engagement

The most essential, and most elusive, element of a BAC is a sense of engagement among its members. At best, bored, underutilized members may resign. At worst, a failure to engage BAC members may hurt an institution's reputation in the business community.

To foster a sense of engagement among BAC members, make sure that members are encouraged to contribute during the meetings. Be sure minutes are recorded for each meeting. At the next meeting, return to the topics that were raised previously and let members know which suggestions were put into action, which ones were not, and why. BAC members want to know that their input is valued and making a difference. BAC members also want to network with other members, so make sure time is built into every meeting for informal conversations.

And while a close attention to detail is always important to a dean, it's perhaps even more so when working with a BAC. Not only must you make the best use of BAC members' time, but you also must make the experience as enjoyable for them as it is beneficial to your school. Moreover, BAC members will be assessing your institution and, by association, your graduates, by their experiences on the BAC.

It doesn't take a large oversight to compromise a BAC meeting; in fact, even the most trivial details can have a lasting effect. Therefore, make sure that the smallest details of the meeting—from communicating the meeting's purpose beforehand, to limiting the number of guests, to arranging for parking, food, hotel rooms, campus tours, and faculty interaction—are in place. Such planning is the only way to avoid unpleasant surprises and offer a successful forum for members.

Beyond BAC meetings, a business school should show its appreciation for members' input by keeping them informed, involved, and remembered. Send out a dean's newsletter as a simple yet significant way to keep members apprised of new programs and research, awards and honors, and student achievement. Invite two to three members to participate in

panel discussions that other members, faculty, and possibly students can attend. Provide tickets to campus athletic and cultural events. Take members on tours of new facilities during the construction phase. Such exclusive treatment costs little but is highly valued by BAC members, who in turn help spread the word about your new facilities.

Before our business school opened its newest building, we not only gave business leaders a tour; we also gave them hard hats bearing the school's logo. Keepsake gifts such as paperweights, sweatshirts, or a framed group photo of a BAC acknowledge the time of the members. Moreover, these are items that members will proudly display in their homes or offices, a perfect marketing opportunity for a school.

Perhaps the most valuable gesture a dean can make to foster engagement with members is a personal visit at least once a year. If that's infeasible, then make a personal phone call. In this way, the dean and the school bond one-on-one with BAC members, find out if the BAC is meeting the individual's expectations, and build their personal allegiances with the school.

Valuable Opportunities

I've learned firsthand that it is difficult to specify or anticipate all the potential benefits a BAC can provide. At one meeting, for instance, I mentioned that the market for student internships seemed to have fallen; a member who was also the president of a professional organization in Boston put out the word. By week's end, eight companies had contacted us about possible internships for our students. During another meeting, we asked for our members' input about our business school's new master of science degree in information technology. One of our members—the CEO of a software company—was so excited about the program that she offered to be included in our promotional brochures.

Such opportunities can easily arise from a well-structured, perpetually cultivated BAC—and these opportunities can't easily be found through other means. No matter what your school's goals are, its BAC should be an asset, not a liability. Without the proper time and attention, a BAC will founder. A BAC, however, that is aligned with a school's mission, meets the expectations of its members, and gives those members a stake in the school's success becomes an indispensable, strategic asset for the school and well worth the time and effort. **Z**

Patricia Flynn is a trustee professor of economics and management and former dean of the McCallum Graduate School of Business at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts.