Best Practices in
Community & Employer Engagement

Dear Colleagues:

There is a growing recognition of the importance our employers play in the success of our schools. They inform us of the emerging skill demands required for new hires which we can convert into our academic programs. They hire our graduates. And they can be the most independent and thus credible voices defending the quality and importance of our work to policy makers at all levels. In many ways, it is the relationship our schools have with their communities and their employers that makes the difference in our work!

As part of last year’s Strategic Plan, there was a recommendation to produce a best practices guide for this important work. Today, I am proud to share the product of this work with you. A taskforce contributed their best wisdom, counsel and experience to create this new guide for all to use.

We believe it is our sector’s connections to their community’s needs and their employers’ skill demands that separates us from other sectors of higher education. We hope these guides will be helpful to you in this important work.

Thanks for who you are and all that you do.

Sincerely,

Steve Gunderson
President and CEO
We are in the business of preparing our graduates for employment. To achieve this goal, we must design and deliver those occupational skills essential for their success in today’s workplace. Our academics begin with employers telling us what skills their employees need to be successful; and it ends with employers hiring our graduates because they meet the highest standards of skills preparation in their chosen occupation. In all of this, we need a community that believes in the quality of our graduates and the mission of our school. For our schools to succeed, we must effectively engage our employers and our communities. Only together can we all succeed.

For this to work, we must begin with an Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committee that works – for our students and for our employers. And when this happens, our school can be successful!

Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committees serve as a school’s public liaison, as voices who partner with the school in communicating the mission and success of the school. This is different work than that of an accreditor’s requirements for Program Advisory Committees and their purpose of specific program advice.

Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committees serve as our bridge to the communities we serve. What needs to be done is simple. Your school must care about the community before you can expect the community to care about your school. The challenge is whether a school will take the time to build effective community relationships.

Such committees are much more than a public relations effort. A successful committee begins with the right employers and community voices becoming your advisors. It operates through a professional process that values the employer’s wisdom and experience, and the community’s commitment to excellence in education. In the end, good programs will seek guidance in academic programming, lab work, internship and externships, and beyond.
A school's culture will reflect its commitment to the community, especially to those students that call that community home. A good Advisory Committee’s work doesn’t begin when a student enrolls or end when a graduate is hired. It begins with the school’s outreach in ways that define and deliver your commitment to meeting the needs of the community's workforce skill demands – both individually and collectively. You seek to work with the citizens of the community in ways that equip them for professional success. You seek to work with the employers in a partnership that identifies and meets their specific skill needs.

This guide of best practices was developed as part of CECU’s Strategic Plan 2020. One of the strategic planning working groups recognized the diversity of such advisory groups throughout our sector. Frankly, some are better and more successful than others. CECU’s Strategic Plan calls for the creation of a Best Practice Guide for Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committees in ways that enable all CECU members to design and operate such advisory committees at the highest levels of excellence.

CECU schools recognize the value of Employer and Community Advisory Committees in achieving and maintaining high-quality programs, delivery of academic excellence and student success. Postsecondary Career Education has evolved from basic job training to high-level occupation-specific career education. Today, 65 percent of all jobs and 85 percent of all new jobs require some level of postsecondary career education. Success requires a vision of tomorrow’s job skills, a willingness to constantly review current programs for relevancy, and a commitment to offer both academic and experiential learning in ways that make each graduate job ready and valuable to their new employer.

This guide was produced by some of the top subject matter experts in our sector offering their expertise and counsel. We believe this guide offers every school both an opportunity for self-assessment and a roadmap to more effective employer and community engagement.
Best Practices for Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committees (EAC)

The best practices are organized under seven subject areas:

• The Role and Mission of an Employer and Community Advisory Committee
• Making it Worth your Committee Members’ Time
• Making it Work for your Community
• Making it Work for your School
• Creating the Right EAC for your School
• Effective Committees have Effective Meetings
• What Happens Between Meetings Really Counts!
I. The Role and Mission of an Employer and Community Advisory Committee:

Schools are in the employment preparation business and employers are in the hiring business. A school is in the education business, and a community is in the “Quality of Life” business. In both cases, both parties need to rely on the other for successful outcomes. It is this recognition of the essential bond between a school, its employers and its broader citizen leaders that collectively prioritize the interests of the students and establishes the basis for open, honest, and constructive conversations.

The mission of an Employer and Community Advisory Committee is, quite simply, to enable a school to offer the academic and experiential programs that produce graduates who are ready on day one for jobs that meet or exceed the employer’s needs and that make the community a great place to live and work! A successful Employer and Community Advisory Committee begins with a recognition of its critical role:

- Finding ways to better serve the needs of the employers, including how we engage with their departments.
- Working to support our employers in the community; strengthening relationships with those employers will support our educational institutions in return.
- Developing community engagement around support for local charities and other non-profit organizations.
- Student involvement in community projects and activities prepares them for full participation in life as community leaders.
- Collectively engage with local, state and national conversations related to workforce development and new skill demands.
- Employers provide a continuum of work-based learning opportunities to help students understand their career choice, what the work entails, and what employees expect.
- Employers are an excellent marketing resource.
- Employers ensure curriculum relevance.
- Employers provide invaluable feedback regarding program design, program competencies, the employment community and the industry-at-large.
- EACs provide a platform for ongoing communication among the school, its employment partners and the broader community.
- Employers and community leaders can play a supportive role in assessment of a school’s programs through open, honest conversations.
2. Making it Worth your Committee Members’ Time:

Employers are busy people. They need to see value in their engagement for them to continue participation. Here are some suggestions for creating an Advisory Committee that is worth their time:

- The committee must see their dual roles: to help the school become more successful while also meeting their own employee skill demands.
- The committee must have a clear understanding of the school’s mission and their role in helping the school succeed.
- The committee must be made up of professional employers at the appropriate level of authority who are genuinely invested in the betterment of the school-employer relationship.
- Diversity matters! Your committee should reflect both the occupational and demographic diversity of your students.
- Through this partnership, employers will help you build your brand throughout the community, and vice versa.
- Conversations must directly, and broadly, consider the skill demands/deficiencies of the community’s employers and industries.
- The school must be receptive to suggestions and ready to advance changes that better serve the needs of employers.
- Through this partnership, you will help employers leverage their community resources more effectively and promote your school as an important resource.
- Through this partnership, the employer and the school can promote joint stories of success.
- The committee must be able to serve as an honest critic. Constructive criticism related to graduate work performance must be sought and welcomed.
- Meetings must be constructed in ways that make them effective and efficient in order to produce quality outcomes.
- A visionary committee will serve current and future employers—current and future workforce skill needs. Make sure the committee includes individuals with an understanding of new emerging employee skill demands in the area.
3. Making it Work for your Community:

Community leaders bring both a knowledge of and a commitment to the quality of life in their hometown. This passion is your pathway to connections, communications and credibility.

- Communities with healthy education and economic sectors are successful communities. Your community voices should see their role as that of committed community leaders.
- Communities either grow, or they decline. Community voices should see both the education and employer voices on this Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committee as key contributors to the community’s future growth.
- Students are citizens of their community, and they need the collective support of the entire community. Identify specific ways such community voices can contribute to the student body’s success.
- Community voices can “connect the dots” in ways that enhance the life of a learner – those influences outside of the specific roles of educators and employers.
- Community voices are communicators! They can provide independent and credible affirmation of a school’s importance and its success.
- Community voices can often serve as connections to elected officials and other community leaders.
- Community leaders can serve as voices for those workforce needs that may not be represented on the Advisory Committee.

4. Making it work for your School:

- An Employer and Community Advisory Committee is just that: 1.) Employers and Community voices 2.) Giving Advice 3.) as a Committee that works collectively to complete their task.
- Accordingly, instructors and school staff should engage with the committee in ways that help them give the best advice possible for the school and students’ collective success.
- But they are also volunteers. So, a liaison that is responsible for all meeting logistics is essential.
• We encourage an employer or community leader to serve as chair of the committee. Often individuals exist that are both. This sends a signal that the school values their work and their advice. It also makes clear the committee is sufficiently independent to be open and honest in their advice.

• The Committee Chair should work closely with a member of the school’s leadership to identify and recruit new employer members.

• The Committee should be small enough to be productive; yet large enough to reflect the occupational programming of the school.

• Limit your meetings to no more than one per quarter; but then make sure every meeting is well organized and productive.
5. Creating the right EAC for your School:

• **Your Employer and Community Advisory Committee members must reflect the mission and academic programs of your school. This is not a legislative body; it is a panel of workplace and community experts participating with your school and helping you to be viewed as a value to the community.**

• Reward and honor those employers who currently employ your graduates. But don’t hesitate to include individuals who can serve the school’s larger and long-term vision – even if they are not currently a source of student employment.

• Recruiting members for these committees is challenging, but if done right, can be productive. If you are not willing to invest the time to make this special, don’t waste the time of either the employers or citizen leaders you seek to join.

• Start with a brief mission statement that communicates to participants their role, responsibility and potential benefits from such service.

• Seek stability in both your membership and your school’s staffing of the committee. It is essential for effective meetings.

• Begin by creating a data base of potential employer experts in fields related to your academic programs. Include citizens, like voices from the Chamber of Commerce and/or trade associations, who can offer the big picture of emerging demographics and skill demands in the region your school serves.

• It is appropriate for academic department heads to identify individual employers or citizens in their occupational areas; and to conduct an initial outreach to identify potential interest. But in the end, the school leader must make the final “ask.”
6. Effective Committees have Effective Meetings:

- Your Committee Chair and your school leader should jointly develop the agenda for meetings.
- The agenda should be concise. The leader should know how to keep a conversation moving, while encouraging full participation.
- The agenda should promote both employer and community engagement in the discussions. Remember, it is an Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committee – not a staff offering explanations and defense of the status quo.
- If possible timewise, an opportunity for student engagement helps remind everyone of the common mission.
- Create an agenda that promotes specific recommendations. While an Advisory Committee is not a governing board of trustees, they deserve discussions that can lead to recommendations that are actually implemented.
- A good meeting is founded on a clear agenda with background documents distributed to the Advisory Committee at least one week prior to the meeting. Remember, these are busy professionals giving of their time for you and your school.
- Distribute meeting notes, including recommendations and anticipated outcomes within two weeks of a meeting.
• Appropriate follow-up should occur for those open items either between meetings or at the following meeting. Participants deserve to know how their collective advice and counsel was used.

• If sub-committees are appropriate because of a school’s diversity of programs, use them!

7. What Happens Between Meetings Really Counts!

• Don’t ignore the Advisory Committee for the next three months! Keep them informed and engaged.

• Provide the Advisory Committee with school updates, especially student stories.

• Invite them to special events such as meetings with your elected officials or graduations. In doing so, make the connections between the Advisory Committee’s work and your school’s success. At a meeting with elected officials, encourage committee members to speak – especially about the role your school provides in producing skilled workers. At graduations, recognize such committee members as providing the guidance that leads to successful graduates.

• Connect the advice of your Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committee to your longer-range planning and budgeting; and let them know their work has made an impact.

CONCLUSION

In the end, a successful Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committee is one that works for those who serve on it, and for your school.

Each school is different, each Employer and Community Engagement Advisory Committee should reflect a school’s mission and personality. But you should organize and operate your Advisory Committee in ways that every member of the committee believes this is the most valuable committee they have ever served on!