

## REVIEW ARTICLES

# Human Services Programs' Advisory Board Initiatives: A Practical Model

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Advisory boards are essential components of human services programs within higher education. They play a critical role in the oversight and achievement of program goals and outcomes. Advisory boards are required for programmatic accreditation and are commonly an institutional requirement as well. Despite their ubiquity, the processes and procedures that sustain advisory boards as part of programmatic development remain underexplored. This article outlines essential strategies for the establishment, maintenance, and evaluation of advisory boards, emphasizing the importance of diverse representation and active engagement. A case illustration highlights practices that can be considered by human services programs at various stages of advisory board development. This exploratory observational study emphasizes the vital role that advisory boards serve in bridging human services curricula with real world applications and in supporting the mission and strategic plans of human services programs.

### Introduction

Before describing advisory board formation within a human services landscape, a modest historical contextualization is warranted. Advisory boards, comprised of lay individuals, professionals in various fields, and academic experts, also known as Community Advisory Boards (CABs), have been used in higher education for decades specifically for overseeing human subjects research in response to unethical historical abuses of research participants (e.g., Stanford prison study, Milgram experiment) (Quinn, 2004; Yuan et al., 2020). These boards are designed to combat stigmatization of marginalized communities, as well as to improve recruitment, ensure culturally appropriate consent procedures, and ensure understandable language in research materials (Newman et al., 2011). CABs are comprised of community representatives, academics, and practitioners with expertise in research topics (Newman et al., 2011; Yuan et al., 2020). CABs have historically been assembled concurrently with the research project and dissolved at the conclusion of the project. Usually, the CAB is formed for a specific amount of time due to project funding. This is a limitation that hinders CABs from contributing to research as meaningfully as they could if CAB members had long standing commitments to the group and had established rapport with one another (Newman et al., 2011). Since

CABs typically meet after the study has been funded and approved by the Institutional Review Board, their ability to influence planning, developing research questions and protocols is curtailed. As such, many universities and colleges acknowledge the immense potential offered by CABs, or from this point forward referred to more specifically as advisory boards or advisory committees (Dietz et al., 2002; Kilcrease, 2011). Depending on the institution of higher education, state education protocols, and accreditation regulations, maintaining an advisory may be a programmatic requirement (Dietz et al., 2002; Xu et al., 2023). Surprisingly, the literature is scarce on the valuable role of programmatic advisory boards in higher education (Dietz et al., 2002; Nehls, 2020; Zahra et al., 2011).

The focus of this article is to articulate a human services advisory board model using a particular illustrative case example from an accredited (Council for Standards in Human Services-CSHSE) public community college. Suggestions for the establishment, maintenance, and evaluation of advisory boards are presented and are transferable to any undergraduate or graduate human services program, because the structures and functions described, from faculty and partner participation to strategies for organizing a board, are in fact universal across higher education, particularly when comparing accredit programs.

### **CSHSE Accreditation Advisory Board Requirements**

For human services programs that are accredited by CSHSE or for programs that are seeking accreditation, it is required that the program maintains an active advisory board (CSHSE, 2025). Accredited programs at all levels (associate, bachelor's and master's) must have an established advisory committee that “provides feedback regarding local, state, and national trends and needs, policy changes, and to act as an advocate for the program” (CSHSE, 2025, p. Standard 3). The Council recommends that this committee include “individuals representing the human services field, such as practicum experience agencies, employing agencies, citizen advocacy groups, alums, current students, adjunct faculty, and other persons related to the field of human services” (CSHSE, 2025, p. Standard 3).

As part of the accreditation process, human services programs are required to share detailed descriptions of the advisory committee members, minutes of advisory committee meetings for the two years prior to the self-study, and a narrative or table of how the committee interfaced with the program in relationship to specific issues (CSHSE, 2025, p. Standard 3). In addition, during the site visit, accreditation site visitors will ask to meet with advisory committee members to learn more about the relationship and the role of the board in supporting the program. The purpose of this meeting is to ensure that the advisory board plays a vital role in supporting programs and that board members are in fact engaged meaningfully as trusted advisors and partners in achieving the goals of the program, aligning programmatic outcomes with real-world needs and student interests, and that board members represent a relevant and diverse constituency.

## **Advisory Board Purpose**

The current discourse on the value of a college education has been infused with growing skepticism (Hope, 2020). College curricula have been labeled as misaligned with current and future job market needs and students are increasingly questioning the importance of completing a degree program versus a training program, apprenticeship, or certificate (Ohmann & Shor, 2024). This sentiment has led to declining enrollments nationwide, particularly for underrepresented groups such as students who identify as immigrant, first generation, low income, and/or Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Pavlov & Katsamakos, 2020; Sutton, 2020). Advisory boards can play a pivotal role in addressing this growing concern (Benigni et al., 2011). Board members with community connections are able to innovate enrollment strategies by recommending venues, strategies, and providing connections through their professional networks to access underserved potential students. For example, board members who work in immigrant communities may be aware of community events, block associations, or local leaders who can promote the program.

Advisory boards function to connect academic research to “real world” programs and policies while supporting faculty and staff in connecting the student academic experience to “real world” career pathways and advanced degree programs (Dietz et al., 2002; Kaupins & Coco, 2002; Mello, 2019). Board members provide insight into the alignment of curriculum with organizational needs and workforce trends with the hope of enhancing student outcomes such as retention and satisfaction, employability and transfer to advanced degrees (Kilcrease, 2011; Taylor et al., 2010). Board members are equipped to help develop appropriate metrics and methods for assessment of programmatic outcomes that would be needed for Academic Program Review (APR) (Blaisure, 2012). Additionally, board members offer a pipeline of networking opportunities, internships, and job placements.

In addition to supporting programmatic and strategic initiatives, advisory boards promote the academic program to members’ colleagues and community members. In some instances, board members can exert political influence and support fundraising efforts (Mello, 2019; Schaeffer & Rouse, 2014). In a time where many institutions are facing declining enrollment, the value of such efforts should be highlighted.

Involving current and former students in the advisory board meeting process provides opportunities for them to gain competencies around organizing, meeting facilitation, and participation in a professional organization (Dietz et al., 2002). Student participation also encourages the development of professional skills, including the opportunity to share their perspectives on programmatic matters. It should be noted that some board members may be reluctant to discuss programmatic challenges in front of current students (Dietz et al., 2002). This potential issue should be discussed among program faculty before seeking student members.

## Key Considerations

There are several key factors to consider when developing a human services advisory board including resources and strategies for the establishment, maintenance, and evaluation of the board. These considerations can be especially useful for programs that are in the process of developing an initial advisory board, for those programs who are looking to revamp their advisory board, or for those individuals in new programmatic leadership positions who will be responsible for leading an advisory board.

### Establishment

When establishing a human services advisory board, it is important to first decide as a program what purpose the advisory board serves. How will the advisory board align with, and support, the program's strategic plan and mission (Mello, 2019)? What are the mission and goals of the advisory board (Dietz et al., 2002)? Does the institution have guidelines on the establishment of advisory boards? For example, does the creation of the advisory board need approval from a governance council, administration, department chair, or other entity? Who will take on the responsibility of leading the board? Is there a budget available to fund the board?

Next, it is important to create a recruitment plan for the advisory board (Mello, 2019; Taylor et al., 2010). A plan ought to include industry professionals, other higher education professionals in human services or related fields, faculty (full and part-time), college administration and staff, students and alumni, and community representatives who are consumers of human services themselves. These diverse perspectives are needed to support the growth and strategic plan of an exemplary program by providing both internal and external perceptions (Dietz et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2010). Another consideration for selection may be the professional networks of each potential member (Mello, 2019). The recruitment plan should specify the size of the board, the process for engaging and selecting potential members, including term limits if applicable, and a timeline for completing the process to maintain momentum and foster commitment from new members.

Additional considerations during the establishment phase of developing the board step may include the drafting of an advisory board mission statement as well as a board guide or contract that outlines the roles and responsibilities of board members, participation expectations, and term limits (if applicable) (Dietz et al., 2002). It is crucial that these elements are created in draft form and only finalized with the board members having a chance to provide input and feedback. Initial encounters with the board should reinforce the participatory nature of the processes. Successful advisory board rely on members' buy in that their voices are in fact influential and not a "rubber stamp". See [Table 1](#) for a summary of key considerations at each phase of advisory board development.

## **Maintenance**

Maintaining the board over a period of time is, perhaps, the most challenging aspect of the process. This section covers practices by successfully maintaining a functional board. Once recruitment has been concluded and members are prepared to begin meeting, it is imperative to have a structure in place that delineates how the agenda is created and distributed collaboratively, how the meetings are held (time, location), how frequently meetings take place, and how meetings are facilitated/organized (Mello, 2019). This includes deciding how often and when the board should meet, the format of meetings, the development of the agenda, as well as preferred communication methods (Dietz et al., 2002)). It is important to note that this may change as the needs of the program and board members fluctuate over time. When planning board meetings, it is important to be realistic about members' time commitments and keep in mind that the average advisory board meeting has an approximately 50% attendance rate (Olson, 2008). It is best practice to share meeting minutes with all board members, especially for those not in attendance. It is also recommended to share the minutes with human services faculty (full and part-time) who may not serve on the board (Kilcrease, 2011). For various reasons such as shifts in programmatic leadership, a lack of board member engagement, or new program initiatives, board membership may need to be revamped or in some cases a clean start with all new board members may be necessary (Mello, 2019). In these circumstances it is important to acknowledge the contributions of exiting board members.

Sustaining relationships over time with board members is critical for member retention. Collegial, warm, and genuine relationships keep board members engaged and feeling appreciated (Dietz et al., 2002; Mello, 2019; Zahra et al., 2011). This can include providing certificates of recognition, promotion on the College's website and social media, or letters of acknowledgment from college leadership. It is also important to connect outside of meeting times. This may include members being invited as guest speakers at events, serving as mentors or internship supervisors, helping students with career preparation, or providing a professional development workshop for faculty and staff (Hunt et al., 2017). Engagement can also be encouraged through invitations to programmatic events and inclusion on email announcements of significant programmatic accomplishments or changes.

## **Evaluation**

Evaluation should be a well-established aspect of the advisory board process (Kilcrease, 2011; Matthews et al., 2018) Through routine assessment, it becomes apparent where changes need to be made to improve the board's processes and outcomes. This section shares some viable ideas on how to evaluate the effectiveness of the board. Programs should periodically examine the board's mission, goals, and by-laws make updates as needed. It is also recommended that evaluation measures shed light on member retention,

Table 1. Key Insights for Each Phase of Advisory Board Development

Stage	Key Considerations
Establishment	Identify key personnel/staff who will be responsible for advisory board. Identify tasks associated with managing the board (e.g. correspondences, recruitment, documentation, minutes) Consider how the advisory board can best support the program's mission and strategic plan. This will aid in drafting the mission and by-laws. Identify any accreditation or institutional requirements. Develop a board mission statement, goals, and by-laws. Develop a member recruitment plan.
Maintenance	Decide meeting frequency and format. Create a plan for routine check-in with members. Gain buy-in from members for mission, goals, and by-laws through consultation allowing for revisions. Develop a mechanism for providing honoraria/stipends for participation (if possible). Provide certificates of gratitude for service to community partners and students. Encourage networking and relationship development outside of meetings between members.
Evaluation	Administer annual member survey Review of meeting minutes Track attendance/retention data Administer surveys for students who attend advisory board meetings or events led by advisory board members Conduct annual review of progress toward

satisfaction, and engagement, and on outcomes related to the program goals and strategic plan (e.g., student retention, accreditation). This step can be approached in a variety of ways (Kilcrease, 2011; Matthews et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2023). An evaluation of the effectiveness of the board can be done via an annual survey of advisory board members inquiring into their satisfaction with the board and the recommendations for improvement. Evaluation of the advisory board can also be part of institutional program reviews and as part of the CSHSE accreditation process.

### Challenges

While advisory boards can offer human services programs multiple benefits, there can also be challenges that arise. Attrition is amplified by several factors; unusually high turnover rate in community organizations and in higher education (Center for an Urban Future, 2024; Dietz et al., 2002; Ratcliff, 2024). Board members are difficult to retain simply because from year to year, they may find themselves in new jobs. One way to mitigate this challenge is to maximize the number of board members who come from the human services profession, rather than the College itself. Those who work in community-based organizations may be inclined to continue should they change jobs. It is crucial to have both personal and professional contact information for this reason.

In addition to losing members, maintaining participation and engagement is not easy (Dietz et al., 2002). Generating interest, creating a dynamic and stimulating experience, and fostering a sense of fulfillment are necessary conditions of a healthy board. This challenge can be addressed by eliciting agenda items of interest from board members, holding meetings that are well-planned and appropriately timed, and getting to know each member individually to understand how the board can serve their needs in return (Dietz et al., 2002). Closely related is the challenge of member burnout. Human services providers' burnout is well documented (Gleason & Sanchez,

2022; Henriques et al., 2024; Lizano, 2015; Thomas et al., 2014) and since the pandemic, a growing body of literature has pointed to a similar phenomenon in academia (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023; Koster & McHenry, 2023; Spector & Reynoso, 2024), therefore advisory boards may inadvertently contribute to this feeling. To mitigate burnout, self-care should be routinely addressed as an agenda item. Member check-ins and ice breakers can center on the theme of self-care. Showing members appreciation through honoraria, certificates and other forms of public recognition may prevent feelings of burnout or fatigue (Dietz et al., 2002).

### Case Illustration

Human services, just like advisory boards, is an applied practice. Therefore, the authors endeavor to move the discussion herein from theory into the “real world” and to use a case illustration is to exemplify a human services advisory board at a CSHSE accredited public community college in New York City. In describing the process and lessons learned, this case illustration offers a replicable approach for other higher education institutions as they develop their own advisory boards or look to incorporate new ideas into their existing boards.

### Establishment

The Human Services Advisory Board was established in 2016, shortly after the College was founded. The College is a vital part of the New York City metropolitan area as the first new public community college that serves students from the public school system. The board sought members that could build reciprocal relationships (Schwitzer et al., 2023) to support the growth of the new program. Throughout the past decade, the program’s community partnerships, as well as the number of members on the board, have grown. The composition of the current advisory board is shared in [Table 2](#). The board’s mission statement states that the advisory board is *committed to the advancement of the human services program through enhancing the educational experiences of students. The board will work with the college to identify opportunities that support student learning and scholarship while serving as advisors who provide strategic direction and resources for the program.* The goals of the advisory board are to (1) enhance the educational experience of students, (2) identify opportunities to support student learning and scholarship, and (3) provide strategic direction and resources.

### Maintenance

Currently, the advisory board meets annually in the spring. Since the COVID-19 Pandemic, there has been a change from in-person to virtual meetings. This option encourages greater participation from members who would otherwise have to travel throughout New York City to attend an in-person meeting. The human services program also attempts to keep board members engaged throughout the year (Mello, 2019). All members are invited to the end-of-the-year celebration where graduating human services

Table 2. Advisory Board Composition

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College President
Provost and Vice-President for Academic Affairs
Faculty Dean
Department Chair
Human Services Faculty (2)
Practicum Manager
Director, Center for Career Preparation & Partnerships
Chief Librarian
Directors and Program Managers from Community Agencies (13)
Human Services Faculty (other institutions of higher education) (6)
Current Human Services Students (2)
Human Services Program Alumni (3)

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students are honored, along with site supervisors, partner agencies, and advisory board members. In addition to the advisory board, several members also supervise student interns at their organizations. For these members, there is even more frequent communication from the program and supervisors are invited to attend a fall professional development workshop at the College.

The entire advisory board receives email communication throughout the year sharing program updates, opportunities for members to provide feedback, or special requests such as serving as a guest speaker. Guest speaker opportunities have included sitting on a panel to discuss careers in human services and presenting about their area of expertise (e.g., child welfare, mental health counseling, agency administration). Relationships fostered have also created opportunities for faculty collaboration in research, conference presentations, and networking events outside of the advisory board. Social relationships have to develop genuinely and cannot be forced, but creating opportunities by actively reaching out outside of meeting times can help encourage them to develop naturally.

## Evaluation

*Survey.* Advisory board members are provided with a link to a survey at the end of the annual meeting to provide additional feedback on the agenda items discussed and share ideas for future meeting topics, the human services program, and their satisfaction with serving on the board. There is also the option for members to share ways they would like to get more involved with the program (see [Table 3](#)). A follow-up link to the survey is also sent with the meeting minutes so advisory board members who were not in attendance are still able to share their ideas. The feedback is collected and discussed with the human services team. The data becomes part of our CSHSE accreditation self-study and academic program review.

**Meeting Content Analysis.** As part of the evaluation process, a recommended practice is to align agenda items with advisory board goals to adhere to the board's mission. As part of the program's academic program review, meeting minutes from the last five years were analyzed for alignment with the board's goals. All agenda items aligned to at least one board goal. The goals are summarized in two main categories relating to either programmatic growth and sustainability or student learning and scholarship.

Table 3. Advisory Board Member Survey

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Thank you for taking the time to provide your feedback. Your insights are invaluable in helping us improve our advisory board and our human services program. Please answer the following questions:

1. Name (optional):
2. Do you have any additional feedback you would like to share about agenda item #1 (topic)?
3. Do you have any additional feedback you would like to share about agenda item #2 (topic)?
4. Do you have any additional feedback you would like to share about agenda item #3 (topic)?
5. Do you have any suggestions for future agenda items?
6. Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience on the advisory board?
  - Very Satisfied-Satisfied-Neutral-Dissatisfied-Very Dissatisfied
8. What aspects of the advisory board do you appreciate the most?
9. What challenges or concerns do you have regarding the advisory board?
10. What suggestions do you have for improving the programs supported by the advisory board?
11. Are there any ways would you like to get more involved with the program?
  - Participating in events or workshops
  - Providing professional development opportunities to faculty, staff, and/or students
  - Providing mentorship to students
  - Other (please specify):
5. Do you have any additional feedback or comments you would like to share?

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Table 4. Meeting Content Analysis t

Advisory Board Goal	Agenda Item	Outcome
Programmatic growth and sustainability	Draft internship model (Pandemic)	Revision of model based on best practices and board suggestions
	Curriculum revisions discussion	Proposed changes approved by board.
	AI software proposal/ Mental health simulation software	How to obtain support for purchasing software.
	CHSE recommendations and feedback discussion	Board made suggestions on strengthening program for accreditation.
	Electronic Timesheet feedback	Internships benefiting from new process however ongoing tech support is needed.
	Development of New Certificate Programs	Community health worker partnership discussed.
Identify opportunities to support student learning and scholarship	Board vision	Brainstorm for wording began.
	Mental health simulation software	Collected suggestions on how to best implement mental health simulation software into the curriculum and practicum model
	"Fitness for Profession" policy	Revision of "Fitness for Profession" policy based on Board feedback
	Resume and interviewing skills	Partnership with New York Public Library and possible mentoring with internship agency partners.
	Open discussion on best practices in changing social/ political climate	Members resolved to monitor climate and organize advocacy efforts.
	Preparing students for senior college	Students transfer pathways discussed. Gaps in information identified.
	Internship options	Discussion of stipends and other incentives.
Essential Employability Qualities (EEQ's)	Integration of NACE competencies in coursework.	

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Over time, it is conceivable that goals and outcomes may overlap. For example, the proposal to secure funding and support for AI software led to a goal of integrating the software to augment student learning. Below, [Table 4](#) provides an excerpt of the most recent alignment review.

## Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Critical to good stewardship of the board is secure and reliable record keeping. One limitation that the authors encountered in writing this paper was the absence of all but the previous five years of meeting records. Staff and faculty turnover and changes in electronic systems can result in data losses. Program leadership should store meeting records, including transcripts and recordings, which are now easily created through AI tools, in university cloud-based data storage. This will help ensure continuity of board progress.

Board membership can be unstable due to high turnover in both community agencies and academia (Dietz et al., 2002). While it can be good practice to ask outgoing board members for recommendations for a replacement member from their organization, another way to mitigate the challenge is to invite two members from each agency, one senior level and one junior. In this situation, there will hopefully be a continuation of representation from key partner organizations and the senior level members can also serve as mentors to the junior members.

Having college leadership serve on the board comes with potential benefits and challenges. Board meetings provide the opportunity for the administration to gain insight into the human services program and hear first-hand feedback from board members. Leaders can also provide additional recognition for board members' time and service (Mello, 2019). A concern about having administration present at meetings is that some, particularly non-tenured faculty, may not feel comfortable sharing their views. Also, due to relatively high turnover in higher education administration, it might be preferred to invite full-time faculty rather than new staff who may be unfamiliar with the advisory board and require repetitive onboarding.

It is recommended to have at least one agenda item brought forth from each constituency group. For example, at least one agenda item should come from industry, one from the host college, one from academic institutions that offer the same or a closely related program, and one from student representatives. This best practice ensures that everyone has a voice during the meetings and encourages engagement from all stakeholders. This practice can be accomplished through a call for agenda items before the meeting.

Most of the meeting time should be spent on seeking insight from board members and not on general program updates (Flynn, 2002) as a demonstration of respect and appreciation for board members' time and expertise. At the end of each meeting, it is recommended that the leader summarize key discussion points and clarify expectations about involvement in projects/tasks/initiatives/assignments (Mello, 2019). Follow-up personalized thank you messages should be emailed within 24 hours. These notes should include an invitation to respond with additional feedback or comments that were not raised at the meeting. Any agenda items that require follow-up with board members should be prioritized and addressed as expeditiously as possible.

Moreover, it is essential to keep in mind that board members are volunteers. Nehls and Nagai (2013) highlight that to maintain commitment, being cognizant of time, having meaningful interactions and opportunities for socialization and networking, as well as maintaining a size that permits everyone to be heard and included is recommended.

### Conclusion

Advisory boards are not only integral to the success of human services programs but also serve as a vital link between academic curricula and practical application in the field. The current article provides human services programs with a framework for developing an advisory board, as well as ideas for enhancing their existing boards. As the field of human services continues to rapidly grow and face new challenges, strong collaborations between practitioners and educators are vital to the training of the next generation of professionals. Advisory boards require investment of resources to recruit and retain members, sustain engagement, and facilitate regular communication over time. As workforce initiatives proliferate within community colleges and higher education overall, advisory boards may be leveraged to assume more of “pipeline” role, by targeting involvement of potential employers, local policy makers, and including fewer internal administrators or faculty members. The landscape for higher education is changing and advisory boards are poised to do the outward facing work that is needed to connect human services programs with real opportunities for students to realize the benefits of their education and training.

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