

An Overview of Advisory Councils for School-Based Agricultural Education Programs¹

Ralph Easterly III, Debra M. Barry, Brian E. Myers, and Edward W. Osborne²

Introduction

Advisory councils can provide practical advice for secondary agriculture teachers. An advisory council is an organized group of selected business representatives, community members, and school stakeholders who provide input in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of a school-based agricultural education program (Phipps et al., 2008). Advisory councils work to ensure the local school-based agricultural education program meets the needs of the community (Masser et al., 2014). Advisory councils, also referred to as advisory boards or committees, differ from an FFA Alumni chapter and should not focus on the FFA or fundraising efforts. They provide an opportunity to connect instruction to the world outside the school walls as well as input that helps to better prepare students for life after school (Pawlowski & Meeder, 2012).

Why have an advisory council?

An advisory council has the potential to provide valuable input on the total components of an agricultural education program by connecting school, community, and local agriculture needs with the agricultural education program (Taylor et al., 2017). It has the potential to provide well-reasoned advice from members of the community who want to see the program be successful. According to Pawlowski and Meeder (2012), well-managed advisory councils have the potential to:

- Help focus on the right outcomes.
- Bring training expertise to the table.
- Secure potential resources.
- Provide students and staff with new opportunities.
- Connect with the larger community.
- Advocate for the program.

Establishing a New Advisory Council

The request to form an advisory council for a middle school or high school agriculture program should be initiated by the agriculture teacher(s) in the school and approved by school administrators. This approval chain includes the career and technical education (CTE) director, school principal, and school board. The school board may issue a charter for the agriculture advisory council (see example at the end of the PDF version of this publication) to formally establish the council as an important contributor to the overall quality and impact of the agriculture program. CTE programs that receive federal funding through the Perkins Act are required to have an active advisory council to provide business and industry input on all CTE programs in the school district, including agriculture programs. Specialized advisory councils that focus on a specific program, such as the agriculture and natural resources program, can be a valuable complement to general CTE advisory councils. These program-specific advisory councils are viewed by school districts as either separate advisory councils (also called committees) or subcommittees of a larger CTE advisory council.

An initial step in planning an advisory council for the agriculture program involves carefully examining the school district's general CTE advisory council in terms of its membership and operations. In many ways, the agriculture advisory council should mirror the general CTE advisory council. Typically, the chair of the agriculture advisory council will serve on the general CTE advisory council. Thus, frequent communication with the CTE director is needed when planning and operating the agriculture advisory council.

Key considerations when establishing an agriculture advisory council include the council's purpose, structure, membership, operations, communications,

and engagement with school staff and administrators. Preliminary decisions on these items should occur with the CTE director to ensure productive alignment and strong support for the new agriculture advisory council. The agriculture teacher should explore interest in the community for the program-specific advisory council and use those conversations to build a list of potential members. The agriculture teacher can then use these ideas to draft the charter and constitution and bylaws of the new advisory council for review by the CTE director and other school administrators. Once these draft documents are ready and potential members have been invited, the school board will typically call the organizational meeting of the council.

Selecting Members

Advisory council members determine the value of the council to the agriculture program. Thus, the composition of the council membership warrants careful consideration. Membership should be large enough to ensure active discussion and diversity of perspectives and experiences at each council meeting without compromising the opportunity for each member to contribute. In addition, occasional absences from meetings should not jeopardize the council's ability to develop recommendations for program improvement, due to an insufficient number of voting members. An advisory council consisting of 9–12 members representing the agriculture and natural resources interests and demographic diversity in the community is ideal. Gender, ethnicity, occupation (public and private), agriculture sector, geographical area of the school district, employer segments, postsecondary education opportunities, and other factors should be considered when identifying potential members. Connecting a program with local industry should be a focus. An advisory council can play a strong role in this linkage (Pawlowski & Meeder, 2012).

Council members should be respected community members who will regularly participate in council meetings and actively contribute to the council's work. Consider potential member's knowledge, experience, network, resources, interpersonal skills, time, passion, responsibility, and their key role as a thinker, manager, or doer (Pawlowski & Meeder, 2012). Each council member should bring unique perspectives and strengths to the council, as well as familiarity with and appreciation for the role and purpose of the school-

based agricultural education program. To ensure open discussions, close friends and political leaders should not be invited to become council members. After approval of the list of potential members by the CTE director and school administration, the school board should extend invitations to the selected individuals. The teacher can follow this invitation with a personal visit or phone call to further encourage the participation of each prospective member.

Council Operations

Agriculture advisory councils should follow standard operating procedures to ensure democratic member input and decision-making, moving the group toward being self-governing. These procedures should be clearly articulated in the council's constitution and bylaws (see example at the end of the PDF version of this document). In addition to the purpose and activities of the advisory council, this document should explain member selection and rotation, expectations for member participation, officers and their respective duties, meetings, and changes to the constitution and bylaws. This document should be distributed in advance and discussed, modified as needed, and adopted at the organizational meeting of the council. Program-specific advisory councils usually meet twice a year, with additional meetings called as needed. A standard agenda should be followed for each meeting, with draft meeting minutes distributed and approved at the subsequent meeting. Systematic member rotation will ensure a continuing flow of new perspectives and ideas, while maintaining continuity in the council's work. Staggered three-year membership terms with a limit of two consecutive terms will help maintain the momentum of the council as it makes long-term contributions to the agriculture program.

Keys to Success (Pawlowski & Meeder, 2012)

1. Obtain approval from the school administration including CTE director, school principal, and school board.
2. Develop a charter to document the role and purpose of the council.
3. Work in tandem with the CTE advisory council.
4. Appoint committed and representative community members to the council.
5. Develop the constitution and bylaws.
6. Prepare and distribute meeting agendas well in advance.

7. Ask for RSVPs.
8. Offer refreshments and snacks.
9. Make sure the technology works.
10. Facilitate meetings effectively, staying on task and on schedule.
11. Create opportunities for members to communicate and share opinions and perspectives.
12. Incorporate student successes and program updates into advisory council meetings.
13. Express your appreciation to council members for their service and support.
14. Leave time for socializing.

Conclusions

An active and productive advisory council can be a valuable resource to all agricultural education programs. The advice and information provided by an advisory council can provide the guidance, support, and community capital needed to keep a program strong and relevant. The council should be a self-governing group that works in conjunction with the agriculture teacher(s) and school administration to ultimately build the best program possible to meet the needs of the students and the community.

References

- Masser, D. T., Falk, J. M., & Foster, D. D. (2014). Level of agricultural education advisory council implementation in Idaho secondary agricultural education programs. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 55(3), 116–131.
<https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2014.03116>
- Pawlowski, B. & Meeder, H. (2012). *Building advisory boards that matter*. ACTE.
- Phipps, L. J., Osborne, E. W., Dyer, J. E., & Ball, A. (2008). *Handbook on agricultural education in public schools*. Clifton Park, NY: Thompson Delmar Learning.
- Taylor, S., Stripling, C. T., Stephens, C. A., Hart, W. E., Falk, J. M., & Foster, D. D. (2017). Advisory councils in Tennessee school-based agricultural education programs. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 58(2), 232–251.
<https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2017.02232>

¹This document is AEC731, one of a series of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date June 2021. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

²Ralph Easterly III, associate professor, agricultural education, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; Debra M. Barry, assistant professor, agricultural education, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center, Plant City, FL; Brian E. Myers, professor and chair, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; Edward W. Osborne, professor Emeritus, agricultural education, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.