Engaging Volunteer Leadership

Stevenson, like other institutions of higher education, works to engage community leaders in the life of the University. However, this is not always easy given the complexity of the operations of a university and the time constraints of its volunteer leadership. To meet these challenges, Stevenson created the President’s Advisory Council (PAC). We structured the model so that being a PAC member requires minimal time and gives maximal opportunities to share input about the University.

Currently, we have about 50 influential Marylanders on the PAC, including lawyers, politicians, business professionals, and representatives from nonprofits. These volunteers create a special network for us and approximately four PAC members have become Board of Trustees members during the past 15 years. The PAC meets twice a year, in October and April, from 8-10 a.m.

As the initial planning process in creating the PAC began, we questioned the most meaningful characteristics of running a university and concluded that, among other things, one was to creatively solve problems. Higher education institutions face a variety of daily problems that, if properly identified and solved, can become the energy for momentum and for its future. Yet we knew that busy volunteers who wish to be involved don’t always have the time to invest in considering complicated issues. This is why we developed our case study approach for the PAC meetings.

Typically, there is a discussion of the upcoming case study with the University Cabinet. In each case study, we try to outline a pressing and current issue that includes a narrative discussion in the study as well as two to three questions for further discussion. The topics for these studies are usually suggested by one of the Cabinet members. During the past 15 years, we have covered a wide variety of topics, including Web strategy, study of a proposed football team, environmental sustainability, and town and gown relations. The most recent study, covered in the April 2015 meeting, included a conversation about branding the University.

A frequently asked question about these case studies is whether there is any practical value to them, and the answer is yes. We have used suggestions from the PAC in actual campus practice, such as creating a concierge function in Rockland, our student center. In addition, the Cabinet and the Dean’s Council are present at all PAC meetings, giving senior administrators the ongoing opportunity to see the “big picture” of Stevenson University.

A prime example of a case study is the one created around the decision to change the institution’s name and to become a university. The PAC was asked several questions, including which stakeholder and external constituent groups should be involved in the name study part of the process; what kind of decentralized academic structure would make the most sense; and what might be some effective means to generate excitement and rapid awareness of a university and name change. The answers to these questions helped to provide a foundation for further research.

The second-most frequently asked question has to do with the facilitation of the case study, which is somewhat of a challenge considering that we have only 90 minutes for the discussion. I facilitate it with assistance from select cabinet members. For example, in the April branding discussion, I was assisted by Glenda LeGendre, Vice President for Marketing and Digital Communications. Facilitating such discussions requires asking probing questions, listening effectively, and quickly assembling solutions to real issues. We have identified potential board members while teaching them more about Stevenson. Lastly, the President’s Advisory Council has been a win-win solution without the typical bureaucratic structure requiring tremendous time to execute.

We have had members tell us they enjoyed Stevenson PAC discussions because of their high level of involvement. After 15 years, we have established a sophisticated think-tank that could probably address any pressing problem in quick fashion. We have at least 25 busy PAC members attend out of the 50, and many stay afterward to explore issues identified at the meeting.

There are many advantages of our process. We get to know people in the community without asking much of their time. We have created a group that can generate helpful, practical solutions to real issues. We have identified potential board members while teaching them more about Stevenson. Lastly, the President’s Advisory Council has been a win-win solution without the typical bureaucratic structure requiring tremendous time to execute.

Stevenson is very mindful of a complex future, and we understand that our mission is to serve both our students and the community. The President’s Advisory Council and the case study approach have proven to be an effective vehicle for networking, brainstorming, and problem solving.