## HIGHER ED IMPACT

### DIAGNOSTIC JULY 2014

## **ACADEMIC** IMPRESSIONS



## 8 KEYS TO IMPROVING TASK FORCES AND COMMITTEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By Amit Mrig and Patrick Sanaghan

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## CONTENTS

COMMITTEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION		6	
8 KE	EYS	5 TO IMPROVING TASK FORCES AND COMMITTEES	13
EFFE	ECTIVE TASK FORCES		
	1.	CAN ANSWER YES TO THE QUESTION: DO WE EVEN NEED A COMMITTEE FOR THIS?	14
	2.	FOLLOW A CLEAR PURPOSE	15
	3.	HAVE ADEQUATE RESOURCES TO DO THEIR WORK	17
	4.	PUT THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT SEATS	18
	5.	MANAGE THE PROCESS IN ADDITION TO THE TASK	20
	6. 	DON'T LET POLITICS UNDULY INFLUENCE THEIR WORK	22
	7.	DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH UNDERPERFORMING MEMBERS	24
	8.	FOLLOW THROUGH ON RECOMMENDATIONS	25

# WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT TASK FORCES AND COMMITTEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As part of our ongoing research into higher education, Academic Impressions is very interested in how institutions allocate their resources—dollars, space, and technology— and how that allocation is changing in a post-recession economy. We are not alone of course; numerous organizations and individuals are working to address the market and economic imbalances. Yet, there is very little attention being paid to the most plentiful resource an institution has to deploy: its people's time.

Most department and division heads we speak to have very limited discretionary resources. Especially on the administrative side, institutions have been forced to operate as leanly as possible over the last 5–10 years. For most of these departments, re-deploying resources means people, not dollars, and that means making sure that each person's time is maximized for the benefit of the students and institution he or she serves.

Time is the most precious resource on campus, and it is one we can control and influence.

But how closely do we manage people's time across our institutions? What are the biggest opportunities to increase the value from someone's time? And how do we actually derive more value? These are the questions that led us to our most recent project: examining committees and task forces.

# THE SCOPE OF THE OPPORTUNITY

Committees task forces and are ubiquitous in higher education, yet, very limited attention is invested to help asses or improve their effectiveness. Whether mandated through shared governance structures or because of noble intentions for participative decision making, task forces and committees abound. In fact, in a recent Academic Impressions survey of 300 higher-ed professionals, approximately 35% of respondents currently serve on 5 committees or more.

If the average committee work consumes one hour a week (which is a low estimate when you consider the pre-work, research/preparatory work, meeting time, communication, off-line meetings, etc.), then, easily, more than 10% of our time is being invested here.

If we're spending more than 10% of our time, the work must be important. And indeed most of it is—at least in theory. Some of the institution's most critical needs—from student retention to strategic planning to hiring—are managed via committees and task forces.

Despite noble intentions and charters that are mission-critical, big questions remain as to how effective these groups are. In our same survey, respondents gave an overall effectiveness score of 6.72 out of 10<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Respondents were asked to give a general rating of 1-10 across all of the task forces or committees they serve on

## So what are we getting for 10% of our time?

It doesn't sound like very much. But therein lies the opportunity—if we could substantially increase the output from this investment, we could do amazing things for students, for faculty, and for our communities. We could do much to move ourselves and our institutions forward. However, even taking into account the muted optimism of college and university presidents, these numbers suggest something is seriously wrong with how these groups function. No matter how important the charge, the same problems continue to plague task forces and committees across our institutions.

## **ROSE-COLORED GLASSES?**

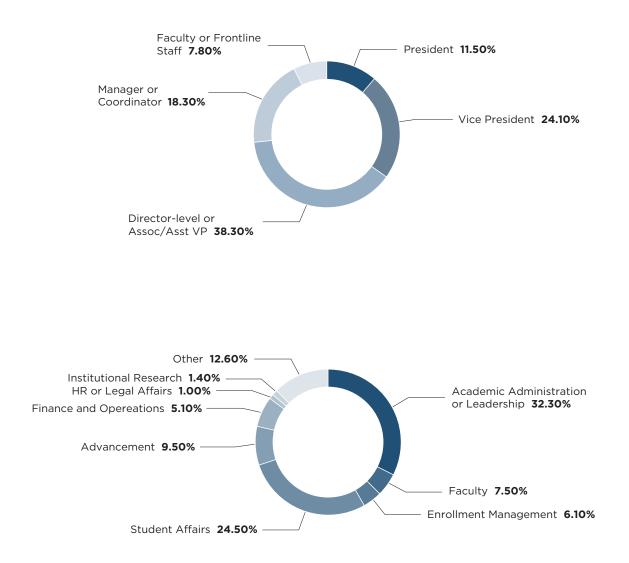
As we have found with most issues facing institutions, executives who responded to our survey had a decidedly more positive view of how well their institution's committees and task forces operate than their middle managers did. For example, of the several dozen presidents who responded to our survey, no one rated their task forces below a 5 (their average was 7.6 out of 10).

Of the respondents who scored their committees effectiveness 10 out of 10, half were college or university presidents.

# **KEY FINDINGS FROM OUR SURVEY ON TASK FORCES AND COMMITTEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

## **A NOTE ABOUT DEMOGRAPHICS:**

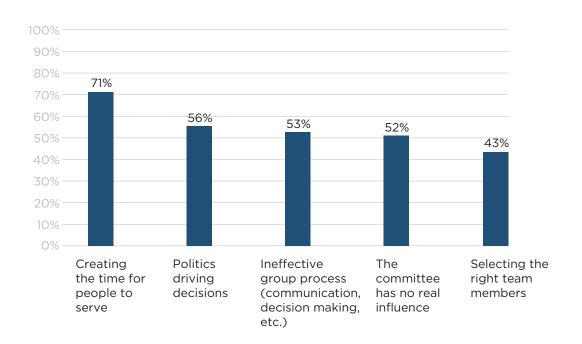
In order to achieve a representative sample, we surveyed mid to senior-level managers across both academic and administrative units in higher education. The demographics of our respondents:



Our research could not uncover another comparable survey on the overall effectiveness of task forces and committees in higher education, and we believe that our survey, though informal and meant to be more "common-sense" in nature, is one of the only diagnostics on this subject.

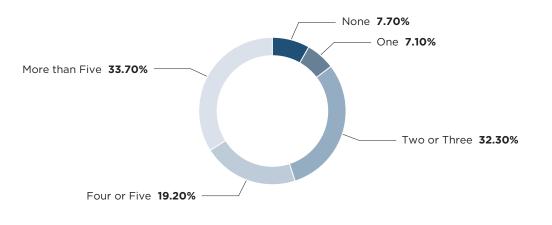
While many of the findings won't be surprising, the fact that very little is being done to address these issues is very surprising.

Here is a snapshot of our key findings:

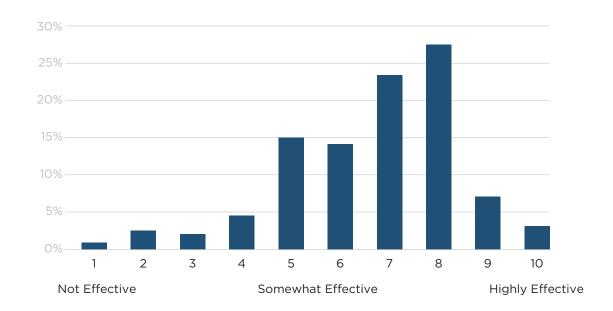


### **TOP 5 CHALLENGES FACING TASK FORCES AND COMMITTEES:**

## HOW MANY TASK FORCES AND COMMITTEES DO YOU SERVE ON?



### HOW EFFECTIVE ARE THE TASK FORCES AND COMMITTEES THAT YOU SERVE ON?



The challenges are clear, and they are significant. But what are the solutions? Read on...



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# 8 KEYS TO IMPROVING TASK Forces and committees

Our research has uncovered many best practices to maximize the task force or committee's work. The most effective task forces:

- 1. Can answer YES to the question: Do we even need a committee for this?
- 2. Follow a clear purpose
- 3. Have adequate resources to do their work
- 4. Put the right people in the right seats
- 5. Manage the process in addition to the task
- 6. Don't let politics unduly influence their work
- 7. Deal effectively with underperforming members
- 8. Follow through on recommendations

Let's take a closer look at each of these.

## 1. ANSWER YES TO: DO WE EVEN NEED A COMMITTEE FOR THIS?

The first question that campus leadership has to answer is whether a committee or task force is even appropriate or required for the task at hand. Given the time invested in these groups, this decision should be carefully weighed against the opportunity cost of redeploying these resources elsewhere.

If the critical decision has *already* been made or if the campus leadership already has a clear direction for a decision, a committee is likely to do more harm than good. Many respondents to our survey shared stories of committees that did important and difficult work, and presented recommendations that were both well thought out and had the support of the constituents that they represented. And too often, their recommendations were completely ignored by campus leadership.

Of course. not all ideas and recommendations have to or can be followed, but when campus leadership sets up committees as a mask of inclusivity, the results usually backfire. This can build a powerful skepticism throughout the campus, and it negatively impacts future committee and task force work. Trust and morale are deeply impacted, and leadership must then work hard to regain that trust.

Task forces and committees are most impactful when:

- The issue or challenge impacts multiple stakeholders across the campus.
- The input and perspectives of multiple stakeholders are really needed.
- There are no clear or easy answers to a problem.
- There is a clear charter or purpose for the task force or committee.
- The outcome of the task force will significantly influence the final decision.
- The stakes are high (as in the case of strategic planning or academic program prioritization).

## 2. FOLLOW A CLEAR PURPOSE

To complete their work effectively, task forces and committees need to be set up for success. As we'll discuss in the next few sections of this paper, positioning task forces and committees for success requires multiple steps.

The first step is to have a **charter** that clearly states the purpose and scope of the work. Without a clear purpose, the committee's work is bound to wander and lead to few real outcomes.

What does a clear purpose look like?

It must adequately state what a committee must produce or accomplish; it may even state the boundaries of that work, noting items that the group is not intended to address.

### **ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A CLEAR CHARTER**

#### 1. Define the task force's assignment

What are they being charged to do? A statement of the goal is helpful. Then provide some key objectives that support the goal (e.g., create an inclusive planning process, conduct research on "best practices" on retention, conduct extensive research topic on a particular topic)

#### 2. Identify task force members and co-chairs

#### 3. Describe the work plan and schedule

How often will the committee meet? How long will the meetings be? What is the time frame for the work to be completed? (e.g. 1 year? 6 months? A semester?)

#### 4. Describe the intended outcome or output

Will this be an extensive report? A set of recommendations? A specific decision?

#### 5. Identify who will receive the final work product

Will the work product go to the governing board? The faculty senate? The president's cabinet? The board of trustees?

#### 6. Identify the givens and the restraints

What can change? (e.g., "reorganize a division") What can not change? (e.g., "we can't cut staff")

#### 7. Lay out a communication plan and a clear process

Explain how the task force will communicate with each other How the task force will communicate with the appropriate stakeholders Identify specific mechanisms and protocols The charter needs to be reviewed and validated by all members of the task force or committee. A well-written and agreed-upon draft is essential to beginning the conversation; you do not want the group to waste time debating and dialoguing about the charter itself. The charter will define the boundaries and scope of the task force's mission.

What's more, this mission needs to be clearly stated to the campus community so everyone understands what the task force is in service of. There also needs to be clear support from the institution's leadership for the committee's work. For example, a strategic planning task force would need to be highly visible with multiple venues to discuss the overall planning process and the task force's role in it.

# **3. HAVE ADEQUATE RESOURCES TO DO THEIR WORK**

To produce work that is worthy of the institution, the task force and committee will need adequate time to invest. How much time participants are expected to commit should be stated up front.

Equally important, campus leadership must help participants secure this time. Depending on the nature of the task force, this may include release from other campus responsibilities—at the very least, from other committees.

Remember that 35% of the respondents to our survey serve on 5 committees or more. That is not a recipe for focused work, or for success.

For example, academic and administrative program prioritization processes are so critical and time intensive that it wouldn't be unusual for faculty to receive a course release or perhaps additional compensation to reflect the additional work involved.

Also, give some thought to scheduling. If the committee includes more than ten people, especially if it includes senior faculty or administrators, scheduling meetings is likely to be the biggest logistical challenge a group will face. How will they tackle this? Assigning administrative support to help coordinate meeting times, locations, food, and other



important items can help smooth these challenges and ensure the task force or committee members' time is being used judiciously and efficiently.

Of course there are times when a committee may need to make a significant purchase or two to assist with its work. For example, the committee may need to hire a consultant or order a software package. Institutions should plan ahead for how these decisions will be made and how the committee must present their case for these decisions. In certain union situations, additional stipends may have to be paid or certain stakeholders may not be able to participate.

For all of these reasons, the specific budget for the task force needs to be negotiated and communicated up front.

# 4. PUT THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT SEATS

As Jim Collins famously discussed in his book *Good to Great*, the most important decisions that organizations make are personnel decisions. In the case of committees and task forces, the credibility of the task force members will make or break their work. This is especially true of the chair or co-chairs for the task force. These individuals must be chosen for their integrity, reputation, and work ethic. The chair or co-chairs can't be an official appointment made just because someone happens to have a certain title or position.

In fact, how the institution selects committee and task force members will communicate a clear message from the very outset about the importance of the group's work. *Who* is on the task force matters:

- Is the committee formed from the same "usual suspects" who won't challenge the status quo?
- Have our best people been identified for the task?
- Does the committee represent the entire campus community or just a portion of it?

*How* these individuals were selected also matters:

- Were participants identified and selected by the president?
- Was there an election process?
- A nomination process?
- Who was nominated and not selected for participation?

All of these questions can help build the group's credibility or hurt it. Based on who is selected and how, the rest of the campus community will make critical judgments early on about the committee and about whether they will support the committee's work.

While the selection process will vary by committee type and purpose, for the highest profile and most important work (such as strategic planning or presidential search), we make the following recommendations:

- The committee should be cochaired by a credible faculty member and a senior administrator. This models the collaboration needed for work that will impact the entire institution. It also gives faculty a critical voice.
- Members should be nominated, with the ultimate selection made by the president. Your best people may or may not volunteer, but they will almost always step up to the task when asked. When the work is vitally important, you have to task your best people.

- The committee's members should reflect the **diversity** of the institution. These types of task forces and committees should include people from different backgrounds. They should reflect different levels of tenure with the institution, reflect gender and ethnic diversity, and should include people from multiple departments and levels.
- Include one or two skeptics but no cynics. You want people who will challenge each other's thinking and raise the tough questions, but you don't want people who are not interested in getting things done. Optimism for the institution's future and open-mindedness are critically important.

Whatever the criteria, it's critical that these criteria are communicated across the campus. The campus community needs to see the connection between the articulated criteria and the members serving on the task force. The selection process cannot be seen as a deal that was done behind the scenes or for political reasons.

# 5. MANAGE THE *PROCESS* IN ADDITION TO THE *TASK*

The second biggest challenge identified in our survey was ineffective group process. If the committee doesn't pay enough attention to the group dynamics and process, it won't be successful, no matter how smart the individual members.

Successful task forces:

- Build relational capital, provide a safe space for brainstorming, and encourage risk taking
- Establish an intentional plan for communicating with committee members
- Communicate clearly and regularly with the rest of the campus community
- Outline a clear process for decision making

### **CREATING A SAFE SPACE**

Special attention and time has to be carved out to build the **relational capital** necessary to do important and challenging work. If the institution is hoping for innovative recommendations and ideas, a **safe space** has to be created. **Risk taking** and failure have to be acceptable outcomes.

There are several well-known tools that groups can use to create this space and encourage risk taking, including:

- Brainswarming
- Metaphorical problem solving
- Edward De Bono's "<u>Six Thinking</u> <u>Hats</u>"

# 5

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# ESTABLISHING AN INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION PLAN

Effective communication isn't accidental. There needs to be a communication plan that is closely adhered to. For example:

- How will individual members be kept apprised of their fellow members' work?
- How will meeting minutes be captured and shared, especially for members who miss meetings?
- Who will communicate with members who miss meetings, how fast, and in what manner?

## COMMUNICATING WITH THE REST OF THE CAMPUS

Further, task forces and committees need to think through how they'll communicate with the rest of the campus community. Emails and websites can be useful communication tools, but they usually aren't enough. To both share the progress of the group's work and solicit feedback, reactions, and additional ideas, try:

- Face-to-face conversations
- Town hall meetings
- Q&A sessions

## OUTLINING A CLEAR DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Last but not least, group members need to pay special attention to how decisions will be made along the way. Most task forces and committees will be charged with making important decisions, so the rules need to be set up front.

Most groups strive for consensus, but this can stifle progress. There are many other successful decision-making models and task forces and committees can use more than just one, depending on the situation.

The higher the stakes for the decision, the more rigorous the process to arrive at it should be.

For example, we advise that groups avoid using a **simple majority** (51% of the vote) to move a decision forward; those recommendations will be weakly supported and may not be implemented. **Legislative majority** (2/3 vote) or **supermajority** (75%) may be more effective. If your group does insist on a **consensus** model, they will need to define exactly what consensus looks like for your group, because there are many different definitions. Striving for a consensus is a positive aspiration, but you also need to discuss what will happen if the group gets stuck. In situations where the group operates by consensus, we have found **the 85/15** rule to be an effective guideline. If 85% of the task force members agree with the decision, assuming the process has been fair and transparent, then one or two members can't stall the progress of the entire group.

Regardless of which decision-making rule is used, stating from the beginning how decisions will be made will level the playing field, create much needed transparency, and increase the likelihood of acceptance of the final outcome by all task force and committee members, as well as those they represent.

In addition to clarifying how the group will make decisions, there should be some upfront agreement as to what will happen with the task force or committee's recommendations. Who will these recommendations be sent to (to what individual or governing body) and what process will be used to follow, modify, or reject the recommendations?

## 6. DON'T LET POLITICS UNDULY INFLUENCE THE WORK

There is no way to eliminate the reality of institutional politics, but their impact can be mitigated.

The best place to start is to follow the previous five keys to committee and task force effectiveness. This is because:

- Committees without clear purpose are much more likely to be unduly influenced by those with hidden agendas.
- If the quality of the individual members is not worthy of the purpose of the task force, they may succumb to peer influence.
- If information about the task force's work isn't widely and transparently shared and if decisions are controlled by the chair or chairs, there will be significant questions as to the integrity of the group's work and, ultimately, the integrity and quality of their recommendations.

Here's what else you can do...

## DISCUSS POLITICAL INFLUENCE AT THE START

To be most effective, the task force needs to talk about political influence at the very first meeting. Identify this difficult issue, discuss it openly, and be committed together to neutralizing the power of politics over the decisionmaking process.

Give every task force member the permission to flag when they feel politics are influencing both the dialogue and recommendations. You can surface this feedback by periodically evaluating your group meetings, but remember to evaluate the meetings anonymously to ensure you receive honest information.

### **SET GROUND RULES**

The most successful task forces and committees set meaningful **ground rules** for how they'll complete their work. These ground rules go beyond platitudes that look good on laminated cards and posters, and they aren't wasted outlining expectations for attendance and participation. In forming the ground rules, communicate that these rules assume that basic principles of attendance and preparation will be met.

The task forces and committees that do stellar work understand their specific workplace and team dynamics and set ground rules accordingly, and they hold each other accountable to their rules.

Examples of useful ground rules include:

- Essential messages that will be communicated to others outside the group are agreed upon before people leave the meeting
- We will agree on how decisions will be made before making them
- We will anonymously evaluate the effectiveness of each meeting
- One person talks at a time
- Use active listening when there is a conflict

We suggest that you share these sample ground rules at the first meeting but then use a process to brainstorm and decide on your own. Try and limit the list to the 4–5 most important ground rules and try not to overwhelm people with too many. When a list of ground rules becomes overwhelming, the rules lose their usefulness.

## 7. DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH UNDERPERFORMING MEMBERS

No matter how carefully individual members are selected, it's inevitable that from time to time, task forces and committees will be forced to confront members who are not carrying their weight. How these situations are handled will speak volumes to what kind of end result these groups will be able to achieve.

Establishing clear expectations and holdina members accountable for their performance is the only way to achieve results that are worthy of the members' commitment. And addressing the underperformance in responsible and timely ways will only serve to build more trust and credibility to the group's work. When underperformance goes unaddressed, it can demotivate others and ultimately derail the task force's results.

To mitigate this, task forces should routinely assess their work and individual contributions to it. If a member is missing deadlines consistently or assignments, it is the responsibility of the chair to intervene early. The chair should handle this directly in an offline and confidential conversation. In that conversation, the chair's first responsibility is to identify the root of the performance issue and attempt to provide support to help the individual overcome it. If the problem persists, even after adequate support is provided, the chair should take steps to remove or replace the task force member.

Like political influence, this is another key issue to bring up during the first meeting. It is essential that process issues be identified and discussed early; this helps facilitate the effectiveness of and efficiency of the group's work. Do not wait for problems to emerge, be proactive.

#### MANAGING TRANSITIONS

Transitions are inevitable. The committee or task force may report to different leaders throughout their work, and individual members may join and leave the group. How these transitions are managed is essential to the ultimate success of the group's work.

When new group members come on board, the chair or co-chairs should sit down with them privately and bridge them in by providing information, having them ask questions, and making sure they know what their assignment will be before they show up for the next meeting.

The chairs should also provide new members with all relevant materials, including the charter, past minutes, etc. The chairs should discuss ground rules and decisions related to group process, including how political issues are managed, the communication plan, meeting evaluations, etc.

This one-on-one meeting is valuable and helps build a connection to the larger group.

# 8. FOLLOW THROUGH ON RECOMMENDATIONS

If the first seven keys to effectiveness are followed, the task force or committee is usually successful. But there is one more step that can make a difference.

For task forces that have a finite ending date or milestone, it's important to think ahead to the impact of their decisions including: cutting costs, cutting people, and changing policies or protocols. This will give some weight to the recommendations, so that the final decision-making person or body inherits a set of recommendations that have been fully vetted and thought through.

One of the most effective ways that a task force can ensure that their recommendations and work products move forward and actually influence the formal decision-making process is for them to identify possible obstacles or barriers to implementation. This is a counter-intuitive notion but is a critical strategic step. By identifying the obstacles to implementation, they can make recommendations that also include strategies for dealing with the potential obstacles they have identified. This will help the final decision maker in their decision-making process.

Depending on the charter or purpose of the group, the task force or committee should also think ahead to how the group will reconvene to maintain momentum and to avoid efforts stalling out. If appropriate, we recommend reconvening once a year to:

- Reflect on how conditions have changed
- Document and share lessons the institution has learned
- Discuss what changes or updates need to be made to the plan
- Update the campus community on progress and opportunities

Reconvening these task forces helps ensure continuity and accountability. These individuals have significant investment in the recommendations and the process used to create them; they are in the best position to ensure follow-through.



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