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The Use of Industry Advisory Boards in Aviation Degree Programs-An Exploratory Case Study

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This exploratory case study was presented at the UAA Conference in Fall 2023 to share initial findings. The researchers sought to determine the level of aviation degree programs utilizing Industry Advisory Boards (IAB), what their makeup looks like, and what the meeting schedule constitutes. Additionally, the researchers questioned the participants as to the challenges and opportunities they would like to see improved within their programs. The initial conclusion is that there is no significant consistency amongst different IABs, including the name of the group. However, some consistency existed in that many respondents indicated seeking more diversity and effective planning techniques.

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Introduction

Currently, accreditation organizations such as the Aviation Accreditation Board International (AABI) require industry feedback as a metric for accreditation completion. However, what this feedback looks like has not been researched, nor is any guidance readily available for aviation degree programs. In fact, there is very little research in relation to industry partnerships with aviation degree programs in any context. This research quickly found that the term used to describe this industry partnership was inconsistent and included labels such as industry advisory board (IAB), working groups, and industry advisory committees. This paper uses IAB as an all-encompassing term to represent these groups.

As there are no formalized best practices or guidance on how to utilize industry feedback, these researchers proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do aviation degree programs incorporate industry feedback?

RQ1a: What is the current makeup of the individuals and organizations in which aviation degree programs seek this feedback?

RQ2: How are IABs used in aviation degree programs?

RQ2a: What level of formality exists when organizing and working with the IAB?

Methodology

This exploratory study's purpose, then, was to determine how faculty and program directors perceive how their aviation program utilizes industry feedback and, if they have an advisory board, how it operates. A survey was determined to be the best way to collect this information. This survey was sent out to all current University Aviation Association (UAA) members in addition to being posted to both author's LinkedIn profiles.

Survey design and data collection

The survey was created using Survey Monkey, and survey questions were influenced, in part, by the published work of researchers Soderlund et al. (2017), who sought to learn more about advisory boards in communication programs.

Respondents were initially asked about their institution's usage of an IAB, with the intent to ask different questions based on this response. The questions then asked about their own IAB, if they had one, including the make-up, size, duration, frequency of meetings, benefits, and challenges they currently face. If no IAB existed, questions focused on the reasons why they did not in order to understand potential barriers to creating an IAB. The survey was distributed via email to UAA and AABI membership distribution lists and posted on both researchers' LinkedIn accounts.

Results & Discussion

The preliminary results included benefits such as industry connections, budget support, resource planning, and scholarships. Industry connections included curriculum development or management, networking opportunities for both students and faculty and internship and employment opportunities. Faculty who are aware of their IAB involvement seem to have an overall positive perspective of their involvement. However, there does seem to be some concern as it relates to communication and timelines.

Survey participants expressed concerns or suggestions regarding communicating the objectives of the board, the results of the board's feedback, and even keeping the meetings on track. Additionally, getting the IAB members on campus and ensuring a strong relationship is built with each member was mentioned frequently. Lastly, a big push was to ensure diversity of the board not only from a demographic perspective but also as far as industry representation, associations with the university, and types of positions within various organizations.

Conclusion, Discussion & Future Research

This initial exploration serves as a launching point for additional research to fill in the many gaps in information. The ultimate end goal is to publish a best practice guide for aviation degree programs that will help aviation programs implement and utilize IABs effectively; however, more information must be gathered first. This research team seeks collaborators from other institutions who would like to work with us on a multi-case study of specific IAB usage. During the conference presentation, one audience member asked if there were specific criteria to join, and outside of being associated with an aviation degree program, there is not. The research team wants to get a holistic view of current IAB usage in order to give the most comprehensive best practices that are backed by research.

Aviation programs reside in a wide range of colligate structures, and the more information we can gather from wide-ranging perspectives, the more value we can add to research findings. Being able to research IABs from different-sized programs, programs from different areas of the country, programs located in public and private universities, and programs offering two-year and four-year degrees would provide us with the optimal mix of diverse perspectives.

Following that phase of research, the team plans to focus on IAB members and their motivations for serving on an IAB. We also want to identify the barriers that prevent IAB members from serving in their full capacity. Questions will explore why board members serve. What do they appreciate from their institutions? What challenges do they face? What would make it easier for them to engage?

The final phase of research will result in the publication of a comprehensive guide for best practices for aviation advisory boards. Longer-term research might also include follow-up exploration that examines the effectiveness of the best practices guide and ongoing revisions, should those be warranted.

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