

On April 29, Biotility hosted the second in a series of Bioscience Educator Forums. These forums are meant to provide an opportunity for teachers to connect and share their best practices for a variety of subjects that are relevant to the bioscience classroom. Each forum begins with a Q&A session featuring a panel of bioscience educators, followed by an informal discussion facilitated by the Biotility staff.

For this forum, the topic of discussion was building and maintaining an advisory board for your bioscience program. Joining us were three panelists: Wyland Oyama from Santa Fe High School (Biotech program), Ian Sharp from Barron Collier High School (PLTW program), and Sarah Kumar from Wendell Krinn Technical High School (PLTW program). The following is a summary of the Q&A portion of the forum.

Question: How did you find your advisory board members?

Overall, the panelists suggest that you use previously established connections or events to find individuals that would be a great fit for your advisory board. Wyland found his members by reaching out to local bioscience companies or laboratories and connecting with bioscience industry professionals on field trips. He also cited that he has had great success with reaching directly out to HR representatives. Ian found board members by utilizing parent outreach events such as open houses or parent newsletters. Through parent outreach, he was able to connect with parents who are in the bioscience industry or know someone in the bioscience industry to serve on his board. Sarah suggested that you shouldn't be shy to directly reach out to local labs or bioscience companies. She also suggested that you stay in touch with students who went into the bioscience industry and utilize them as part of your advisory board.

On another note, our industry specialist, Tiara King, suggests that you also use LinkedIn to connect with individuals in the bioscience industry. Simply reaching out to bioscience professionals may bring about advisory board members who are incredibly supportive and helpful. Also, with the convenience of virtual meetings, don't hesitate to reach out to individuals in the bioscience industry who are not in the local area.

Question: How many members are on your advisory board? Do you ever rotate members in/out?

The panelists have anywhere from 2-8 members on their advisory boards. Sarah added that it's not a bad idea to have board members with different backgrounds. For example, for a PLTW program, she would suggest that you make sure that your members don't all work in healthcare because it is important to hear from people who work in labs as well as bioscience companies. They all bring different perspectives, which will bring versatility to your program. Wyland added that it's a good idea to have a list of contacts on hand that are not on your advisory board, in case you would like to invite a particular type of industry expert to a meeting. On another note, Wyland recommends using Zoom for your board meetings. Not only is it convenient for your members, but it works great for an 8-member board.

The panelists currently do not rotate their members in or out of their advisory boards.

Question: How do you define your advisory board member roles?

The panelists emphasized that the greatest role that board members play is providing advice and input and connecting teachers and students to bioscience opportunities. To give us better perspective on how their roles work, each panelist described a typical advisory board meeting.

Ian's meetings usually consist of a discussion of current topics, activities and goals for his class, as well as ways the board can support his program through field trips, contacts and other opportunities for the students.

Sarah's advisory board meetings had many of the same qualities as Ian's however she highlighted that the open conversation is important in defining roles, and that the input from the board is helpful in ensuring that the skills and standards taught in the classroom match industry expectations.

Wyland's meetings have a set agenda but encourage active participation from the advisory board members. The meetings start with a call to order, approval of meeting minutes, then highlights from his class (Tip - He suggests that you invite students to your board meetings not only to discuss the highlights from their class, but to also learn how to organize and run an effective meeting.) and finally, a focus on new business such as guidance on finding classroom resources, field trips, opportunities for students as well as discussions on how to improve upon industry skills in the classroom.

Question: What are the “positives” of having an advisory board? What have you been able to accomplish with an advisory board?

Since the panelists already mentioned that one of the biggest positives of having an advisory board is the opportunities the students receive, we asked them to talk about some of their most notable student opportunities.

Ian's students visited a company that designs orthopedic tools and were able to look at cadaver limbs. Some of Ian's students were also given opportunities to work in a dermatology lab.

Sarah's students have had opportunities to shadow lab technicians, participate in EKG clinicals and tour a forensic lab and University of South Florida (USF) labs. One of Sarah's students had an opportunity to work on antibiotic resistance research at USF and others had an opportunity to work at a company where they make realistic cadavers with polymers.

Wyland's students have had scholarship opportunities and experienced interview preparation with his advisory board members. Wyland's advisory board members also setup a “GoFundMe” for his class and donates items to his class when their company can no longer use them such as glassware.

Question: How frequently do you communicate with your advisory board members? How frequently do you meet with your advisory board members?

Panelists noted that they officially meet with their board members anywhere from twice a school year to once a month. However, each panelist also stressed that they communicate and connect with their board members more frequently than the formal meetings to optimize the benefits of having an advisory board. Some connect with their members with classroom newsletters as well as direct conversations to set up field trips, outreach, and work opportunities for their students.

Our next forum is on July 29, 2021, at 6pm ET. We will focus on online bioscience resources and ways to utilize them in the bioscience classroom. Hope to see you there!