

How to collaborate regionally with no money?

Regional collaboration activities have come and gone, mostly grant funded and rarely institutionalized. About two years ago, a few people from the CTE leadership in Orange County spun a group off the Regional Tech Prep Initiative to kick off regional advisory meetings. It was composed of a couple of CTE deans from the community college side, several CTE leaders from K12 school districts, and a number of people from the local ROPs.

We all knew that most of our independent advisory meetings were not very effective, with memberships that were generally composed of previous students, part-time faculty, and very few people from the industry. We also knew that all of us, the CCs, the high school districts, and the ROPs, were tapping into the same pool of industry do-gooders for our advisory members. So, the idea was that if we could pull our resources together, we could have advisory meetings that were of higher quality and with more unbiased input to guide our programs. We invited a non-profit entity, Vital Link, to the table that had worked with our Tech Prep groups for many years and had organized industry-specific field trips, occupational awareness workshops, curriculum development work, etc. We had a lot of questions and concerns as to how this partnership was going to work. At times it seemed that our interests and needs were too disconnected to pull off such a regional effort. But the relationships between the members were strong enough that no one wanted to walk away from the table.

We decided that we could spend years talking and arguing about the details of such an undertaking, so the best thing to do was to just do a few of these regional advisory events and evaluate the outcomes. We chose some of the more common subject areas such as Business, Digital Media, Culinary Arts, and Automotive. We also asked the colleges, ROPs and K12 districts to commit 2% of their Perkins dollars to fund Vital Link for organizing the events.

Each advisory meeting was an all day event starting with one hour panel discussion with the business representatives on industry trends followed by two hours of smaller groups discussing even more specific subject areas such as Business versus Management versus Accounting. These smaller groups discussed specific learning modules that could fit into course curriculum and broke down work-based skill-sets that the industry would expect from a high school graduate versus a college student with a certificate versus a college student with a certificate and an AA degree.

"The regional advisory meetings are the best place for CTE instructors to get vital information regarding changes in industry. The environment between the instructors and industry professionals is one of positive collaboration and forward thinking dialog. With rapid changes in technology, tight budgets and training requirements, an advisory meeting can answer many questions about the best path to move a CTE program forward to meet the industry standards of tomorrow." - Renah Wolzinger, Golden West College

After lunch, the high schools, ROPs, and community college faculty met for a couple of hours to review, prepare, and sign course-specific articulation agreements. The final two hours of the day were reserved for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The PLCs are most valuable for subject areas, such as Culinary Arts, where programs are often run with single faculty and the faculty feel isolated with few opportunities to share ideas with colleagues in their fields.

"The life of a CTE teacher is often one of professional isolation. I have been the only business teacher at my school for the last 8 eight years and there are no other teachers in my district that share my curriculum. By attending the CTEoc advisory meetings I have been able to connect with other teachers in our county that teach the same thing as me. I have also had direct contact with industry leaders who give valuable insight as to what the industry requires." -- Mike Sciacca, Business Academy Coordinator, Newport Mesa Unified School District

Vital Link runs these events like a champ. They secure an appropriate venue that is often specific to the subject matter (such a local vintage automotive showroom for the Automotive event), coordinate the audio/visual equipment, recruit note takers for meeting minutes, and provide breakfast, snacks, and lunch.

We have learned a great deal in the past couple of years and hope to continue refining our regional advisory meetings. Our membership has grown to cover every ROP, almost every high school district and about half of the community colleges in Orange County. Our group now has a formal name, CTEoc, and is taking on additional efforts that could benefit all of us regionally. For example, we are finding that collaborative grant proposals written to serve the needs of a region seem to be more successful than individual grants written by one college or agency. We are also finding that we can negotiate better software licensing costs regionally for items that are not covered by the state or our districts such as SolidWorks. In summary, we think that we can better serve the needs of our region when we are working together.