

Spring 2025

discover the collective way forward

COLLECTIVE INSIGHT

Newsletter



COMMITMENT



VISION



COMMUNICATION

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1

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Open Letter from Our Principal

Let's Talk About Advisory Boards

"Advisory Boards Are Not Meaningful Engagement"

But, they are...when done right!

In recent meetings, I have heard "Advisory boards are not meaningful engagement" more than one time. It seems that this is a growing sentiment among some leaders in the engagement world, including funders and engagement policymakers.

To be honest, this statement worries me. I also believe it is inaccurate. I want to take this opportunity to share my views on this topic. My hope is that we can minimize the damage such statements can cause, especially when diverse voices are being silenced or replaced within federal agencies, grants, and websites.

My first point is simply to ask: ***Is this just a language issue?*** If so, I get this. My first engagement project in 2001 led us to form an *Implementation Council* instead of an *Advisory Group*. Advocates demanded this symbolic language change and move from business as usual given their lack of influence in previous advisory roles.

So, we changed the name. But, let me be clear. It was not the name that made the group more active, more inclusive, or more influential. Nope. It was the people, approach, and environmental factors that came together, oh so perfectly, which really made that council work. I saw this firsthand. This experience was so eye-opening that it led to my dissertation work in 2011 and the formation of Collective Insight in 2014.

So, here is the truth: you could have called the group *purple unicorns* and those involved would have still come away saying, "we want more of that."

PAE Attention Framework

At Collective Insight, we apply the PAE Attention Framework in all that we do. This Framework provides us with the foundation to understand and implement effective methods across a range of program, policy, and research activities. Learn more [here](#).



Throwing the baby (advisory groups) out with the bathwater (poor engagement) is simply not the answer. It instead demonstrates a lack of understanding of the true ingredients that make engagement meaningful and influential. It also gives people, especially powerful people who don't care about voices of disenfranchised groups, a chance to squash the few mandates that exist—mandates that have paved the way for communities to have a seat at a lot of very important tables.

So, go ahead and call it something else, like *Action Councils* or *Implementation Councils*. But, don't eliminate the concept; improve the concept. Be thoughtful about representation. Avoid tokenism. Apply accessible and culturally reflective outreach strategies. Ensure accommodations create space for inclusive conversations. And, of course, align engagement with actual opportunities to influence decision making.

Newsletter Look Back **Making Engagement Work**



As you think through what makes engagement work, beyond the name, visit our past newsletters to help you on your journey. Our 2023 “Making Engagement Work” series provides some great ideas and tools to add to your toolbelt. For instance:

- [The Power of Preparation](#)
- [Climbing Arnstein's Ladder](#)
- [Don't Delay Engagement](#)
- [Engaging the “Usual Suspects”](#)
- [Good Problems to Have Part 1](#)
- [Good Problems to Have Part 2](#)



Let's be careful making broad statements like, “advisory groups are not meaningful” because it simply is not true. I know many people implementing and participating in advisory groups that have done amazing things. See Collective Insight's [“Reimagining Expertise”](#) documentary for a couple of my personal favorites.

I'd like to conclude by saying this: There are many advisory groups that are doing amazing things and many action councils doing nearly nothing. **In this climate, let's not give anyone any reason to cut any group that people with lived, community experience have a place to learn from each other and help create community responsive policies, programs, and research.** Instead, let's spend time figuring out how to lift up any and all groups and find ways to help them be better.

Thank you for your time and efforts to bring new and important voices to the table!

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Erin".

Erin McGaffigan, PhD, MSW, MS
Principal, Collective Insight

Engagement Spotlight

CI Training Intensive

Join our 2-Day Community Engagement Intensive to enhance your professional skills! Get in-depth knowledge and latest strategies from experts in their fields.



JUNE 10 & 11, 2025
11AM - 4PM EST

**Early Bird Special: \$549 per participant with
CODE: CI-EARLYBIRD**

LARGE GROUP AND ADVOCATES DISCOUNTS ALSO AVAILABLE

[REGISTER NOW](#)



Tip of the Month

Assess Your Engagement

How do you know if your engagement is actually working?

Ask yourself:

- Am I engaging those most impacted?
- Do I understand and address engagement obstacles?
- Do I engage people at a time in which they can actual influence ideas?
- Do people know how their ideas led to change?

If you answered “**yes**” to all these questions, you are well on your way to meaningful engagement. Need help?

Reach us at info@collectinsight.com! **We've got your back.**