Karen Antman was fortunate: when the dean of the School of Medicine arrived in 2005, she inherited an advisory board that was eager and engaged. At her first meeting with the board, Antman asked for suggestions about how to raise money for scholarships. Her advisors brought up the possibility that decreasing costs for medical students might accomplish the same thing. One way to do that, the board suggested, was to provide below-market-rent student housing, which would not only aid the students financially, but improve their quality of life. If they lived near the medical school, they wouldn’t have a long trip home after extended rotations.

In 2010, the school broke ground on its first-ever student residence. The building, with housing for 208 students, opens this coming June. Throughout the process, says Antman, a subcommittee of the board provided crucial advice. They urged her to put the project out to bid while the construction industry was in a downturn.

When Brown arrived at BU, only half of the colleges had functioning advisory boards. Of those eight, only two were the kind Brown envisioned, made up of leaders in their fields who provide expert guidance and financial support. Now, at Brown’s urging, all 16 colleges plus the athletics department and Marsh Chapel have active advisory boards. They range in size from 6 at the School of Education to more than 40 at Metropolitan College. Some boards are filled with alumni. Some also include parents and nonalum experts. But all gain from the wisdom of heavyweights in business, health care, entertainment, real estate, and engineering. They include Bonnie Arnold (COM’78), a film producer at DreamWorks Studios, on the College of Communication board, Edwin Fuller (SMG’68), president of international lodging at Marriott International and vice chairman of BU’s Board of Overseers, on the School of Hospitality Administration board, and John Abele, founder and director of medical device innovator and manufacturer Boston Scientific Corporation, on the College of Engineering board.

“We need and have leaders on these boards,” says Scott Nichols, senior vice president for development and alumni relations. “When you have actual leaders, they don’t run away from the problems.”

Adam Wise, associate vice president for development and alumni relations, says the boards have succeeded on various fronts, and particularly when it comes to raising funds. In the past five years, nine colleges have received the largest commitment in their history from an individual. At the top of that list is the $10.5 million anonymous gift from an advisory board member and alumna at the School of Medicine.

None of the gifts have been less than $1.5 million, according to Wise.

The board members have also been important allies in helping deans solve problems, rethink their programs, and chart the future. They provide reality-checking sounding boards, enabling deans to brainstorm with news executives, entrepreneurs, and hospital presidents.

“Board members are smart businesspeople or artists or philanthropists and because they come from a different world, they aren’t wrapped up in the details of the University,” says Virginia Sapiro, dean of Arts & Sciences. “They are constructive critics who hold my feet to the fire.”

In recent years, these boards have vetted the colleges’ strategic plans and taken the lead on specific projects. At ENG, the advisory board’s suggestion led Dean Kenneth Lutchen to combine the manufacturing and the aerospace engineering departments. The advisory board at SHA helped envision the college’s first building and then make it a reality. Working with Dean Christopher Muller, they are now deep in discussions about how best to brand the school.
At the School of Public Health, Dean Robert Meenan (MED’72, GSM’89) asked his board for thoughts on where the school should expand its international programs, which are mostly in African countries. Rather than add more in Third World countries, they suggested that SPH should look at India and China, where the University overall should have more connections.

“A regular form of external feedback is helpful,” says Meenan. “Otherwise you get insular, and that’s a problem.”

At the College of Communication, Dean Thomas Fiedler (COM’71) has wrestled with how the school can better prepare students for a rapidly evolving media. Fiedler worked for two years assembling his board, which includes Jason Binn (COM’90), founder and director of luxury magazine publisher Niche Media, Harold Burson (Hon.’88), founder of the influential PR firm Burson-Marsteller, and Jay Roewe (COM’79), senior vice president at HBO.

Roewe says he was happy to join the board because it was a way to give back to the school. “It’s also interesting to go into academia and hear where people think they are going,” he says. “And I find it stimulating to be around smart people.”

The group is hashing out ways that the school, with its aging facilities, can integrate digital media into the curriculum. The board’s advice: build a new wing with state-of-the-art facilities on par with similar schools. Now they are helping COM make that happen, Fiedler says. Board member Maya Ezratti (COM’98), director of community and public affairs for GL Homes, visited the University of Miami’s School of Communication recently to see how its facilities compared to COM’s. Ray Kotcher (COM’79), CEO of the advertising and public relations firm Ketchum, advised the dean on the kind of data he’ll need to persuade people to put their money behind the new wing.

“That’s the kind of advice that Ketchum clients pay huge sums of money to get,” Fiedler says. “I can’t overestimate the value of the advisory board.”

Online daily deal sites like Groupon are generally great for consumers, offering deep discounts on things from restaurants to sporting events. But are they good for business?

John Byers, a College of Arts & Sciences associate professor of computer science, and Georgios Zervas (GRS’11), a postdoctoral fellow at Yale, worked with Michael Mitzenmacher, a professor of computer science at Harvard, to find out. The researchers, who collected a massive amount of data over a six-month period, found that for merchants, Groupon cuts both ways.

From January 3 to July 3, 2011, the researchers monitored every Groupon deal offered in 20 cities—16,692 deals altogether. At the same time, they collected data on Facebook “likes” tied to the deals and later gathered data from the daily deal site LivingSocial and the review site Yelp. For each Groupon deal associated with a Yelp rating, the researchers collected all of the reviews posted on Yelp through August 2011. They found a surge in reviews from new customers after a Groupon offer, but they also found that reviewers mentioning the words “Groupon” and “coupon” give “strikingly lower rating scores” than those who do not mention those terms. Reviewers mentioning either keyword offer ratings that are 10 percent lower, on average, while the ratings of the small fraction of reviewers mentioning both keywords are more that 20 percent lower, on average.

The findings, published last September in the online journal arXiv (pronounced “archive”), call into question the very foundation of daily deal sites.

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