

# SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNING BOARDS:

## A Snapshot

BY HAMLET CANOSA

**T**he challenges facing public and private institutions of higher learning are myriad and complex. They include scarce financial resources, escalating operational and capital expenses, erratic annual enrollments, increased competition for faculty and administrators; and rising costs of evolving technologies. Despite their religious affiliation, North American Division (NAD) Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities are not exempt from such problems. Given these realities, how well does each institution's governing board, through its group practices and behaviors, address such challenges?

Do the practices and behaviors of our institutions' governing boards facilitate institutional mission, or do they give evidence of (to borrow a phrase from a Harvard Graduate School of Education professor) "manifestations and permutations of dysfunctional governance"?<sup>1</sup> Do these boards enhance the vitality of their respective institutions, or do they "add too little value too much of the time, . . . micromonitor rather than microgovern, and . . . mistake misgovernance for mismanagement"?<sup>2</sup>

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cacy of governing boards, whose trustees have usually had little formal training for this role. *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* recent sampling of 1,478 trustees from both public and private four-year colleges indicated that nearly 60 percent had not previously served on a tertiary-level board. Less than 15 percent of the respondents indicated they felt "very well" prepared for their first college or university board membership.<sup>3</sup> Trustees, it seems, get mostly "on-the-job training."

There are significant costs for boards and the institutions they serve when board members are unprepared for their duties. According to one *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey, in addition to feeling less connected to the institution's president, trustees who report a lack of readiness for board service are "more

likely to feel unfulfilled and less valued and to say they [are] not interested in serving again." Clearly, trustee preparation must be considered an imperative for all higher education institutions.<sup>4</sup>

For more than a decade, I have had the privilege of serving as an ex officio trustee of two college boards in the Columbia Union Conference. Witnessing how these boards function, both in times of success and challenge, has contributed to my interest in boardsmanship. So, with encouragement from Richard Osborn, president of Pacific Union College and former education vice president of the North American Division, I decided to survey trustees of four Seventh-day Adventist higher education institutions in the NAD.<sup>5</sup> My research would assess the demographics of board membership and explore trustees' perceptions about the



extent to which their respective boards employed preferred group practices and behaviors identified by Chait, Holland, and Taylor in *The Effective Board of Trustees*.<sup>6</sup> When they interviewed 108 board members including trustees and presidents of 22 independent liberal arts and comprehensive colleges, these researchers concluded that there were “specific characteristics and behaviors that distinguish strong boards from weak boards.”<sup>7</sup> They identified six fundamental areas where contrasts could be made between strong and weak boards. The competencies were noted in (1) contextual, (2) educational, (3) interpersonal, (4) analytical, (5) political, and (6) strategic dimensions.<sup>8</sup>

Eighty-four trustees from four Seventh-day Adventist higher education institutions geographically dispersed across the United States responded to a 64-item survey about the six competencies identified in the Chait, Holland, and Taylor construct.<sup>9</sup> The study’s variables included church affiliation, gender, age, race/ethnicity, and primary occupation. The study sought to determine any notable distinctions in responses that might exist between (1) older and younger trustees, (2) males and females, (3) trustees of dif-

ferent races, and (4) trustees who were employed by the church and those who were not.

**T**here was no notable difference in perceptions of board best practices between age groups. Moreover, there was general agreement between male and female trustees, with several exceptions relating to board development. Females were more inclined than males to say that their respective boards (1) used board retreats to examine board performance, (2) set board-specific goals, and (3) used brainstorming sessions to seek creative approaches and solutions to problems. Responses to the item that asked about setting board-specific goals as opposed to organizational goals also produced a notable difference in perceptions between church-employed and non-church-employed trustees.

In only one item was there a notable difference in perceptions between white and non-white trustees: how often and to what extent the organization’s values were discussed at board meetings. Non-whites said such discussions took place with greater regularity than did their white counterparts.

### **Board Composition**

All 84 respondents were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This was not surprising as it is church policy for trustees to be members of the sponsoring denomination.<sup>10</sup>

The respondents’ gender, race, and ethnicity contrasted significantly to those in recent broad-based surveys of board membership in U.S. public and private four-year colleges and universities. Of 1,478 trustees responding to *The Chronicle* survey referred to earlier, 36.2 percent were female.<sup>11</sup> This percentage exceeds that found in the research of Schwartz and Akins in which 28.2 percent of 354 respondents from 543 independent colleges and universities were female.<sup>12</sup>

Although my total sample size was small, only 14.5 percent of the respondents were female. The sample also revealed (1) very few non-white females (none of African-American or Hispanic descent); and (2) no church-employed females.

In a study of 415 trustees of public and private higher education institutions in Ohio, Michael and Schwartz found that female respondents were more inclined to take visible and active roles as trustees, attaching greater importance than male

subjects to such activities such as (1) soliciting support and resources for their institutions, (2) developing new education vision, (3) soliciting donors, (4) cultivating the media, and (5) providing academic leadership.<sup>13</sup>

One wonders if the Adventist boards may not have fully capitalized on the rich, substantive, and varied perspectives females might bring to board discussions and decision-making.

**O**f the 84 persons who responded to my survey, one chose not to mark any demographic items, while another did not identify his or her gender, age, or race/ethnicity. Of the 82 subjects who responded to the item about age, 48.8 percent were under age 60, including half of all identified female respondents. Of the 83 subjects who responded to the question about primary occupation, 47 percent said they were church employees.

Interestingly, the racial and ethnic makeup of the total sample in my study was largely consistent with that found in broader-based studies regarding the predominance of Caucasians on college boards. White males dominated, but African-American (13.4 percent) and Hispanic (4.9 percent) representation of my total sample was higher than the percentages of those ethnic groups in *The Chronicle* survey. When compared to the findings in *The Chronicle's* survey, the respondents to my survey were more ethnically diverse than their counterparts in *The Chronicle* survey, a finding that speaks well for the church.<sup>14</sup>

### Trustees' Perceptions of Board Practices and Behaviors

Board-specific results were provided in reports to each of the presidents of the institutions participating in the study. Such reports included commentary about the respective boards and the study's general recommendations.

A number of study findings are noteworthy. Generally, trustees perceived that their respective boards, to varying degrees, did not employ practices that ensured that all board members were well informed about their respective organization; the professions of other trustees

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on their board; and the board's roles and responsibilities, including board education and development.

Most of those responding to my survey said that the following recommended practices did not regularly occur on their

board: (1) board discussions with new members about their roles and responsibilities, (2) acknowledgement of the board's responsibility for ill-advised decisions, (3) discussion about what could be learned from mistakes the board had



made and what should have been done differently, (4) provision of helpful feedback for individual members regarding their performance, and (5) assignment of mentors for new board members to help them learn how the board operates.

### Recommendations

1. *Seventh-day Adventist board chairs and college/university presidents, working together, should provide systematic provision of board education, and develop strategies to enhance board members' service.*

Education and development improve board function and are especially useful for new members, giving them a better understanding of the board's culture, work, roles, and responsibilities. Some boards may not provide in-servicing because (1) they think there is insufficient time, (2) they do not see it as necessary, or (3) they have a disdain for (or fear of) accountability. Correcting this problem should strengthen overall board function and enable members to more effectively contribute to the board's work.

Boards that employ effective strategies for board education and development often gain significant advantages over those that fail to do so, including (1) trustees who experience greater satisfaction in board service, (2) more meaningful and productive discussions and decision-making processes in board meetings and committees, (3) more successful dissemination of substantive information to stakeholders, and (4) higher levels of board credibility among faculty and stakeholders. If consistently and efficiently implemented, retreats, formal annual or semi-annual evaluations of board performance, and orientation for and mentoring of new board members can be effective methods of board education and development

2. *Board members, in collaboration with their chair, should set goals that promote stronger group dynamics.*

When asked if their board had adopted goals distinct from the goals of the organization, the majority of my survey respondents said no. The lack of goal-setting might have occurred for several reasons, not the least of which is the limited amount of time available at regularly scheduled board meetings. Board retreats provide an ideal setting and ample time

for goal-setting, as well as opportunities for enhancing personal relationships between board members, fostering cohesion, and strengthening group morale.

3. *Board chairs should construct agendas that devote more time to matters of strategic importance—particularly items that focus on ensuring the institution's long-term viability.*

Sampled trustees indicated that they spent more time at board meetings addressing current issues rather than matters of strategic importance that could affect the institution's future. Boards need

to find the right balance between addressing current concerns and doing strategic planning for the institution's future.

The board's allocation of time in session determines, in large part, the extent to which members actively engage in its work. Inadequate meeting time (both frequency and duration), poor planning, the nature and severity of current issues faced by a board, and the perceived political interests of internal and external stakeholders are some of the reasons cited by respondents to my survey for member disengagement from discussion and decision-making. Even though they obviously need to address current, urgent



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concerns, boards should ensure that strategic planning and implementation are also included in the agenda.

### Recommendations for Future Research

There are very few formal studies of the performance of Seventh-day Adventist higher education governing boards. Much more research is needed, given the ongoing challenges faced by our institutions. Such research could be sponsored by a division or by the General Conference, and would make an excellent topic for doctoral dissertations. Such broader-

based studies would provide a clearer and more substantive picture of how our governing boards perform, and suggest strategies for improvement. ✍



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This article is based on his dissertation: “Perceptions of Governing Board Performance Held by Trustees of Four Adventist Colleges: Select Group Practices and Behaviors in Six Competencies” (La Sierra University, 2005).

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R. P. Chait, “Why Boards Go Bad,” *Trusteeship* 14:3 (May/June 2006), p. 8.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. “The Chronicle Survey of College and University Trustees,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* LIV:1 (August 31, 2007), p. 28.
4. J. Selindo, “Trustees: More Willing Than Ready,” *ibid.*, LIII:36 (May 11, 2007), p. A12.
5. The author wishes to express his sincere appreciation to La Sierra University and W. G. Nelson (chair), Ed Boyatt, and Robert Cruise, committee

members, who facilitated his research.

6. R. P. Chait, T. P. Holland, and B. E. Taylor, *The Effective Board of Trustees* (New York: Oryx Press, 1991).

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.

9. The survey had a response rate of 70 percent (84 out of 120 possible trustees) in the four NAD institutions to whom forms were sent.

10. Some tertiary boards in the North American Division diligently seek to identify a limited number of non-Adventists who might, in addition to financial resources, provide more expansive political, social, and intellectual capital as a way to drive institutional mission; explore advantageous strategic partnerships, and enrich the schools’ “footprint” or impact in the local community and beyond.

Most of these institutions appear to be convinced that the possible advantages of a small number of carefully selected non-Adventist members outweigh the potential risks of such an infusion to board membership.

11. *The Chronicle* survey (August 31, 2007), op cit.

12. M. P. Schwartz, and L. Akins, *Policies, Practices, and Composition of Governing Boards of Independent Colleges and Universities* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2004), pp. 4, 8.

13. S. O. Michael and M. Schwartz, “Perceived Role of Trustees: A Study of Higher Education Institutions in Ohio,” *Journal of Educational Administration* 37:2 (1990), p. 180.

14. *The Chronicle* survey (August 31, 2007), op cit.

