

Help Wanted: College and University Trustees

College and university trustees are a vital link in the governance process of Seventh-day Adventist higher education. They make decisions that directly affect the day-to-day operation of the campus and, perhaps more importantly, help to set future institutional directions.

Trustee Role Changes

Historically, many college or university governing board (trustee) positions were occupied in virtual anonymity, did not “require much heavy lifting,” and were more honorary than substantive.¹ Things are different today. Trustees are now expected to contribute expertise—on a wide range of topics—to institutional deliberations. They are also asked to function as both advocates and ambassadors for their school. Contemporary trusteeship is a high-energy activity that requires engaged, enthusiastic participants.

Authors Edward Kazemek and Michael Peregrine recently speculated about how to recruit the principle-centered individual who would be an effective non-profit-sector trustee by posting the following *Help Wanted* advertisement:

“Looking for someone willing to assume a position of tremendous responsibility overseeing an organization in one of the most complex industries in America. Significant time demands preparing for and participating in numerous board and committee meetings. Ongoing education on multiple subjects required, including attendance at weekend retreats. Subject to intense scrutiny by the public . . . and, possibly, the state. . . . Little to no pay. Advancement opportunities comprise becoming a board officer and doing more of the same.”²

While this tongue-in-cheek synopsis of expectations emphasizes the demands rather than the rewards of board service, it underscores the vigorous nature of college and university trusteeship in the 21st century. The “constant vigil” required to identify trustee candidates is necessary, not just to create a pool of the willing, but also to develop criteria for identifying and selecting those who are best qualified for this unique type of voluntary endeavor.³

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By W. G. Nelson

Trustee Candidate Qualifications

So, what talents, experience, and/or personal characteristics predict success for future trustees? Should they have had prior association with some form of educational endeavor? Does successful business or entrepreneurial experience correlate well? Is the best forecaster of effectiveness the

candidate's willingness to write large checks and to be an enthusiastic booster?

Some observers of higher education believe that the most valuable legacy of college or university trustees is to make decisions and vote actions "that enhance the long-term quality, vitality, and stability of the institution."⁴ This suggests that it is less important for effective trustees to share similar personality traits and experiences than for them to understand how to assist in institutional visioning, planning, implementation, and assessment. "The best boards add the most value—usually through five interrelated approaches," which include (1) helping senior management determine what matters most; (2) creating opportunities for the president to

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think aloud; (3) encouraging experimentation; (4) monitoring progress and performance; and (5) modeling desired behaviors.⁵

A survey of private college trustees asked which five activities they considered most important. The answer: "concern for [the] long-range plan, support for the president, attention to budget details, making institutional policy, and soliciting donors."⁶ The best trustees, then, are those who can help to establish a creative and reflective board culture that nurtures the types of activities that are essential to the long-term strength of the institution.

I remember attempting to recruit a capable businesswoman to sit on a college board. She was successful in her field and appeared to have much



Kettering College of Medical Arts (KCMA) trustees (left) Jack Fritzsche and (right) Fred Manchur, along with college President Charles Scriven (center), listen intently at a recent board meeting.



In April 2004, several trustees from Walla Walla College (WWC), College Place, Washington, and WWC religion teacher Keith Bramlett (right) tour the newly renovated office area temporarily housing the School of Theology and archaeology lab.



Amabel Tsao, Pacific Union College (PUC) board member, receives thanks from the PUC Student Association (SA) for her donation of nearly \$20,000 to help renovate the campus center. With her are several of the 2002-2003 SA officers.

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to offer as a trustee. She graciously thanked me for the honor of being considered for the position but declined, my protests notwithstanding, stating that she knew “little about the current college curriculum.” Her feeling of inadequacy in this area is not unique. Potential trustees often think that their lack of academic expertise is a debilitating handicap. But evidence seems to indicate that this is more a problem of perception than reality. In one recent study, private college and university trustees listed the inability to provide academic leadership as one of the five least important trustee roles, the others being “interpreting government policy, providing direct institutional management, lobbying the government, [and] cultivating politicians.”⁷

One additional qualification should be a requirement of all trustee

candidates at Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities. Recent surveys have shown that trustees of effective boards understand their institution's mission. They "rely on it as the essential context for major decisions."⁸ Trustees of Adventist institutions should have a clear understanding and commitment to the spiritual values and heritage of the church. These traditions serve "as a touchstone and litmus test" for all program decisions.⁹

Trustee Contributions

Emphasis on board trustees' decision-making skills and commitment to the values of the church does not imply that knowledge, general or specific, is unimportant to successful trusteeship in higher education. In fact, some prior knowledge is key to effective board participation. Trustees need to be knowledgeable about three

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areas in order to function effectively: the higher education culture, the politics within their specific institution, and the differences between the ad-

ministration of higher education and that of the business organization.¹⁰ Candidates' knowledge can be easily ascertained through reference checks and interviews.

Another key factor in trustee effectiveness relates to the individual's contributions to the welfare of the institution. One of my administrative colleagues suggests that these contributions fall into four categories: time, talent, influence, and/or means. Regrettably, major attention today is being given to the trustee's ability to contribute financially. The need to grow institutional endowments has made it more urgent for trustees to participate in college and university fund-raising efforts and to lead by example in this area by making significant institutional bequests.

This must not rank as the sole qualification for potential board members, however. There is still am-



Oakwood College President Delbert Baker (far left) and Calvin Rock, board chair (far right), cut the ribbon at the opening of the college industries building, as the trustees look on.

ple room for trustees who contribute their talent, expertise, or influence.¹¹

Trustee contributions can be classified as direct or indirect. Trustees contribute indirectly by using their influence outside of the institution, either with the public or with politicians. The importance of this contribution, which is based on the trustee's good reputation, cannot be underestimated.

Direct contributions, on the other hand, include the trustees' "level of visibility within the campus, . . . resources personally contributed, and . . . resources attracted to the institution."¹² Trustees who participate in campus events such as commencement and honors convocation make a powerful symbolic statement through their presence. Those who serve on planning committees, attend on- and off-campus constituent meetings, and act as external campus representatives are actively promoting the goals of

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the university. Such contributions are vital, as are personal contacts on behalf of the college or university that may produce financial support from various individuals and organizations.¹³

Conclusions

Academic governance processes and trustee responsibilities have been described as "remarkable in ambiguity" by both critics and defenders of higher education in the United States.¹⁴ No two colleges or universities use exactly the same methodologies. Each has its own constituency

and institutional culture. These wide variations in educational governance suggest that the precise trustee needs of each institution will vary. In the final analysis, this probably means that the selection of trustees will, of necessity, continue to be more of an art than a science. For Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities, this means that, while we must exert our best efforts, using reason and research, to achieve excellence in institutional governance and trustee selection, we will always need to pray for the Lord's guidance to achieve these goals. ☞



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For college board members to work together successfully, they need to feel comfortable interacting with one another. Too often, lay members of the board are socially marginalized and therefore reluctant to discuss differences or strategies outside of meetings. Building social capital among board members is as important as building material resources. Above, several Kettering College of Medical Arts trustees take a few minutes after the board meeting to discuss their shared concerns.

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