

Understanding Academic Culture: Essential Groundwork for New Trustees

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Effective board leadership in higher education requires that trustees understand academic culture and learn to work within its collaborative governance structure. While many boards spend time orienting new members to board and college operations, few adequately orient members to academic affairs and the faculty's role in institutional governance.

Shared governance can be perplexing to new trustees because power is dispersed among campus leaders. Even more difficult is the reality that accountability may be separate from the sources of power, so the delicate balance the president must maintain between his authority and other powerful players on campus, particularly the faculty, is rarely understood by new board members.

Faculty members' influence in institutional decision making reaches well beyond individual faculty responsibilities and is fundamental to maintaining institutional stability. Successful collaborative governance in academia necessitates faculty input on many decisions affecting institutional strategy and direction. Additionally, decisions on faculty promotion and tenure, faculty hires, and academic programs are commonly influenced by peer faculty members. New board members sometimes wonder about the inherent conflict this presents and are surprised when the president or dean gives faculty opinion on these matters such weight.

New trustees may also underestimate the major role scholarly prominence plays in institutional reputation, not understanding the likely consequences if several key faculty members were to leave for higher wages, better research facilities, or more motivated students on another campus. While it might be appealing to say, "If they don't like it here, let them leave," tenure-track faculty searches can take years to complete, costing institutions substantial time, resources, and reputation while critical departmental posts remain open. Once an

institution's reputation diminishes, leaders will find it more difficult to attract students and alumni dollars, not to mention well-regarded faculty members.

The influential role faculty members play in institutional governance requires the president to actively listen as she persuasively leads. New trustees may initially discount this approach, not realizing that when the faculty is unhappy with the president's leadership, it can play its trump card--a vote of no-confidence in the president. Often taking the board by surprise, this faculty action can ultimately result in the departure of the president, necessitating a costly search for new leadership.

To expose new trustees to faculty thinking, the orientation for new trustees should include a session in which the dean and faculty chair contribute to discussions led by the president and board chair on the roles of all players in the collaborative governance framework. A separate session with administrative division heads on the college's operations and how each supports the institution's core business is equally important. Some boards ask the faculty-senate chair to participate in full board meetings, in addition to attending academic-affairs committee meetings, thus educating all board members about faculty leadership and decision-making. For insight on the impact of scholarly talent on the institution's reputation, it is helpful to incorporate board-education programs into board meetings by having department chairs present overviews of their departments' current initiatives, teaching, and research.

Only after boards possess considerable understanding of the academic culture they serve can their leadership and governance in this collaborative framework be effective. The serious work of college governance begins with a knowledgeable board that works in concert with the president to engage campus leaders in ongoing planning that continually renews the institution's strategic vision. When faculty and administrative leaders participate in establishing specific measurable goals against which the college monitors its success, everyone has skin in the game. All players are then responsible for the institution's success and the result is a collaborative governance structure that works because it calls for intentional and informed engagement from each of the institution's sources of power.