

The Board Vice Chair: Key Facilitator of Strategic Engagement

*This article, written by Elizabeth Bulette, was published by the AGB in the September/October 2011 volume of **Trusteeship**.*

“In the absence or disability of the chair, the vice chair shall perform the duties of the chair.”

For many boards, the role of the vice chair can be as uninspiring as the quotation above. If the vice chair is simply standing by in case the chair is unable to serve, boards waste an important resource that could otherwise help direct the board’s attention to action on important strategic issues. Developing a board practice that elevates trustees’ strategic engagement is a vital function to which few boards assign accountability. With the chair serving as the chief liaison between the board and the president, the vice chair is well placed to focus on enhancing the board’s effectiveness.

Most board members want to serve on boards where their participation influences institutional direction. This kind of engagement occurs when trustees are knowledgeable about the institution and its challenges, and are aware of current trends in higher education. Unfortunately, many boards are stuck in a report-driven meeting structure where little board time is spent in meaningful discussions regarding those issues of greatest importance to the institution’s future. Board members must be selected with greater expectations in mind and prepared to work differently, or boards will continue to conduct business as usual trapped in a meeting cycle of committee reports followed by board approval.

To facilitate strategic engagement, the chair would be well served by relying on the vice chair to help align board members’ work to the institution’s strategic priorities, which can be done effectively if the vice chair also chairs the governance committee. With the vice chair positioned for regular interaction with the chair and the president as well as each of the standing committee chairs who serve on the executive committee, the vice chair is the logical choice to coordinate people and work. It is important that the vice chair’s responsibilities compliment the chair’s and are clearly described in the by-laws.

The vice chair should be responsible for overseeing several things: First that the people on the board collectively provide a full complement of necessary skills, experience, and resources that match institutional needs. A plan for board composition developed from the institution's strategic plan will aid in the selection of board members ready to perform the wide range of board work. Second, that board members are well informed about the institution, higher education, and their responsibilities as trustees. Lastly, that committee work, board meetings and board education are organized around the strategic objectives that ensure the institution's long-term success.

The governance committee (known on some boards as the nominations or trusteeship committee) is the ideal vehicle for the vice chair to manage this process. Governance committees, particularly in independent colleges, spend much of their time attracting and orienting new trustees to the board but often too little time creating conditions that focus meetings on the institution's strategic priorities. For the full board to be effective, this committee's work must involve collaborating with the board's leadership to develop future board meeting agendas and to arrange for appropriate board education. When the vice chair is responsible for leading this committee, it ensures that the committee's work goes beyond simply assembling the right combination of board members.

Successful boards operate in a culture where inquiry, critical thinking, and informed discussions regularly take place regarding the institution's strategic objectives. For best results, a person on the board must be accountable for developing its members and working with the chairs of each of the standing committees to coordinate mission-critical work. The vice chair is ideally positioned to do this, especially when the responsibilities include chairing the governance committee. With the chair focused on leading the board in shaping institutional direction and the vice chair minding the board's process for accomplishing it, the board's leadership is better configured to foster effective board engagement. A board interested in establishing a board culture of strategic engagement should consider how well it uses the position of the vice chair.