

Bring New Trustees Up to Speed FAST

BY DAWN BRILL DUQUES

TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Trustees can be of great value to a college or a university if they are well chosen, well schooled in their role as trustees, and well informed about the ongoing concerns and activities of the board.
- 2 Trustees want more information before they begin serving, to allow them to be actively engaged from the start.
- 3 Formal orientation programs emphasize the importance of the position and assure that important information is not left out.

SOMEONE ONCE SAID, TONGUE IN CHEEK, THAT trustees are worth their weight in gold. Do administrators and other campus constituents cherish trustees just for the gold they can give, or do they also value them for what they can give in numerous non-monetary ways? If they are not valued for contributions other than money, institutions are wasting an extremely valuable resource.

So how can a board be certain not to waste this potential asset? First, the board must look to itself and be aware that times have changed. The rubber stamp board of the past is—or should be—no more. Today most colleges and universities practice shared governance, where the trustees, the administration, the faculty, and the staff all must have a say in how their institutions should operate. And this is as it should be. Today's institutions are more complex than those of the past, and the expertise of all of those constituencies should be in the mix for the best decisions to be made. No one person or group could make the best decisions regarding all of the complicated concerns facing our colleges and universities in today's educational environment. Just consider the following topics: conflicts of interest, risk management, curriculum redesign, program assessment, joint ventures with other institutions, and alliances with state and local government agencies. Is there one entity within an institution that wants to take on all of this?

A governing board, properly constructed with members from various walks of life, can add much in the form of wisdom and guidance in today's complicated educational envi-

ronment. But to ensure maximum performance, a board—no matter how brilliantly balanced—must be certain that all its members are well schooled in the various facets of the institution, their operations, and their challenges.

So how do most board members learn? In the past at many colleges and universities, it has been through on-the-job learning. Many new trustees received little if any information up front and merely absorbed what they could at board meetings. What a sinful waste of time when most board members would need at least two or three meetings just to get a sense of the board's culture, of how meetings operate, and of what their missions and responsibilities are.

I asked 51 trustees from various colleges in the United States what they experienced when they first joined their boards, what they wished had transpired, and what education they thought new trustees should receive. All but one of them wished they had received more information up front, and each of them offered a number of suggestions as to what orienting information new trustees should receive to help them become competent board members.

When asked in what ways they felt orientation information

could benefit new trustees, they indicated that such information would help new trustees:

- Find their appropriate niches within the board and on committees more quickly,
- Lower their anxiety levels,
- Gain a boardroom view of the institution,
- Become active and effective more rapidly,
- Understand their fiduciary responsibilities up front, and
- Get an up-to-date picture of their alma maters if they are alumni.

One trustee pointed out that the mere act of offering an orientation indicates to new trustees the importance of their positions.

From my experience, I have found that, because being asked to become a trustee can be very exciting and flattering, a new trustee often will initially experience a high level of energy and expectation. If new trustees are engaged, informed, and put to work from the beginning, they will be far more likely to work at a higher, more committed level. Without that kind of support, I have seen trustees resign because they just didn't feel that they had been able to contribute much. That shouldn't happen.

So how can we turn rookie trustees into veterans as quickly as possible? Here are steps I'd suggest based on my interviews with the 51 trustees:

Set a date for a formal orientation program. Once a trustee has accepted a position on your board, set up a formal orientation. Try to offer it to all new trustees at the same time, and schedule it prior to their first board meeting. Starting the day before the meeting can work very well for two reasons. First, it allows the new trustees to apply what they have learned immediately. Second, it is more convenient for new trustees who have to travel a distance.

Send out materials to be read prior to their orientation. Immediately after candidates have agreed to become trustees, they should receive:

- An *organization chart* of the institution, a copy of the most recent annual report, and the "fast facts" information put out by institution's public-information departments.

- A *full trustee handbook* in a loose-leaf notebook so that information can be added or deleted over time. Include statements of mission and vision; the current strategic plan; the bylaws; names, addresses, and phone numbers of each trustee; and a list of the board's committees and their members. Also, in the back, include a list of acronyms most frequently used in academia and at your institution.

- A *board member and VIP book*, also in loose-leaf style, with information on each trustee, the president, the president's cabinet members, and the deans. Include for each of them a picture, name, address, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, a bio, and a short paragraph giving human-interest information that the individual would like to share. It is a good idea to ask each person in the book to fill out a form annually providing updated information.

- *The AGB Statement on Board Accountability*, (2007), Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Univer-

sities and Colleges.

- A *meeting book*. This is the book that goes out to all trustees prior to each upcoming meeting. If possible, send the other recommended materials out at least a week before this one is mailed, so the new trustees have some time to digest it before they must tackle the meeting book. Too much information at one time can be overwhelming. The meeting book generally includes the agenda of the upcoming meeting, supporting materials for each agenda issue, minutes from the prior meeting, and an updated list of trustees. Be certain that the new trustees are on that list!

Have your new trustees meet their mentors. Prior to the orientation, select mentors for your new trustees. If possible, each mentor should be a trustee with a long-term good track record on your board. It is also good if each pair shares something in common and lives close to one another. Have the mentors call the new trustees and set up introductory meetings, preferably in person, prior to the orientation.

All those steps will help prepare new trustees for the formal orientation. Ideally this should last a day and a half and include several elements:

1. *Begin with breakfast in the president's office or in the cafeteria.* This should be a time to encourage relaxed conversation and to allow the new trustees to ask questions. The president and one or two of his or her cabinet members should host it. Invite the new trustees' mentors, the head of the student association, and several other student representatives. Student representation at this point is a good idea, because, of the 51 trustees I interviewed, 30 indicated that they would like to have more interaction with students. Indeed, 15 indicated that the most rewarding part of trusteeship was interaction with the students, so provide this opportunity from the get-go.

2. *Hold a session on trusteeship.* Have the chair of the committee on trustees present this session. It should cover governance in general, shared governance, and some information about how academic-board work differs from that of the corporate world. It also should address the differences between oversight and management responsibilities, the board's bylaws, a definition of the fiduciary responsibilities of a trustee, and meeting responsibilities and procedures. Also include some discussion on what makes a good trustee and the rewards of trusteeship.

3. *Take a break.*

4. *Hold a second session that deals with more specific aspects of trusteeship.* Have the chair of the committee on trustees continue with more specific topics. Risk management; financial, organizational, and mission accountability; and the legal aspects of trusteeship, including conflict of interest, personal liability, disclosure of confidential information, and communications outside of the board room should all be covered. Also touch on the inappropriateness of asking for special favors.

5. *Hold a new trustee-faculty luncheon.* It's time for the new trustees to meet faculty. Again, this contact is what trustees want. Of those interviewed, more than 40 wanted more

contact with faculty members. This is probably a good thing for the institution, as well. In my research, the trustees who mentioned meeting faculty during their orientation rated their board-faculty relationships as excellent.

Have a dean or deans, the faculty-senate chair, a union representative if applicable, and some tenured, non-tenured, and part-time faculty members from various departments attend. Also include the new trustees' mentors, the chairman of the board, the chair of the committee on trustees, the chair of the committee upon which the new trustee will serve, and any trustee on a faculty-liaison committee. In most instances, it is probably a good idea for the president to skip this luncheon, allowing others to take center stage.

6. *Hold a session on the board and its committees.* Put the chairman of the board or the chair of the committee on trustees in charge of this session. Start with an introduction about the board, its culture, traditions, and idiosyncrasies. Follow with a brief overview of the committees, their memberships, history, current issues, and meeting schedules. An explanation of how committee rotation occurs should be included.

7. *Take another break.*

8. *Finish with a session on board building.* Here it is a good idea to have the board chair do the presentation. Include succession planning and how performance assessments of the board collectively, of individual trustees, and of the president are done. Also, touch on trustee term limits. Cover goal setting and giving and getting feedback. Finally, cover long-range goals of the board, information on the annual fund, a picture of the capital campaign if one is ongoing or planned, and the trustee's role in giving and fundraising.

9. *Enjoy a relaxed evening.* Have a small dinner for new trustees that includes the president, the board chair, the mentors, another key trustee or two whom the new ones have not met, at least one town official, and possibly an honored former trustee. While it should be a relaxed social evening, allow for questions. If they can't be answered on the spot, they can be addressed the following day.

10. *Start the next morning with a continental breakfast in a location that hasn't been used yet.* It could be in a new facility, the offices of an outstanding department, the alumni office, the development office, or the board room if that hasn't been seen yet. The hosts would be determined based on the location.

11. *Have a session on plans for the future.* First, touch on finances, including the endowment. Then discuss the college's goals for the future, special projects, and current difficulties with the staff, faculty, administration, students, the community and/or the environment, if they exist, and any long-range plans that relate to the master plan.

12. *Take a lunch break.* Be creative here. Use your institution's theme, mission, or athletic mascot in a way to add something special. Make your new members feel they are a part of the team. Invite a few officials the new trustees haven't met yet.

13. *Take the new trustees to their first meeting.* Be sure that

there are large place cards with each trustee's name written on both sides in very large print placed in front of each one who is attending the meeting. Be certain to place new trustees next to their mentors.

Begin the meeting with a formal acknowledgment or ceremony to bring the new board members on board. Follow this with introductions around the table, including the new trustees. Have trustees pronounce their names, give their professions, tell the number of years they have served on the board, explain why they joined, and list their committee memberships.

14. *Hold the meeting.* The orientation work is done. Your new trustees are attending their first board meeting. They are not uncomfortable, quiet, and uninformed. They are comfortable in their new environment, knowledgeable about the job at hand, and actively engaged in the process. Your efforts have already begun to pay off and will continue to do so. Just keep the information and education flowing. ■

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T'SHIP LINKS: Dawn Brill Duques, "Courting the Best for Your Board." November/December 2007. E.B. Wilson, "The Learning Curve of Trusteeship." January/February 2005.