



## Getting the Most from Your Board 2015-2016

The following five essays on trusteeship appeared during this past academic year in [Inside Higher Education](#). Knowing that the demands of your schedule often outpace the time available during the academic year, we thought you might appreciate a consolidated set of essays for your summer reading.

The essays, while not originally intended to work as a set, clearly identify themes that presidents and trustees might find beneficial. We hope you'll agree and share the set or individual ones with members of your board and senior staff. Please share your thoughts and ideas with me, Peter Eckel ([eckelpd@upenn.edu](mailto:eckelpd@upenn.edu)), or my collaborator, Cathy Trower ([catrower@trowerandtrower.com](mailto:catrower@trowerandtrower.com)).

### Essays on Trusteeship

*\*Note: [Inside Higher Education](#) uses different titles on their website*

[Mired in Mediocrity](#) (Jan 25, 2016)

Why too many boards underperform and seem to be striving for mediocrity.

[Out of the Quagmire](#) (Feb 9, 2016)

Actions that board leaders and presidents can take to move beyond mediocrity.

[Damned if You Do; Damned if You Don't](#) (March 4, 2016)

Governance is difficult and this essay spells out some of the inherent challenges for effective trusteeship.

[The Power of What Cannot Be Seen](#) (April 28, 2016)

Effective boards need constructive cultures that shape how they do their work. We introduce a novel framework to make board culture explicit and actionable.

[Diversity: Not a Spectator Sport](#) (Nov 2015)

Boards have a governance role when it comes to advancing campus diversity efforts. Here are a set of steps boards can take in partnership with the administration.

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## Governing boards are too often only mediocre in their performance (essay)

Submitted by Cathy Trower and Peter Eckel on January 25, 2016 - 3:00am

Harvard Business School professor Dutch Leonard once said, “The central challenge for nonprofit leadership is that mediocrity is survivable.” His observation was sad, but true -- and one that could easily apply to many college and university governing boards. However, the difference today given the challenges facing higher education is that mediocrity might not be survivable. At a recent conference of presidents, the key thread of the conversation was about the dangers of mediocre governance.

We observe that too many boards seem to be mired in mediocrity. During numerous board assessments that we’ve conducted over the years, we’ve asked trustees to provide a letter grade to their board’s overall performance. On average, trustees give a C-plus grade. And when we ask why they give this grade, trustees say such things as:

- “We’re a good, but not great, board.”
- “I’ve been on worse boards.”
- “I suspect we’re better in our own minds than in the minds of the senior staff.”
- “We never discuss our performance; our focus is on the administration’s performance.”
- “We love this institution, but I’m not sure we really know how to govern well.”

Not very encouraging responses.

### Why do college and university boards underperform?

The boards in the headlines are often those that are dysfunctional (think Penn State or the University of Virginia). While they may well deserve their negative spotlight, most boards are *not* dysfunctional -- they simply can do more to add more value and be an asset to the institution they govern. Boards do not add as much value as they should for many reasons. Some of the more common ones that we have come across include:

*The focus is on the “pretty ponies.”* One trustee we know remarked, “Our board meetings are dog and pony shows, but the administration only trots out the pretty ponies.” If all the trustees hear is how great everything is going, they tend to assume that everything really is great, and they may become complacent. Similarly, too often boards only learn about issues after they have already been decided, either by an overly powerful executive committee or the administration.

*Brainpower goes untapped.* Too often trustees do not bring their A game when it comes to board work. In some instances, the administration does not involve the board in important and meaty matters. And other times, trustees do not do their homework prior to meetings that would allow them to engage fully. Regardless of cause, when trustees check out mentally, they provide no value.

That can lead to apathy that not only affects the board's performance at meetings but also can result in lackluster philanthropic support. Furthermore, if the right people are on the board, the institution is missing a key opportunity for their input.

*The one-issue trustee reigns.* On one board that we worked with, the answer to every institutional problem was "women's golf." They didn't have a team, and one trustee clearly wanted one. The institution needed to increase enrollment and posed that issue to the board. "Invest in women's golf" came the solution from the often vocal trustee. The institution wanted to engage alumni more effectively. "Women's golf," that same trustee urged a few hours later in the meeting, contending, "Women golfers will be dedicated alumnae." During discussions about increasing auxiliary revenue, he jumped in with, "Well, you know, we should consider improving the golf course and creating a women's golf team." And so it goes.

*Congeniality is not collegiality.* Many boards suffer from being overly polite and deferential -- both of which result in mediocrity. In contrast, the best colleagues take each other on, pushing each other's thinking and debating ideas, all in the spirit of advancing the common good.

High-performing boards do not shy away from difficult conversations and conflicting views and ideas. Instead, they understand that such messy, if not uncomfortable, dialogues are essential to understanding complex issues and eventually lead to better decisions. And at the end of the day (or board meeting), those trustees are able to put aside their differences and move ahead.

*Good (enough) is the enemy of great.* Too often we hear that the board is pretty good -- in fact, good enough. Why push harder for more? Many boards believe that behaviors that worked sufficiently in the past will continue to serve the board and the institution today and into the future. But given the increasing and changing demands on higher education institutions and their leaders, governance that was once good enough no longer is.

Many boards do not take the time to assess themselves or their meetings meaningfully. And often those that do ask questions of themselves rarely yield constructive insights. Rather, they make comments such as, "I liked the pace of the meeting," or "We had good attendance."

*Boards don't know otherwise.* Administrators and faculty members have deep and extensive professional networks to help them not only find solutions to problems but also provide a set of benchmarks. But the fact is that most trustees have neither, as they rarely see another academic institution's board in action. They assume that as their board goes, so do all other boards. This is clearly not the case. Too often boards look only to their own histories and practices as a guide for the future rather than looking at the practices of high-performing boards.

*Presidents perpetuate the problems.* There are four reasons presidents may not lead boards away from mediocrity. First, some presidents simply believe that boards do not have the knowledge to help in meaningful ways. And depending on who sits on the board, that unfortunately might be true.

Second, some presidents worry that once trustees are invited to engage in more substantive

work, they'll never get out of the details. In this case, the potential downside of micromanagement is not worth the reward. Third, presidents may not believe they have the requisite time to devote to governance. The demands on time are great, and a board that is good enough (rather than great) allows for time to be spent elsewhere.

Finally, presidents simply are inexperienced working effectively with boards. A study of presidents that one of us conducted and that was summarized in the Association of Governing Boards' magazine *Trusteeship* found that approximately 25 percent of presidents had no experience working with boards prior to ascending to the presidency.

*Governance structure contributes.* Boards get mired in mediocrity related to the work and structure of governance for three primary reasons. First, because board work is episodic -- with infrequent meetings -- boards do not benefit from repetition and practice or from an easy continuity between meetings.

Second, on many boards, the executive committee has undue influence. That imbalance of influence may cause the rest of the group to check out, leaving a lot of complex work in the hands of too few trustees.

Third, the mind-set of trustees matters. Some trustees feel that they serve on the board to be decisive, which means to make decisions -- not to explore and understand issues, regardless of uncertainty and ambiguity about various paths forward.

*Board culture is misaligned.* Finally, boards may not have the right cultures for the work that they are facing or the environment in which their institution finds itself. Does the board perpetuate divergent thinking or convergent thinking? Which is needed?

Do board leaders need to maximize efficiency or deliberation? Do they bring a corporate or academic mind-set to decisions? All of these points, and others, add up to shape board culture. But the real questions are: To what extent does board culture match what the institution needs, and how might that vary over time?

In a follow-up *Inside Higher Ed* article, we will provide recommendations for how boards can avoid becoming mired in mediocrity. Please don't get us wrong. Many boards have dedicated and hardworking trustees. Our point is not to belittle governance or trusteeship, but to point out its all too common shortfalls. Given the pressures facing many (if not most) colleges and universities, they need to be able to draw on all of their assets, including effective boards. Many, if not most, boards could and should be doing much more to add value as partners in the leadership of very complex institutions.

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## **Editorial Tags:**

Governance <sup>[1]</sup>

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/01/25/governing-boards-are-too-often-only-mediocre-their-performance-essay?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

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## Recommendations for improving governing board performance (essay)

Submitted by Cathy Trower and Peter Eckel on February 9, 2016 - 3:00am

Despite their affinity for the colleges and universities that they govern, too many boards have not found ways to add important and consistent value. As we wrote in a [previous article](#) <sup>[1]</sup> for *Inside Higher Ed*, they are mired in mediocrity.

The good news is that we have seen a continued increase in the number of boards that recognize they can and should be better. To do this they must: (1) recognize how average they currently are (no small feat), (2) have the will or desire to improve and (3) chart a path forward. What follows are strategies that have proven successful for many boards with which we have worked.

*Look in the mirror.* The first step is recognition. Boards must focus attention on themselves and how they govern. Possibly because they are composed of volunteers, many boards don't see themselves as sufficiently knowledgeable about governance or believe they lack the time or expertise. Thus, they are not prone to asking themselves questions in any intentional and systematic way about how well they are governing. Without a first step of looking in the metaphorical mirror, they're stuck.

*Gather some data and do something with it.* Boards expect their college or university to make decisions based on data. They should demand the same of themselves. It's important to ascertain how trustees view their experiences serving on the board. That can be done using short and simple surveys or full-blown assessments conducted internally or with outside experts. The key is to discuss the results of the data and act upon them.

Here is a simple strategy to get started: ask board members to (anonymously) provide a letter grade for the board's overall performance. Calculate the GPA and display the range. Then ask, "If you could only do one thing to improve that grade, what would it be?" You can also ask, "What do you find most fulfilling about serving on this board?" and "What do you find most frustrating?" (Again, you should ask anonymously, so people can be forthright.) Discuss what trustees say and how to build on what's fulfilling and fix what's frustrating: "What would success look like? How might we close the gaps between where we are now and where we want to be?"

*Talk about governance expectations.* Boards can benefit tremendously by talking not only about their committee structures and the number and length of the meetings but also about the fundamental values that guide their work. How well does the board value participation,

preparation, transparency, teamwork and accountability? What are the important and often unstated values that should shape its governance work? How closely do they match reality? For example, some boards say they value participation, yet they have a history of barely making a quorum.

A good practice is to create a Statement of Mutual Expectations for serving on the board: what the institution can expect from trustees, what trustees can expect from the institution and what trustees can expect from one another. Such a statement may list trustee guidelines for comportment, attendance, philanthropy and confidentiality. It may also include an institutional commitment to ensuring appropriate and timely information, as well as transparency about crucial incidents on the campus, the student and faculty experience, and financial documentation.

*Intellectually engage the brains.* A goal of all boards is to tap the collective brainpower sitting around the table. Those brains are best engaged when the work is intellectually challenging -- which might not be the case often enough. As one of us, Cathy Trower, wrote in the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges' *Trusteeship* magazine (March-April 2015), "Send trustees a reading or two along with questions they should think about as they read. This way, trustees arrive at the meeting having done some critical thinking and prepared to discuss matters appropriately and thoughtfully." Such work requires presidents and board leaders to think hard about the agenda and its content to ensure its relevance and level of engagement.

Good questions to go along with reading materials and reports might include: About what are you most optimistic? What has you most concerned? Are essential elements of the issue not addressed in the reading? What assumptions underlie the reading's conclusions?

Good questions must be important and require thought. Posed in advance, they keep the focus on what matters most, help trustees think critically and ensure that they add value as thought partners with the administration.

*Develop governance experiments.* While boards share much in common, they also vary tremendously in size, structure and, more important, their cultures. Thus, boards should experiment with what practices work well for them given their current contexts and agendas.

Boards should develop experiments in good governance and see if they work. For example, you can increase the number and frequency of joint committee meetings on key topics (such as enrollment and finance or academic affairs and facilities or technology). Or you might develop new task forces on emerging strategic challenges or opportunities and invite nontrustees to participate. Start *and* end each session with an executive session to put key issues on the table. Disallow rote committee reports and instead have trustees read reports or meeting summaries prior to attending the board meeting. Set up the boardroom with round tables that seat six to eight trustees each instead of a huge table that doesn't allow good line of sight.

In some instances, these strategies work well; in other situations, they have limited positive effects. Try something and test it; try something else and test that, too. Figure out what works for *your* board.

*Ensure that board leaders lead.* One of the contributors to mediocrity is when presidents believe they cannot invest the time in board improvement. Sometimes this happens when presidents feel they need to lead both the institution and the board because board leaders are overcommitted or don't understand their leadership roles. Presidents cannot fulfill both roles effectively for very

long. Board leaders need to demonstrate that they can and will lead the board and invest the time in doing so. Effective board leadership, particularly the chair, is essential to progress.

*Create continuity and bridges between meetings.* The episodic nature of board meetings significantly influences board performance. For many independent institutions, trustees show up on campus three times a year in order to “govern,” too often with little institutional contact in between.

A good practice is for the board chair, a committee chair or an administrator who is in front of the board to remind trustees of what happened at the last meeting and inform them of what’s happened since. Then toward the end of the meeting, the board chair should take a few minutes to summarize what occurred (and ask, “Did I get that right?”), discuss implications and describe what trustees can expect next.

Some boards are experimenting with having a conference call between regularly scheduled meetings for the purposes of updating trustees on what’s happening on the campus and to keep them engaged between meetings. In addition, many boards hold committee meetings via teleconference between regular board meetings to work on vital matters.

In conclusion, boards mired in mediocrity too often are satisfied and fall far short of effectiveness. In contrast, boards that add value continue to evolve. They grow tired of the status quo. They understand that governance as usual will not help propel their institutions forward. Boards should develop what management experts Jim Collins and Jerry Porras call a “positive restlessness” -- and be never quite satisfied with their performance.

After all, the world is complex and ever changing. Like the institutions that they serve, boards must ask questions, learn from experience, adapt to changing conditions and continually improve.

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### **Editorial Tags:**

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## The challenges and tensions of being a board member in difficult times (essay)

Submitted by Cathy Trower and Peter Eckel on March 4, 2016 - 3:00am

In the two short months since the New Year, headlines about college and university boards and governance have abounded. While the headlines paint one picture, those of us who try and keep a thoughtful eye on governance also read the comments sections of the stories reported here and elsewhere. Some of those comments are well formulated and advance the conversation about good governance; others are misinformed or just nasty.

Look at the comments on *Inside Higher Ed* about the board-president tension at Suffolk University, the actions and inactions at Mount St. Mary's University, and what is happening at the University of Missouri. While the stories give renewed attention to the power and role of governance and call out some of the tensions, the comments suggest that much more understanding is needed about the role and function of lay boards of trustees, part of our historical structure since America's first colonial college.

Governance can be arduous, as we will explain. Being a trustee is one difficult volunteer role, and boards often find themselves in "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situations. In the midst of the vitriol and mudslinging that occurs, our intent is not to play the metaphorical violin and feel sorry for trustees, but we do want to point out a few harsh realities. Boards today must cope with:

**Responding to tricky, if not impossible, decisions thrust upon them.** Boards do not get to choose the issues that come before them. Some problems and quandaries that end up on board agendas are conceivable -- student concerns (and in some places protests) regarding race and equity are a recent example. Yet, even if foreseeable, the board never knows how an issue will play out in real time, and there often are no right answers or simple paths forward.

Other issues simply cannot be predicted. It is not as if the boards in Louisiana planned for the [\\$940 million budget deficit](#) [1], or the Mount Saint Mary's board anticipated [the accreditation issues](#) [2] or other fallout from its president's remarks, including picking up the pieces from his resignation, or the University of Missouri's Board of Curators wanted to deal with the [actions of a faculty member](#) [3], acting on her own accord and captured on video, that resulted in criminal charges being brought against her and decisions about her employment.

**Balancing both immediate and long-term concerns.** Taking the long view sometimes seems nearly impossible in a culture obsessed with speed and desirous of instant gratification,

especially on college campuses, which have: 1) students who are there for only a short time (in the scheme of things) and are not timid about issuing immediate demands, 2) four generations of faculty with competing interests and who have seen their jobs change a great deal over the years, and 3) administrators who must grapple with crises on a nearly daily basis. Boards find themselves at once caught up in the demands of the immediate while needing to never lose sight of the long term. But, as Harvard sociologist David Reisman said, the role of boards is to “protect the future from the present.”

Boards have three basic, yet sometimes difficult, responsibilities that require them to balance the needs of today with those of future generations:

1. **Duty of care:** competence and diligence, the care that an ordinarily prudent person would exercise in a like position and under similar circumstances. Board members have the duty to exercise reasonable care when making decisions as stewards of the institution; they are expected to actively participate in organizational planning and decision making and to make sound and informed judgments.
2. **Duty of loyalty:** allegiance. Board members must give undivided allegiance when making decisions. Board members may not use information obtained as a member for personal gain and must act in the best interests of the institution. When acting on behalf of the institution, board members must put institutional interests before any personal or professional concerns and avoid potential conflicts of interest.
3. **Duty of obedience:** staying true to mission. Board members are not permitted to act in a way that is inconsistent with the central goals -- the mission -- of the institution. A basis for this rule lies in the public's trust that the institution will oversee assets (financial, physical and otherwise) to fulfill its mission. Board members must ensure that the institution complies with all applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations.

While it is hoped that all individual members of the campus community would act in such ways, no other group has the same legal and ethical requirement to do so. Board members are not employees and have a fundamentally different relationship with the college, university or state system.

**Deciding in the spotlight.** Boards are governing in difficult times of heightened scrutiny; in fact, public boards need to govern in front of the public. Imagine trying to having a thoughtful, candid, difficult conversation about controversial issues with your spouse or entire family surrounded by invested onlookers -- and then covered by the press to boot. This is the experience of public boards.

For instance, we would bet that most, if not all, boards should be seriously grappling with how to best deal with the long-term financial health of their institutions. Even well-endowed institutions face economic issues. In January 2013, Moody's downgraded the entire American higher education sector to negative, an outlook continued in 2014 and 2015. As one trustee put it, “We have a relatively undercapitalized institution, offering a largely undifferentiated product, into an increasingly price-sensitive market, characterized by declining demographics.” Who would be bullish on that? How can boards explore complex and contentious issues, engage in dialogue, and ponder and wonder out loud, when the news media may cover their every thought? Our next point is related.

**Balancing competing interests.** Because the board needs to take the long view (but also provide counsel and make decisions regarding immediate challenges), and because of its duties of care, loyalty and obedience, it must try to balance the competing interests of a range of

stakeholders. They include, among others, faculty members from multiple disciplines, staff members, current students, future students, alumni, community and civic groups, neighborhood associations, policy makers, and boosters. In addition to long-term versus short-term views, on all of our campuses, other paradoxical issues are at hand. Should the board drive change or work to help maintain stability? Focus on core businesses or new businesses? Save and build the endowment or innovate and invest? And in the meantime, the public wants everything better, cheaper. Every single decision a board makes is going to please some and upset others. That's reality.

**Acting as a group.** We all know how hard it is to make certain decisions alone, right? While some college and university boards are small, the average size of private university boards is 29. Boards must deliberate issues, hear all sides, seek optimal solutions and come to decisions that will be made public *as a collective*. Imagine that you have to come to a mutually acceptable decision with competing interests, fast, in a group and under the spotlight (and by the way, with interim leadership, as is often the case). We think we can all agree: this is a tough job.

**Dealing with challenges of accountability.** Board work is difficult because it lacks natural systems of accountability. Who is watching the board, and to what extent does the board see itself as accountable? Boards work well when they take their own accountability seriously, but too often they do not. Yes, the faculty can vote no confidence in the board, and the state attorney general can intervene, as was the recent case at Cooper Union. But for the most part, boards must develop the ability and conscientiousness to establish their own mechanisms for accountability.

## **Where Good Governance Reigns**

Finally, we must not forget that board members are volunteers, the preponderance of whom are members of the general public, not of the academy. Board members are appointed (public boards), elected (alumni, faculty or student representatives, or by general election in some states), or they volunteer when asked. Most college and university boards are composed of influential individuals who care deeply about the institutions they serve. It's true that some come with an agenda, but, by and large, that's not the case. They want to do good work, and they want their institutions to succeed. These volunteer boards can and do add value to the institutions they govern by bringing collective expertise, insight and wisdom.

Strong boards share some important ways of thinking about governance that go beyond size and structure. They:

- recognize that the stakes are high, and have perhaps never been higher, for the institutions they serve;
- realize that all trustees and boards have room to improve -- and make a commitment to seeking feedback, reviewing their work and learning;
- have a certain positive restlessness that keeps them always striving to do better;
- are self-aware, think about their collective impact, are cognizant of complexity and the paradoxes surrounding them;
- pay attention to substance, structure, culture, process and boardroom dynamics; and
- can adapt to changing circumstances rather than get trapped in stale routines (however comfortable they may be). They have, as one president said recently, "the ability to pivot."

## **Recommendations for Boards**

This essay is not an apologist's perspective on governance today. Given the complexity of the world in which boards must govern, we realize that we run the risk of ridicule for oversimplifying and making broad-brush statements (and fully expect comments below to those effects). And we realize that there are no panaceas, no right answers and no silver-bullet solutions to governance. Still, we offer here six ideas boards might consider to help ensure that they are ready when (not if) the messy issues arise.

1. With the administration, and within the parameters set forth by your bylaws, develop an explicit understanding of good governance. Communicate it to the faculty.
2. Practice ("scrimmage"), when times are good, on easier issues. Boards cannot predict what difficult issues will surface and must be well practiced to take on the most unexpected challenges.
3. Review cases in the news and ask, "What can we learn? What if that were us?"
4. Consider the perspectives of multiple stakeholders by asking, "Who are the stakeholders for this decision? What's at stake for them, particularly the faculty and students? Why?"
5. When appropriate, seek input from key stakeholders, being especially cognizant of your institution's shared governance expectations.
6. Communicate not just the decision outcomes but also the deliberations. Help those affected stakeholders understand the different viewpoints that were broached in the boardroom.

Boards will likely face the "damned if you do, damned if you don't" context for the foreseeable future. The better they are prepared to address the big challenges ahead, the better our institutions will be.

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## **Editorial Tags:**

Governance <sup>[4]</sup>

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## **Links:**

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/02/19/la-freezes-payments-state-grant-program-colleges-pick-slack>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/02/26/accreditor-demands-answers-mount-st-marys-numerous-standards>

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/02/26/u-missouri-board-votes-fire-melissa-click-assistant-professor>

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## The importance of board culture in shaping behavior and decisions (essay)

Submitted by Peter Eckel and Cathy Trower on April 28, 2016 - 3:00am

Governing boards are dynamic groups of individuals where, sometimes, the whole does not equal the sum of its parts. Presidents want and need their boards to be active, productive and engaged assets for the college, university or state system that they govern. Yet too many boards underperform. We argue that it is not what boards do (or don't do) but *how* they do their work that really matters.

Consider these examples of poor board behavior:

- The perennially underengaged board asks few questions of the administration and fewer of themselves;
- The overly powerful executive committee controls 85 percent of the agenda and excludes other trustees; and,
- The impulsive board quickly moves to decisions without divergent or devil's advocate thinking.

We think that educating boards on *what* they should do -- their roles and responsibilities -- while important, is insufficient. In actuality, underperforming boards may know their roles but have cultures that limit their effectiveness. Board culture, those patterns of behavior and ways of understanding that are deeply ingrained, reinforced and taught to new trustees, is what demands attention.

Rather than tinker with board structure, such as the size of the board (the large boards wishing they were smaller and the small boards thinking they should be larger), or the number and size of committees, board leaders and presidents should work to ensure a healthy board culture. It has been said that culture eats structure and strategy for lunch, and we agree. But culture is much more elusive and difficult to explain succinctly, making it challenging to expose and act upon.

We have been working with several boards to describe, measure and analyze their cultures and then ask if that culture fits the institution's environment, current context and the work facing the board. Boards are complex social systems they have norms, expectations and preferred ways of working. Some of the norms are explicit (attendance), and others are implicit (comportment). Such normative elements are the building blocks of board culture. A proverbial fish in water syndrome, culture is difficult to see objectively for those immersed in it. By making the normative behaviors and interaction explicit, we can make culture actionable and create a road map for

aligning culture with needs.

In our research, we've identified several important dimensions of board culture, such as the extent to which:

- influence is consolidated in the hands of a few trustees or widely dispersed across the board,
- the board sees itself more as a cheerleader or critic,
- the board has an academic mind-set versus a corporate one, and,
- the board seeks diverging and diverse views rather than preferring to move quickly to consensus.

These cultural dimensions are continuums with a matched partner at the other end.

Cultural factors such as these and others in our framework have both positive and negative aspects. Think about the classic Myers-Briggs introvert-extrovert scale as a parallel. Being introverted or extroverted, on its face, is neither good nor bad; rather, it depends on the context and the ways in which the strengths and blind spots play themselves out for an individual. Still, it is helpful for individuals to understand their natural tendencies and preferences. We believe that the same is true for boards as they rate themselves on dimensions of culture.

For example, think about a large board, in a highly dynamic situation, where it needs to make decisions quickly. This board, and its president, may be well served by a board culture that has consolidated influence. A few highly respected and good board leaders are able to respond quickly.

But on the flip side, a board that has consolidated influence and needs widespread input to understand novel and complex situations confronting the institution may exclude key members who have much to add. If a small group of trustees dominates all board work, takes up the most airtime during board meetings, shapes all agendas and even talks over other trustees, why would others participate? Consolidated influence may drive trustee disengagement for some boards.

At the same time, however, boards with distributed influence may micromanage. A larger board with a lot of trustees may not have enough substance in their board work, so hungry people are looking for more engagement and can easily cross the murky line into operations.

The one exception we are exploring to the notion of cultural continuums (again, think Myers-Briggs) relates to how board members treat each other, or what we call comportment. For instance, having more trust among board members is better than less, having more respect for one another and one another's contributions is healthier than animosity, and being more openly deliberative in meetings is more desirable than having off-line conversations or "parking lot meetings" (that occur after the board meeting as trustees head to their cars).

Understanding the cultural explanations of common board problems can be helpful for board leaders and presidents. Some of those problems include:

- overly inclusive processes in which boards cannot make decisions (death by discussion). For example, we know of a board that could not move on approval of the tuition increase recommended by the administration because they continued to debate the issue at a series of meetings, putting the tuition-dependent institution at a disadvantage when the freshman recruitment cycle began.
- a board that is overly clubby and deferential to the president (the in-the-pocket board). One

board found itself in difficulty when the president didn't share all of the institution's financial situation; instead some trustees eventually found out about it from faculty with whom they sang in the church choir.

- a board that jumps to decisions too quickly (the knee-jerk board) One board found itself with a parcel of real estate in another state that became burdensome because it quickly accepted a gift from a longtime supporter even though there was neither a plan nor purpose for it.

In these cases, knowing better the roles and responsibilities of good governance might not have thwarted the problems. Instead, the culture of the board contributed, allowing these issues to snowball.

Here are some key questions that start to capture board culture:

- To what extent does the board have a corporate mind-set or an academic one? Is it mission or market driven?
- Is influence consolidated or distributed?
- What is the level of trust within the board and between the administration and the board?
- Does the board have a disposition toward efficiency or deliberation?

A cultural lens to the work of boards can explain many things. But the real benefit is having the language to make elements of culture visible and thus actionable. Once boards have the means to understand their own culture, the subsequent work should focus on the extent to which the board's culture is aligned with the demands of the environment in which the institution and the board has to work and the nature of the challenges it faces. The cultural profiles of boards suggest that they may be well suited for some work and some situations but ill prepared for other situations. Knowing these can be extremely important to ensure ongoing board effectiveness. Too many boards get caught by the blind spots and shortcomings of their cultures.

Helping the board and the president understand the board's strengths and potential vulnerabilities is essential to making culture actionable. They can then have meaningful conversations about the board culture they have and whether or not it is working well in the current (and future) context, think about what changes to culture might be helpful, and develop strategies to act on them. Changing the culture of a board may not be as problematic as changing the culture of an institution. The relatively small size of the board, the ability of the board chair to set new expectations and norms, and the infrequency with which boards meet mean that with attention and intention they can adopt new cultural norms and expectations. In addition, board turnover can be used to advantage, because institutions can cultivate and orient trustees who fit the desired culture.

A board culture profile provides a road map to align board dynamics with the work the board needs to accomplish, the president's leadership style and the institution's context. One sample profile from our pilot effort includes the following dimensions along the five continuums. The board:

- Has distributed influence across the members of the board;
- Seeks to maximize efficiency in how it conducts its work;
- Has divergent thinking, prizing multiple perspectives and critical thinking;
- Has an academic mind-set in that it understands the academy; and,
- Views its role as partnering with the administration.

One potential vulnerability of this board is that for the sake of efficiency, time is not well organized to ensure both sufficient involvement and a breadth of issues. The concern may not be one of time management, but the way in which time is allocated to issues. Does the board address sufficient substance? Could it be covering more issues if it altered its culture and meeting structure? These questions seem to be on the minds of board and administrative leaders at this university as they seek to add substantive discussions to board meetings.

Board culture has been called “the invisible director” for the influence it creates, both positive and negative. The real goal of understanding board culture and its influence on how boards work can put governance on the pathway toward increased effectiveness. It is making sure that invisible director is moving the board in the right and positive direction.

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**Editorial Tags:**

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## Role boards play in the racial debates on campuses (essay)

Submitted by Peter Eckel and Cathy Trower on November 17, 2015 - 3:00am

The long-simmering tensions related to race, ethnicity, inclusion and diversity in higher education have reached the boiling point nationally. The headlines regarding [protests and demands](#) [1], not only by students but also by faculty and staff members, at Claremont McKenna College, Ithaca College, the University of Missouri, Yale University and elsewhere have put such issues firmly on the agendas of boards of trustees everywhere, if they were not there already.

And those recent controversies probably have added a sense of urgency to the conversations. While some boards have been giving these matters some attention for some time, we have now reached a tipping point where all boards must step up to partner in leadership with the president.

Regardless of trustees' personal or political views on affirmative action and other policies, boards have an important role to play in their fiduciary as well as strategic roles with respect to race and inclusion at their institutions and within the state systems that they govern. The following are some specific steps that boards should consider. They should:

**Ask for numbers and climate data.** Boards should request meaningful data related to race, ethnicity and socioeconomic diversity; discuss the data and trends over the past three to five years; and understand the implications of what they learn.

Beyond the data on enrollment, retention and graduation rates by race and ethnicity, Pell eligibility, and gender, boards should ask for more granular data to identify meaningful trends. In what degree programs are students of different races and ethnicities enrolling? How well are different demographics of students progressing across these various degree programs?

For instance, are white students succeeding in STEM at different rates than minority students? Does a higher percentage of minority students leave after junior year as compared to other types of students? Or do those students not return as sophomores at different rates than majority students? What about admissions and yield patterns by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status?

Another type of data to collect relates to campus climate, which differs from asking for information that the institution already has. The methodologies often include surveys, focus groups and interviews. Climate studies may be a significant undertaking, yet they can yield keen insights because they allow personal stories to emerge. They help leaders understand the actual experience of students, faculty and staff in ways that numbers alone cannot.

**Ensure a comprehensive diversity plan.** In addition to the need to understand current and emerging issues, boards should ensure that the institution has an intentional plan to encourage campus diversity and equity for students, faculty and staff. Such questions include: Is the plan appropriate? Does it address the right elements? Is it consistent with other institutional goals and priorities, such as those outlined in the strategic plan? Are the milestones and metrics sensible? How realistic is the timeline? Does it clarify who is responsible for what?

**Hold the president accountable.** A primary responsibility of boards is to ensure progress on institutional milestones and goals, and they do this by holding the president accountable. In turn, the board should be assured that the president is holding his or her staff and the faculty accountable for progress, as well. By being explicit about their expectations, the board sends an important signal that it too cares about equity in a sustained and systematic manner.

That said, any new goals must work in concert with other presidential priorities. Unrealistic goals and a constantly changing set of priorities do little to advance the institution or provide an effective North Star for progress.

**Support the president.** When the institution faces difficult and challenging issues -- as those involving race, diversity and inclusivity frequently are -- a board will also often need to counsel and support the president. Many presidents have and will come under fire for lack of perceived progress on objectives related to diversity and equity. While some deserve the criticisms they receive, others are and have been working diligently on this agenda.

Given the sense of frustration on many campuses, the way forward is often unclear, with no road map. There are no simple, proven strategies or silver-bullet solutions. If progress on diversity were easy, higher education -- and the nation -- would be farther along on these lasting challenges.

**Acknowledge complexity.** Change in the academy can be difficult and seem slow, much to the frustration of some trustees. The complex and often contentious issues of diversity and inclusion are adaptive challenges, not technical problems with quick fixes or clear answers. In fact, treating these issues as technical problems in order to apply a tried solution may only exacerbate them.

Instead, boards must work with the president, staff, faculty and students to examine the issues, acknowledge the complexity of views of multiple stakeholders, think critically about them, define what can be done and take steps forward -- in some cases boldly, and in others more incrementally.

**Make sure a campus protest plan is in place.** Headline-grabbing protests have occurred at a handful of campuses and are likely to unfold at others. It is impossible to say which institutions might face significant protests. Boards should help ensure that their campuses are prepared for possible protests and know their role if such protests emerge. Intentional conversations with campus leaders can help articulate a strategy and minimize any risks to people, property and reputations.

**Develop a media strategy specifically for the board.** An effective approach includes clarifying questions with the board such as: Who speaks for the board? Who crafts the talking points? What

do rank-and-file board members say or not say if they are approached by the media?

Any communication strategies also need to attend to social media. How are the institution and the board monitoring it? What are the means of communication that the board should pursue or try to minimize? What are the priority outlets where the board and institution should focus their attention? How agile can such media strategies be if the platforms shift, from, say, Twitter to Instagram?

**Discuss lessons learned from other industries, fields or sectors.** Many trustees are highly effective leaders in their own industries and fields. They may have lessons and insights to share from outside of higher education that can help campus leaders.

For instance, many corporations and nonprofit organizations have made tremendous strides related to diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Others may have lessons to share from failed efforts that can also be illuminating. Boards should not shy away from serving as counselors when they have insights to share.

At the same time, savvy boards know that not all ideas from corporate or other settings transfer smoothly into higher education. Discovering what applies well or not can only happen through a candid dialogue between the board and the administration.

**Look in the mirror.** Most boards themselves have a lot of work to do regarding their own diversity. According to the most recent survey of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, the racial and ethnic diversity of boards has not increased significantly over many years. Thus, boards should consider the ways in which issues of diversity, inclusion, voice, power and perspective play out in their own boardrooms.

Key questions to ask include: How diverse is the board? To what extent does it mirror the campus or larger community? What are the experiences of minority board members? Do they feel their voices matter consistently? How well has the board retained minority members? Do they hold positions of board leadership?

Such conversations can be difficult to frame and hold, much like what is occurring on college campuses -- yet they are essential for the board to have. People on the campus must know the board is as serious about addressing such issues within itself as it is within the institution.

**Build the campus culture by design, not default.** Values matter greatly in the academy. In their dialogues with key stakeholders, boards should always think about the campus culture they want to build and the values they hold most dear and want to perpetuate. Those values should be pervasive throughout the campus -- so embedded in the culture (part of the ethos of the place) that they define all interactions and are defended at all costs. Boards should spend time learning how students experience the climate and culture, what shapes the student experience, and whether that differs across diverse groups and individuals.

**Listen to students, faculty and staff.** Trustees often are most comfortable in a problem-solving mode. But what may better serve their institutions is simply to be able to listen and empathize with students, withholding immediate judgment. Boards must remember that the heart of the matter is about students, their experience and their success. Moving too fast to solutions without understanding the nuance of the issues may provide a short-term sense of progress but create more significant challenges in the future. Building bridges between the board and students and other groups on the campus may be more important now than it has been in the last decade.

In sum, the challenges of race/ethnicity and equity are longstanding in the academy. Ten years ago, the American Council on Education released a report aimed at new presidents about leadership strategies for campus diversity, *Leadership Strategies for Advancing Campus Diversity* [2]. The insights still resonate today, because unfortunately the challenges remain even if the stakes are higher now. In addition to the work of administrators, faculty and staff, board members have the potential to add value in creating a campus culture that is truly open, welcoming, respectful, diverse and inclusive.

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[2] <http://www.lib.washington.edu/msd/norestriction/b57359908.pdf>

[3] <http://www.ahead-penn.org/about/eckel>

[4] <http://www.trowerandtrower.com/about-us/cathy/>

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity>

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