

The Overlapping Worlds of Academic Governance

*Given the tensions over who has ultimate authority
over academic programs, boards should
approach the faculty with a focus
on strategic leadership.*

T RUSTEES TYPICALLY ARE COMFORTABLE actively overseeing a college's financial and business operations. These territories have specific administrative structures and clear lines of authority. Yet faced with decisions about academic matters, trustees are perplexed. They perceive the administration to be deferring to faculty committees that work on important matters in slow motion, with no deadlines, and in apparent isolation from the real world.

Trustees wonder who is in charge. In their view, the system clanks along with a barely tolerable ambiguity. Nerves fray as administrators and the board push the faculty for rapid responses to solve problems, develop programs, or reduce expenses, yet the academic machinery grinds at its own pace.

At times, campus tensions spill over into deep distrust, especially if the board mandates central aspects of an institution's academic program. The conflict between the autonomy of higher education and demands for greater accountability appears in many different forms, and it sets the context within which governing boards must fulfill their duties.

Even though educational opportunity and access are at all-time highs, public and private institutions alike are under constant pressure to control their costs and prices. Many believe that higher education has yet to respond decisively to economic realities because it has been reluctant to restructure the nature of academic work itself.

• BY RICHARD L. MORRILL •

TRUSTEESHIP

Most trustees realize that academic professionals require a large measure of autonomy to do their best work, and they take pride in the exceptional achievements of many of their faculty. Trustees also feel bound to put the interests of the whole institution before all special interests and to protect it from ideological or partisan agendas.

To fulfill their stewardship effectively, boards—working primarily through the academic affairs committee—must understand, monitor, evaluate, and exercise responsibility for the institution's academic programs and policies. In the academic affairs committee, trustees, administrators, and faculty members together can discuss the educational values and academic programs that provide the animating center for all the administrative and financial issues that normally crowd the board's agenda. Here are some thoughts on how.

Values in Academe. Two overlapping worlds of decision making exist in colleges and universities—the organizational and the academic. The experience trustees bring from the business world prepares them well for the organizational facets of university decision making. Preparing and analyzing budgets are familiar tasks, as are decisions relating to raising money, financing and constructing facilities, installing new technologies, overseeing investments, and managing the campus equivalents of restaurants and hotels.

In the academic sphere, however, things are less familiar. Some faculty members hold lifetime appointments from which they can be removed only for serious cause. Crucial decisions on the institution's primary programs and its permanent personnel often are made separately from financial realities. Many academic decisions seem loosely related to explicit goals and to measurements of effectiveness and efficiency. Often, those with the authority to make decisions on academic programs or personnel (such as a faculty committee or department) are unaccountable personally or even collectively.

There also are multiple constituencies. Groups that believe they have a claim on the institution include students, parents, townspeople, legislators, accreditors, public officials, alumni, staff members, and assuredly, faculty members. Other organizations,

such as business corporations, know the concerns and expectations that issue from multiple stakeholders and occasionally even the public. But colleges and universities may be unique in providing a formal role in decision making to many constituencies. However poorly defined or understood, the expectation for shared decision making is a given in higher education.

The best way for boards to understand this reality is to discern the values that create the culture of campus decision making. What are the defining commitments that move faculty members to believe and act as they do in making academic decisions?

On most campuses, faculty members generally resist institutional processes that deny them autonomy and control. The same tension flourishes in other organizations built around knowledge-based professionals—among physicians in hospitals, research scientists in corporations, technology innovators in companies, and attorneys in law firms. The autonomy of knowledge professionals fuels their creativity, so schedules and systems must be adapted to fit their needs. As professionals, they alone are able to decide how best to do their work and how to relate to other professionals. The decision-making culture in academe is expected to be collegial, and most faculty perceive the managerial requirements of the organization merely as an unavoidable annoyance.

Autonomy plays out in several ways. It appears as academic freedom, providing the foundation on which knowledge and understanding are created. To have the opportunity to pursue ideas without constraint wherever they might lead is at the core of the academic profession.

But autonomy also includes the opportunity to work independently and with fewer constraints than normally define work in other organizations. Academic professionals not only need to be free to explore ideas that may be strange or unpopular, they also must be able to organize their research or to structure their daily work according to their best judgment. The wider benefits that flow from what may seem eccentric to outsiders are evident in the creativity that produces new ideas that energize the classroom and in discoveries that may transform the wider society.

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Academic autonomy not only characterizes the work of individuals, it also defines the profession as a collective. The profession sets the standards that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable performance. Only those who know the special language, methods, and content of an academic discipline can serve as true peers to others in the same field.

Most organizations, by contrast, emphasize order and dependability, attributes attained by means of controls. They define, limit, and regulate what otherwise would be the chaos of autonomy run amok.

There is nonetheless a natural pressure for most academic professionals to want to enlarge the sphere of autonomy. It appears in the desire to be free from the heavy time pressures of committee and administrative work, to escape the ever-enlarging controls of external agencies or accreditors seeking assessment data, to simplify the demands of federal or state agencies relating to issues of health and safety, or to avoid the insistence of the university for yet another survey, study, or strategic plan.

But all academic professionals know that life in any institution involves a clash between the intrinsic good of knowledge and the day-to-day preoccupations of the organization. With the organization comes the question of relative worth, because resources are always finite. Not every good can be equally served. Competition for resources enters the scene.

Thus the reality: Institutions are required to make relative judgments about absolute goods, to divide up differentially their forever-limited resources. Practical management and decision-making concerns press themselves into the pure pursuit of knowledge. Willy-nilly, the talk is of priorities, productivity, cost-effectiveness, branding, and markets.

Strategic Leadership. Trustees who understand the academic culture can find imaginative and constructive ways to live with these conflicting values. To rush impatiently to one or the other side of the values equation yields no solutions; balancing autonomy with authority creates workable possibilities.

What, then, can be done to clarify board responsibilities toward academic affairs? Because trustees

are not part of this day-to-day world, the board's responsibility should be considered in terms of the board's participation in the collaborative strategic leadership of the institution.

Although often misused or distorted, strategic decision making can provide colleges and universities with a dynamic method of collaborative leadership. Strategic self-definition forces a college or university to see its programs as a series of distinctive capacities by which it defines its future within a competitive environment. It places issues of institutional identity, academic quality, performance, and effective use of resources at the heart of the agenda.

To be effective as a leadership tool for setting directions in a university context, strategic decision making must be collaborative, integrative, and action-oriented. It should draw upon the contributions of a significant cross-section of the campus community, and trustees should be an important voice in the strategic conversation.

The heart of effective strategic decision making, especially as a way to guide the institution into the future, is found in the narrative of the institution's identity through time. Stories of identity—narratives that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed—constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader's literacy arsenal.

Let the story be told of what truly matters to a place. As this occurs, campus constituencies can articulate a shared set of substantive values that provide a common ground for decisions and narrow the gap between professional autonomy and institutional control. The shared values will embody such defining commitments as quality or service, innovation or community, and will be articulated with precision. Instead of typical empty rhetoric, these terms can be given powerful expression and distinctive meaning to create the basis for a vision—the articulation of the institution's best possibilities for the future.

Academic professionals will cede some of their independence to serve an absorbing cause like academic quality that requires common effort, especially if it is described in ways that reverberate with the authentic achievements and possibilities of the institution.

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Where Trustees Come In. In this process of strategic thinking and decision making, trustees have much to contribute. Above all, they must assure all constituents that the process is done well. Moreover, with the president, they are the only participants who see the place whole, from whose purview no facet of institutional life is excluded. Along with wholeness of vision, they represent a continuity of responsibility. Whether of long or short service, trustees usually know the institution through various forms of association. They also carry the authority, values, and obligations that have been defined by legal documents and enacted through history.

The effort to translate common values into comprehensive strategic directions and priorities for the institution is critical to a collaborative process. When set in a strategic context, collaboration is a natural and necessary form of decision making. Instead of irresolvable and legalistic disputes about who has authority, the methods of strategic leadership enable common goals to shape an institution's future.

The process is complex, of course, and includes deliberation among groups, the careful analysis of data, the development of comparative benchmarks, and above all, the creation of measurable goals and methods for monitoring, assessing, and ensuring results. In practice, strategic leadership is a highly integrative discipline that draws together the often-fragmented dimensions of an institution's life. It connects planning with budgeting, needs for resources with ways to obtain them, data with meaning, goals with assessment, and the past with the future.

Conducted properly, strategic decision making can energize an institution and focus the board's duties. It offers a way for trustees to see their academic responsibilities in a new strategic light as the capacities that situate the institution in the world.

Authority for Others. The administration and faculty have the primary responsibility to assess and

improve programs, while the board simply reviews that process. It would be a fundamental mistake to shift the administrative dimensions of responsibility for evaluation to the board, which would be ineffective in that role.

Programs, proposals, and recommendations are first voiced by others, with the board an active listener. As the board responds, it provides perspective, gives everyone in the conversation a chance to be heard, and makes sure that all the topics have been fully addressed. By expecting accountability and assessing performance, the board has a powerful mechanism that can foster change.

The board's authority is always *for* others. The board carries the heritage of the institution and is responsive to alumni. It represents the public interest, in quite direct ways if it is a state institution. It answers for the institution's commitment to its values, for its legal and financial integrity, for achievement of the institution's goals, and for the realization of its best possibilities. The board answers to the campus community as it strives to preserve, protect, and advance the best interests of students, staff, and faculty.

"In our cultural world," writes Burton R. Clark in *The Academic Life*, "the academy is still the place where devotion to knowledge remains most central, where it not merely survives but has great power. Many academic men and women know that power and still believe in it. They glow with that belief. In devotion to intellectual integrity, they find a demon who holds the fibers of their very lives." The academy needs leaders to sustain this vision. Trustees can be among them. ♦

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