

**Working with Boards: The President's Role and Responsibilities**  
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Although there is always a good deal of discussion at meetings like this about best practices, I have found throughout my career that I've often learned the most from the negatives, that is, that I learned a great many things that should be avoided at all costs. So let me start with a few anecdotes about bad practices before I suggest to you what I think of as some principles that should govern a president's work with the board.

[Provide a few anecdotes]

So what are the principles that should guide college presidents?

- 1) The Board is the President's most important constituency. While the faculty, students, staff, alumni, parents and the community matter, nothing good will ever happen if the president does not enjoy the confidence of the board.
- 2) The president and the board need to take seriously the fact that they are truly entrusted with the health and integrity—academic and financial—of the institution.
- 3) The President and the Board need to be in agreement about the mission of the institution and the President's vision for realizing and advancing that mission.
- 4) Presidents and boards should agree at the outset about a constructive and annual process by which the board evaluates the President. At the very least, the President should every summer lay out in writing her or his top five-six priorities for the coming year and years first for the board leadership and then—with their approval of those priorities—at the fall board meeting for all trustees. The President should conclude the academic year by providing the board with a self-evaluation of progress or lack of progress toward their goals.

- 5) Presidents need to look at their budget as one of their chief planning documents and have the board to the same as they review the allocation of resources and fundraising goals. And remember, nothing worries a board more than deficits.
- 6) Good presidents do look at the board as their strategic partner and do take advantage of the experience and wisdom of individual trustees. This is especially true in terms of strategy, establishing priorities, the budget, the physical plant, legal and personnel matters.

Example: domestic partner benefits at Puget Sound.

- 7) Leave the management of the endowment in the hands of the trustee investment committee.
- 8) Smart presidents never ever surprise their boards. Important to keep the board chair informed about every potentially important and controversial matter and to—with the board chair—decide when to inform the executive committee and the entire board. Indeed, over communicate with the board.
- 9) Important to pave the way about important matters. E.G. If bringing a proposal for a new science building, begin the process a year early. Ask the faculty to give a presentation on how the teaching of science today is different from when they and the trustees were students. Then at the next board meeting, have science students—with faculty advisors—do poster presentations of their research projects.
  - a. Engage the board with the faculty, staff and students. presentations followed by shared meals
  - b. time at some board meetings for board members to go to classes rehearsals, athletic events, meetings of student clubs.
  - c. Annual dinners with small groups of trustees in faculty homes
- 10) Never be confused about your role. Presidents are the center of attention because they are the president. Most presidents do not have the affluence of many of their board members and should not behave as if they do (i.e. should not use college funds as if they were their personal funds rather than something with which they are entrusted). (All of

us know the stories of presidents who failed because they spent lavishly on themselves and sometimes on the boards: e.g. the Adelphi president who decided to have a board meeting in Greece, the legion of presidents who doomed their presidencies by spending way too much money on the President's House and the President who at a time of budget worries took a very costly international trip, along with an entourage, to explore the slimmest hope of collaboration with some foreign universities, none of which materialized.

- 11) Finally, be focused on the institution and its mission at all times and in all matters and enjoy the wonderful journey that a successful college presidency offers.