

What College Presidents Need to Know about Governing Boards

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on several key aspects that college presidents and/or chancellors should bear in mind as they work with their governing boards. Above all else, presented here is the idea that organizational goals need to supersede individual goals, and that ultimately, the success of an institution is predicated on its ability to meet the needs of its society.

With colleges and universities in need of responding to an increasingly complex confluence of social, political, and economic pressures, postsecondary leaders share responsibility for ensuring their campuses accommodate a wide range of needs from the public, policymakers, industry, and other stakeholders. With differentiation between state, regional, and local communities, as well as the mission of institutions altogether, there is no uniform approach to striving for harmony at such intersections. Nevertheless, as chief executives at institutions of higher learning are increasingly called on to balance no shortage of competing priorities stemming from this challenge, there are certain attributes that would be useful to bear in mind as each works to meet the goals and expectations of the governing boards to which they are accountable. Doing so can help them (and boards) to steer their respective academies through changing tides and uncertain waters.

Courage to evaluate service delivery to students and the public

Presidents should be proactive toward assessing the extent to which institutions are meeting the needs of the communities they serve. Governing and coordinating boards of public institutions are customarily appointed via gubernatorial and/or legislative authority, or, elected by the public at-large. As such board members share a responsibility to gauge how institutions are responsive to the needs of the citizens who have entrusted them with oversight responsibility. The CEO of an institution would be better served if s/he was assertive in regularly communicating to their board the steps they are taking to ensure the types of programs delivered are critical and meet external demand. When Board members interact with policymakers, voters, business leaders and others they can articulate support, assuage concerns, and dispel myths as it regards the portfolio of service delivery. Too often colleges and universities are characterized as either underserving industry needs or overserving program options. Board members positioned to communicate how institutions are continuously refining and improving their scope and scale of delivery can build credibility for the board with stakeholders and help stave off skepticism by those who may otherwise view institutions as self-serving with minimal accountability. This can serve pivotal during budget-setting conversations.

Taking a more engaged approach with program advocacy

Speaking of credibility, presidents would also build goodwill with board members if they are able to take a more active engagement in academic administration. Boards are becoming accustomed to viewing the CEO as detached, an outward-facing figurehead focused primarily on facilitating external relations and cultivating financial support for the institution. Indeed, for many sound logical reasons presidents are increasingly relegated to such duties. However, the primary purpose of most institutions is to prepare students for life after college. After all, the lion's share of operating resources are generally devoted to providing instruction. In addition to a provost, vice-president, dean, or department chair articulating the merits of a proposal to establish or discontinue an academic program, a president attesting for Board members why they should consider such proposals can illustrate how s/he takes seriously the implementation of degree offerings and the resource implications involved. No longer can boards (literally) afford to adopt or disown programs without first understanding the steps that will be taken to ensure student success, in addition to the fiscal impact they can have on an institution or system. Having a president clearly communicate how these investments fit into the priorities of a college or university would demonstrate for the board a command of the knowledge around these items. Such an endorsement of proposals would be viewed far less as rubber stamp by presidents, thereby cultivating greater trust and understanding by board members with respect to decision-making around these items that have the greatest impact on mission, goals, and finances.

Leveraging 'systemness' to achieve goals

In an environment of diminishing and scarce resources, Board members are relying on institutions to set aside their differences and spirit of competition in order to achieve resourceful delivery of postsecondary education. If higher education is to be considered less a private commodity and more a public good, then institutions must be able to pursue this ideal with presidents leading the way. At their respective institutions and with external stakeholders they are responsible for actively advocating for cooperation across campuses. This may mean coordinating program delivery, sharing resources, consolidating services, and messaging a common set of priorities to stakeholders among other items that boards share interest in seeing accomplished. With most states and boards having adopted attainment goals, presidents are uniquely positioned to leverage the unique missions of their institutions to meet goals beyond their borders of their campuses. Furthermore, boards are increasingly compelled by legislators and governors to show how institutions are serving the best interests of the state through effective and efficient partnerships. For purposes practical, political, and pecuniary boards would benefit from presidents who are willing to pursue a sincere approach to system-like cooperation, understanding the difficult job that often exists to clearly communicate this vision to various constituency groups within each institution's community.

As boards and board members look to find ways to advocate for public support and investment in higher education, it is increasingly helpful for presidents to be well informed about the efforts that are (or should be taken) to make higher education more accessible and responsive to community needs. As boards are not in the day-to-day business of institutional operations, they rely primarily on chief executives of colleges and universities to provide them with the

information necessary to advocate on their behalf. In order to provide such information critical to an effective messaging strategy, presidents must first exercise the leadership and decision-making needed at their campuses to respond to increasingly skeptical citizens and legislatures. In doing so boards can leverage the actions taken at the institution level to evaluate and articulate the performance of each, and to help higher education make a more persuasive argument for its value proposition. Investing in these approaches toward managing and possibly rethinking institutional service delivery are key components, among others, that would benefit presidents in their service to board members.