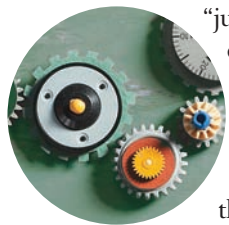


activity programs—along with the experiential learning that takes place through the student’s engagement with the campus community and beyond, such as via global education.

Moreover, Longin says committees are being more intentional about their strategic responsibilities. For example, he says, “the finance committee is much more of a strategic finance committee now, rather than a committee on budget balancing.” Still, Longin sees too many boards whose structures continue to mimic the institution’s administrative structure and whose work in budgeting, for example, “just replicates the work of on-campus folks around budget processing.”



Longin says that he counsels boards that they don’t necessarily have to change their committee structures radically. Nonetheless, he tells them, “You really ought to be turning the thing on its head and asking, ‘How do we allocate our time effectively to accomplish our purposes? Which responsibilities are strategic and not just monitoring or oversight? Which committees do we really need? Where do we want to put our emphasis?’”

In a way, Longin suggests, the transformation in governance structure that is needed today requires a shift from constructs first created decades, if not centuries, ago and “bringing the committees and the board into a 21st-century accountability framework.” He encourages boards to conduct periodic retreats, either annually or once every two years, where they do nothing more than plan a strategic agenda for the coming year or two. At such retreats, the board should review its responsibility, the quality of its performance, and how it is organized to conduct its work. In such meetings, he says, boards should “focus on what’s really important. Where can we have a real impact in the areas of strategic responsibility and strategic priority? Where do we add value? How can we have a real impact on the institution?” Longin says that stepping back from day-to-day business gives boards room to consider “if we’re effective now, here’s how we can become highly effective. And if we’re doing a pretty

Inside the Boardroom: Eckerd College

The Eckerd College board took a close look at its committee structure 10 years ago, when a financial crisis prompted the institution to hire a new president and assess many of its policies and practices. Grover Wrenn, an entrepreneur who founded several companies, serves the board today as vice chairman. When the new president was appointed, Wrenn recalls, “we engaged in a detailed examination of governance. That resulted in substantial revision of our bylaws. We shrank the board to a maximum of 30.” (At one point, the board was as large as 52 members.) At the same time, he says, Eckerd reviewed and revised its committee structure.

Today, the college’s standing committees include academic affairs, audit, buildings and grounds, trusteeship, finance, investment, executive assessment and compensation, and student life, as well as an executive committee. Since that structure was implemented, only minor tweaks have been made. Trying to find the right board home for development efforts, for example, the college closed down an advancement committee on the theory that “all trustees had a responsibility to participate in college advancement activities,” Wrenn says. The board found, however, that the advancement area still needed focus. This year, Eckerd added a new standing committee on advancement, marketing,

and communications to support institutional fundraising and “to provide advice and support for a newly constituted marketing program at the college.”

“When an issue arises that would benefit from resources that do not exactly fit in our committee structure, we have used ad hoc committees from time to time,” Wrenn says. A recent example came when the college wanted to restructure a long-standing relationship with a commercial bank. Further flexibility comes from occasional joint meetings, such as with the buildings and grounds committee and the finance committee in planning a new life-sciences building.

Board member Susan Russ Walker, chief United States magistrate judge in the middle district of Alabama, has worked extensively with the student affairs committee. “We have a division of the board that allows us to assign half the board to the student life committee, and the other half to academic affairs. So a large number of board members participate on the student life committee. In that context, the very substantial participation of board members has made a difference because so many are acquainted in much more detail with, for example, the challenges facing the dean and the student affairs staff, as well as the students. So there’s not a sense of being blindsided if one of those difficult issues crops up suddenly.”

good job of adding value, let’s do a *really* good job of adding value.”

Longin is optimistic that boards that ask themselves those fundamental questions will then find the committee structures that best support their mission. “It can be a hard transition,” he says. “But unless the culture of the board changes, you’re not going to get the transformation that needs to happen.” ■

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T’SHIP LINKS: Edwin H. Welch, “Empowering Board Committees.” July/August 2010. Susan Whealler Johnston, Martha W. Summerville, and Charlotte Roberts, “The Changing Landscape of Trustee and Board Engagement.” July/August 2010.