
Can Adventist College Boards Pass the Test?

By Philip Follett

Everyone gets tested these days. Students face exam weeks, faculty members get evaluated, and administrators must be reelected. Now, judgment time has arrived for Adventist college and university boards.

During the year following General Conference Session most of these schools hold their quinquennial constituency sessions and elect new boards. This year, with higher education facing serious financial, enrollment, and identity challenges, boards are the object of considerable discussion and controversy.

Constituencies will confront several issues as they rewrite bylaws and reappoint board members. Are Adventist college and university boards too large? Do they include too many church officials? Do they have enough power to run the schools? Do they exercise their power wisely? What, exactly, are they supposed to do? Are they doing it well?

What Does the Board Do?

Higher education boards everywhere are facing serious questions. Cyril O. Houle says that "in the minds of many observers, the quality of boards is uneven. Some are bad, and some are worse."¹ Yet, boards are not total failures. In the words of Houle, "They [boards] might seem unworkable if it were not for the fact that they are at work everywhere."²

Wilmarth Lewis, a distinguished Yale fellow, is quoted as saying,

Considering how much time is given to talking about trustees, it is remarkable that people should be so muddled about them. They are regarded with esteem, envy and suspicion; they are honored and caricatured. Why is there this confusion? Are not the functions of the trustees of a privately endowed university perfectly clear? As a matter of fact,

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they are not.³

However, there is a generally accepted list of duties for which trustees are held responsible. Morton Ruah summarizes these core duties:

- "1. They hold the basic legal document of origin.
- "2. They evolve the purpose of the institution consonant with the terms of this document.
- "3. They seek a planned development.
- "4. They select and determine the tenure of the chief executive.
- "5. They hold the assets in trust.
- "6. They act as a court of last resort."⁴

To Protect

Boards have as their primary responsibility to protect the integrity, identity, mission, and people that constitute their college or university.

Clark Keer and Marian Gade argue that the board's primary function is to serve as guardians (or protectors). They say boards should guard and care for (1) the overall welfare of the institution and its mission; (2) the autonomy of the organization; (3) the academic freedom of teachers and students; (4) the protection of the institution against single-minded demands; and (5) the public welfare, balancing social responsibility and institutional autonomy.⁵

In Adventist institutions trustees operate the institution on behalf of the con-

stituency that the college serves. This agrees with what Kerr and Gade call guarding "the mission." Constituents expect their college and university boards to ensure that those institutions consistently represent and promote the overall mission of the church. Being a board member of an Adventist institution is therefore more complicated than serving a secular learning center.

Obviously there is tension between church control and institutional independence. Adventist schools cannot be unbiased about Christian beliefs and behaviors. Their purpose goes beyond accumulating and disseminating knowledge and serving their community. They are unashamedly committed to propagating Christian faith as understood and taught by Seventh-day Adventists, to integrating that faith with all of life, and to preparing students for effective service as employees or active laypersons within the church.

Boards participate (with other institutions and organizations of the church) in the continual spiritual and intellectual renewal of the church. They have special opportunities to provide an interface between the intellectual element of society and the church. Clearly, the church needs its higher educational institutions—as truly as the institutions need an intimate relationship with the church.

The board must also guard the uniqueness of its educational institution within the church's framework. Each school has a special mission, and that mission must be protected. Beyond what Kerr and Gade refer to as "balancing social responsibility and institutional autonomy," the Adventist board must also coordinate the church's mission with the school's identity and special role.

In addition to guarding the identity

and mission of the institution, the board must protect its assets, its reputation, and its people. Board members must never be party to rumors or innuendo. They must protect their institution when it or its people are unjustly attacked. When things go wrong, trustees should make improvements, but never in a negative, critical manner.

The president especially deserves the protection of the board. An old adage says that the first item on every board's agenda is whether to retain or fire the president, and after that how to support the administration. This has some truth to it, although most modern boards would not settle for such a secondhand leadership approach. Special attention should be given to the way the board and the president work together.

The pattern of board-president relationships is a subtle one of mutual influence. It is a complicated interaction in which the board's attitudes and participation in the government of the college are shaped by the president, while the president's role is being significantly determined by the board at the same time... In many cases these relationships have evolved over a long period of time and are the result of a slow growth of tradition.⁶

Cyril Houle describes his concept of boardsmanship as a "tripartite system" of institutional leadership—board, administrator, and staff. He notes that the success of the institution depends upon the interrelationship of these entities.⁷

To Provide and Promote

Several other essential functions of the board might be summarized as "providing and promoting." Boards must provide their institutions with resources—time, money (either personally or from other entities through their influence), ideas, and energy.

"Promotion" includes not only recruiting students and soliciting funds, but also providing a vision for the future. Trustees must not simply protect and guard what is already in place. They must actively seek a vision of the future. Trustees need to define the following: What publics should be served? What curricula will be needed? What facilities will be required? What new visions can be projected?

Identity

Adventist college and university boards are not self-perpetuating, nor are they chosen by one person, such as a governor. They are elected by constituencies, which usually consist of persons representing the sponsoring conferences, the institution's faculty and staff, and the current board. A nominating committee presents names of prospective candidates to that constituency for its approval. In practice, the college

president often has a significant voice in submitting candidates' names. A wise president and nominating committee seek the balance of skills, experience, wealth, and influence that will strengthen the institution.

Traditionally Adventist institutional boards have included a sizable proportion of church officials from supporting conferences. In recent years, the number of board members not employed by the church has increased. However, usually at least one-half of college board members are elected church leaders.

This practice has come under criticism. Certainly, it has some weaknesses. Conference officials are not usually wealthy. Many other duties vie for their attention. They do not necessarily have much expertise about the concerns facing academia. Indeed, some people characterize their role as a "conflict of interest."

On the positive side, the bodies led by elected church officials are expected to provide major support to the college or university, both by encouraging a large subsidy from the organizations they lead as well as by recruiting students and employing graduates. These leaders

Do Adventist college boards exercise their power wisely?

need to understand the college well, and to feel a part of the decisions made about it. Most of them are deeply dedicated to the success of church colleges and universities, and work hard to represent them favorably at every opportunity.

Given the fact that college expenses often escalate faster than church income and subsidies, these leaders will increasingly need to solicit new monies for the institutions they serve. Elected officials serve in a two-way relationship between the constituents and the college. Church members expect their elected officials to represent the concerns of the constituency to the college. They also hold church officials responsible for the character of the school.

Clearly, there should be a balance between church officials and lay members on college and university boards. Laypersons provide a variety of perspectives and expertise, as well as access to broader support. They also call the board to accountability. These functions are essential to the future of the church's schools. Laypersons should never be manipulated or outmaneuvered by church officials. Yet, boards

also need the involvement of elected church leaders to ensure that the institutions remain integrated within the church and to guarantee financial and personal support. An approximate 50-50 ratio of lay persons and church leaders may prove most nearly ideal.

Difficult Decisions

Board decisions most frequently questioned have to do with setting salaries for faculty members and administrators, establishing standards for student and faculty behavior, approving some types of athletic programs, and assessing controversial teaching methods. More infrequently, a decision regarding the sale of an entire campus, such as at Loma Linda University, raises a whole new set of issues.

Should a board allow the policies or practices of its parent body to dictate its decisions? In order to govern effectively, the board must retain the right to make decisions about its institution. Pragmatically, boards must also retain the goodwill and loyalty of their constituencies.

A solution to this dilemma may lie in more effective communication between colleges and their constituent bodies. Both boards and constituencies must clearly understand what they can expect from each other. Each must be kept informed of the needs, interests, and requirements faced by the other. And persons affected—students, faculty, and constituents—must be fully informed about unpopular decisions.

How Large Should Boards Be?

Most Adventist college and university boards are large—perhaps 30 to 45 members. As a result, it is difficult for the members to meet together often. Individual members may tend to feel insignificant and thus, less responsible for their decisions.

Why are these boards so large? Traditionally, they have been composed almost entirely of church leaders. When it was deemed wise to include laypersons, they were usually *added*, without dropping anyone. It is undoubtedly time to reduce the size to a manageable number—perhaps to the low 20s. However, downsizing must not go so far as to endanger representation. Kerr and Gade comment,

We found far more difficulty with boards that are too small than with boards that are too large. The very large board may require an executive committee, which may become too dominant; consequently, some of its other members may lose their sense of responsibility...

But a very small board can be a disaster. A single person can become too disruptive; it is difficult to get all the needed skills and to develop a good committee structure; and the replacement of a single member can change the direction or conduct of the board and the

political situation of the president. There is safety in numbers. A big board can tolerate a few poor members; a small board can tolerate none; and ineffective members are possible everywhere.⁸

How Often Should Boards Meet?

Scheduling meetings is a problem, particularly for a large board. Laypersons often find it difficult to take off work during the week, and church leaders have crowded schedules on weekends. The board must meet frequently enough to keep up-to-date on issues and to ensure a good working relationship both internally and between the board and the college administration. A board should meet up to four times a year, with executive committee meetings six to eight additional times.

How Boards Function

The usual model discussed in the literature recommends that the board should limit itself to "broad policy development," leaving academic and student affairs, along with day-to-day management, to the administration and staff. How this works out is a little more complex.

In times past, some successful boards functioned in a style Miriam Wood terms "the ratifying board." Such a board saw its role as selecting a president, then placing it in his hands.⁹ This style is unacceptable to most modern boards. They prefer to have committees that interact with students, faculty, and maintenance personnel. This model, described by Wood as "the participatory board," requires more time and energy on the part of board members. It also demands sensitivity, lest board members interfere with the prerogatives of the administration and faculty.¹⁰

Each board, including its chairperson, the college president, and the chairpersons of board committees, must work out an appropriate balance between involvement and division of responsibilities. The process of negotiating these assignments may be one of the most important contributions of such an arrangement.

How Well Are We Doing?

Today, quality is of prime concern. In order for the board to discharge its responsibilities, it must assess the quality of education and the effectiveness of the president at its institution. However, the board must also analyze its own effectiveness.

Boards should see that their members meet the following criteria: (1) education—learning the heritage, circumstances, challenges, and needs of the institution

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ent expectations. Doing so does not become easier with time. We now deal with students whose values and life-styles have brought some of them in conflict with their parents, and many more in conflict with their church. I have great respect for our deans and their staff who guide the campus life of our students. In the face of immense pressures from contemporary culture they nurture students toward a mature Christian life-style. They deserve our support and encouragement.

In the second arena—maintaining high academic standards—we face an equally daunting task. This responsibility falls largely upon our faculty and academic deans. They are constantly asked to miraculously prepare large academic meals with small loaves and few fishes. They really have done remarkably well. However, the push for quality must continue relentlessly. This commitment begins with a well-qualified faculty, continues with opportunities and support for faculty development, and ends with a high level of teaching competence, academic maturity, and professional confidence. In addition, the high-powered academic life described above must harmonize with Adventist life and faith, or the whole mission of our institutions will falter.

In my new position as a college president, people frequently ask what I think about my job. Already I am greatly impressed with the remarkable talent and commitment of the human resources in our educational institutions. As educational leaders we must find ways to release this talent and commitment. To the extent that we make existing and pent-up resources available to young people, we will have achieved our goal of improving Adventist education.

—Niels-Erik Andreasen.

Dr. Niels-Erik Andreasen recently became President of Walla Walla College, College Place, Washington.

COURSE SYLLABUS

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as well as studying the craft of boardmanship; (2) participation—sharing wealth, wisdom, and working to the level of their capacity, with special emphasis on regular attendance at board meetings; and (3) evaluation—periodically requesting the chair to lead them in a self-study to assess their own performance.

Certainly, the challenges of tomorrow will require greater skill, devotion, and disinterested commitment on the part of board members in order to increase the quality, cost-effectiveness, and spiritual contribution of Adventist colleges and universities. Even more importantly, the Adventist Church must seek greater openness combined with deeper trust by everyone who has the challenge of operating these institutions in the 1990s. □

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sachusetts, and Chairman of the Atlantic Union College Board.

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¹ Cyril O. Houle, *Governing Boards: Their Nature and Nurture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1989), p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³ Morton A. Rauh, *The Trusteeship of Colleges and Universities* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1969), pp. vi, viii, quoting Wilmarth S. Lewis, "The Trustees of the Privately Endowed University," *American Scholar*, vol. 1, pp. 17-27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵ Clark Kerr and Marian L. Gade, *The Guardians: What They Do and How Well They Do It* (Washington, D.C.: The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1989), p. 12, 13.

⁶ Kerr and Gade, p. 29.

⁷ Houle, pp. 5-12.

⁸ Kerr and Gade, pp. 47, 48.

⁹ Miriam Wood, *Trusteeship in the Private College* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 94-100.

¹⁰ Wood, pp. 115-123.

OF INTEREST TO TEACHERS

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bus plunged over an embankment into a water-filled excavation pit after colliding with a delivery truck at an Alton intersection.

Based on the investigation, the NTSB held that the truck driver was responsible for the collision itself, but said that the students died because there were too few emergency exits on the bus, which filled with water within 30 to 60 seconds and came to rest on its side in 10 feet of water.

The bus's front door jammed shut, and only three to five students were able to escape through the rear emergency door, which was repeatedly forced closed by the water pressure. Most of the students who escaped the bus crawled out through 9-inch by 24-inch windows, but many students became stuck or too many students tried to escape at the same time.

The board asked the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to develop a guide for training transportation and emergency-service personnel in school-bus rescue methods and drills on the use of bus exits.

The board also asked the NHTSA to study whether larger windows would aid in passenger evacuation, and to revise federal safety standards so that floor-level emergency exits such as doors remain open during school-bus evacuations. In addition, the board reiterated a call for improved passenger exits in school buses, which it had made after 27 Kentucky children died after being trapped in a school bus fire.—Reported by *Education Week*, vol. IX, No. 40, August 1, 1990. □