

# Trustees Must Be Courageous

**T**rustees are significant partners with the president in nurturing the bonds of affection that alumni have for their colleges—partners

on whom we depend for financial and reputational support.

When trustees are visible regularly at reunions and other alumni functions, or at least through the alumni magazine, they will have more credibility with the alumni body than if they are hidden behind the governance curtain, popping out only on ceremonial or crisis occasions.

When something happens on campus that might be a source of concern to alumni, the president and board chair (or a designated trustee who is an alum) should work as a team to communicate with the constituents. If the team also can include the elected president of the alumni association (if that person is not a trustee), all the better. Alums need to hear from their brothers and sisters in governance positions, not just from the president.

Sometimes, depending upon the crisis, the board chair needs to step up and be the spokesperson for the board, drawing fire away from the president. Alums—like citizens everywhere—will go after the leader, who is most often the president. They forget that leadership in a university is collegial, that many people are involved in decision making.

The board chair represents the collective thinking of the entire governance structure, not just the personal opinions

of one leader. Yes, the president also should be able to represent the team, but the president may be perceived to be part of the problem, so the board chair must be active.

Trustees, as well as the president, must be philosophical about changes and conflicts that inevitably arise. It is utterly naïve to think that any kind of major institutional change can occur without someone objecting, legitimately or not. Good board members don't hide from change or conflict; rather, they plan

Courage in these situations includes, at times, direct confrontation with those who are spreading self-serving misinformation. Sometimes such confrontation needs to occur in public statements, sometimes in private meetings. But setting the record straight is important so that the negativity does not poison those who start out with no opinion or a disposition to be supportive of the institution.

Remember the 10-10-80 rule of thumb: In most such controversies, some 10 percent of the group will be

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to manage the conflict through the bitter hard parts all the way through to the restoration of peace.

Boards cannot make policy based on fear of avoiding angry alums. The idea that trustees would fail to act in the best interests of the college because of a fear of conflict with a group of alumni betrays the whole idea of trusteeship. Some will say that keeping alums happy is important financially, but frankly, that's a cop-out. No singular gift is so important that it should be allowed to trump thoughtful governance decisions. Moreover, for every loud voice claiming that they'll never give another cent, there are many other quiet alums who actually admire leaders who have the courage to do the right thing. Courageous leaders can move the large body through the conflict period and even gain many more supporters.

deeply involved in the dispute, 10 percent will be completely out of it, and 80 percent will be on the fence. The 80 percent will be satisfied if the situation is handled well and sensibly, with sensitivity to individuals and transparency about institutional processes. Allowing the 10 percent at the center of any controversy to draw all institutional time and attention away from other priorities is a great mistake.

Here again, trustees can be a force for balance and perspective, keeping the management team and larger constituencies (don't forget the faculty and students!) focused on the real business at hand, which is the quality of teaching, learning, and scholarship on the campus.

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