

## What Makes a Good Trustee?

The following series of six interviews appeared in issues of The Woolbright Groups e-newsletter *Bright Ideas* between April 2008 and April 2009.

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**An Interview with Michael P. Archibald  
Vice President for University Advancement  
St. Lawrence University**

**Tell us a little about the make-up of your Board of Trustees (number, who they are—parents, alumni, term of service, other)**

St. Lawrence has 40 trustees and 17 emeriti (non-voting) trustees. Within the 40, there are two non-alumni parents and four young alumni (graduates of the last decade, four positions specifically allocated for young alumni representation). Trustees serve a six-year term. Maybe 60-70 % serves two terms, and a few serve more than two terms. We don't have term limits but a rigorous trustee evaluation process after the first year and at the mid-point (3 years) of each term. The board elects trustees; we don't have a general alumni election of trustees.

**How would you define the role of your Board of Trustees?**

First, and perhaps most critical, the St. Lawrence Board of Trustees recruits and manages the President. Beyond that, our trustee statement of commitment and responsibilities reads, “members of the Board of Trustees of St. Lawrence University serve as ultimate fiduciaries of the University in their oversight of institutional affairs in accord with the charter and bylaws of the University and as implemented through periodic statements of mission and purpose and institutional plans.” Later in the document, a critical addition reads, “Trustees should recognize that the board is a corporate body approving University policies and monitoring the implementation of those policies while deferring to the administration of the University for the management of daily business.” Our board has a very helpful saying that was introduced to us by a former Chair, E.B. Wilson '53, which is: “noses in, fingers out.”

**In general, what do you see as the role of the board related to raising philanthropic support for their respective institutions?**

I think our approach at St. Lawrence to this sensitive topic would apply well to many other non-profit boards. While obviously some trustees are more active in fund raising than others, it is made clear the role of every trustee is to:

1. Make the institution their top philanthropic priority during their term.
2. Give to capacity, and stretch.
3. Support the annual fund generously first before supporting restricted projects.
4. Encourage financial support from individuals and organizations in any way possible.

**Please describe the specific requirements of your individual Board members.**

In addition to philanthropy, this is what St. Lawrence's list would look like:

1. Dedication to and understanding of the institution and the liberal arts.
2. Regularly attend all meetings and plenary meetings of the board.
3. Actively participate through the board committee structure.
4. Promote the University favorably to alumni, potential applicants, donors and other friends within their communities and sphere of influence.
5. Serve the interests of the institution as a whole, rather than a particular constituency interest.
6. Maintain confidentiality and avoid any personal conflicts of interest.
7. Not speak publicly on behalf of the board or the University, allowing that role to be filled by the board chair and the president.

**In general, what do you think are the three biggest challenges (or issues) facing boards today?**

There are many, but here are three:

It takes a commitment from trustees to pay attention to critical and fast changing issues in higher education, for example: student loans, athletics, tuition costs and financing higher education, ratings, and tenure. Trustees must invest the time and energy necessary to stay abreast of many issues, and I worry some trustees at some institutions don't value this "education" enough.

It is a challenge for trustees coming from the corporate world to adjust to the pace and culture of higher education, including, for example, a shared governance model with the faculty.

The best trustees are often those with the least time (they are busy effectively running other organizations). The ability to engage new trustees sufficiently early in the development of their leadership, while still retaining institutional continuity and a connection to history and culture, is a critical challenge for colleges and universities.

**In your own experience, how has the board regularly evaluated itself? Its members? What is the process?**

It is essential to have a strong trustee evaluation process in place, especially if your trustee bylaws don't include term limits. We evaluate trustees (and in turn they evaluate their board experience) after the first and third years of each six-year term. The board chair and chair of the committee on trustees conducts these interviews jointly, and it has become an important mentoring tool for up and coming leaders on the board. In addition, our board goes through a periodic self-assessment as a trustee body, using the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) resources as an effective evaluation tool.

**How would you describe the ideal relationship between Board members and staff?**

Board members and staff have an essential partnership, but each must recognize his or her role in the relationship. A trustee must provide input and ideas, help to set and review goals, build a partnership with staff in establishing the vision for an institution or

a function within it. The staff implements the program on the ground, using trustees as leverage to build relationships and to strengthen the donor base. The President's staff must be sure to keep the President informed of progress and issues; it is much better for the President to hear good or bad news from the staff than from trustees directly. Staff must also remember to recognize what drives the trustee/staff relationship; it is not a peer relationship and though we become close with the trustees with whom we work we must always remember the professional role that defines the relationship. Respecting these lines keeps roles clearly understood.

**In some cases, there may be instances whereby an ethical breach on the part of a Board member may occur. If this were to happen, how do you imagine it should be managed?**

First, ideally trustees must surface the potential for these problems regularly and often; it's always easier to deal with them in the hypothetical. If a breach does happen, the board chair or another senior trustee should deal with it, damage must be assessed, and a plan is devised from there. There are some modest ethical breaches, lesson learned, from which trustees can recover and continue their service effectively. Other more serious breaches require immediate transparency and appropriate action. If the balance of the board sees ethical breaches remaining unaddressed, it can diminish overall board confidence and effectiveness.

**Do you and/or your staff utilize any outside resources related to governance matters (i.e., websites, workshops, journals, blogs, consultants, etc.)?**

We provide AGB (Association of Governing Boards) materials as part of new trustee orientation, and have used AGB resources several times in the last decade to help us with board self-assessment issues. New presidents and board chairs attend the AGB board/presidents seminar; trustees all have subscriptions to the Chronicle of Higher Education; and finally we're fortunate to have a former board chair, E.B. Wilson '53, as one of AGB's top consultants.

Recently, a survey by CASE (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education) and CIC (Council of Independent Colleges) reported their findings from small and mid-size American colleges. It was reported that only one percent of college leaders believe their boards are well grounded in the basics of fundraising. To what do you attribute such results? What role might Chief Advancement Officers play in educating board members? What steps have you taken to address this topic with members of your board?

I'd agree that very few trustees enter their trustee experience sufficiently informed on fund raising matters, but what they do have is the devotion, intelligence, energy, and relationships necessary to ramp up their effectiveness quickly. The key is to spend time training trustees in the art and the science of fund raising. A strong trustee orientation program, and an active volunteer role in your Campaign or fund raising program, can make this possible. Of our forty trustees, frankly probably 25-50 % of them are engaged almost every week in some fund raising matter, and that is plenty. For the others, I want them to be advocates for philanthropy to our institution when they can, but every trustee does not have to list fund raising as their number one expertise. I'd rather work closely with a manageable number of trustees who love raising money for St. Lawrence, who join the staff and the President in the noble and prideful work we do for our institutions. Ultimately they find the experience wonderfully enriching because they see the difference they can make when they understand what to do and how to do it.

**What Makes a Good Trustee? - Part II**  
**Interview with Linda Durant**  
**Senior Vice President for University Development, Widener University**

**Tell us a little about the make-up of your Board of Trustees (number, who they are—parents, alumni, term of service, other)**

There are 26 non-honorary trustees and 3 honorary (non-voting) trustees. The non-honorary trustees include 19 alumni, 6 friends and 1 student trustee. They are elected for a three-year term, and can serve multiple terms. The exception is the student, who serves a one-year term. The student is recommended by the President and presented to the Trusteeship Committee and Executive Committee for nomination to the Board.

**How would you define the role of the board at Widener University?**

The Board has full responsibility for the financial conditions and resources of Widener, including the investment and administration of the endowment fund. In addition, the Board is responsible for the recruitment and on-going evaluation of the President and providing support and feedback throughout his tenure. Finally, the other major responsibility of the Board is to provide strategic direction and leadership to the President, the executive team, and the university community through an annual review of the university strategic plan, which was approved by the Board in 2004. At the Board's annual retreat, the entire board discusses a complete review of the previous year's goals and objectives. The staff assesses the outcomes and identifies the result of each item using a green light, red light, or yellow light designation to the item to indicate progress.

**In general, what do you see as the role of the board related to raising philanthropic support for their respective institutions? From your perspective, how is that best accomplished?**

I believe it is the Board's responsibility to be engaged and aware of the philanthropic efforts of the university. This can be accomplished in a number of ways – for example, there are three major roles that trustees can play in working with individuals, corporations or foundations. Those roles are advocate, guide, and solicitor. It is my belief that all trustees should be engaged in at least two out of three of these roles. This is best accomplished when the staff takes ownership of educating the trustees about these roles and takes the lead in providing information and training as necessary for each board member. For example, it is made clear to all our trustees during the nomination process that they will be expected to participate on the board in these roles, as well as making a gift each year to their means, with a minimum amount suggested.

**In general, what do you think are the three biggest challenges (or issues) facing boards today?**

In light of recent incidents on many campuses throughout the country, I think that ensuring the safety and security of our students is a challenge for all trustees. They are acutely aware of the incidents that have occurred and are asking us to assess our campus safety procedures and policies and the training of our campus safety officers and staff members to be sure everyone is prepared to handle any type of emergency.

Another challenge facing boards today is the recruitment and retention of the institution's president. Every day there are news releases of presidents leaving one institution for another and the average tenure of quality presidents is becoming shorter each year. Our board is very cognizant of this trend and makes every effort to support and provide incentives to keep the president here.

Finally, the cost of "doing business" at the university is rising rapidly and the board feels a responsibility to continue to provide a high quality educational experience to our students, while keeping tuition at a reasonable rate. This has become increasingly difficult for any institution to achieve. Students are graduating with a heavy debt load

and the board is sensitive to this issue and works with the administration to maintain quality while not excessively raising tuition each year.

**In your own experience, how has the board regularly evaluated itself? Its members?  
What is the process?**

Our Trusteeship Committee has developed a thoughtful and comprehensive self-assessment tool that is given to each trustee annually. The Trusteeship Committee members review these self-assessments and discussion is held as to what resources or information to provide, or decisions made in response to the outcomes. For example, if a majority of members believe they do not have a full picture of the university's finances, a presentation will be made at the next meeting. Additionally, the Executive Committee evaluates each trustee at the end of his or her third year on the board. This review includes attendance at meetings, participation in board and committee work, and financial support of the university.

Also, an evaluation is done at the completion of each board meeting and changes may be made to the next meeting as a result of that feedback.

**Do you and/or your staff utilize any outside resources related to governance matters (i.e., websites, workshops, journals, blogs, consultants, etc.)?**

We have utilized consultants with the board to review our governance issues and as a result have made changes to the committee structure and the actual design and structure of board meetings. In addition, the chair of each committee and the university liaison to that committee attended the AGB conference and as a result changes were made to the charges of each of the committees. Also, at a new board member's orientation, the AGB pamphlet for the committees the member serves on is given to him/her. I have also participated in CASE webinars that deal with building a better board.

**Recently, a survey by CASE (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education) and CIC (Council of Independent Colleges) reported that only one**

**percent of leaders at small and mid-size American colleges believe their boards are well grounded in the basics of fundraising. To what do you attribute such results? What role might Chief Advancement Officers play in educating board members? What steps have you taken to address this topic with members of your board?**

I do agree that this is a major issue for many colleges and universities; however, it is most likely the fault of the staff and not the trustees. The university staff, most importantly, the advancement professionals, are responsible for providing the training and information to trustees as to their role in fundraising and the basics of fundraising. This should be done with all new trustees and periodically with all members of the board.

I think there is a false impression by some university staff that all trustees come to the board with this knowledge and have had experience with fundraising efforts. The Chief Advancement Officer must take the lead to assess the trustees' knowledge and then plan and provide appropriate training, utilizing either a consultant, or the CAO directly giving this information to the board. At Widener, we have done this in a variety of ways. For example, when I first arrived, I used the opportunity of being a newcomer to develop a Fundraising 101 information sheet that I discussed first with the advancement committee and then with the full board.

Additionally, at our first board retreat, I had a consultant spend a half-day addressing fundraising and campaign topics. Now that we are in the silent phase of a campaign, our campaign consultant has done two presentations on campaigns and the role of the board in the campaign. These sessions have been very well received by the board.

**What Makes a Good Trustee? - Part III**  
**Interview with Geoff Liggett**  
**Director of Alumni Relations and Development, Pomfret School**

**Tell us a little about the make-up of your Board of Trustees (number, who they are—parents, alumni, term of service, other)**

The trustee by-laws state that Pomfret School may elect up to 32 members for its board. There are currently 27. Of these, 17 are alumni and 10 are parents. Of the 17 alumni, four currently have children at the school. Nominations for trustees come from the Board's Governance Committee, which polls annually all alumni and parents for potential members. Trustees are elected to four-year terms, and can serve two consecutive terms. They must retire from the board after a second term. There are also three ex-officio members including the Head of School, and the Presidents of the Alumni Association, and Parents Association. Finally, there are honorary life trustees who are voted by the full board. These members are invited to all meetings and also receive all trustee mailings. While they have a voice and are welcome at all meetings, they have no vote.

**How would you define the role of the board at Pomfret?**

First and foremost, is their responsibility to select, support and evaluate the Head of School, and oversee the finances and investments of the school, both of which they do exceptionally well. Pomfret has a very active board. In the past seven years the parent representation has grown from one to ten. These parents (obviously) are well informed about the workings of the school and have energized the board. The board took a leadership role in Pomfret's recently completed \$48 million campaign, and has wasted little time in putting together a strategic plan for the next campaign. They focus on the overall governance of the institution and have spent a lot of time during the strategic planning process to better clarify the role they should play here at the school. In the short

term they have formed task forces with the senior administration to concentrate on mission and the School's position in the marketplace.

**In general, what do you see as the role of the board related to raising philanthropic support for their respective institutions? From your perspective, how is that best accomplished?**

There is a rule of thumb that trustees should contribute approximately 30% toward a capital campaign's goal. The number is probably at least the same for Annual Giving – or that has been our experience at Pomfret. Setting a personal example is the most important thing that a board member can do. Most of our trustees follow the “give or get” adage. About one third are active fundraisers. One can provide training and set goals, but in the end the willingness to ask for money is either in their blood or it's not. A select few of our best fundraisers have been board members, but even they didn't hit their stride until several years of active soliciting. Finding a way to instill and sustain an ongoing passion for the school and its work is perhaps our greatest challenge.

**In general, what do you think are the three biggest challenges (or issues) facing boards today?**

Time. It is one of the most precious resources for trustees and it is vital that the administration of (in this case) a school prepares them well for meetings. This can mean a lot of up-front work, but is greatly appreciated by the trustees and makes them more effective and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Succession planning. To recruit and train talented people who will soon take leadership positions on the board and the school.

Compliance. To keep current on the increasing number of state and federal regulations and compliance issues which affect the school.

Fund raising. It is an increasingly competitive environment for raising money. And yet, the pressure to raise significantly greater funds each year for the school only increases.

**In your own experience, how has the board regularly evaluated itself? Its members? What is the process?**

There is an annual review of the board and senior staff of the school. For the board there is a self-evaluation as well as an opportunity provided for their views on the functioning of the board. There is also a committee evaluation done by each of the committee heads. This information is collated and reviewed by the Governance Committee and suggestions for changes or actions recommended to the Executive Committee. The board and Head evaluations are conducted via the on-line survey provided by NAIS.

**Do you and/or your staff utilize any outside resources related to governance matters (i.e., websites, workshops, journals, blogs, consultants, etc.)?**

Of those listed above, articles written in journals and occasional meetings with consultants would be the two most frequently used sources of information regarding board governance.

**In the past few years, there has been much discussion among advancement about the preparedness and ability of boards in their ability to raise philanthropic support for their schools and colleges. To what do you attribute such discussions? What role might Chief Advancement Officers play in educating board members? What steps have you taken to address this topic with members of your board?**

A lot of responsibility for the board's readiness and ability to conduct campaigns – annual or capital – rests with the CAO and CEO of the organization. If a board is expected to raise approximately 25 – 30% of the AF and campaign totals, it is imperative that there are board members who can make those kinds of commitments. Several steps used at Pomfret include:

Identification of, and advocacy for, potential new members. An individual can make only so many leadership gifts. It is imperative to bring on new members while keeping past members connected.

CAOs must be clear on the needs and expectations regarding each member's philanthropy, and educate those trustees who are responsible for recruiting members to the board.

Comparative analyses with similar institutions are a helpful tool to inform the board, and align their expectations with their desires (abilities?).

It is critical that the CAO informs and communicates frequently with the president of the board and head of the development committee. They are the leaders of any fundraising efforts and must be on the same page with the CAO.

**Are there any other comments, suggestions or observations about the role of boards in raising philanthropic support that you might provide? Any words of wisdom? Any lessons learned from your own experience?**

Be active. Take on as much responsibility for the smooth functioning of the board as possible. If 30% of our gifts are coming from this constituency, it is worth every minute of your time.

**What Makes a Good Trustee?  
Interview with Linda Mansfield, Chair, Board of Trustees  
Elms College**

**Tell us a little about the make-up of your Board of Trustees (number, who they are—alumni, parents, friends; term of service, other)**

The Board is comprised of 24 bright and committed individuals who each have a story about their personal affection for the Elms. In addition to several alumni, the Board includes five Sisters of St. Joseph who belong to the order that founded the college 80 years ago. The local community is represented on the board with the participation of bankers, lawyers, small business owners, not-for-profit organization and government leaders.

**How would you define the role of the board at Elms?**

In addition to fulfilling the requirements to ensure appropriate oversight of the college's financial matters, the board plays a key role in contributing and approving strategic goals and plans that are consistent with the institution's mission and resources.

**In general, what do you think are the three biggest challenges (or issues) facing boards today?**

- Efforts to keep tuition affordable in the face of rising costs at a time of significant economic uncertainty
- Understanding the enrollment and economic consequences of the changing demographics of prospective students
- Garnering necessary philanthropic support

**In general, what do you see as the role of the board related to raising philanthropic support for their respective institutions? From your perspective, how is that best accomplished?**

Raising philanthropic support is a primary responsibility of a trustee; a requirement that some trustees embrace more enthusiastically than others. It is helpful to have the advancement staff assess the skills and comfort level of board members and make recommendations for each trustee as to how he or she can create opportunities to contribute to the financial well-being of the college. It is a rare occurrence when a trustee cannot help foster relationships that can eventually result in financial support.

**In the past few years, we are hearing more and more about board governance. Typically, this is related to the identification, recruitment, evaluation, assessment, and on-going education of board members. In what ways is your board considering this matter of governance? From your perspective, what are the major issues for boards, in general, to consider in this area of governance?**

The Elms board of trustees is currently undertaking an overhaul of our governance documents and processes. We determined that we needed to be more explicit about the roles and responsibilities of trustees, descriptions of standing committees of the board, attributes desired on new trustees and a new trustee nominations process. It is a healthy exercise and one that brings all the trustees to a mutual understanding about the governance responsibilities of the board.

**Are there any other comments, suggestions or observations about the role of boards in raising philanthropic support that you might provide? Any words of wisdom? Any lessons learned from your own experience?**

Because raising philanthropic support is an ever-present need, it is challenging for the board to balance the immediate concerns with the requirement to continually create and update long range fund raising plans. And inevitably, it is the leadership of the president

and advancement professionals that helps to ensure that the right balance is found and maintained.

**What Makes a Good Trustee?  
Interview with Paul Goodof, Principal, Goodof & Co.  
Trustee, Hebron Academy**

**Tell us a little about the make-up of your Board of Trustees (number, who they are—alumni, parents, friends; term of service, other)**

Our current board is made up of sixteen individuals, twelve of whom are alumni, two are current parents, two are past parents, one is a current grandparent, and one is a long-term friend of the Academy. Four are attorneys, six from business, five from education or educational administration, and one in medicine. Geographically, there are seven from Massachusetts, three from Maine, and one each from New York, Illinois, Florida, Virginia, Washington, DC, and California. Trustee terms are four years and renewable once (for a total of eight years), except for officers, who are elected annually without limitation.

**How would you define the role of the board at Hebron?**

Our By-Laws are very specific as to the powers and duties of the Board of Trustees, and include: (1) the responsibility for appointing and fixing the terms of employment of the Head of School; (2) the responsibility for management of all funds and assets of the School, including the right to appoint agents, auditors and investment counselors; (3) the right to acquire, by purchase or gift, all real or personal property that may be deemed appropriate for the operation of the School; (4) the right to borrow and to secure, by pledge or mortgage if desirable; and (5) the responsibility for adoption of annual budgets for the operation of the School.

More broadly, we see ourselves as stewards and fiduciaries, helping to focus aspirations and chart direction, but with a clear sense of, and respect for, the difference between governance and management and an acknowledgment that operational policy is the responsibility of the School's management team. In addition to the statutory roles, we try

to act as advisors, bringing specialized knowledge and experience to particular issues and challenges, and we try to complement where we can the skills and talents of the administration, faculty and staff – challenging their thinking where we believe appropriate, offering a breadth of outside perspective, and supporting their efforts and initiatives wherever and in as many tangible and intangible ways as possible.

**In general, what do you think are the three biggest challenges (or issues) facing boards today?**

This is a particularly interesting time to pose that question, given the current turbulence and volatility in the world's financial markets. A year ago, I'd have probably said (1) continued focus on increasing the quality of our primary product, the education of young people, measured by outcomes, which in so many instances are defined not just by college placements but also by the kind of young adults we produce – the notion of always improving how we do our job and better serving our students; (2) continued improvements in fiscal stability and the creation of operating reserves to sustain the School through normal cycles; and (3) raising endowment funds.

Today, there are, by my count, about five things that are working against virtually all independent schools, all related to the world-wide financial mess: (a) the effect of diminished values of School endowments on the annual operating draws; (b) the almost certain slowdown in broad-based annual giving; (c) the reluctance of donors to stretch for capital campaigns in the current environment, accompanied by some anticipated renegotiation of pledges in hand to back-end-load the fulfillment; (d) the changed circumstances of both current and prospective families, which will almost surely require increases in financial aid over the near term; and (e) the deferral of planned faculty and staff retirements because of diminished values of defined contribution assets. Each of these will impose constraints of significance on operating budgets for the next several years, and they are challenges that have to be met and dealt with in the context of each school's individual circumstances. The presence of exempt debt on the balance sheets of

so many schools, with covenant compliance requirements, will make this more difficult for some.

That said, the primary challenge for schools such as ours is to retain, in the midst of huge volatility, our focus on the long term, to “stick to our knitting” as best we can, always evaluating our decisions in the context of our mission, and to have thoughtful and advance plans in place to deal with surprises. The current muddle is also an opportunity to rethink how we do what we do, to implement rationalizations where possible, and to engage in productive collaborations that promise economies and efficiencies.

**In general, what do you see as the role of the board related to raising philanthropic support for their respective institutions? From your perspective, how is that best accomplished?**

I’ve always felt that the “three-w” model works better for independent schools than the “three-g” approach currently in vogue at some institutions. We benefit from broad-gauged people with a common-sense approach to everyday problems, and not all of those will be great givers or getters. But there is an ambassadorial role that all trustees must be comfortable playing, which goes to the heart of donor and prospect cultivation and stewardship – all members of the board need to be able to tell the story in compelling ways to diverse audiences, and if not adept or comfortable making asks, need to be able to accomplish a smooth hand-off to those who can.

There are a number of models that have proven effective – staff-driven, board-driven, head-driven – but the one that I feel works best is to have a core trustee committee that assumes responsibility for actual solicitation, partnering with others of the board, or the school head, or the director of advancement or other appropriate staff – in each case choosing the most effective combination of resources to fit the specific prospect. It’s the only way I know to provide leverage in a campaign mode, and to reach a broad number of prospects in a reasonable time frame. Acknowledging that many prospects, particularly in the top half of a campaign pyramid, will want to meet with the head of

school, trustees can often pave the way more easily for such meetings and make the most effective use of the head of school's time.

**In the past few years, there has been much discussion among advancement professionals about the preparedness and ability of boards in their ability to raise philanthropic support for their schools and colleges. To what do you attribute such discussions? What role might heads, chief advancement officers and board chairs play in educating board members? What steps have you taken to address this topic with members of your board?**

Board education and training is an evolving art. Many very effectively-run institutions have large numbers of board members not well versed in raising funds, and equally, many have boards whose collective resources and ability to make gifts fall well below thresholds currently being discussed – target percent of campaign totals from the board have been steadily rising. Clearly one way to cure a deficit of this sort is to try to attract board members with substantial resources, and significant effort to do just that is being expended at every institution with which I'm involved. But that sometimes takes time to do, and great care (be careful what you wish for!), and while those efforts are underway, one should not ignore the fact that cultivation, stewardship and even solicitation can be taught, and in many instances, at least in my experience, it's really the lowest-hanging fruit: Board members are already well-versed in what's going on at the school, and can – with thoughtful work on the part of the head and the advancement staff – develop skills and abilities that produce real leverage. As noted above, that doesn't mean that every board member is going to be temperamentally suited to solicitations, but enabling them to be effective members of cultivation teams can yield exceptional dividends.

**In the past few years, we are hearing more and more about board governance. Typically, this is related to the identification, recruitment, evaluation, assessment, and on-going education of board members. In what ways is your board considering this matter of governance? From your perspective, what are the major issues for boards, in general, to consider in this area of governance?**

How boards work, or don't work, is a subject about which much has been written over the years, and I'm not sure I have any wisdom to add. To me, the best boards, the ones that accomplish the most and are the best suited to ride the roller coaster of inevitable cycles and changes of all sorts, are the ones where there is exceptional trust among members and between members and staff, where this is an ingrained habit in all members of listening carefully and well and always being prepared, where there is a willingness among all members to subordinate self-interest, where everyone takes a 40,000-foot view after developing an understanding of the view from the ground, and where there is common, deep-rooted and passionate commitment to the mission of the organization. Some of that can be accomplished simply by who gets asked to stand for election to the board; some of it has to be developed over time as board members get to know each other (and I'm a great believer in informal time at or between meetings to foster this); and some of it can be taught, or perhaps better, demanded or enforced by effective board leadership. In recent years, formal board (and board member) evaluations have, in very tentative ways, become more common, and I would expect them to become more rigorous, pointed and helpful with more usage and experience.

**What Makes a Good Trustee?  
Interview with Debra Romero Thal  
Trustee, Smith College**

**Tell us a little about the make-up of your Board of Trustees (number, who they are—alumni, parents, friends; term of service, other)**

There are 39 members of the Board consisting of alumni, parents, and friends of the college.

**How would you define the role of the board at Smith?**

Primary roles include hiring and evaluating the President, maintaining fiduciary responsibility for the institution, and serving as the ultimate decision for college policy. The board doesn't have individual delegated authority, but rather it operates as a single body.

**In general, what do you think are the three biggest challenges (or issues) facing boards today?**

- The challenges of fund raising in the current economic climate put a strain on nonprofit boards of all types.
- Budget management in the face of loss in endowments.
- Keeping committee work moving forward without the benefit of regular face to face meetings.

**In general, what do you see as the role of the board related to raising philanthropic support for their respective institutions? From your perspective, how is that best accomplished?**

I believe that any Trustee who is a member of a Board has responsibility in advancing the philanthropic needs of the institution. For some, this support comes directly in the form

of personal donations. But, as importantly, the support comes from cultivation of donors. This requires development of a good working relationship with development staff, so that there is a team approach in identifying and cultivating a donor. The Trustee is also an important partner in stewardship. Through participating in events, personal calls, writing notes or “brain storming” with staff, a trustee can be an important addition to the fund raising effort.

**In the past few years, there has been much discussion among advancement professionals about the preparedness and ability of boards in their ability to raise philanthropic support for their schools and colleges. To what do you attribute such discussions? What role might presidents, chief advancement officers, and board chairs play in educating board members? What steps have you taken to address this topic with members of your board?**

I have sat on many boards and it surprises me that when being asked to join a board there is rarely a direct discussion about the expected role of the trustee in philanthropic support and fundraising. So, from my perspective, the first step is that there needs to be an open and direct discussion of the expectations of the board member in regard to personal financial support and events and solicitations for fund raising.

Also, the Advancement staff needs to know all the trustees well, so that her role in fund raising can be tailored to fit. For example, know if she is a person who is comfortable asking for money, or if she is more suited for a stewardship event. Understanding the trustees well will make it possible to create an effective fund raising relationship.

**In the past few years, we are hearing more and more about board governance. Typically, this is related to the identification, recruitment, evaluation, assessment, and on-going education of board members. In what ways is your board considering this matter of governance? From your perspective, what are the major issues for boards, in general, to consider in this area of governance?**

Smith College has a Committee on Governance which looks at all the issues that you raise in your question. Regularly considering the size and composition of the Board is obviously important. Self evaluation should be on-going.

Keeping a board diverse is extremely important. However, I don't believe that keeping a board diverse (economically, demographically, and racially) means that the fundraising of the board is compromised. As I mentioned, even if a board member cannot personally give at a level expected of others, she can participate in the fundraising of the institution in a productive manner.

**Are there any other comments, suggestions or observations about the role of boards in raising philanthropic support that you might provide? Any words of wisdom? Any lessons learned from your own experience?**

I am an alumna of Smith College, having graduated in 1977. This past year I was appointed to the Smith College Board of Trustees, so having participated less than a year, I am a novice. (My term is for five years, with the possibility of a second five year term). The college has a very effective orientation program for new trustees. At our first board meeting, the new trustees have a series of meetings with senior administrative staff from admissions, finance, and advancement, the office of the dean and the office of the president. In these small setting, the new trustees are informed of the roles of individual offices and can ask questions to get a better lay of the land. In addition, we received our committee appointments in advance of the first meeting and all the committee chairs called to provide an understanding of the committee's mission and current issues. Also, the board appointed each new trustee a trustee mentor, who provides yet another resource for understanding the meetings and role of the board.

A new trustee greatly benefits from this level of orientation and direction. With meetings intensively filled with work and decision making, a new trustee's effectiveness depends on traveling as much of the education curve as possible before hand. All aspects of my

orientation have encouraged participation and inquisitiveness. These are qualities that all trustees should embrace.