



The issue
now is

STRATEGY

not **governance**

Robert E. Cooley and Christa R. Klein discuss mission-focused board leadership

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IS CHANGING at warp speed, and schools that fail to keep pace with the shifts are likely to languish, says Robert E. Cooley, president emeritus of **Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**. Cooley believes that within the next few years, boards must transition into a mode of ongoing strategic planning, take advantage of new technologies, and understand that the spread of information is altering the way leaders make decisions.

Cooley is widely recognized as a deep thinker about governance issues in theological education. He was a successful seminary administrator, served as the president of the Association of Theological Schools, and led In Trust's board from 1999 to 2005. Since his retirement, he's helped Christian colleges and theological schools restructure their boards and administrative teams, building their abilities to respond to new demands and expectations. He's also walked alongside more than a dozen schools as they've explored mergers and partnerships with other institutions.

When Cooley told Christa R. Klein that "the issue now is strategy, not governance," he got her attention, because the two have been collaborators in board education for many years. This month, Klein is stepping down after nine years at the helm of In Trust. She was one of *In Trust* magazine's cofounders in 1988 and served on its editorial council and its board of directors before being named president in 2003. Cooley was In Trust's second board chair.

So, is Robert Cooley, the guru of governance, turning his back on everything he's been saying for 25 years? Not at all, it turns out. But as the issues continue to evolve, they require oversight by boards that are more nimble than ever. Here's an edited portion of Klein and Cooley's recent conversation.

Shared mission and shared governance

Christa R. Klein: You assumed the presidency of Gordon-Conwell in 1981, a time when church funding for schools was tapering off and free-standing evangelical schools like yours were grappling with disagreements that ranged from the nature of scripture to the question of inspiration. How did that change the role of your board?

Robert E. Cooley: Controversy can drive change. In our case, I'd say it broadened our vision of

trusteeship and caused us to build a board of top-quality individuals who brought a variety of expertise. These were people who were passionate about education for ministry and the church. They also were focused on a particular mission and its subsequent vision. So, it wasn't just a 'reporting-to' kind of board work; it dealt with the very nature of theological education and its outcomes.

Klein: How did these trustees respond to the controversies and disagreements that they encountered?



ONCE YOU ARE FREED FROM DENOMINATIONAL JURISDICTIONAL CONTROLS, YOU BECOME AN INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEUR.

Cooley: They stabilized the institution and sharpened the mission. My early years as president focused on defining the mission of the institution. This document gave me an opportunity to develop a sense of shared governance. By using the faculty and board to finalize a mission statement, we underscored the importance of the governing process. The board became a legitimizer. They legitimized the outcome of the shared governance process relating to mission and began to drive the seminary's growth from the standpoint of that statement. We really became a mission-driven institution.

Klein: You're saying that the mission created an understanding among the various parties about how biblical interpretation would be done at Gordon-Conwell?

Cooley: Yes, and it underscored for the faculty the commitment to an exegetical theology, which determined the requirement of biblical languages and the number of credits of biblical and theological studies. What emerged was a commitment to an academic theology along with a friendly relationship to a practical side.

The fracturing core

Klein: I appreciate your emphasis on the importance of mission in determining the direction of a school. Let's talk about how it has application today. What are some of the current challenges that boards face?

Cooley: Well, many challenges of the past are still with us. Biblical interpretation is an example. Even though scripture may unify, interpretation diversifies. But when we talk about new issues, I see schools going through fragmentations beyond their traditional cores. In other words, the traditional core of a school is composed of faculty, the library, and the classroom. But this core is eroding while the periphery is expanding. Schools are trying to serve a larger constituency because of partnerships, extension sites, and outsourcing.

So the periphery is expanding while the traditional core is eroding. I think the real challenge for a board is planning and not governing. Without a strategy and long-term plan to control this phenomenon, it's almost impossible to govern because of the sheer complexity of things.

Klein: Another factor that adds to the complexity is the division that has occurred between those who educate in theological schools and those who govern and lead denominations and para-church organizations. In the past, it was not uncommon for the seminary president to have a prominent place in the denomination, and the faculty members would write for the denominational press and produce biblical and theological studies for pastors. On the other hand, today many faculty members are more engaged with their academic fields and less engaged with denominational leadership and the continuing education of pastors.

Cooley: Right, and once the denominations began to reduce their financial support, schools had to find other forms of revenue and relationships. Consequently, service to the constituent denomination began to wane. Theological school leadership now struggles with new economic models so they're forced to find broader revenue streams to support their budgets. What was once a passionate relationship has fractured.

Klein: But it's not all gloom and doom. Don't you think there's a positive side to these changes?

Cooley: That's an important point because once you are freed from denominational jurisdictional controls, you become an institutional entrepreneur. You open yourself to a freedom to make decisions, and you find boards beginning to cast about for newer avenues of service in theological education. This is what expands the periphery. The former situation controlled the traditional core, but the more entrepreneurial and innovative spirit that has dawned has pushed out the periphery.

Educating for competency and capacity

Klein: That said, multid denominational or non-denominational schools still have to find ways to prepare people for ordination by church bodies.

Cooley: Yes, and ordination requirements are areas where I see some of the greatest changes coming. A shift is occurring from what we might call the 'democratic good' for education to an individual 'technological good.' We're now going to be talking about competencies and capacity rather than how many credits, how many semesters, how many hours students might amass. That's going to eliminate our degree nomenclatures.

Klein: This reminds me of the contrasting model of the Program for Priestly Formation in the Roman Catholic Church. That model is organized around four principles of formation:

- human formation
- intellectual formation
- spiritual formation
- pastoral formation

Those are not academic categories but capacities and competencies that the church now requires. The faculty must line up curricular studies to meet these formational goals.

Cooley: And then there are huge changes in the time requirements for earning a degree. As we move toward a five-year understanding of preparation for ministry, the old bifurcation between an undergraduate degree and a master of divinity degree is going to be shattered. We're likely to see younger students who are called to ministry entering a five-year track almost immediately. I see signs of that already, particularly as schools incorporate online education or partner with community colleges. I know of one "three-two" program in which a four-year undergraduate program is compressed into three, and a three-year divinity program is compressed into two. This culminates with a master of divinity degree at the end of five years. It also responds to the vision of Dan Aleshire [executive director of the Association of Theological Schools]. Dan encourages schools to begin to explore new timelines and new relationships in preparing men and women for ministry.

Start planning, because change is afoot

Klein: That exploration brings us back to the importance of planning and strategizing. Some schools are doing a good job of picking up on trends and carving out niches. The danger, of course, is that trends and niches come and go.

Cooley: That's why we can't overemphasize the importance of thoughtful, long-term planning and not quick, knee-jerk reacting. In governance work, we typically have started with defining our processes and structures of governance and then we've moved on to strategies. Now we're seeing a reversal of that.

In the future, boards will spend more time strategizing to define the niche of service that their institutions will focus on. As boundaries begin to

expand and the needs become more complex, no single school can meet all the demands. After a board determines its niche, it will build structures such as curriculum, governance, and management around that strategy.

My concern in recent days has been the amount of time and effort boards are devoting to short-term crisis work rather than long-term thinking and planning.

Klein: Do you think that schools with the resources to do theological education the old-fashioned way will continue to do so? Will they leave the entrepreneurial approach to schools that feel forced to innovate because of financial concerns?

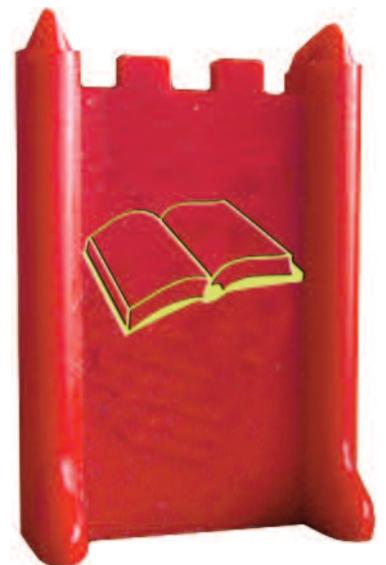
Cooley: Possibly, but even well-resourced schools are feeling the impact of erosion. As more students resist residential theological education in favor of an online, technologically-based program, schools will have to respond. They're in competition with digital delivery, whether they like it or not. Any board that ignores the impact of technology does so at its own peril.

Klein: I see boards grasping at technology as the solution to their economic woes without looking at underlying issues such as the amount of financial backing necessary to do great online theological teaching. It takes people who know how to deliver education in new ways; it takes technicians, and it takes constant upgrades in equipment. Content has to be assembled, and that's costly.

Cooley: Instead of publishing books, faculty members are going to be putting their materials online; theological resources are going to be technologically distributed and not stored on library shelves. Schools will be recruiting professors who can produce content that will belong to the institution. I envision seminaries needing fewer full-time faculty and more adjunct professors. The whole nature of the professorate is going to change. How will school initiate and manage all this change? That's why the number one issue for boards is strategic thinking, not governance.

Klein: And the president can't do that alone.

THE PRESIDENT'S ROLE IS TO MOLD FACULTY, BOARD, AND ADMINISTRATION INTO A PLURALISTIC LEADERSHIP TEAM.





Heroes no more

Cooley: The day of the 'heroic president' is over. The president's role is to mold faculty, board, and administration into a pluralistic leadership team. This team represents a mosaic of skills and attitudes that lead to the defining of an institution and its mission. I also see a downsizing of boards. You can't do good strategic planning at the board level with 30 or 40 members. You end up with a debating society.

Klein: And any debate can go viral with a few keystrokes.

Cooley: Exactly. Authority structures will be redefined because technology has the capacity, through knowledge sharing, to empower all kinds of people. Shared governance is going to feel the impact of increased information. Decisions made within a board meeting are tweeted out and the faculty knows it before the board adjourns. The answer is to move toward a more empowered and pluralistic kind of leadership that incorporates the board, faculty, administration, and church into a long-term decision-making consortium.

Klein: I hope those who lead and govern theological schooling will envision many new strategies and test them rigorously. We need more educational models that prove themselves. Taken together, do they educate and form faithful, articulate, excellent preachers, teachers, scholars, musicians, and lay leaders for the churches and the world? Do they tend the diverse faith traditions rooted in scripture and the experience of the church? So much is at stake in any era of transformation. It will take strategizing, re-strategizing, and prayer!

Cooley: I agree. Boards are the guardians of the values of our traditional core, but, at the same time, they are the gateway into the expanding periphery of new and exciting opportunities that lead to transformational learning and the renewing of the mind and heart. **IT**

Edited by Holly G. Miller based on an interview by Jay Blossom.

Neither Yes

Recruiting the right chief

By Holly Miller and Jay Blossom

WINSTON LING, the former chief financial officer at **Tyndale University College & Seminary** in Toronto, remembers a time when the school's president, Brian Stiller, wanted to launch a new program that Ling opposed. He thought it was too expensive, and the return on investment too uncertain.

"Brian was very creative — lots of big vision," recalls Ling with appreciation. "But our organization was financially sick. It had no extra money to do anything." So they struck a deal. If the president could find donors to cover the costs of the new program for three years, Ling would report to the board that the school had sufficient resources to launch the new initiative. But if three years of financing were not in place, Ling would tell the board that they couldn't afford the new program.

"My job wasn't to dampen his enthusiasm but to figure out how we could make his idea work," says Ling.

Different people, different skills

To say Winston Ling was a hard act to follow is an understatement. Hired as chief financial officer in 1995, when Tyndale was a small school called Ontario Bible College and Ontario Theological Seminary, Ling and Stiller rescued the institution from near bankruptcy — "things were a lot worse than I expected," he admits today. Then, after the campus enjoyed a dozen years of economic stability under his watchful eyes, he announced plans to step down. He was tired, ready for a new challenge, and felt the school would benefit from a different set of skills in the CFO's office.

Tyndale takes planning seriously and doesn't limit succession planning to identifying the next president. The school's close brush with financial disaster convinced the board and administration of the vital role a CFO plays in an institution's