The board’s responsibility for evaluating the president

By Rebekah Burch Basinger

When done right, presidential evaluation strengthens the partnership between board and president and sets the stage for enhanced performance.
Regular evaluation of presidential performance is among the top two or three responsibilities assigned to boards of theological schools. It is also a task that many board members prefer not to tackle. So they don’t.

For their part, presidents — in particular, those who’ve endured a poorly managed evaluation — approach a performance review with anxiety. Heads of theological schools want feedback, but worry about how information will be gathered, analyzed, and delivered.

When the presidential evaluation goes badly, it is horrid. The nonprofit landscape, including the territory occupied by theological schools, is littered with sorry remains of evaluations gone wrong. But when done well, the benefits of a well-conducted assessment of the president’s performance are significant.

Presidential assessment can

- **Strengthen** the board/president partnership.
- **Model** mutual accountability for the whole campus community.
- **Enhance** the legitimacy of the presidential office.
- **Set the stage** for improved performance by the president, grounded in a deepened commitment to the institution and its unique mission and vision.

By giving attention to the five principles that follow on the next few pages, boards can approach presidential evaluation with confidence and competence, and presidents can approach it with serenity.

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**Is your board ready to assess presidential performance?**

Before jumping into the evaluation process, assess your board’s readiness to provide the president with a thoughtful, encouraging performance review by responding to the questions below:

- **Yes** □ **No** □ Does the president have an up-to-date, written position description?
- **Yes** □ **No** □ Does the president have an employment agreement or contract?
- **Yes** □ **No** □ Are there written criteria for presidential evaluation?
- **Yes** □ **No** □ Does the board (or one of its committees) periodically update the criteria for presidential evaluation?
- **Yes** □ **No** □ Do both the president and board members perceive the executive evaluation process to be constructive and objective?
- **Yes** □ **No** □ Do all members of the board have sufficient knowledge of the president’s performance to comment meaningfully?

Where you answered “no,” commit to correcting the deficit before the next scheduled evaluation of the president.
1. Begin early and keep it up

Strong boards demonstrate their care for the president (and the institution) by providing regularly scheduled evaluation of the chief executive’s work, beginning the process in the first year of a president’s tenure and continuing it throughout the whole of a presidency. Whether evaluation of the president is mandated in the bylaws of the school, is outlined in the employment agreement with the president, or is the outgrowth of the informal agreement between board leadership and the head of the school, an annual review should be understood as a precious gift from the board to the president.

The board’s wholehearted commitment to providing regular and thoughtful performance reviews is essential to the long-term success of a presidency — so much so, in fact, that The Nonprofit Board Answer Book from BoardSource warns job seekers away from offers that come without clear expectations against which their performance will be evaluated and the schedule on which evaluations will occur.

Although many boards wait to undertake a presidential evaluation until there’s trouble afoot, at its best, assessment is proactive rather than reactive. Boards and incoming presidents should agree on the goals of the presidency and evaluation procedures in the hiring process. Everyone involved should understand that a performance review isn’t to be used in fighting institutional fires, but rather is meant to prevent them. Presidential evaluation should be understood as a prelude to enhanced effectiveness by the leader and the institution.

2. Keep the process simple (mostly)

A pernicious myth of presidential evaluation is that it’s complicated and time consuming. This unfortunate assumption discourages board leaders from doing what they should. However, a guiding principle of presidential evaluation is this: Don’t worry so much about finding exactly the right instrument, model, or method. There is a time — every three to five years — for formality in the assessment process, but most years, simple is the rule.

As just suggested, presidential assessment takes two forms: informal (annual) and formal (periodic), with the first of the two methods dominating over the course of the usual presidency. In other words, once over lightly in most years, seriously analytical in others.

Let’s take a look at the two modes of evaluation.

**Informal evaluation:** In most years, the review of the president’s performance is as simple as a written self-assessment that’s distributed to board members who are asked to provide confidential comments to the board chair or other designated board member. A summary of board members’ reflections is shared with the president and a synopsis of that conversation reported to the full board, preferably in executive session. The final step in the process is a report back to the president with questions, comments, and words of affirmation generated during the board’s discussion.

The annual review is led by the board chair or other designated board member — sometimes the chair of the governance committee, if one exists. Outside consultants are generally not used in conducting informal presidential evaluations.
Formal evaluation: Every three to five years, boards are encouraged to engage in a more thorough evaluation of the president’s performance. This is sometimes referred to as a 360° review. In a formal review process, the board invites input from a broad swath of institutional stakeholders, including the president’s senior administrative team, other administrators and staff, and faculty. Occasionally alumni, donors, and other friends are also invited to participate. However, the board must remain in control of the review process.

Formal evaluations usually include an online survey tool augmented by in-person interviews with selected individuals. The combined findings are presented in a written report with accompanying recommendations. In Trust encourages boards to engage an outside evaluator to assist with a formal evaluation. A competent, objective third party adds credibility and perspective to the process.

Whether informal or formal, “if the board handles the process sensitively, it will gain a valuable assessment of the institution, its people, policies, practices, and its president,” says educational thought leader James Fisher in The Board and the President. “The incumbent will be closely and objectively evaluated, and the presidential office will be enhanced rather than diminished.”

3. Make the evaluation institution specific

Although an apparent godsend for a busy board, off-the-shelf assessment instruments are not necessarily the best choice in a seminary setting. As convenient as these tools may be, prepackaged instruments don’t capture the nuances of a specific presidency or institutional situation. The review process should encourage presidents to think deeply about their own satisfaction with the position, and what they have learned about the strengths and weaknesses they bring to their responsibilities.

Boiler plate questions and prepackaged surveys can skew the evaluators’ attention in directions that aren’t important to the goals, mission, and priorities of a particular school. That said, most presidential evaluations combine assessment of professional competencies with ratings of more general management skills and job-related behaviors such as communication, managing change, planning, problem-solving, reliability, and productivity.

The presidency of a theological school may be idiosyncratic, but the characteristics of successful leadership are not without similarity to what we see in other organizational settings.
Since developing the leader is a primary goal of assessment, it’s crucial that the board focus on the president’s strengths and likelihood for achieving the institution’s short- and long-term goals. Specific aspects of the evaluation process should be determined by the executive committee or a special presidential review committee, drawing upon the strategic plans of the school and conditions within the external environment.

4. Focus on learning
Presidential evaluation is first and foremost about learning — by the head of the school, members of the board, and everyone else who participates in the process. There should be no concern on the part of the president of a covert operation for ferreting out the bad, while ignoring the good. The goal is no surprises — for the board or the president. Both sides need to be candid and open with each other, committed to learning together for the good of the school.

The best evaluations encourage presidents to think deeply about their own vocational satisfaction. The president should emerge from a performance review affirmed in his or her strengths and assured of support in addressing weaknesses. In many cases, the president and board will identify similar issues and conclusions. When there is a divergence of perception, the president’s openness to learning from the review process makes easier the resolution of disparate judgments. The ultimate purpose of presidential reviews is to contribute to institutional effectiveness.

Discussion starter
Review the presidential profile that was part of the process that brought your current president to the school.

Now, imagine that you were writing such a profile today. Are there significant differences between what the board described as essential presidential characteristics in the first document as compared to essential leadership characteristics for the next five years? Does your president fit the new profile? What assistance might the president need to meet coming challenges?

Four steps to successful presidential evaluation
These four steps can make the annual review easier by breaking the process into manageable actions.

1. **Establish a committee to manage the presidential evaluation.**
Many boards form an ad hoc committee to manage the evaluation process. Others cede the process to the executive committee or a governance committee. Some schools invite the president to suggest a nonmember of the board to serve on the committee as a way of ensuring balance and setting a tone for a collaborative review.

2. **Set criteria for the evaluation.**
The annual review process should begin 12 months in advance with the president’s annual goals. Consider how the board will monitor the president’s progress toward meeting those goals and in advancing the school’s strategic or annual plan.

3. **Gather input.**
A good review cannot be conducted in a vacuum. The goal is to gather enough perspective and input to fit the level of evaluation sought. In most years, a written report from the president and responses from board members to a simple survey are sufficient. For formal evaluation, the board will look beyond its ranks for input, reaching out to administrators, staff, faculty, and selected others.

4. **Discuss the findings with the president.**
In a face-to-face meeting, the board chair or perhaps the entire review team should provide the president with feedback to his or her written report and the comments of board members (and others). This meeting is the time for dialogue, ensuring there is adequate time for the president to ask and answer questions and respond to recommendations. After the review meeting, the committee should develop a final written review and summary, including the president’s comments and goals for the coming year.

Source: Institute for Conservation Leadership
Presidential evaluation is an assessment of the entire learning community. The board has the opportunity, in the way it conducts its appraisal of the president’s performance, to engender trust, openness, and greater collegiality with the seminary community. A thoughtfully organized and presented presidential evaluation serves a twofold purpose. It provides opportunity for reflection on the performance of the entire organization (not just the individual). And it encourages a calibration of expectations and goals between the president and the board.

As a longtime president recalls, “Knowing I had to prepare an annual report for the board forced me to take time out each spring to reflect on whether the things I’ve done were consistent with the plan or were forced on the school by outside forces. The process helped me be more strategic about the use of my time—to stay focused on what was important.”

5. Focus on the future
Assessing performance to date is the easy part of presidential evaluation. As the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20. However, boards dare not stop with an analysis of the president’s accomplishments to date, as great as those may be. As they consider and define appropriate performance targets for the president, the board needs to consider the direction in which the school should be moving.

Looking back is good, but assessment of the president’s performance must also have a future focus. As Terrence MacTaggart wrote in the January–February 2012 issue of Trusteeship:

The practice of presidential assessment needs to catch up with new reality by shifting focus in three new directions:

- The evaluation process should examine past performance as the key source of information on the executive’s ability to lead change in an ambiguous and challenging future.

- The criteria must include the kind of skills and attitudes conducive to engineering positive change in an academic setting, not just conventional leadership traits.

- Since every leader is, to varying degrees, incomplete, the evaluation must be joined to a presidential development program that will assist the president in doing a job often vastly different from the one he was hired to do four or five years earlier.

Times change, but abilities, aptitudes, and skills sets usually don’t, won’t, or can’t. It’s important to test the leader’s strengths and abilities against the skill set needed in a fast-changing environment. If your president has been in place for more than five years, it’s likely the institutional context into which he or she was called is very different from that of today. Boards must be prepared to redirect the focus of evaluation from a backward glance to a forward focus. The point is to learn from what has been as a prelude to what’s to come.

After presidential evaluation, then what?
Most often the evaluation process, whether informal or formal, affirms the good work of the president to date and confirms the worthiness of the leader to continue in his or her role for
 prformance will be accepted by the incumbent as a gift, not an attack. And presidents must understand that while the board has his or her best interests at heart, its greater loyalty is to the institution.

**For more information**


**About the author**

Rebekah Burch Basinger, a member of the In Trust board of directors, is an independent consultant for board development and fundraising. Her consulting practice and work as an In Trust Governance Mentor have been enriched by her experiences on the boards of numerous organizations over 30 years, beginning with her children’s daycare center and extending to the national boards of MAP International (a Christian global health organization), the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, and MOPS International (a Christian ministry for mothers of young children).

A regular contributor to *In Trust* magazine, Basinger has written numerous articles on board leadership and governance. In addition, she is the coauthor (with Thomas Jeavons) of *Growing Givers' Hearts: Treating Fundraising as Ministry* (Jossey-Bass, 2001) and the lead author of “The President’s Role in Institutional Advancement” in the *Handbook for Seminary Presidents* published by the Association of Theological Schools.

Basinger received a B.A. in English from Trinity College (Deerfield, Illinois), a master’s in English from Wichita State University, and a doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies from Temple University.

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