

*The academic affairs committee balances prerogatives, maintains mission*

## Pulling together on behalf of the school

By Rebekah Burch Basinger

**W**ho is responsible for maintaining the integrity and spiritual vitality of a seminary's academic program?

Institutional bylaws and accrediting associations are generally clear — it's the board, in close consultation with the faculty and administration.

Yet if truth be told, many trustees lack confidence about what they can contribute to the conversation about academic issues. Presidents and deans are accustomed to thoughtful silence from the board whenever the agenda turns in this direction. But members of the academic affairs committee, at least, should do more than listen carefully and smile pleasantly.

The academic affairs committee enjoys the special challenge of balancing the prerogatives of faculty and administrators with the board's responsibility for mission consistency and institutional effectiveness. Association of Theological Schools standards acknowledge that faculty normally provide leadership in this area, especially in the "development of academic policy, oversight of academic and curricular programs and decisions, establishment of admissions criteria, and recommendation of candidates for graduation" (ATS General Institutional Standard 8.3.3). Nevertheless, the buck stops with the board. Academic affairs committee members feel that responsibility more keenly than most other trustees.

At a minimum, the members of the academic affairs committee are expected to know the school's curriculum and its faculty. Members should acquaint themselves with the quality of the entering class, satisfaction levels of continuing students, and the success of the school's graduates. At most seminaries, the committee's scope of authority includes oversight in four areas:

- **Policies and procedures.** Do faculty personnel policies and procedures complement academic priorities?
- **Program.** Is the educational program consistent with the institutional mission, strategies, and theological emphases of the school?
- **Budget.** Does the academic budget reflect

the institution's academic priorities?

- **Assessment.** Is the effectiveness of academic activities being assessed regularly?

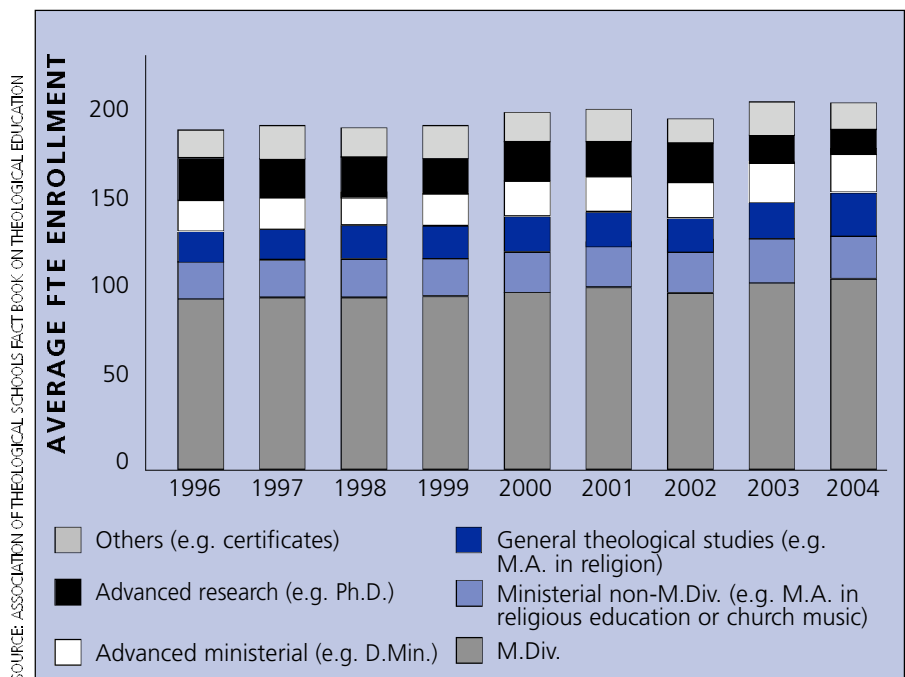
Effective oversight in these four areas requires that members of the academic affairs committee dig deep into institutional life and prod a bit where needed. When members of the academic affairs committee ask tough questions and call the school to accountability for what it says about itself, the institution can grow stronger.

### Educating the committee

Much of what falls within the purview of the academic affairs committee can be counted. Issues such as faculty/student ratio, enrollment trends within the various degree programs, library holdings, and technology expenditures are easily quantified and charted over time. The annual Fact Book on Theological Education is available from the Association of Theological Schools at [www.ats.edu](http://www.ats.edu), and the Institutional Peer Profile Report (IPPR) is provided directly to

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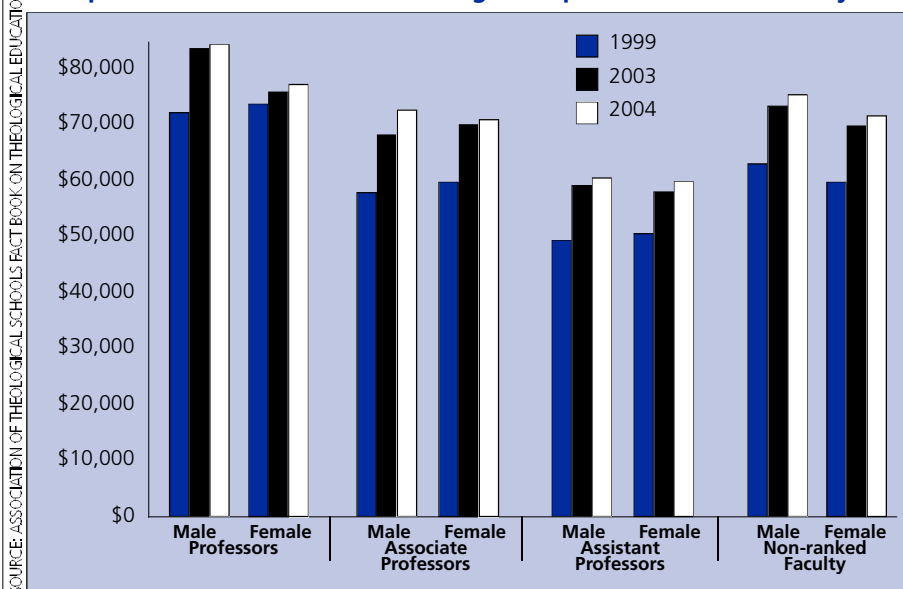
### Sample dashboard indicator: FTE enrollment by degree program



*Average enrollment in North American theological schools has been nearly flat over the past decade. Academic affairs committees should examine their own schools' enrollment figures to determine which programs are growing.*

## TOOL BOX

## Sample dashboard indicator: average compensation of FT faculty



Average compensation for all faculty levels has risen steadily over the last five years. Academic affairs committee members can study their own institution's patterns to see whether compensation increases are following North American averages.

## Talking points

1. Board involvement in academic policy matters may strike some board members as inappropriate. Why? Why should your board play a role in academic governance?
2. How does the hiring and periodic review of faculty members relate to your seminary's mission?
3. What kinds of information would help your board exercise its role in academic policy making?
4. How can the academic governance partnership between board and faculty at your seminary be strengthened?

schools by the ATS. Both are helpful resources as an academic affairs committee develops "dashboard" indicators of success — statistics (like enrollment and faculty compensation) that serve the same purpose as the lights and dials of a car's dashboard, revealing what is happening "under the hood" of the institution.

While it is praiseworthy when an academic affairs committee takes time to design an information "dashboard" for easy tracking of the obvious things, that is just the beginning of the committee's work. Not everything the committee surveys lends itself to charts and graphs. For example, when it comes to assessing the adequacy of faculty personnel policies or reviewing what students and church leaders are saying about the curriculum, numbers are not enough. Embedded in the issues that come to the academic affairs committee are values that define the character of the institution and its faithfulness to its mission. This requires that the academic affairs committee ask questions that lead to a nuanced understanding of the school. The committee should be prepared to deal with qualitative and sometimes messy issues.

Thoughtful common sense questions and observations — questions that move the discussion beyond the obvious — should dominate the work of the academic affairs committee. These may include:

- Is service on this faculty attractive to the best candidates? How can this institution

take the steps necessary to attract better candidates?

- Do we know why faculty candidates accept or reject our offers? Where are the candidates going who reject our offers of employment?
- Are the best and brightest students applying to this institution? How many accepted students matriculate? Are we taking the steps necessary to attract the best students?
- Do we know why some student applicants reject our offer of admission? Are they going elsewhere?
- Do we know why faculty members and students who leave the school are leaving?
- How do women and people of color fare as members of the faculty? As students?
- How do the churches that receive our graduates feel about their preparation for ministry?
- What do church leaders think of the seminary's curriculum?

These are merely sample questions. An institution's real questions will be shaped in direct response to the strategic plans of the institution and the critical issues facing the school.

The academic dean is the committee's best and chief resource in its search for accurate and timely information, but members should not put the full responsibility of their learning on the weary dean's shoulders. Committee members can be involved in seeking and synthesizing impressions and data.

### The committee educating

It does a school and a board little good if the academic affairs committee keeps its knowledge to itself. The next step is just as important — to help the president and dean educate other board members about critical issues within the academic program.

When the academic affairs committee is encouraged and empowered to share the information they have gleaned, the committee itself can strengthen the academic life of the school. How does the committee do this? By synthesizing the data about the school's performance and presenting the bottom line to the rest of the board. Christa Klein, In Trust's president, puts it this way: "A faithful committee will view itself primarily as an educator of the full board, an expert charged with the responsibility of filtering the large body of information concerning academic affairs and apprising the full board of essential data" (*Good Stewardship: A Handbook for Seminary Trustees*, edited by Barbara E. Taylor and Malcolm L. Warford, Association of Governing Boards, 1991).

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too focused on contrasting alleged worldviews.

According to the Jacobsens, who are both on the faculty of Messiah College in Pennsylvania, many other traditions can contribute models for bringing scholarship and faith together, including Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Wesleyan, Anabaptist, and Pentecostal traditions. They make a good case for a broader perspective and differing models, but they are unable

to do more than hint at these different approaches. With the exception of the Roman Catholic tradition, which is, if anything, both much older and deeper than the Reformed tradition, these other traditions have produced very little scholarship on the topic at hand. Instead, they tend to illustrate the naiveté that the Reformed evangelicals have sought to remedy.

The Jacobsens and their colleagues may well be right, but Christian scholars

reflecting these non-Reformed but evangelical perspectives have their work cut out for them. At the moment, there seems to be only one model that is compelling. Nevertheless, *Scholarship and Christian Faith* merits discussion by faculty members at evangelical Christian colleges and universities. ■IT■

*“If ministry is conceived simply as the exercise of a set of professional abilities, education for ministry could follow . . . an ‘assembly line paradigm’ in which spiritual formation is neglected because it does not fit the paradigm.”*

— Samuel Escobar in *Practical Wisdom*

## TOOL BOX

### Pulling together on behalf of the school

The academic dean and faculty also benefit from a proactive academic affairs committee. Committee members should avoid becoming one-issue ideologues, but judicious advocacy on behalf of academic program is completely acceptable — even expected — behavior for the academic affairs committee. When resources are tight, as they almost

always are, the academic affairs committee’s advocacy is priceless to faculty. As the old saying goes, respect trumps resources.

In *Strategic Leadership in Academic Affairs: Clarifying the Board’s Responsibilities* (Association of Governing Boards, 2005), University of Richmond Chancellor Richard L. Morrill cautions that “too many campuses waste time arguing about whether the

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faculty or the trustees is the final governing authority on academic matters.” A well-functioning academic affairs committee can help move the seminary community from a hurtful “we/they” tug-of-war to acting as one powerful team, all pulling together on behalf of the school, the students, and ultimately, God’s church. ■IT■

