A shared governance case study

This case study is designed to help theological school leaders think about issues surrounding shared governance. Written by Bob Landrebe, an expert in seminary governance, the case study focuses on a fictitious seminary but provides a scenario that could play out anywhere. After discussion of the case study, schools can request a discussion guide that provides a deeper look at the issues at play to draw out valuable lessons that can be applied to any school. Email: resources@intrust.org to request the discussion guide.

The situation at OnMission Seminary

OnMission Seminary is a stand-alone theological school. It educates students who upon graduation are qualified to serve in churches and organizations associated with many denominations. The board recently attracted three new trustees who are in leadership roles in three different denominations. Rev. Cross, a popular author and keynote speaker, is one of those new trustees who appears to be a leader among leaders even as a first-year board member. Rev. Cross also happens to be a major influencer within the reverend's denomination. The reverend's personal efforts provide the seminary with a strong pipeline of new students. At an earlier board meeting, Rev. Cross gave voice to this concern:

> "I'm hearing concerns that our graduates are not adequately prepared for their practical leadership roles in our churches. This matter became a topic of conversation about OnMission Seminary at our annual denominational meeting. There is a core of our delegates who want to see some tangible changes by our seminary or want to form partnerships with other theological institutions. I love our school and believe that we are one of the very best seminaries. But, I am sorry to report that we are slowly losing the confidence of some key denominational leaders. I think our board needs to respond to this threat. And I believe it's real. We simply cannot afford to rest on our laurels."

Although this was not a new issue of concern to the board, it seemed to become more legitimized by denominational executives like Rev. Cross who joined the board. The board chair, Dr. Wilson, asked for this matter to become a future board agenda item.

At its most recent board meeting, more trustees joined into the conversation expressing concern that the faculty are out of touch with the needs in the church. Several shared specific stories of criticisms they have heard. Trustee Bryant, a long-standing and respected member of the seminary's executive committee, weighed into the discussion:

> "It's our role as a board to address this issue head on. These anecdotes are collective evidence that we've got a problem. We've talked about it in general for years but we've been reluctant to take action. Left unattended, it threatens the relevancy of our school's mission and our long-term fiscal health. The time has come for us to express to the faculty the board's desire to address the preparation gaps of our graduates."

After discussions with President Jones and Provost Jackson, the board enthusiastically passed a motion inviting the faculty to complete a curriculum review and recommend improvements to better meet the needs of the church. The follow-up board meeting survey included numerous comments from trustees that this was one of the best and most consequential board meetings they had ever attended.

Following the board meeting, President Jones and Provost Jackson met with the faculty to discuss the board's request. Several professors spoke up to remind the provost that the faculty have been cooperative and attentive to administrative and board pressures for changes in curriculum. They cited specific improvements that were made over the past five years to:

1. Keep costs affordable for students through creative ways in reducing credit hours;
2. Attract new students through new degree programs; and
3. Offer more online and hybrid programs.

Dean Kramer reminded Provost Jackson that significant time and money was invested in primary research to support and validate the changes. As a result, student numbers are up, tuition revenues are strong, and faculty are working harder than ever with larger class sizes.

Dean Kramer spoke up, again, and said:

> "With all due respect to the board's role and our collective appreciation for the board, it would be helpful to the faculty to know what data was used by the board to warrant the conclusions reached in passing this motion. After all, in our recent accreditation visit, we were complimented for how favorably our alumni expressed their appreciation for how the seminary prepared them for their ministries. ... And furthermore, if the board wants improvements beyond these already impressive results, what additional resources will the administration and board provide to make further curricular changes possible?"

After an unexpectedly heated discussion, Provost Jackson thanked the faculty for giving voice to their concerns and stated that the provost and the president would confer about next steps. As news leaked out to the board that the faculty were displeased with the board motion, Trustee Bryant called Dr. Wilson to express disappointment with the faculty's response. Dr. Wilson called the president to develop a response.