



## ESSENTIAL 3: Responsibility for effective institutional leadership

Presidential Evaluation: To help, not harm

### SUMMARY

Presidential evaluation in the hands of a well-meaning but inexperienced board can be a fearful thing. With stories swirling across the theological school landscape of evaluations gone awry — and presidencies unraveling in the aftermath— it's little wonder that boards drag their feet on this essential. The potential pitfalls in evaluating the president are myriad: reducing a year's work to a single incident, prioritizing personality over performance, or avoiding meaningful feedback altogether are just several examples.

Tone matters, too. The way feedback is delivered to the president, especially when difficult truths must be named, can shape how the message is received. Honesty is essential, but so is honoring the good a leader has done. A thoughtful evaluation strikes a careful balance, combining candor with compassion, accountability with affirmation.

Ultimately, evaluation should leave the president with a clearer understanding of their priorities and goals, strengths as well as areas for development, and a renewed sense of the board's commitment to their success. Attention to the following three principles can help ensure that an evaluation achieves the intended ends.

### FROM THE BEGINNING

Starting early means embedding evaluation into the rhythm of governance from the outset of a presidency. It begins with the onboarding of the president, where expectations are clearly defined, and the evaluation process is introduced not as a threat but as a tool for growth, alignment, and support. Whether mandated in the school's by-laws, outlined in the employment agreement, or organically as part of an informal conversation between board leadership and the head of the school, the board's commitment to providing regular and thoughtful performance reviews is key to the long-term success of a presidency.

## **SIMPLE AND INSTITUTIONALLY SPECIFIC**

Although off-the-shelf assessment tools may seem like a godsend, boards should resist the temptation to outsource discernment to a one-size-fits-all instrument. Every five years or so, it may be wise to engage an outside facilitator to conduct a more comprehensive review of the president's performance, but on an annual basis, simplicity is not only sufficient, it's best. A simple, tailored process allows the board to affirm what's working, name what needs attention, and support the president's growth with clarity and care. In the end, the best evaluation tool is a board that knows its president, understands the school's mission, and commits to stewarding both with wisdom and care.

## **EVALUATION AS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

Every leader, no matter how experienced, has room to grow. The strongest presidents are those who welcome evaluation not as a threat, but as a means for becoming better. The role evolves. The situation into which a president was hired five (or more) years ago almost certainly bears little resemblance to that of today. Evaluation helps presidents see where they are and where they need to go. The In Trust Center advises that a presidential evaluation be paired with a development plan. Boards that embrace this approach signal their commitment not only to accountability but to accompaniment. They become partners in the president's growth, not just assessors of the executive leader's performance.

Whether formal or conversational, a snapshot in time or an ongoing practice, the intent of presidential evaluation should be the same: to foster learning, clarify expectations, and support the president in navigating emerging challenges and opportunities for the institution. Done well, an evaluation doesn't simply measure a president's effectiveness. It helps shape a presidency.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What feedback mechanisms are in place for the president outside of formal evaluation cycles? (Investigative)
2. What might change if we framed presidential evaluation as leadership development rather than simply a performance review? (Speculative)
3. What does our approach to evaluation say about our board's understanding of power and stewardship? (Interpretive)



In Trust Center members and affiliates have permission to print and share this resource.  
To learn more, contact [resources@intrust.org](mailto:resources@intrust.org).