

Five things for a high-performing advisory board

Savvy academic leaders recognize the benefits of a high performing advisory board. The expertise, wisdom, and networks that advisors bring to academic units within colleges and universities are invaluable. Advisors participate in program reviews, help in opening new student markets, introduce development staff to potential donors, and more. In fact, “advisory boards can do virtually anything the members and institutional leaders agree to, *except make decisions on policy*” (Teitel, p. 19).

Specific to embedded seminaries, the advisory board is a tether, holding the school in relationship with a founding denomination and/or constituent congregations. The advisory board may also be the “entity” which, in the words of the Association of Theological Schools’ standard on governance, “attends to the theological school’s mission” (Standard 9:1). In these ways, advisory boards are essential to the well-being of embedded schools. But there’s more.

Advisory boards are a ready source of guidance, advice, and fresh perspectives for the schools they serve. And individual advisors act as ambassadors and advocates within their local spheres of influence. Spanning, as they do, the boundary between a seminary and its constituents, advisors are ideally situated to “convey the concerns and perspectives of the community to the institution and explain the institution’s vision and priorities to the community” (Reeves and Buller, p. 65).

As a dean described, an advisory board can be “a dream team for addressing critical issues facing the seminary.” Moving your advisory board toward “dream team” status begins with attention to the following five things.

- 1. Start with purpose.** Like the families of Tolstoy fame, high functioning advisory boards are alike in many ways and yet, the founding purpose of each board is unique and institutionally specific. Within schools where the process of embedding is recent, the why of the advisory board is fresh in minds and evident in how advisors relate to the theological school. However, unless the origin story is repeated from one generation of advisors to the next, the purpose(s) for which the board was created will fade from institutional memory. The form continues, but without a clear understanding of the intended function of the advisory body.

For all but the most recently added volunteer boards, what schools need from advisors today is different than in years past. As theological schools adapt to new educational and financial

Clarifying terminology

For all their similarities, every theological school located within a college or university has its particularities, including in terminology. Throughout this document, the term “embedded” is used to describe the affiliation of the theological school to a larger institution. “Advisory board” is used to identify all such volunteer advisory bodies and “advisor” is used when referencing individual members. The term “dean” is used to identify the chief academic officer of an embedded seminary. Specific to the roles and responsibilities of advisory boards, the phrase “and more” is a stand-in for lengthy lists of possible forms of service.

models, high performing advisory boards move in step with the institutions they serve. Within these boards, the founding why serves as a touchpoint against which proposed purposes are assessed. Re-telling leads to re-tooling, as deans and advisors re-think the board's purpose(s) for a new day.

- 2. Clarify roles and responsibilities.** Newcomers to advisory boards sometimes arrive with expectations more in line with those of trustees. Fortunately, most settle into their role as advisors when provided with a written description of what their work is about, and what it's not. In some schools, the board's roles and responsibilities are codified in official bylaws. In other institutions, advisors get their marching orders via looser, less formal statements of expectations. Regardless the format, the end goal is the same: to "define the goal of the advisory board and delineate how it functions" (Reeves and Buller, p. 104) in documents that are accessible and frequently referenced.

Members of high performing advisory boards accept the limitations of their roles gracefully and embrace enthusiastically the responsibilities entrusted to them. They respect the procedures and policies that guide their activities and willingly work within the authority structures of the larger institutions. The membership understands "what advisory boards do, how they're different from other boards and why [their] role as boundary spanners is so important" (Reeves and Buller, p. 121).

- 3. Equip, educate, and resource.** Members of advisory boards are recruited for their wisdom, networks, and professional expertise and yet there are bound to be gaps in advisors' knowledge of the seminaries with which they volunteer. Seminary personnel intent on nurturing a high performing board seek to equip, educate and resource advisors, but without overwhelming. Leaders must not let their own need to communicate necessary information shut down comments and questions from advisors. "The variety of ideas . . . usually means that the end results will be far better than any one person could have achieved independently" (Reeves and Buller, p. 101).

In recent years, advancement activities – fundraising, student recruitment and constituent relations – have moved up the list of roles and responsibilities for many advisory boards. There's no surprise in this, considering financial stressors and competition for students. When equipped and resourced for the work, advisors can be effective in attracting funds, students and goodwill to an embedded school. In these ways, advisory boards help in securing a seminary's sustainability and its standing within the larger institution.

- 4. Honor the work.** Although advisory boards, by definition, possess no authority over the seminary, it's a best practice to give advisors the same attention and consideration as presidents do to trustees. Members of advisory boards should be well informed, actively engaged and feeling useful and appreciated. In short, the management strategies used with both types of boards – governing and advisory – are similar.

Advisors want (deserve) to know that their volunteer commitments to the school are appreciated and their service matters. It's impossible to overdo gratitude and especially when it comes from the dean of the seminary. Regardless the quality of care provided to the advisory board by others, there's no substitute for praise from the dean. (and even better when delivered by the provost and/or president of the larger institution). When deans speak, advisors listen and respond accordingly.

5. Give and receive feedback. Leaders committed to nurturing high performing advisory boards are faithful in letting advisors know how they're doing. Well-timed feedback strengthens volunteers' commitments to mission, reinforces mutual accountability, and highlights the efforts of individual advisors. Every five years or so, there's value in engaging the advisory board in an instrument-based self-assessment process. In between, simple, sincere, and specific messaging (when possible, in person) does the job.

Institutional leaders should also ask for and welcome feedback from advisors. Do advisors feel their time is well-used? Are meetings well-planned and strategically focused? Are advisors clear about what's expected of them? Does the seminary communicate too little, too much, or just enough throughout the year? Do advisors feel adequately prepared and resourced to succeed in their roles? How do advisors rate their interactions with the dean and other seminary personnel? Responses to these and similar questions may make you wince, but change depends on knowledge.

In Summary

To be sure, there is more to nurturing a high performing advisory board beyond the five things listed above. But working the list can improve a board's performance, both corporately and as individuals. "Dream team" status is within the reach of every advisory board, including yours.

Sources

Reeves, Dianne M. & Buller, Jeffrey L. (2019). *A Handbook for College and University Advisory Boards*. Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

Teitel, Lee (1994). The Advisory Committee Advantage. *Creating an Effective Strategy for Programmatic Improvement*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No.1.

Dr. Rebekah Burch Basinger is an independent consultant for board development and fundraising who has worked closely with the In Trust Center for more than 25 years.



In Trust Center members and affiliates have permission to print and share this resource.
To learn more, contact resources@intrust.org.