

# What One Trustee Wishes He Had Known Going In

*By David W. Miles* March 18, 2018

For nearly 23 years I have served on higher-education governing boards, first with my alma mater Drake University, followed by a six-year appointment to the Iowa Board of Regents, and now once again with Drake. Like the board members with whom I've served over the years, I wanted to make a positive impact. But like most of these same board members, I really wasn't as fully prepared as I might have been at the start of my board service.

Both Drake and the Iowa Board of Regents provided me formal orientation sessions through which I learned about process and some of the challenges facing the institutions. But looking back, I realize just how little I knew — or at least understood — and how long it took me to become a truly effective trustee.



Here are some pieces of information I wish I had been given when I first started out that would have brought me up to speed more quickly:

- A data-driven analysis of the contributions of higher education to society

and to individuals, as well as where it falls short.

- An overview of the higher-education system in the United States and globally, including the types of institutions and how they address student needs.
- A better understanding of the ethical questions that can arise on the board and how to resolve them. For example, problems can occur when a trustee's company is doing business with the university or when a trustee's recommendation for an applicant's admission comes across as a demand.
- An unvarnished look at the business model of higher education, including both key revenue sources and expenses, and how my own institution fits in.
- A deep dive into the unique shared-governance model of higher education, historically and in the present day.
- Greater detail on the history, current state, and future vision of my institution.
- Information on where to find additional resources to further my understanding. I've since learned that the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, whose board I'm honored to chair, is a good source for research, reports, and articles about governance.

In short, I wish that I had benefited from a more intentional educational effort that moved me further and faster toward a more complete understanding of higher education and of my institution in particular. In that vein, I would recommend the following to all institutions:

- Educate trustees to understand and appreciate the unique role of the citizen-trustee and shared governance. Being a trustee is one of the most unique positions in the world, and it is very special to be among only 50,000 women and men serving in this vital capacity, responsible for your specific institution, system, or foundation as well as for the sector

broadly.

- Make sure trustees recognize that while it is an honor to serve as a trustee, the responsibility is not honorific. Those being recruited or considered should fully understand — before accepting — the scope of work and time commitments involved.
- Insist on a formal orientation program. Some institutions already require such training — but it should go beyond process and rules of order to fully explain the role of fiduciaries as well as the issues and trends that extend beyond campus walls. The [Association of Governing Boards](#) has a wealth of resources and expertise to assist public and private institutions in developing such programs.
- Maintain board education and training programs throughout the year. Stretch the comfort zone at meetings, go beyond carefully staged institutional presentations, and get trustees to consider and ask larger questions, such as "What are the key national or global forces influencing the direction of higher education?" or "Does the traditional model of counting hours in the classroom to earn a degree accurately reflect mastery of the material?" Such activity builds trust on the board and leads to better, more informed decisions.
- Consider pairing new board members with veterans who might serve as mentors or coaches. I benefited greatly from similar informal relationships during my board service, and formalizing such arrangements could more quickly develop board members as leaders and decision makers.

I began serving on a college board — one of the most rewarding experiences of my life — with a simple desire: to give back to an institution that had given me much. As I developed a deeper appreciation for the transformative impact of higher education on individuals and our society, my only wish was that I could have made a bigger impact right from the beginning.

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