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## Encouraging Board Members to Be Active, but Not Activist

### Center urges public-college trustees to set aside personal agendas; critics see defense of status quo

By SARA HEBEL

Washington

The continuing evolution of two distinct schools of thought on college trusteeship became sharply evident last week, as a mainstream governing-board group announced a new center for trustees of public colleges that was immediately attacked by critics as too soft on leadership issues.

Officials of the new center -- which is sponsored by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges -- aim to help state leaders attract and select top-notch trustees and educate board members about policy and how to work effectively with college presidents and state lawmakers.

Too often, the officials said, trustees' involvement is passive and their policy roles ambiguously defined. Board members, they argued, should become arbiters of policy goals and bridge builders between state and campus leaders.

Members of another trustee group, however, argued that for years now they have been educating trustees and teaching them how to be more assertive. Officials at the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** "are already doing it and are doing it better" than the new center will, argued Candace de Russy, a trustee of the State University of New York and a member of the council. "The Association of Governing Boards has been more an advocate for institutions, whereas the council has pushed extremely actively for real higher-education reform."

The advisory group of the new center will be led by a former

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state official who is active on higher-education issues: former Gov. Zell Miller of Georgia, a Democrat with a reputation for bipartisanship.

Richard Novak, the executive director of the new center, lauded Mr. Miller for how he handled trustee issues as governor. He said that the governor had "picked good people" and had given them "the independence to do their jobs."

Besides Mr. Miller, the center's advisory board is replete with some of the most-respected figures in higher education. It includes state and college leaders, as well as the top officials of government and education groups.

The center's leaders say they prize partnerships and coalition-building. They will urge members of governing boards to speak up as groups rather than take on issues as single-minded activists with personal agendas. In taking those tacks, the center is positioning itself as a distinct alternative to the **American Council of Trustees** and **Alumni**, which has focused on trustee training since 1998.

The council's philosophy is that board members should serve foremost as watchdogs of institutions and protectors of taxpayer dollars. The group's members view states' contributions to higher education as "vast" and urge trustees to carefully monitor how the money is spent. The council provides workshops for state leaders and college trustees, using the forums to urge specific institutional reforms, such as focusing undergraduate academic programs on a common core curriculum and funneling larger percentages of state money for colleges to improve student instruction.

The new center wants trustees to hold institutions more accountable, too, its leaders say. But they also emphasize the role governing boards must play in persuading politicians to value colleges' contributions to each state -- and to honor institutions' importance by providing enough money to support them. Trustees, the center says, need to serve a balancing role, protecting state interests by ensuring high-quality higher education while weighing institutional needs as colleges work to help meet the broad needs of their states.

Compared with the council, "we have a much broader sense of the issues," Mr. Novak said.

In a March speech at the association's annual meeting, as planning for the new center unfolded, Mr. Miller said that it should help states select "level-headed leadership" for boards. "We need to help elected leaders develop clear qualifications and expectations so we can get intelligent and active -- but not activist -- trustees," he said.

His differentiating between "active" and "activist" trustees, and the creation of the new center, raised red flags at the **American Council of Trustees** and **Alumni**. Ms. de Russy, the SUNY trustee, argued that board members must be activists who feel a duty to "boldly confront" wasteful spending and bad academic policy.

"If there is a terrible flaw in an institution and a trustee becomes an activist against that, what's the problem with that?" she said.

Jerry L. Martin, president of the council, questioned the center's mission and planned work. He said the governing-board association was focused too much on coalition-building and too little on making needed changes.

"It looks like higher education circling the wagons in defense of the status quo," he said.

But leaders of the center argue that developing ties among the players in higher-education policy is essential if colleges are to help states with their changing needs.

One member of the center's advisory board said state officials would make better decisions on policy ideas like performance-based budgeting systems if trustees got more involved than they have been. "Those kinds of decisions don't work out so well if policymakers are isolated from institution leaders and trustees," said Ronald R. Cowell, a trustee at the Community College of Allegheny County and former Democratic legislator in Pennsylvania.

To encourage trustees to participate more actively in debates, the new center plans to start trustee-education programs and provide trustees with the information they need to make good policy decisions.

Center officials also want to encourage states to choose board members based on merit. For instance, Mr. Novak said, a state

might create a nonpartisan, third-party screening committee -- as Kentucky and Minnesota have done -- that would give the governor a list of qualified candidates.

The design of higher-education governance is another priority for the center. Its leaders say they want to offer advice when states ask. In Florida, the association has offered to help the state's public-university system negotiate with the governor and state lawmakers over a legislative plan to abolish the system's Board of Regents. Mr. Novak has not gotten a reply. State officials, many of them Republicans, appear bent on making their own decisions.

Yet another priority is increasing trustees' influence on state policy. Staff members of the center plan to weigh in on legislation that would affect governance -- a switch from the information-gathering role that some trustees and higher-education associations have played. And center officials want trustees to push their priorities rather than delegate decision-making to lawmakers or others. For instance, trustees should jump in before states pass laws pushing institutions on issues such as meeting job-market needs and improving teacher training, Mr. Novak said.

"Too often boards are just not stepping up to the plate," he said.

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