

Governing Boards—Raising Consciousness

by Anne D. Neal, President, American Council of Trustees and Alumni

The present-day academic culture is politicized, one-sided, coercive, and manipulative. This situation is the product of nearly three decades of postmodernist transformation of the academy. Whereas political bias used to be considered the enemy of dispassionate teaching and scholarship, postmodernism has turned partiality into a virtue.

This sea-change has been largely ignored by boards, governors, alumni and the public because of the relatively unchallenged notion that universities in the United States are the “best in the world.” Mesmerized by their sense of superiority, boards – and often the governors who appoint them –are frequently intimidated and manipulated by administrators and faculty into accepting the status quo.

In the process, boards of trustees have permitted vast delegations of authority to faculty and administrators with the resultant decline in salutary checks and balances essential to any thriving institution.

Unfamiliar with academic protocols and the unique nature of the university, those trustees who *have dared* to question have found themselves hoisted upon the petards of academic freedom and shared governance – without a clue what to do.

But the times, they are a’changin’.

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education just recently issued a report that found higher education complacent and in need of reform.

Recent national surveys have shown that the postmodern academy produces American graduates who fall short in math and science skills; basic literacy; and, as both ACTA and ISI have shown, knowledge of their own history and heritage.

The American people --- parents and taxpayers—are demanding to know what they are getting for their money.

To address this sorry state of affairs, many efforts must be tried and NAS is highlighting successful fronts in the battle of higher ed reform throughout this conference.

Clearly one is Raising Trustee Consciousness, the topic of today’s panel.

Just as we have seen a paradigm shift in corporate governance post Enron, so we must demand a similar change in university governance. That indeed is why ACTA and its Institute for Effective Governance exist -- to empower trustees on behalf of greater academic freedom, academic quality; and accountability; to provide a national forum for trustees to share experiences; and to offer training for trustees in the unique universe known as the academy.

Lay governance is a uniquely American institution designed to bring the informed perspective of citizens – not politicians, not faculty, not government employees, but citizens -- to the very heart of the university.

It is our experience, however, that few trustees know or understand what is happening on our college campuses. And this is not unintended. Rather than viewing them as a resource, higher education administrators and faculty often view them as meddlers or mavericks whose job should be to “put up and shut up.”

Against a backdrop of rising costs and declining quality, trustees have too often subscribed to the mentality of “go along-get along,” a misguided belief that trustees are cheerleaders and that – for the most part – they should leave it to the academics to make the key decisions.

Too many Governors, in turn, view trustees as political plums and fail to insist on qualified individuals who have the time and dedication necessary to tackle the many challenges facing higher education. And in the private colleges, trustees are often selected more for their wallet than their brains.

Active stewardship can make a real difference in what students know and do when they graduate, in access, in cost effectiveness, and in developing closer linkages between the priorities of the greater society and the universities that serve them

However, as former Wisconsin regent Phyllis Krutsch has noted, experience shows that the full promise and actual practice of lay boards are often far apart.

While certain governing boards -- including those represented on this panel -- have raised the bar for trustee engagement and thoughtfulness, not all boards offer the same leadership. It is critical that boards focus on the need to do their job more effectively.

If we are to remain the best higher education system in the world, trustees must address the key issues of cost, quality, and accountability and do so without being intimidated by bullies on the inside. Effective boards understand the tradition of shared governance—the participation of faculty, and sometimes students, in developing policies that affect academic life – but do not confuse the value of that tradition with their own ultimate authority and accountability.

How can boards -- which hold plenary authority over their institutions – be changed to ensure active informed governance that responds to the needs of the state and the long-term needs of the graduates?

That is what we will discuss in today’s panel.

I am pleased to report that, already, there is much to cheer about.

Reform-minded governors in Florida, New York, Virginia, Massachusetts and Colorado have worked with ACTA and others to offer trustee training. And the American Legislative Exchange Council recently adopted a model resolution calling on boards to educate themselves on the key issues facing higher education.

And, of course, there are individual stories. Stories from Todd, Candace and Tom that we will hear today.

These are promising times. They are promising because for too long, constituencies such as alumni and trustees have been expected to remain outside the walls of the ivory tower, particularly when it comes to issues of academic quality and accountability.

The logic behind the tradition is deceptively simple. Academic decisions should be made on academic grounds – hence they should be made by academics. But, as you will hear from today’s panelists, current conditions in the academy urgently call for outside scrutiny – and that outside scrutiny is taking place.

Most institutions – and their internal constituencies – need checks and balances and higher education is no exception. That is why restoring trustee oversight and raising trustee consciousness is so important and why ACTA is grateful to be here today.