

Welcoming New Board Members

15 Tips for Better Orientations

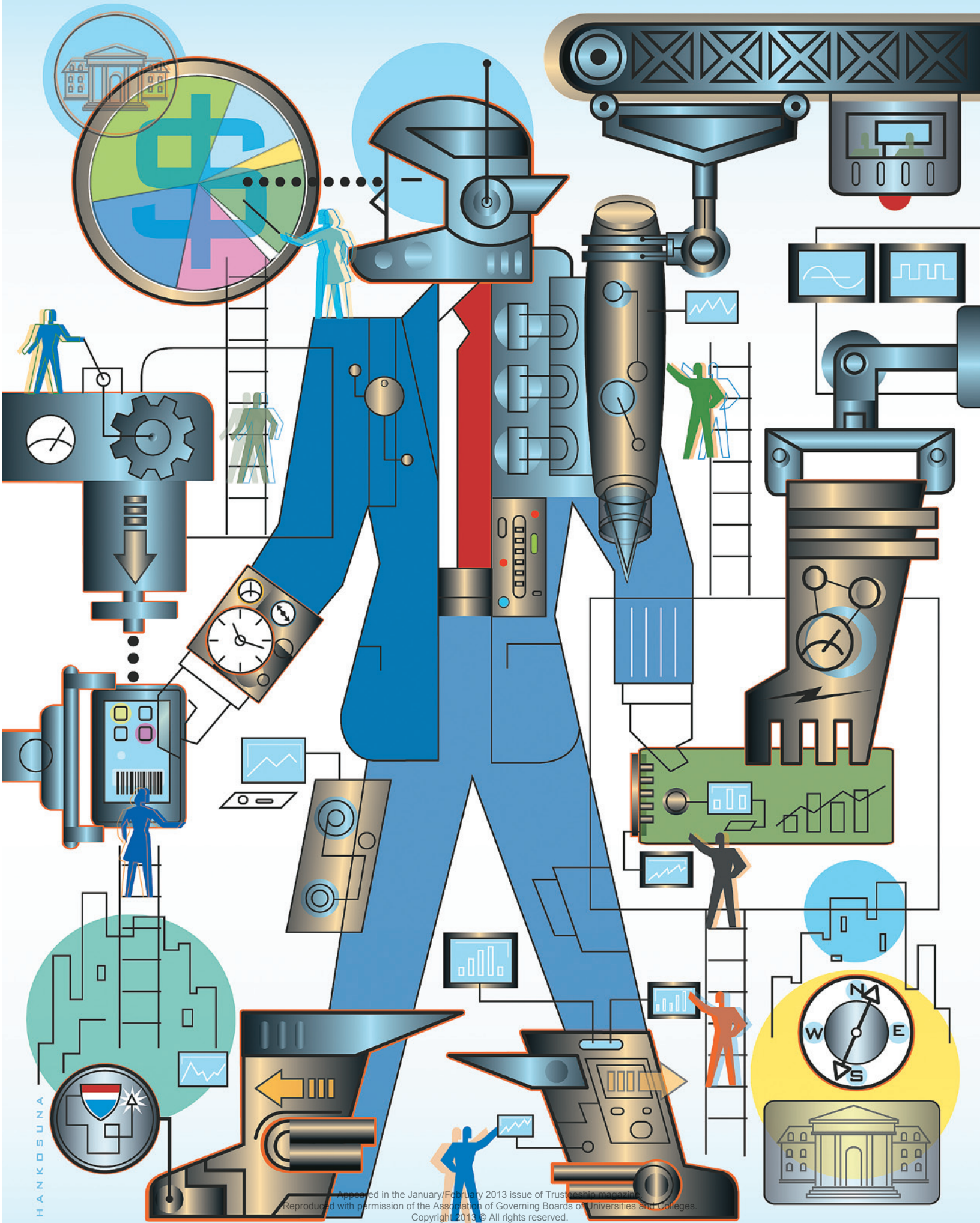


TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Many institutions are not sufficiently intentional or purposeful about orientation. The common approach—a day or half-day—leaves time to just scratch the surface for all that a new board member needs to know.
- 2 Given that board terms are often short, it is very much in the institution's best interest to make sure that new trustees hit the ground running—with a reasonably broad understanding of the college or university—from their very first meeting.
- 3 Board orientation provides an excellent forum for an institution to help new board members understand their roles and what's expected of them, and it affords individual institutions a natural opportunity to develop practices that reflect their distinct culture, mission, and history.

BY STEPHEN G. PELLETIER

WHEN TOP ADMINISTRATORS AT AUGUSTANA College first organized “unfiltered” discussions for new board members with both faculty and students—meaning that no administrator would be present—they worried that experimental part of board orientation might backfire. But the board members surprised them.



HANKOSUNA

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Yes, they had heard some griping, the trustees reported later, but they said they expected that. (As leaders themselves, many are used to hearing complaints.) Far more important, they said, was hearing firsthand about the transformational impact of the college experience—such as the student who gushed about how her chemistry professor had helped her overcome a challenge. Later, well into their second board terms, some board members were quick to recall the inspiring stories they found in those initial sessions.

One lesson for the administrators? Don't be afraid to take risks in orienting new board members. The payoff could be remarkable. That's just one of the takeaways that institutions are realizing as they become more intentional about delivering a strong board orientation program.

Welcoming New Trustees

Among all the programs and events that a college or university conducts in a given year, the orientation of new board members probably ranks relatively low in the amount of attention and planning it gets from top administrators. But that might be a tactical or even strategic error.

Institutions often invest considerable efforts to recruit board members. It follows, therefore, that they should also be intentional in planning how to best welcome those recruits to actual service. And given that board terms are often short, it is very much in the institution's best interest to make sure that new board members hit the ground running—with a reasonably broad understanding of the college or university—from their very first meeting. That makes board orientation an important, if sometimes overlooked, exercise.

Board orientation provides a unique forum for an institution to help new board members understand the roles and responsibilities expected of them. It is a chance, too, to share essential information that the college or university thinks new trustees need to know. Moreover, it is an opportunity for the institution to bring new members up to date about where it is today and its goals for the future.

Board members essentially jump into a conversation in the

middle and need to be briefed on “the state of play of the key initiatives and issues that the board will be dealing with,” says Richard V. Riddell, a vice president at Duke University who functions as chief of staff to the president and serves as secretary to Duke's board of trustees. Orientation, he says, “fills them in on the movie up to this point.”

Kai S. Swanson, executive assistant to the president at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, says that board orientation is crucial because it directly affects board performance. Augustana trustees attend a maximum of just 12 meetings during a standard four-year term, Swanson notes. “We can't afford to give a new trustee a year to come up to speed,” he says. “To get the best benefit for the institution, they have to be firing on all cylinders to the greatest extent possible” right from the start of their board service. “Based on what we are laying on their shoulders,” he says, “why not do everything we can to make sure that they are in fighting shape by their first meeting?”

The best board orientations attend to the fundamentals that must be addressed but also leave room for creativity. And while core components of onboarding new board members can be informed by available guidelines, such as those from AGB, and experiences at other colleges and universities, orientation affords individual institutions a natural opportunity to develop practices that reflect their distinct culture, mission, and history.

Shaping Better Orientations

Scanning the current landscape—and talking with some experienced practitioners—yields many ideas to help shape better board orientations. Here are 15 suggestions for institutions to consider.

1. Recognize that even experienced board members need orientation. Many board members join colleges and universities with some board experience already under their belts. But people who have served on corporate boards may not fully understand how such boards differ from those of non-profit colleges and universities. And even if a board member has been a higher education trustee before, that person needs to

understand the culture of the institution he or she now serves. “Orientation is required of everyone, not just those who haven't previously served on a college or university board,” says Kim M. Brunner, chair of the board of trustees at Augustana.

2. Eschew the information overload.

At the beginning, many institutions bury new board members in information. But lengthy, detailed briefings with armies of administrators might be less effective than carefully planned presentations focused on a few well-chosen bullet points. Institutions can backstop those presentations with instructions for how new board members can find details when they want them—such as on a board portal or website. Every institution should cherry-pick the fundamental pieces of information that they want their new trustees to first see.

3. Pace the race. Similarly, colleges and universities should plan communications so new board members can retain essential information by allowing time for them to absorb critical lessons. “In general, there is a tendency on the part of institutions to cram a great deal into a board orientation. I find that, by the end of the day, people are almost wilting from the input of information,” says Ellen E. Hallett, assistant to the president and board secretary at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. “One of the big challenges is to somehow manage and balance that information flow, so that you don't wear out your new trustees completely.” Trying to impart as much information as possible in a short timeframe, some institutions even forget to leave time for new board members to ask questions. One antidote is to bake time into the schedule specifically for discussion versus presentation. Duke, for example, makes sure that half of each information session for new board members is given to discussion.

4. Partner up. Many boards ask experienced members to help guide a new trustee. For some institutions, an official mentor program works well; for others, that is overkill. No matter how formal the process, helping new board members connect with more-experienced ones gives those new



members crucial points of reference and someone to go to with initial questions. Thomas C. Longin, an AGB consultant and senior fellow, advocates for the continuity of pairing a new board member with the same mentor for at least several board meetings.

5. Highlight principles of good governance. Colleges and universities need to make adequate time for discussion of governance writ large: board roles and responsibilities, ethics, risk management, board policies, and other important topics. Board orientation is the perfect time to discuss the general principles of governance—separate from institutional responsibilities—and to underscore the demarcation between governance and management. Wheaton’s Hallett recalls an orientation session in which the president and board chair both spoke about governance and the goals of the institution, sparking an “animated, high-level conversation” that proved to be “a very good introduction to the level of thinking that is appropriate for trustees.” An outside consultant can sometimes help lead that conversation.

In addition, helping new board members get to know the president’s cabinet can reinforce that understanding. “Things work well when trustees understand what their role is and administrators understand what their role is, and how each could benefit from each other,” Riddell says. “Boards function well when those relationships are healthy, and they take work to develop.”

6. Confirm campus contacts. When new board members step onto a campus for their first meeting, they plunge into a highly complex environment. To help them navigate, many colleges and universities make a point during orientation to introduce them to the key campus players—usually members of the president’s cabinet—who can answer their specific questions. “We give new trustees so much information that we don’t really expect them to fully capture or remember it all,” says Janice Breslin Doyle, chief of staff to the chancellor at the University of Maryland System and secretary to the Board of Regents there. “The important thing is that they know that there are



these six people that they can call for more information if and when they need it.”

7. Share your culture. Augustana’s Swanson also says institutions ought to take pains to make sure orientation is a “cultural immersion.” They should provide essential information but also give board members time to tour the campus, visit a classroom, meet with students and faculty, and otherwise engage in the life and culture of the institution. New trustees at Duke University recently had the chance to stretch their legs during orientation with a walk to the institution’s medical campus. More than a change of venue, the exercise also gave them a first-hand look at a huge component of the overall enterprise at Duke.

8. Don’t neglect the small stuff. From the arcane to the mundane, board members often want answers to the same questions in every orientation. (What to wear to board meetings is a good example.) A board FAQ can anticipate those questions and save a board member the potential embarrassment of having to ask what they might fear will be thought of as a “dumb” question. Augustana College distributes a list that translates the countless acronyms that the college uses. Savvy institutions also know to build time into board meetings to help members learn how to access information online, including mastering website passwords and iPads.

9. Help new board members engage with faculty members. Trustees can enrich their understanding of the institution when they better understand those who advance its educational mission. “There’s such value in having opportunities to talk with faculty, to get a sense of their responsibilities as they articulate that, how they fit in with the oversight responsibility of the board,” Brunner says. “That type of cross-communication is invaluable.”

10. Connect new board members with students. In fact, not only new but also seasoned board members have found that hearing directly from students enriches their understanding of the institution. Jeffrey B. Trammell, the rector of the College of William & Mary, sat down with a

What Are the Most Common Topics Covered at Board Orientations?

(in descending order)

- Trustee responsibilities
- Institutional history and mission
- Strategic priorities or challenges
- Board governance policies
- Responsibilities of key administrators
- Institutional finances and budget
- Standing committees
- Academic programs and quality
- Liability of board members
- Auditing procedures
- Institutionally related organizations
- Faculty and/or tenure
- Role of audit committee
- Institution’s relationship with the state
- State and federal compliance
- Personnel laws
- Whistleblower policies
- Student rights
- Other

—Susan Johnston, *The AGB Survey on Higher Education Governance* (2009)

group of students to talk about technology. “For a half hour we discussed the usual issues like parking and housing. Then I asked them to give me their thoughts on how technology is and should be changing the way they learn in ways that we on the board might not have considered. That unleashed an hour and a half of highly spirited analysis and revelation as to how they, as the consumers of the new digital learning, perceive it. The information they shared has been invaluable as we consider strategic directions in online learning,” he notes.

11. Sit in on a class. Having board members attend a class during orientation is another way to immerse them in the life of the university. Swanson tells a story about how a new trustee at Augustana, who is an executive at the Lutheran college’s church headquarters, found himself in a class that was examining religion broadly as part of the American experience. Far from taking umbrage, the church official struck a lasting friendship with the professor, and has

What Board Members Say about Trustees

By William M. Griffin and Rebecca S. Lake

helped inform her research. Many colleges and universities will say there is simply no time in orientation for class visits, but experts argue that taking new board members to class is time very well spent.

12. Don't neglect socializing. The old saw about "all work and no play" applies to board orientations. Whether over a meal, a reception, or campus activity, social events built into orientation are invaluable in helping new trustees bond with the board and the institution.

13. Get feedback and continue education beyond orientation. The University of Maryland System surveys its new board members after their orientation. That feedback "helps us know what to do better next time," Doyle says, adding that the survey also signals that the system values what they think. And, because trustee education should not end after orientation, the Maryland system has also committed this year to having an educational forum at every one of its board meetings or in board retreats. Previous topics have included fundraising, technology transfer, and academic transformation.

Besides fine-tuning existing processes by following some of the guidelines above, institutions would do well to step back a bit and think more broadly about how to improve orientation. Accordingly, here are two additional suggestions.

14. Take risks. Asked what advice he might share about board orientation, Swanson says, "Be not afraid." That is, he suggests, institutions ought to be willing to let boards see the whole of the institution, which gives them a richer perspective. One of the absolutes when it comes to boards is that there should be "no surprises." Certainly institutions want to present themselves in the best light to new trustees, but sugarcoating the truth too much could backfire if and when less-than-sweet truths emerge. Besides, board members can intuit when they are being sold a billed of goods. A genuinely fair and honest description of the institution during orientation—including problems and challenges—will help board members understand the institution more fully and,

From the moment that college and university trustees assume their seats at the board table, they need to be knowledgeable about their institution, understand their role and responsibilities, and recognize that they can only be a high-performing board if they work effectively as a group. But we have found that a number of today's trustees believe that their institution's orientation sessions and board-development programs do not adequately prepare them for the job.

How do board members learn of the intricacies of their institution? How do those who have been appointed or elected to these positions comprehend how to work effectively as a group in what may be, for many, a foreign environment? What are some of the best board-development activities that institutions can provide their board members?

Those were the questions that one of us, Bill Griffin, vice chair of the board at the College of Lake County and a business professor at Triton College, asked as part of his research for a dissertation, "Board of Trustees: The Whole Is Greater than the Sum of the Individual Parts," at National Louis University in Chicago. Rebecca Lake, a former vice-president at a community college and director of the Community College Leadership doctoral program, served as his dissertation chair. The purpose of the study was to identify the adequacy and availability of board-development activities that help trust-



ees become stronger contributors when overseeing colleges and universities. What we learned may be helpful for institutions of all types when working with their boards.

The research focused on board members from four institutions in three Midwestern states. To gather the most in-depth data from a wide perspective, we interviewed at length a group of seasoned trustees who had served more than one term on the board and then a second group of new trustees serving in their first term. The participants described their roles and responsibilities, how they influenced policy, the type of board-development they received, and what was lacking as they prepared to take their seats as governing board members.

When asked what content a board-development program should have for them to do their jobs as trustees well, not surprisingly, all participants described such topics as how the budget was organized and the board's role in strategic planning and policy formation. Other key subjects were an understanding of the procedural processes of a formal board meeting, and clarification of their overall roles and responsibilities as board members. All the participants indicated a desire for educational activities that prepared them to be immediately effective in their roles.

New board members in particular commented that board-development activities should focus on a number of operational areas including the college's finances, accreditation, and unions. They also said an understanding of existing

consequently, do a better job. And they will appreciate the honesty.

15. Rethink the fundamentals. Some experts think board orientation could and should be a richer experience. Longin, for example, says that most institutions are not sufficiently intentional or purposeful about orientation. The common approach—a day or half-day—leaves time to just scratch the surface for all that a new board member needs to know.

Another problem is that typical orientations focus too much on what the institution wants the board member to know and not enough on helping him or her integrate into the board. Here, again, rather than packing every moment of orientation with presentations that are little more than an information dump, effective orientations focus on a well-planned short list of key points that the institution wants to convey, leave ample time for questions and answers, and include sessions that help the

Education

policies and procedures, political issues within the state, and employee contract cycles were important. In addition, new board members stressed their desire to better understand their own role in helping the college to fulfill its mission.

In the study, however, we found new board members overwhelmingly said that the board-development activities coordinated by their institutions were inadequate, both in content and usefulness. They frequently noted that the single orientation day at the beginning of their term was overwhelming and confusing—and that the orientation process should be much more than a metaphorical carousel ride around the institution with stops at the different functional areas of the college.

The trustees often commented that, while they had information regarding students, faculty, operations, and functional areas of the administration, as well as the higher education system, the relevancy of this information and how it related to the responsibilities of the board was lacking. Both new and seasoned trustees indicated that if the board-development information was not contextualized and made relevant to their specific roles at the institution, they found it difficult to comprehend.

Study participants emphasized that board-development activities should be offered consistently, even quarterly throughout the year. They also stressed the advantages of attending meetings of state and national associations to expand their knowledge—that such meetings opened their eyes to the larger con-

text from which to view their new roles and allowed them to compare notes about vital issues with trustees at other institutions.

The study suggests that whether trustee information programs are labeled as board-development activities, orientation, or training is of no consequence. In general, such programs should focus on the following elements: (1) growth in the individual's understanding of trusteeship, (2) knowledge and understanding of the operation of the institution and the constituents it serves, (3) awareness of state and federal policies and trends relevant to higher education institutions, and (4) development of the board as a cohesive, high-performing group.

In addition, we also have concluded that paying particular attention and adhering to adult learning principles while crafting the program presentation can be beneficial for the trustees and, in turn, for the institution. Most learning theorists generally accept that adults learn differently than people under the age of 18 years. Malcolm S. Knowles, a former professor at Boston University and executive director of the Adult Education Association of the United States—and probably the leading adult-learning scholar—has put forth some key tenets, among them that adults need to know why they are learning something (i.e., its relevancy to the situation) and then how to apply this knowledge. This relevancy-oriented requirement of adult learners is very pertinent to trustees because they must understand in a short period of time massive amounts of college-related data

and information. According to Knowles, contextualization of information also helps people to create meaning by linking new ideas or concepts to prior knowledge or experiences.

Thus, based on the study findings, we recommend that institutions:

- Provide regularly scheduled board-development activities for board members. Adults learn by repetition. Rarely is anything new learned effectively with only one exposure to the information.
- Offer real-world examples and connect the relevance of the data and information to the decisions, policies, and strategic plans needed to benefit the college.
- Add context: Connect the content of orientation and education programs to the board members' knowledge/experiences.

Those with whom we spoke reinforced the notion that the quality of board-development activities board members receive before assuming their seats and throughout their tenure is of paramount importance to each institution. One might say that a predictor of the board's effectiveness tomorrow is the regularity and quality of the board-development activities provided today.

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new trustee acclimate to the board itself, not just the institution. Longin thinks orientation should be the responsibility of the board's committee on governance. He also advocates that formal orientation continue well into the board member's second year of service, with continued contact during that time with a strong mentor on the board.

Effective orientation "comes down to storytelling," Swanson says. At Augustana, he suggests, "one of the goals is to help

trustees find their place in our 152-year-old story. It's a good story, and one that many of them already have in place as a former student here. But the institution is not what it was in the 1960s or 1970s. And it needs them as much now if not more than it did then. So it's about sharing the story, and you can't do that in a morning."

"You have to help people find their place in the story," Swanson says. "And if you haven't done that, don't expect high-performance engagement from them." ■

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T'SHIP LINKS: Susan Whealler Johnston, Martha W. Summerville, and Charlotte Roberts, "The Changing Landscape of Trustee and Board Engagement." July/August 2010. Louis R. Charpentier, "Trustee Orientation Is Only the Start of Ongoing Education and Engagement." January/February 2008.