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# A Little Supervision is a Good Thing


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# A Little Supervision is a Good Thing

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Periodically we consult with universities abroad about issues of academic governance because together we bring scholarship on governance and experience in national and institutional policy to bear on questions about academic freedom, mission, and regulation. In the midst of this work, we sometimes are asked questions that require us to go back to the basic tenets of how higher education works. A colleague in Central Asia who is steering the creation of a university that hopes to become a world-class research institution recently asked us why any college president would want to share power with a board of trustees. Why would he or she give up the freedom of action enjoyed under a distant ministry of education, which, in some cases, offers presidents or rectors broad authority?

It was a difficult question to respond to because our immediate answers were based on tacitly held assumptions. We believe that the best universities in the world are based on the principles of academic freedom, service to society, and autonomy. Such institutions are free to innovate, free to design their own curricula, and free to make their own hiring decisions.

Drawing on our knowledge of history and our interactions with universities globally, we believe that the best academic institutions in Central Asia and in other parts of the world are, or will be, those that exercise these principles under the oversight of independent boards of trustees or governors. By and large, these institutions can be more innovative, more dynamic, and more productive than those that function as arms of the state, or those that are obliged to follow centrally prescribed norms, or those that must seek approval for the composition of dissertation committees or even changes in course titles.

A rector or college president should see a board as an incredible resource and a source of power, rather than a looming threat. There are at least four dimensions of power that can come from a board: legitimating power, influencing power, intellectual power, and collegial power. We use the word "power" to describe these roles because we see these responsibilities as significant means to shape and steer the life and work of an institution.

**Legitimating power.** The presence of boards means that there is less of a need for oversight or regulation of a university's educational mission by a central ministry or even a provincial education agency, especially if there is little state finance involved. Presidents who are entrepreneurial and creative embrace this sort of freedom. A board ensures that the authority vested in institutional

leaders is used for the public good. This legitimates the academic and programmatic decisions of the institution's administration and faculty. It does not leave programmatic decisions to state planners and finance officials.

The Malaysian government has begun a gradual process of autonomy for its five leading research universities, expecting them to increase quality and contribute to economic growth. A key step for each one is to create a board of directors to address long-term strategic matters and charge a faculty senate with making academic decisions. This legitimates a shift of decision making out of the national ministry to the institutions, where response times to changes in economic demand, social expectations, and technology will be faster and hopefully more effective.

**Influencing power.** Boards are indispensable partners in "friend raising." That is, broadening the circle of individuals who are aware of the good work the institution does. This is important for establishing and maintaining the good name and even prestige of a university. It is also an important foundation for fund raising. Often board members can cut through red tape by using their influence and connections on behalf of the institution. For example, they can get access to lawmakers and officials to advocate for new policies.

Queen's University, in Canada, has developed a board that excels at fund raising and friend raising by having six members of its governing council elected by graduates and seven members elected by private benefactors and donors. This arrangement fosters stronger relationships with these important constituencies and recognizes their value to the university. It also ensures that the board does not become isolated and insulated but instead is responsive to wider networks of potential supporters.

**Intellectual power.** Effective presidents see their boards as incredibly important partners in long-term institutional planning. Board members have expertise in a variety of areas, including strategic planning, legal issues, health care, curricular development, and marketing. No president has all of these competencies. The Aga Khan University, for example, has on its board a member of the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council, whose expertise is important because one of the university's goals is to strengthen health sciences in the region.

It is important to note that board oversight does not mean micromanaging. When boards meet, they may review the institution's finances and discuss and approve significant projects, like new programs, schools, or buildings. However, the president and his or her senior administration work collaboratively with other constituent groups, especially the faculty, in making daily decisions and enacting policies. In short, having a board does not diminish a president's power in day-to-day affairs.

Collegial power. Boards are an important support to presidents. Being an academic leader can be a difficult, lonely, and, at times, thankless task, particularly when hard decisions have to be made. Certainly the president of an institution and its board members will have their disagreements, but a board that has worked closely with a president can stand behind him or her in tough times. Board members act as colleagues and peers in the craft of guiding a university. Board support lends credibility to presidential decisions and can offer assurances that they are consonant with the institution's mission when external criticism arises. In this respect, the board serves as a court of last appeal.

In sum, boards assume a range of important roles. They establish the legitimacy of the president through the selection process and assessment during his or her tenure. They are partners in long-range planning. They help spread word of the university's initiatives. They secure valuable resources and are staunch advocates. They share their expertise. Most important, they monitor adherence to mission and values by the institution as a whole.

As we described these potential benefits, our colleague from Central Asia listened to us patiently and thoughtfully, nodded, and then asked, "And they do this for free? You don't pay them?"

Apart from good seats at the occasional football game and middling salmon dinners, there are few benefits and no pay. The reward is contributing to the development of a society with institutions that are self-governing and free to grow and change as they serve others through creating and sharing knowledge. And that is the beauty of a little supervision.

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