



collaborative on academic
careers in higher education

Engaging Trustees and Regents

Academic administrators regularly and rightly remind their boards of trustees or regents that the quality of a college or university and the vitality of the faculty are very tightly linked. In turn, most trustees recognize that the vitality of the faculty requires that institutions create an attractive and supportive work environment. In particular, colleges must be able to recruit and retain a talented and diverse stream of "new blood" for the faculty. Despite the importance administrators and trustees assign to this objective, boards rarely discuss the topic.

COACHE reports offer presidents, provosts, and deans the opportunity to engage trustees at an appropriate policy level in conversations about the quality of work life for the faculty that represent the institution's academic future and its current reality. There are two potentially productive lines of inquiry.

In the first mode, management educates the board about major themes that emerged from COACHE data and from benchmark comparisons with the institution's peer group. The Chief Academic Officer Report can be further distilled to highlight for trustees the overall or global levels of satisfaction; specific aspects of work/life that faculty consider most agreeable and most problematic; significant disparities by race, gender, or rank; and trends over time. In short order—and with free-text comments selected to drive home key points—trustees will have keener insight into the organizational environment and personal experiences of faculty, as well as a deeper appreciation for management's commitment and game plan to make the institution a great place to work.

The second mode, which may be even more profitable, turns the tables. Here, trustees educate the administration. As academic leaders contemplate appropriate responses to the challenges and concerns that faculty confront, board members can be a valuable resource. Whether as corporate executives or senior partners in firms (e.g., law, medicine, consulting, and engineering), many trustees also have to create, if only for competitive reasons, diverse and equitable work environments responsive to the preferences and lifestyles of new generations of professionals. While the circumstances are not identical, the fundamental challenges are not terribly different: clarity of performance expectations; professional fulfillment; work-family balance; collegial culture; and inclusivity, to name a few.

With COACHE data as context, trustees can share successful (and unsuccessful) strategies, policies, and practices intended to improve work satisfaction and vitality, whether for relatively young newcomers, midcareer professionals, or seasoned veterans at the company or firm. What did you try, and to what effect? What did you learn? This line of inquiry could well yield some innovative and effective initiatives that can be adapted to academe, and the discussion will reinforce the board's role as a source of intellectual capital and as active participants in consequential conversations.

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