

# The Providence Journal

## Leo I. Higdon Jr.: College president-trustee relationship

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### NEW LONDON – AT CONNECTICUT

**COLLEGE**, today marks not only the graduation of seniors but also the celebration of trustees whose terms are ending. Among the departing trustees this year are two women with a combined service on the board of 22 years and who have been among the staunchest supporters of the institution. They have played critical roles in my ability to hit the ground running as president. This transition makes me reflect on what it takes to have a good and productive relationship between a chief executive and the board.

This question has never been so important for nonprofits — and indirectly for the people whose generosity funds the work of the nonprofits. Increasingly, nonprofit boards are being held to standards of responsibility that originated in the private sector. The positive result is that boards of trustees are more interested, engaged and involved than ever before. The question is, however, how to ensure that this new level of engagement does not devolve into micro-management of the institution, or the board infringing on the work and responsibilities of the chief executive.

Further, in today's closely regulated environment, requirements that purport to be good governance can potentially overwhelm everything else and result in governing by checklist. Board members must maintain an ability to focus on real issues and exercise their fiduciary responsibilities and good judgment — that's where they provide real value to the organization.

I have been fortunate to inherit a board with strong engagement in the college — 84 percent are alumni and 19 percent are parents of students — as well as a history of supporting the college generously. The board at Connecticut College also has some unusual structures, including three young alumni trustees, chosen by their student peers from among the last three graduating classes, and liaison committees that bring together trustees and students, and trustees and faculty directly. These features could blur the line between fiduciary responsibility and day-to-day management, but they have not and I ask myself why this is so. The answer is the quality of the relationship between the trustees and me, which is grounded in:

- Frequent communications, with particular attention focused on issues that can influence the financial health and reputation of the institution.
- Clear understanding by the trustees of the separate spheres of responsibility of the administration and board.
- A shared vision for the college.
- A well-defined strategic plan.
- Annual plans that lay out specific goals for the institution and my personal commitment to reach them.

- Annual assessments of my performance by the board, assessments that are structured around the year's goals.
- Strong relationships between individual administrators and trustees: The trustees know and trust my management team. I foster this by crediting individual administrators for the accomplishments of their divisions and having them present to the full board on topics from their areas, rather than trying to do it all myself.

When I first came to Connecticut College, the college had a highly comprehensive strategic plan that all of the college's constituencies had been involved in writing and ratifying. However, the plan was so all-encompassing that it was difficult for trustees, particularly those new to the board, to articulate the priorities of the college.

A huge part of my first year on the job was to work with all the constituencies, including the board, to narrow down the strategic plan to an actionable set of priorities and then from there create a set of one-year steps toward achieving that better defined set of goals.

Our next step is to translate those goals into a set of campaign goals and to make sure that everyone on the board (or anywhere else in the institution) can reel off the key major initiatives we are aiming for: leadership in science education, internationalization of the curriculum, greater integration between the academic program and residential life, and increased investments in financial aid to ensure that we can continue to enroll the best possible students, regardless of their family income.

If you're looking for evidence that an institution is well-managed, look for the widespread ability to articulate goals and explain concrete steps that are being taken toward them. Read the institution's strategic plan and annual report with this in mind. If they seem to be parts of the same whole, then you know that the strategic plan is not just paper on a dusty shelf but the real guiding light of the institution. That suggests a board of trustees and president working in sync.

With an annual budget approaching \$113 million and an endowment of \$225 million, Connecticut College is larger than most nonprofits. But even if you are serving on a small local board, the principles are the same: open communication, unity of purpose, mutual respect for the separate spheres of responsibility, and accountability for the chief executive. If you can find these things in a nonprofit, no matter what its size, you know that it is on the right track.

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