Seminary governance in challenging times: a checklist of 10 lessons learned at 21 schools

By Eliza Smith Brown

On May 16 and 17, The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) gathered representatives from 21 member schools who had participated in a nine-month project to examine governance challenges they wanted to tackle. Throughout the academic year, each school committed a team consisting of at least one administrator, one faculty member, and one board representative, who worked together with the guidance of a peer coach drawn from the ranks of veteran ATS school leaders. At this, their final gathering, participants conferred with one another and shared the lessons they learned through the process.

The collective learnings of the school teams serve to both affirm established notions of good governance and challenge the status quo with emerging ideas. They offered no particular surprises but rather a series of recurring themes that, taken together, constitute a checklist of 10 lessons that those concerned with seminary governance should keep in mind:

1 Mission is the most important driving force in good governance.

Along with mission goes the notion of institutional vocation. All stakeholders should be conversant with the mission and engage it as a touchstone for evaluating the alignment of decision making with the school's core purpose. Stephen Graham, ATS senior director of programs and services, sees this as foundational as "theological schools find ways to make the case for their value, within society and within their own institutions." From strategic planning to curriculum development to facilities management to development of the faculty handbook, decisions boil down to what kind of an institution a school aspires to be. According to Daniel Aleshire, ATS executive director, when thinking about what matters in good governance, "It's not the buildings. It's not the programs. It's not even the people. It's the mission."

2 Personal relationships and trust are critical to success.

As one faculty member said in reference to the relationship between faculty and trustees, "We have an ethical obligation to know each other." "Relationships can help overcome a poor structure," Graham added. "A great structure can mitigate some relational issues, but structure cannot fully overcome obstacles without relationships." To that end, Sioux Falls Seminary has added a third board meeting at which board members and faculty dispense with the usual reports and focus solely on strategy and space for relationship building.

3 Each constituency needs to be clear on its authority, responsibilities, and expectations.

For board members, this can translate into not only a careful recruiting process but also a robust program of orientation that sets forth the complexity of theological education in general and the idiosyncrasies of an individual context in particular. At Providence Theological Seminary, the governance team collaborated this past year on a board orientation curriculum that identifies specific milestones of engagement at and between board meetings to define how new board members will develop in relationship with the school. The stated expectations should include an explicit philosophy of governance that clarifies the intersection between management and the roles of all other stakeholders, including denominational or ecclesial bodies, where applicable. A visual representation of the structure can be especially helpful in communicating the roles and relationships. The expectations should also include giving parameters that each prospective board member should consider before signing on. Advisory committees can serve as a helpful proving ground for prospective board members.

4 Communications need to be frequent, broad-based, and articulated in a common language.

Sometimes good communications habits are born of crisis, but they should be maintained even after the crisis has passed. Among the suggestions forwarded were monthly communications from the president, complete with dashboard metrics and strategic updates, and even a monthly prayer letter. Regular reporting between meetings not only builds trust, but it also promotes board engagement and allows for more generative thinking when the board meets face to face.

5 Establishment of basic practices and processes helps to ensure a consistent and sustainable governance structure that is more readily passed along to the next group of stewards.

Putting processes in writing supports good governance, and documenting board deliberations and actions through thorough minutes and disposition lists enables the board to track implementation of past decisions.

Participating Member Schools

Abilene Christian University

Ambrose Seminary at Ambrose University

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary

Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School

Concordia Lutheran Seminary

Denver Seminary

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University

Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

Institut de formation Theologique de Montreal

Knox College

Lexington Theological Seminary

Lincoln Christian University

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary of California Lutheran University

Pacific School of Religion

Providence Theological Seminary

Saint Paul University Faculty of Theology

Sioux Falls Seminary

St. John's University School of Theology and Seminary

Tyndale University College & Seminary

6 Don't wait for a crisis to improve governance processes.

The ATS precis for this governance project maintains that "some systems that have worked well in the past are not working as well as they used to, and other systems that work well in stable times are strained in periods of rapid or substantive change." Sometimes it takes a report or focused visit required by the ATS Board of Commissioners to call attention to a systemic governance issue. But a proactive, careful assessment of how responsibilities are distributed and how decisions are made can catch issues before they come before the accreditors or cause more public problems.

7 Look ahead.

Boards should work closely with their administrators and faculty to stay abreast of current trends in theological education and to anticipate the next change/challenge on the horizon. "We should be focused not only on securing what we already have, but also in working toward thriving innovation for the future . . . ." suggested a faculty member from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. "We need to be incubating ideas together," added a Garrett trustee. "What does governance mean in a time of change? What other kind of time is there? We always govern in times of change, and we have to reconcile ourselves to that," said Dennis Smid, a board member at St. John's University School of Theology and Seminary.

8 ATS standards serve as a useful benchmark for evaluating governance structures and processes.

Standard 7 of the ATS General Institutional Standards begins with "Governance is based on a bond of trust among boards, administration, faculty, students, and ecclesial bodies." It then sets forth the normative expectations regarding how institutional stewardship and authority are distributed among the board, the administration, the faculty, and the students. Keep in mind, however, that effective governance requires a shift in thinking from simply satisfying a standard to focusing on becoming a better seminary.

9 Be nimble enough to respond to changing times with appropriate adjustments in governance structures.

For instance, when not specified by your school's bylaws, the number of standing committees can be streamlined, responding to immediate priorities with targeted task forces that are assembled to solve a particular problem and then disbanded. Smid reported that his school responded to its declining student population by pulling enrollment out of the academic affairs department and assigning a special committee to focus on the issue. Stuart Macdonald, a faculty member who serves on the board at Knox College, shared that his working group was surprised to learn that it is possible to complete a project around a key issue in a one-year period—a model the school plans to use again in the future.

10 This work is never done.

Aleshire pointed out that many of the issues that schools are dealing with have been the same issues they faced when the Association was founded 100 years ago. And with ongoing turnover in faculty and board members, the relationships of trust and common understandings they work to establish must be continually nurtured and developed. "Good governance takes time. It's a journey, not a destination," said Amy Kardash, president of the In Trust Center for Theological Schools.

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