

# What works? Three lessons for seminary governance

By BARBARA WHEELER



Governance can be messy business. The media are full of stories about failed relationships and public conflicts among boards, administrators, and faculty. Too often, one of those stories is about a theological school. What can be done to promote good governance and prevent incidents that land on the front page of the higher education press?

According to the best-known theory of governance, developed by John and Miriam Carver for both commercial and nonprofit boards, the key to governing effectively and avoiding disasters is boundaries. The Carver model calls for all parties in the governance equation to understand and adhere to their roles, with powers and responsibilities clearly delineated, thereby minimizing the potential for conflict.

My observation, over several decades of working with and studying theological schools, is that—for us—nearly

the opposite is true. Yes, some of the Carvers' basic principles hold true for seminaries. Governors should focus on broad policy matters and on forging a strategic direction fitted to the institution's context, rather than on the details of administration and educational programming. Administrators and faculty members must accept the fact that governing authorities make the final decisions in any area that they have not delegated to the administration or the faculty. It is essential to clarify lines of accountability and domains of responsibility. But design by itself doesn't create effective governance. The best governance systems involve good designs but also careful but very creative line-crossing, toward the end of building a durable culture that binds together, in solid relationships, all the parties in the governance equation. So what works? Consider these case studies:

At "Smithtown Seminary," a freestanding institution related to a mainline Protestant denomination, a new president faced major challenges. He knew he was

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viewed by some as a fish out of water. Unlike his predecessors, he was neither a graduate of the school nor an academic. He had served as a pastor of a large church in a different region from the one this school served. The board of the school, he discovered on arrival, was deeply

divided. Some were strong supporters of the previous president but others, a bare majority, had disapproved of that president's autocratic style and had nudged him into an early retirement.

Inside, the school was not a happy place. The previous president, though a teacher and a scholar, viewed the faculty with suspicion and even hostility once he came into office. Senior administrators were on a tight leash, and the predecessor had imposed Carveresque norms for governance. All communications to and from the board were funneled through him. Board, senior administrators, and faculty did their work in well-insulated silos. Morale in all sectors of the school was very low.

The new president began by meeting with each board member to identify those with a deep and genuine commitment to the school. He asked these board members to remain, to help in healing the rift among its members, and to suggest persons who could be added to make the board stronger. He was careful to recruit for longer-term service members whose views were different from his own and from those of board majority, but who expressed a willingness to pull together for the good of the seminary. Then, he broke down the firewall between the board and the school. He invited his team of senior administrators to report to the board in person and to form relationships with board members. He told them that he trusted their judgment and their ability to figure out what should be run by him before being taken to the board. He invited board members to consult with him as he hired new senior staff. Productive relationships developed between

board members and administrators and, in 2008, the chief financial officer and chair of the board finance committee collaborated to demonstrate to the president the benefits of taking quick action to preserve the resources of the school. Together, the three of them convinced the board to make immediate cuts pegged to what might be the new financial normal for the future.

Things did not go quite so smoothly with the faculty. They did come to recognize that, although the president lacked a PhD, he had real intellectual gifts and they appreciated the climate of warm collegiality that he fostered inside the school and beyond. But when

staff cuts had to be made in 2008, they felt they had been inadequately consulted, and there was a protest. The president and his by-now unified board did not retreat into an adversarial position. They stood by their decisions. At the same time, however, they met with the faculty, heard them out, and made some governance

changes—adding a faculty observer to the budget and finance committee, for instance, to give the faculty perspective on the school's fiduciary needs.

"Schuyler Seminary" is an evangelical school, also free-standing, with what its board members describe as a culture of governance fostered by strong and warm partnerships between a series of talented presidents and highly respected board chairs. In recent years, these chair/president teams have focused on three projects: fundraising that has yielded sacrificial board giving; clear and unvarnished reporting about the state of the school vis à vis its own goals and the wider enterprise of theological education; and board education about the



*Participants gather in their school teams at the recent Addressing Governance Issues and Advancing Governance Practices conference in Pittsburgh.*

school's program. The president and board chair make as many opportunities as possible for board and faculty members to interact. They urge faculty to be themselves, to share their real views and values, including those that some board members might find challenging. Not all board members agree with all faculty, but honesty in the exchanges lays down a groundwork of confidence in one another's integrity.

The result is good relationships and a degree of mutual regard high enough to hold up under stress. Recently, after hearing all those truthful reports, the board decided that, without changes to the format and length of programs, enrollment in this tuition-driven school would continue to decline to unsustainable levels. They did not dictate what educational designs those changes should entail, only that programs had to be more accessible to attract more students. The faculty did not welcome what they knew this directive would require—shorter degree programs, more compact scheduling, greater online access—but they knew that the board would not ask for modifications if the situation weren't serious. So they set to work and produced the revisions.

## ***Lesson 1: Diverse perspectives***

For institutions that can choose or influence the choice of their governing bodies, look for board members who not only care about the school and its mission but also who bring diverse perspectives—theological, political, organizational—and who can work with those from whom they differ. The board should reflect the range of views in the school's constituency, not the president's nor the board chair's ideological preferences. All its members also have to be persons who care more about the good of the school than winning battles for their sides. "The strength of this board," said one Smithtown trustee, "is that we can disagree without being disagreeable."

## ***Lesson 2: Trusting relationships***

The stronger the relationships in place before a crisis, the better the chance that wise decisions will be

hammered out and that the pain of difficult decisions can be constructively managed. When adversity strikes, board, staff, faculty, president, university provost or president, and archbishop all do a better job, it turns out, not if they stay out of one another's way, but if they know, respect, and are practiced at working closely and developing a deep deposit of trust on which to draw when things get tough. It's not good fences but good connecting paths and bridges that make good governance neighbors—at least in our kinds of institutions.

## ***Lesson 3: Honesty***

Presidents, administrators, and faculty are often tempted to entertain those who have ultimate power in the institution—regaling them with upbeat reports and heartwarming stories and concealing the difficulties—on the premise that insiders can solve their problems better without interference. But as the story of Schuyler Seminary demonstrates, it's the very well informed board that the faculty trusts, and it's faculty who have shown the board what they really think and teach—even if some board members at first find it jarring—who earn the board's confidence and respect.

These principles can be applied in embedded and church-controlled schools as well. In those settings, the theological school usually has nothing to say about who will govern it, but those governors, whether university administrators and trustees, board members of a college/seminary combination, or a church official or church board, can be kept as close as possible—given regular, candid reports about the state of the school and invited into its life. One dean of an embedded institution constantly prods her faculty and administrative staff to get involved in the life of the university, telling her colleagues, "It's all about relationships. The better they know us and the more we have pitched in for the good of the whole, the more they will love us when budget-making time comes around."

Governance is not a free-for-all. It requires clear lines of authority and territories of responsibility. But a solid structure by itself is not enough. Structures have to be

held together by threads of honest communication and relational glue. So here are maxims for those who lead theological schools: Insofar as it depends on you, look for the right people to serve in governing roles—committed to the school more than to a party or ideology, collegial, and representing a range of perspectives. Whether you have a part in choosing your governors or not, tell them the whole truth about the school, about gaps, failures, and threats and well as positive trends and triumphs. And most of all: forge open and respectful relationships, at every opportunity, among governors, administration, and faculty. More than any other feature of governance, such relationships will serve your school well in good times and hard ones too.



*Barbara Wheeler is the former director of the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education and director of the recently published study, [“Governance That Works: Effective Leadership for Theological Schools.”](#) This article was abridged from a presentation she made at the Addressing Governance Issues and Advancing Governance Practices conference in Pittsburgh earlier this month.*