

Presidents Hear Tips on Choosing Trustees and an Offer on Recruiting Them

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Small colleges may have trouble finding trustees of the quality they need to sustain and strengthen their institutions, so many presidents welcomed the news, announced at the Council of Independent Colleges conference here on Monday, that a new nonprofit foundation will start offering pro bono trustee-search services in July.

Robert H. Perry, founder of the Washington-based search firm R.H. Perry & Associates, said that he was establishing a nonprofit organization, the R.H. Perry Foundation, that would provide such services, mainly for small, financially needy colleges. The tools it will offer will include online databases that will gather the names and profiles of people interested in becoming trustees, he said.

College presidents have an odd relationship with their governing boards, which makes recruitment especially challenging, Stephen R. Briggs, president of Berry College, in Georgia, said at the opening of the session at which the new foundation was announced. The board hires the president, yet the president shapes the board, Mr. Briggs said. The trustees expect the president to be an aggressive fund raiser, yet the trustees are often major sources of financial support for an institution.

Presidents of liberal-arts colleges who attended the session on trustee recruitment expressed great interest in Mr. Perry's foundation, but some wondered about his motives. Mr. Perry said that the foundation and his for-profit search firm would remain completely separate organizations, and that he would not draw a salary from the foundation for several years. He said he is still raising money for it.

"There is no ulterior motive or business motive," he said in an interview after the session. "The greatest satisfaction I could have is to leave a legacy to strengthen board governance."

Small colleges face huge difficulties today, Mr. Perry said, and they need the smartest leadership possible. "I think about seven private, independent liberal-arts schools go under every year. If those colleges had a stronger board, maybe they wouldn't have gone under."

He acknowledged that there could be a huge demand for free search services, and said that he might have to turn away public two- and four-year colleges at first.

Pluses and Minuses of Alumni Trustees

Mr. Perry shared his session with two presidents who discussed what they look for in recruiting trustees. John F. Brennan, of Green Mountain College, in Vermont, detailed the turnover on his board over the past several years.

The board once featured a number of alumni. Mr. Brennan has worked to recruit nonalumni professionals from accounting, banking, construction, law, public relations, and other fields so he could draw on their expertise. Trustees from the legal profession, for example, proved useful when the college faced a \$6-million lawsuit recently. The college, which has won attention and praise for its efforts at sustainability, has attracted the president of an alternative-energy company to its board.

Joan Develin Coley, president of McDaniel College, in Maryland, focused on the strengths and weaknesses of alumni trustees. Clearly, alumni are devoted to their institutions and bring energy to their posts because of that, she said. Alumni carry a sense of tradition, and they can "provide cover" when traditions need to change, Ms. Coley noted. When the college decided to change its name from Western Maryland College, Ms. Coley was able to tell alumni that the alumni trustees supported the decision.

On the downside, alumni can resist necessary change and may lack the skills that a college board requires.

Ms. Coley said that her board, which comprises about 45 people, recently attracted some members who include nonwhite people, alumni, and people under 45.

When Mr. Perry retook the podium, he said it was understandable why so many alumni sit on boards "for the connections that they have to colleges. But he added: "I submit that many alumni are on boards for the wrong reasons. They are a friend of a friend," or "as a reward for giving money; they have an impressive title, or even just live nearby. I suggest that a preponderance of alumni may render a board insular, circumscribed, and detached in outlook and experience."

Recently, he said, he discussed his new foundation with the board chair at a major university, where 70 percent of the more than 40 board members were alumni. According to Mr. Perry, the board chair said that among all those trustees, not one understood board governance.

Mr. Perry wanted to make one point about his foundation clear, though. "Our effort is not against alumni. Rather it is to find the right alumni."