The Faculty Trustee: Bridging Two Worlds

BY MARGARET MARY POLICASTRO

TAKEAWAYS

1. Faculty members typically have few opportunities to understand the full scope of trustees’ responsibilities and the work they do for institutions.

2. When faculty can appreciate the work of trustees and trustees appreciate the role of faculty, important bridges between the two worlds can result.

3. Faculty trustees can be a powerful tool in helping educate other faculty about trustee responsibility and governance.

AT THE END OF MY 25TH YEAR OF TEACHING AT Roosevelt University, I was elected by the faculty senate as a faculty representative on the board of trustees. At Roosevelt University this means that you are a full voting member, with a three-year term. My university probably is unique in that the senate elects five faculty trustees to the 57-member board.

The notion of including elected faculty representatives on the board of trustees at Roosevelt originated with its founding president, Edward Sparling, in 1945 and earned the university considerable national attention then as one of the most heterogeneous boards in the country. Faculty representation is one of several factors that produced a rich and diverse board over the years and now, more than 60 years later, Roosevelt is still a leader in this regard with five faculty trustees, plus two student trustees.

Having faculty serve on college and university governing boards is still a subject of great debate. In 1961, the American Association of University Professors reported that only 28 institutions in the country had faculty representatives on their governing boards. In 1997, AGB indicated that 10.7 percent of boards of independent institutions included faculty as voting members and 5 percent or fewer public institutions had voting faculty trustees on their boards. In surveys published in 2004, AGB reported that 13.2 percent of the private institutions surveyed included the head of a faculty/staff council as a voting representative on their boards, compared with 4.3 percent of the public institutions surveyed.

I would argue that when faculty can appreciate the work of trustees and trustees appreciate the work of faculty, an important framework for bridging worlds can be established. That is the basis of my perspective as faculty trustee.

Evolving from Faculty Member to Trustee

Having taught at the university for 25 years, I thought I knew how Roosevelt University was governed. I had watched deans in action, had seen provosts make many decisions, had served on just about every Roosevelt University committee that existed, and had even served in administrative roles such as chair of a department and director of a program. Having experienced so many facets of the university, including growth, program expansion, development of a second campus, I thought I had been a part of it all. What could I possibly learn about governance that I hadn’t already experienced firsthand?
As I pondered what my new role would entail, I assumed it would be to enlighten the trustees about my life—the world of a professor. What I was about to find out, though, was not at all what I had anticipated.

Before starting my new position as a faculty trustee, I had had brief encounters with other faculty trustees and had listened to their reports in the university senate, so I thought I understood my role. After my election to the board, an outgoing faculty trustee told me that I would learn a lot, and another told me that the outside trustees asked a lot of questions of the faculty trustees and that their questions were generally sincere and represented an authentic desire for information. I was informed that these questions would arise during discussions that had direct implications for faculty and that they often centered on academic life.

Some time after the orientation for new trustees, I read that trusteeship is something that is developed and evolves. I wasn’t at all sure what that meant. However, as I look back now, indeed it was, and still is, an evolving process.

Early on as a faculty trustee, I thought my role was to be a champion for my college, department, territory, etc. And in fact, that was the basis of many of my first interactions with other trustees and of my initial contributions during trustees’ meetings. Furthermore, having an opportunity to get the president’s attention, I made sure to voice my every complaint, suggestion, and opinion. I had ideas I needed to communicate regarding every facet of my department. I made sure that my voice was heard regarding everything having to do with my territory. I wanted to let the president know everything that needed fixing, from my personal perspective.

In retrospect, as a dedicated and long-term member of the faculty, this was the ground I knew best. Of course, it was the natural and logical place to begin my venture as a trustee, in my view. As a rookie trustee, where else would I begin?

I recognized my trusteeship as a shifting role one day, though, when I saw new faculty trustees coming in and doing the same sort of communicating. It was at that juncture that I was able to stand back and realize that the actions I had been taking were probably not in the best interest of the board or of the university. The role is much larger than just protecting department turf. I saw, for the first time, the greater picture and my role as an official of Roosevelt University.

Perhaps I had that epiphany because by then I had attended several board strategic-planning meetings. In those sessions, I began to get the bigger picture of what being a trustee entailed. I heard planning reports and presentations about ideas that had been in the works for quite awhile. I was bowled over by the amount of time, effort, and energy that each report entailed, and I was overwhelmed by the amount of work that trustees put into their jobs. I realized what the board members did to prepare before they actually arrived at a meeting.

I can’t remember at what point I finally was able to walk into board meetings and feel like all the other trustees arriving from their jobs, lives, etc. But eventually I arrived from my work at Roosevelt ready to take on different work as a trustee who also happened to be a faculty member. I do remember feeling the shift in how I was perceived, though. Trustees now invited me into conversations and wholeheartedly listened when I talked, even seeking me out for further follow-up.

As I reflect back over my three years, it turns out that I was the one who became enlightened in so many ways, rather than me doing the enlightening. In the course of my tenure, I began to see new worlds of information regarding governance. It is as if in universities there are two doors: one that leads to the faculty world and another that leads to the trustee world. Faculty members have little opportunity to be invited into the trustee world. The door isn’t often open and when it is opened, it is for faculty to give a performance or a lecture to the trustees. Faculty members have little opportunity to interact with trustees other than at commencements and convocations. For trustees, their view of the faculty world is often drawn from their own college and university experiences. Others have children in college and often make inferences from that perspective. It has been interesting to observe how little each trustee or faculty member typically knows about the other’s role.

Another defining moment for me as a trustee was attending my first AGB Conference on Trusteeship, in Orlando, at the end of my first year as a trustee. In one meeting, after I identified myself as a faculty trustee, I was surrounded by other non-faculty trustees asking me questions about my role. Those trustees, as well as presidents and other attendees, were quite curious about my life as a faculty trustee. Most often the assumption was that I didn’t have a vote, held a one-year position, and basically had little involvement as a “real” trustee. They also thought that as a faculty trustee, I would not be invited into an executive session of the board. As I shared my experiences about being a full voting member and being invited to some executive sessions, I could see the distance between where I was and where these trustees were. It reinforced my view that Roosevelt University was indeed very unusual in how it handled its governance involving faculty.

The conference was another benchmark in my ever-evolving role in trusteeship. I had no idea of the scope and spectrum of information available. I attended a workshop for new trustees and found that it provided important new knowledge. For the first time, I saw trusteeship as a discipline unto itself. I couldn’t stop listening, reading, and pouring over every document that I received. Perhaps having been in my discipline for over 35 years, I was ready to assimilate new and interesting content, to fold it into what I had already gained in my 35 years of teaching and 25 years in higher education. It seemed that each board experience brought forth new ideas and concepts that I was eager to learn more about.

Making My Voice Count
As a member of the trusteeship committee of the board, I observed and listened for a year during our meetings. I was intrigued to learn about how members were nominated,
interviewed, and invited to join the board. At the end of my first year, I realized that I knew good people I could nominate as non-faculty trustees. I took a risk; I nominated two people and spent the next two years following up. At this point, I’m pleased to report that these two nominees will be voted on at our next board meeting. I was fascinated during the entire nomination process. One name I put forth was that of a former student of mine whom I knew could represent valuable perspectives on the board as an alumus and a successful businessman. The second nominee was a lawyer and advocate for children whom I have worked with as a parent volunteer. Watching her in action as an advocate for children who struggle with learning, I felt her mission aligned with Roosevelt’s mission of social justice.

In winter 2007, Richard Legon, AGB’s president, made a presentation to our committee on trusteeship. In his talk, he mentioned that a university is only as good at its board; I wasn’t sure what exactly he meant. Now, having been a part of the nomination process for three years and watching firsthand how trustees are selected, I have a much better idea of what this means. As the nominees that I put forth are now being elected to the board, I believe that my contributions will help shape the future of my university for many years to come. Going onto the board, I never imagined that I could leave such a legacy as part of my work as a faculty trustee.

**Bridging Faculty and Trustee Roles**

After my first few months on the job as a faculty trustee, the board chairman brought together the faculty trustees and asked if we would be willing to meet with the president on a routine basis to discuss important issues. This idea has turned into monthly meetings of the faculty trustees with the president. We have no agenda, meet for at least an hour and a half, and have open time for discussion of all sorts of topics. This open line of communication has resulted overall in enhanced partnerships. This idea often surprises people attending AGB meetings. The question most often raised: How could a president have time to do this?

Over the past three years, several other efforts have developed to bring faculty and trustees into more contact. Each board meeting has a presentation from a faculty member; these have included faculty sharing their research and other scholarly accomplishments. Faculty trustees now are invited to attend the interviewing process for the final candidates when a vice presidential position is filled. By the same token, non-faculty trustees have been invited to the final interviews with candidates for deanships. Each of these endeavors has brought forth better communication. Our board chairman in many respects is representative of everything that our founding principles stand for. He believes in faculty trustees and makes sure our voices are heard, continually drawing us into conversations. He is an important part of the bridging process.

My years as a trustee have been invigorating and enlightening, and I have enjoyed the entire process of evolving into a true trustee. I have met and developed relationships with kind, hardworking, and wonderful people on the board. Although not many faculty members can have the same experience with trusteeship that I have had, I try to communicate to faculty colleagues in my department and elsewhere my greater understanding of the complicated issues and difficult decisions that face boards, as well as the hard work trustees put in to meet their responsibilities for stewardship.

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