



**Association of International Education Administrators**  
*Leaders in International Higher Education*

Thomas J. Wyly, Ph.D.  
President

and

Earl D. Kellogg, Ph.D.  
Senior Vice President and Chief International Officer

***Strategic Consulting: The Wyly/Kellogg International Group***

27 Van Ness Road  
Belmont, MA 02478

***The Role of Governing Boards in Campus Globalization***

[tomwyly@juno.com](mailto:tomwyly@juno.com)    [ekellogg@illinois.edu](mailto:ekellogg@illinois.edu)

617-489-2673    217-621-3856

## **A B S T R A C T**

The relatively little evidence that exists suggests that with infrequent exceptions, governing boards tend not to be meaningfully engaged in the creation of institutional international affairs strategy, monitoring the results of international initiatives, or collaborating closely with senior international officers (SIOs). Campus globalization may well be the most important strategic issue facing academic institutions regarding which governing boards are likely to be only peripherally engaged. Few governing boards have created dedicated standing committees explicitly charged with providing counsel and oversight to the process of campus internationalization. Moreover, neither the professional associations serving the trustee community nor those assisting international educators have thus far sought to focus particular attention on the questions of governing board leadership regarding globalization and the relationship of trustees with SIOs. A survey prepared by the authors, and directed to SIOs who are members of AIEA, revealed that at responding two-year, four-year, masters-level, and research institutions, governing boards typically do not contribute meaningfully to international affairs strategic planning, proactively serve as a resource to SIOs, systematically monitor the outcomes of international initiatives, foster international relationships, or raise external funds for international undertakings. Moreover, inadequate trustee oversight contributes, among other adverse consequences, to the insufficient integration of international strategy with other institutional priorities, fragmentation and under-funding of international efforts, inadequate support for international initiatives from non-academic offices on campus, and reduced incentive for presidents and provosts to provide international affairs leadership. Trustees often accept international plans in a cursory, after-the-fact manner without providing meaningful prior advice or subsequent review. SIOs, almost regardless of title, are often several organizational levels removed from ongoing interaction with board members, and many rarely meet with their trustees, if at all. Given the substantial international experience of many trustees, the lack of engagement by governing boards in international matters represents a strategic loss to institutions

and an unnecessary disadvantage to SIOs as they pursue the work of promoting institution-wide transformation. SIOs frequently desire greater trustee assistance, especially regarding fund raising for international initiatives, mainstreaming international considerations into existing planning, budgeting, and decision-making processes, and deepening the commitment of administrative and faculty leaders to campus globalization. The authors, experienced administrators and consultants in international matters, offer a variety of practical suggestions to SIOs who wish to collaborate more effectively with trustees, and to secure the support of their presidents and chief academic officers for their doing so in appropriate ways.

## **The Role of Governing Boards in Institutional Globalization**

*Thomas J. Wyly, Ph.D., President, and*

*Earl D. Kellogg, Ph.D., Senior Vice President and Chief International Officer*

***Strategic Consulting: The Wyly/Kellogg International Group***

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### **General overview**

It is axiomatic that any issue a college or university regards as having mission-level significance will sooner or later receive the careful attention of its governing board, perhaps on an ongoing basis. It is unthinkable, for example, that administrators or faculty would proceed very far with matters such as strategic plans, operating budgets, capital campaigns, enrollment management, investments, or new facilities without first obtaining the advice and approval of an institution's trustees. Timely review of strategy, policy, finance, and performance regarding such matters is unmistakably an obligation of trusteeship; presidents and vice presidents would likely incur a governing board's displeasure if they failed to confer with

trustees regarding such issues prior to taking action; and perhaps most important, the breadth and pertinence of the professional experience of trustees often enable them to make important contributions concerning key issues, such that few prudent administrators or faculty, aiming to do what would be best for their institutions, would willingly forego trustee assistance and support.

Regarding the burgeoning globalization of the contemporary American college or university, however, there is little evidence to suggest that governing boards typically provide strategic input and review comparable to their engagement with other important institutional issues. There are very few institutions at which the governing board has created a standing committee to oversee international developments, or explicitly charged another board group, such as the executive committee or academic affairs committee, to do so. Further, in the professional literature addressed to trustees, attention to the role of governing boards in campus internationalization is all but non-existent; so too, scholarly journals directed to international education administrators are also almost completely silent on the subject of collaborating with governing boards. Similarly, association conferences designed to enhance the effectiveness of higher education trustees rarely offer workshops or seminars regarding the board's role in internationalization, or endeavor to educate trustees about important global issues and the role institutions of higher education might play in addressing them, while academic gatherings focusing on the concerns of SIOs seldom offer panels or discussions regarding governing board involvement. Moreover, our own experience, as international affairs administrators and as consultants, working with a variety of academic

institutions, indicates that all too often governing boards play only peripheral or nominal roles in planning and reviewing initiatives designed to promote the international development of their institutions.

*We have become convinced that while there are exceptions, campus globalization may well be the most important strategic issue in American higher education today regarding which trustees are often only minimally involved, and also largely uneducated by their professional associations.* We believe that on the whole, colleges and universities are failing to capitalize on the international experience of their trustees (which not infrequently can be more extensive than that of some senior administrators and faculty), and that SIOs are too often unnecessarily disadvantaged by a lack of strategic collaboration with governing boards. We suspect that because a strategic approach to internationalization encompasses virtually aspect of the work of a college or university—teaching, research, engagement, student recruitment and development, residential life, counseling, professional development, stakeholder relations, fund raising, alumni relations, and so on—internationalization does not fall neatly within the purview of any one traditional board committee: hence without a careful discussion by the board about how it can best provide oversight to a concern that it at once so critical and so far-reaching, it is doubtful that effective trustee supervision of campus internationalization will occur. It is probably also true that some presidents are disinclined to engage trustees about internationalization, even if they appreciate its importance, apprehensive that their boards might become overly preoccupied with legitimate but secondary issues (e.g., the concerns of political figures regarding the

impact of international enrollments on the admission of domestic students, or safety and security issues for faculty and staff traveling abroad).

A general insufficiency of trustee involvement in developing international strategy and in monitoring results contributes, moreover, to a number of further difficulties. These include: (i) *a failure by many institutions to develop encompassing international strategic plans* that are appropriately connected with institution-wide priorities, while simultaneously also encouraging individual faculty and school interests; (ii) *excessive decentralization and disconnectedness among international initiatives* (sometimes described by SIOs as “islands” or “silos” of international activity), rather than a coordination and leveraging of efforts in order to achieve maximum institutional benefit; (iii) *the exclusion of international concerns from capital campaign case statements and other fund raising strategies*, which can result long-term in the underfunding of international programs; (iv) *a failure to capitalize on the potential of international activities to generate new revenues* and to make a substantial positive contribution to the institutional “bottom line;” (v) *the underrepresentation or omission of non-academic offices, such as admissions, alumni affairs, corporate relations, student affairs departments, and marketing, from international committees*, which necessarily impedes the development of genuine institution-wide strategy; and (vi) *the failure to incorporate international achievement into faculty and staff professional development programs and recognition and reward structures.*

### **What is and isn't known about the problem**

Given the lack of systematic study of the role of trustees in campus internationalization, how much does our profession really know about the extent of governing board engagement in international affairs on our campuses? What institutions have become models of excellence regarding trustee involvement in campus internationalization, with sound practices that might be replicated or adapted elsewhere? What lessons have been learned from disappointing experiences with board involvement? What accomplishments in international education are substantially indebted to governing board leadership? What kinds of governing board involvement would prove most useful in helping institutions design and realize effective globalization strategies, and in supporting SIOs as they pursue them? What do trustees need to know, about the international affairs generally and more specifically about the activities of faculty and staff, and when and in what ways should they be informed? And what steps can SIOs initiate to orchestrate improved collaboration with and support from their boards of trustees, consistent with recognizing that board relations is primarily the responsibility of the president and provost, and that SIOs are often one or more organizational levels removed from regular trustee interaction?

In an effort to shed needed light on at least some of these questions, and to develop practical advice for SIOs interested in working more closely with their governing boards, our firm recently surveyed SIOs who are members of AIEA: The Association of International Affairs Administrators. Approximately seventy SIOs, representing two-year, baccalaureate, and masters institutions, and public and private research universities, responded. We presented the results of the survey at

the 2011 AIEA annual meeting in San Francisco and have also discussed the results since with a number of SIOs. In brief, the survey revealed the following:

### **Extent of governing board oversight**

- At seventy percent of responding institutions, the governing board has not designated a trustee committee to be formally responsible for oversight of international programs and activities, or to confer with the SIO on a regular basis; the board has neither created a new, dedicated international committee, nor charged an existing committee to add international affairs to its portfolio of responsibilities.
- At more than one-third of responding institutions, neither the faculty, the administration, nor the governing board had prepared a separate strategic plan for international affairs (i.e., a plan distinct from the overall institutional strategic plan or an academic affairs plan). Moreover, at a quarter of these schools, international matters were also not meaningfully incorporated into these broader plans.
- Among the two-thirds of responding institutions where separate international plans *had* been developed, at only one in seven had the board been closely involved in the process. At two in seven of these institutions, the international plan had been produced by administration and faculty, and then approved by the board with little or no significant revision. And at four in seven institutions, the governing board had not reviewed or approved the international plan at all.
- In sum, at fewer than ten per cent of the responding institutions were trustees closely involved in creating and monitoring international strategy. At almost half of responding institutions, international considerations were not incorporated into either a separate plan, or an institution-wide or academic affairs plan. And at almost a fifth of responding institutions, trustee review of international affairs was characterized as after-the-fact and perhaps perfunctory.

## **SIO relationships with governing boards**

- Only about one in ten SIOs indicated that they had “a desirable, ongoing, collaborative, working relationship” with their governing boards. A third reported that they had “little or no relationship” with their trustees. Another third reported meeting “occasionally” with the board, but most often to “report information,” rather than receive “advice or direction.” A fifth of respondents indicated that they typically “passed information on to the board through someone else,” rarely obtaining meaningful feedback, and that they “seldom if ever” met with the trustees themselves.
- Less than a fifth of SIOs reported that their governing boards embraced internationalization as a “mission-level issue,” or that they provide a valuable resource to the president, provost, and SIO regarding international matters. Almost half, in contrast, indicated that their boards only make “occasional inquiries or contributions” regarding international matters, and have “no consistent or active engagement.” About ten percent of SIOs believed the board was mainly concerned with financial and risk management issues, rather than with educational, research-related, or competitive significance of internationalization. And one in six SIOs saw little evidence that international education even appears on their boards’ agendas or is regularly discussed in a substantive way.

## **Attitudes of presidents and provosts regarding board involvement**

- Only about a quarter of SIOs felt that they would receive strong support from their presidents or provosts if they asked them for assistance in promoting greater trustee engagement. More than a third, in contrast, thought their presidents and provosts would be reluctant to promote board involvement, believing they would not wish to add to the list of issues for which they are held “accountable” by the board. A fifth indicated that they were “uncertain” what response they would receive from their president or provost

to such a request, and another fifth believed they would receive a negative response, either because the president or provost doubted the board was well-qualified to make a meaningful contribution, or because they felt the presidents and provosts themselves were not strongly committed to internationalization.

### **Kinds of assistance desired by SIOs**

- SIOs had a range of objectives in mind in considering the prospect of greater governing board support of their work. The largest portion--more than a third—desired greater trustee assistance in raising external funds for international purposes. About a quarter wanted trustee assistance in institutional or school strategic planning regarding international matters, and in mainstreaming international considerations into planning, budgeting, and decision-making. About a sixth would welcome trustee help concerning curricular and student development issues, while a slightly smaller proportion desired board assistance in making international affairs a higher priority among administrative and faculty leadership.

### **Limited extent of resources available to SIOs regarding trustee governance**

The incomplete evidence that exists suggests strongly, then, that governing boards on the whole are much less involved in fostering their institutions' international development than they are in influencing other matters of fundamental strategic importance. While there certainly are institutions at which trustees have been and continue to be vitally involved in international matters, these colleges and universities would appear to constitute a decided minority. Further, it appears that neither the professional associations dedicated to supporting governing boards in their work, nor those dedicated to helping SIOs

advance their institutions' international development, have stepped forward to play a leadership role in promoting a greater understanding of international affairs by trustees, or stronger collaboration between governing boards and SIOs.

To our knowledge, no higher education association, professional or disciplinary organization, or accrediting agency has directly addressed the questions of what role governing boards should play in campus internationalization, and how they should pursue this work. Nor are we aware of any organization that focuses on helping board members learn more about important international and global issues and their relation to higher education institutions. Ironically, the substantial international experience of many trustees in their respective professions, including business, health care, law, government, and others, suggests that governing boards could likely play a very helpful role in campus globalization, were institutions to design appropriate governance opportunities for them to do so. Appropriately qualified trustees could play influential roles in matters such as *developing international strategy; using international dimensions to advance institutional competitive position; linking institutions and their constituent schools more closely to the external stakeholders, who rely on the international competence developed by students; providing counsel regarding international developments in the various professions which institutions serve; soliciting corporate and other external support for global initiatives; supporting international admissions and international alumni relations; and facilitating partnerships with academic institutions and governmental and NGO entities abroad.* Further, at institutions where members of the board do *not* offer significant international experience pertinent to institutional missions, a

crucial need exists to identify new trustee talent better prepared to contribute to distinctive international needs; governing boards should directly seek out advice from SIOs in this respect as well. Since it seems unlikely that many presidents or provosts are likely on their own to seize the initiative to orchestrate greater board involvement in international affairs, what options are available to SIOs—many of whom have little or no prior experience in dealing with governing boards—to address this problem?

### **Options available to SIOs who desire to work more closely with their governing boards**

Just as colleges and universities are different from one another in their missions, academic and organizational cultures, and approaches to planning and decision-making, governing boards vary widely as well in their composition, organization, methods of operation, and relationships with the president, provost, and other members of the management team. At the same time, there are widely applicable general principles regarding board governance, transcending different kinds of academic institutions, of which SIOs should be aware. SIOs should appreciate both the key general characteristics of trustee governance *and* any features of board affairs that are distinctive to their particular institutions.

### **Common characteristics of governing board operations**

The first duty of any governing board, at any college or university, is the appointment and evaluation of the president (and then of the provost and the institution's other senior administrative officers). The second is to oversee strategy

and policy. The third is to maintain, and, if possible, enhance the excellence and integrity of academic and related undertakings. The fourth is to assure the ethical treatment of all members of the academic community. And the fifth, related to all the others, is the fiduciary responsibility to preserve and strengthen the institution's financial position. Any SIO wishing to work more closely with a governing board needs to appreciate these fundamental governing board responsibilities, to understand how the board operates in meeting them, and to consider possible roles for the governing board regarding internationalization in the contexts of these overriding concerns. Even as SIOs strive to change their institutions by making them more pervasively international in composition, teaching, research, and public engagement, they need to utilize their institutions' established and preferred methods of governance in order to become effective agents of change. Even if a governing board decides to create a new, dedicated international affairs committee, that new committee will need to function in a manner that is harmonious with the board's overall philosophy and approach to governance, so that it can work in partnerships with other trustee committees. Thus in most cases, SIOs will need to capitalize on a governing board's existing strengths and successful approaches in seeking to fashion greater trustee attention to international issues. Within this general guideline, our recommendations to SIOs are as follows:

### **The governing board and the president**

**Understand the nature of the relationship between the president and the board.** If the president is recently appointed, for example, is he or she still developing a working relationship with the trustees, and still in the process of

earning the board's confidence? If the president is long serving, successful, and well-respected by the board, how has he or she worked the trustees in orchestrating significant change regarding other issues? Does the president have sufficient international experience to be in a strong position to suggest to the board that the institution would benefit by its becoming more involved in international affairs, or if not, might a president feel compromised before the board? Does the president have other priorities that currently preoccupy discussions with the trustees, so that timing needs to be carefully considered before breaking ground on a new issue? SIOs should consider how a president's enlisting greater trustee involvement in international matters might potentially strengthen or weaken his relationship with the board.

Also, it is important that administrators never surprise a president (or provost) in dealing with trustees, e.g., by raising with individual trustees or at a board meeting issues that have not been previously reviewed in full with the president: whether the news is good or bad, the president should learn of it and have the opportunity to pose any questions prior to presentation to the trustees. SIOs should also appreciate that on some boards, there may be one or more members who sometimes approach institutional business in ways that don't properly conform to the board's governance "culture:" SIOs should be wary of relying too much on any trustee who might be regarded as not fully respectful of the board's general approach to trustee-management collaboration; doing so can quickly undermine the SIOs credibility, and possibly create problems for the president and provost as well.

### **Assessing the board's composition and preferred methods of operation**

**Through discussion with the provost/academic vice president and other senior administrators who deal with the board on a regular basis, SIOs should learn all they can about the strengths and weaknesses of the board, its current concerns and priorities, and its particular preferences in conducting institutional businesses.** SIOs should review the board's composition carefully, and determine where there are individuals who exercise significant international responsibilities in their own careers, or who appear to have strong interest in international matters, who might welcome becoming more engaged in promoting campus internationalization. SIOs should ascertain whether there are trustees whose backgrounds seem especially pertinent for assisting with any issues that are particularly important to the internationalization agenda, such as strategic planning, international student recruitment, international partnership development, international admissions and marketing, or fund raising. SIOs can confer with other senior administrators to ascertain whether in recent years there have been other matters regarding which greater trustee oversight was needed, and the president, provost, or another senior administrator successfully approached the board for greater help.

Sometimes it can also be useful to bring a competitive and comparative perspective to bear in addressing issues with board members. If, for example, peer or competitor institutions have an active international affairs committee, or another board committee charged with international affairs oversight, trustees would likely welcome knowing about such practices at other institutions. SIOs should be open to the board's arriving at different kinds of solutions for their focusing greater

attention on international matters: one possibility would be creating a dedicated international affairs committee; another would be assigning the task to the executive committee, which typically includes in its membership the chairs or other members of most other committees; yet another approach would be to assign international oversight to the academic affairs committee, with the understanding that the committee chair is responsible for coordinating international affairs matters with other committees, such as student affairs or fund raising, as required. Still another possibility is the creation of a temporary or *ad hoc* committee to look into international matters, which might later evolve into a standing committee.

### **Boards lacking international expertise**

If, on the other hand, a governing board seems to lack international experience and expertise, then the SIO might wish to investigate what processes the board follows in assessing its own strengths and weaknesses, evaluating board and standing committee performance, and seeking out new potential members. On many campuses, a governing board nominating committee solicits suggestions for new members from the campus community; faculty members often serve as members of such nominating committees. With the help of a president, provost, and such faculty, SIOs can help deepen a nominating committee's appreciation for the need to develop a board's international capabilities. The SIO can also help identify particular individuals whose backgrounds match well with current priority international needs, whatever these might be. Moreover, if a board holds a periodic retreat to reflect on the institution's future and the trustee role in institutional governance, working with the president and provost or the nominating committee

to place the question of campus internationalization on the retreat agenda can prove very advantageous. SIOs can prepare a brief “position paper” to help guide deliberations at board retreats. SIOs can also help boards to understand that a lack of board engagement in international affairs appears to be a common challenge in higher education: trustees who seek to improve their skills by regularly participating in governance seminars and workshops will recognize that international matters receive little or no attention at such gatherings.

### **Institutional boards and foundation boards**

At public colleges and universities, SIO’s would also be well advised to determine whether there are *separate institutional and foundation boards*, perhaps each with own procedures for appointing new members and evaluating board performance, and whether and how the priorities and activities of the two boards are coordinated. Surprisingly, it is not uncommon to find that institutional boards, sometimes largely appointed through a political or legislative process, develop different priorities than foundation boards, which are often self-appointing and self-perpetuating. We have seen instances, for example, in which an institutional board, following a president’s lead, declared campus internationalization to be a very high priority, while a foundation board all but excluded international needs from capital campaign and annual giving case statements. Hence SIOs may need to direct their attention to both kinds of boards.

### **External consultation**

Last but not least, SIOs may wish to consider availing themselves of experienced external consultants having proven track records of helping promote campus internationalization, including working with governing boards. Individuals who serve as trustees are often quite used to engaging external expertise whenever required in their own careers and professions, and the comparative and competitive perspective experienced consultants provide can be very useful.

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