

# Setting the Tone: Evaluating the President

by Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller

It is axiomatic that effective managers start the planning process with the end result in mind. Yet when it comes to comes to the sensitive area of evaluating the president of a college, the process is often reversed, at best shortchanging the chief executive officer and at worst, impairing his or her future effectiveness.

“Most evaluations fall woefully short ... boards employ techniques that compromise the ability of the president to lead,” says Dr. James L. Fisher, president-emeritus of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and author of a number of books, including *The Board and the President*. “A successful presidential evaluation should accomplish two things: (1) fulfill the board’s responsibility to evaluate the president, and (2) increase the legitimacy of the presidential office,” Dr. Fisher continues.

Common areas of need include timing of the process, who conducts it, respective roles of the president, trustees and executive committee, how evaluative standards will be determined and how the campus community will be involved. Thus, a review of fundamental assumptions underlying the entire process of presidential evaluation and compensation may clarify this process. **Many of these, incidentally, are also relevant to evaluations of boards.**

## Basic assumptions:

- **The Executive Committee of the Board should serve as the presidential evaluation and compensation committee.** The membership of the committee usually consists of the officers of the board and the chairs of each major committee. In this way, the committee composition reflects input from the leaders of each “major” area of campus operations. The Executive Committee reviews goals with the president, and then meets in executive session without the

president present. During this session, members discuss compensation terms, which will be presented to the president by the chair.

- **Goals and objectives for the president and board of trustees should be agreed upon at the time of employment.** Initial goals are usually formulated with the assistance of an outside consultant; sometimes, this is done in connection with an institutional review. About one year later, the president prepares a confidential written response to these goals and objectives and shares this with the Executive Committee of the Board. Outside consultants are generally not used in conducting the year one and year two reviews.

- **Sound evaluations include mutually agreed upon written goal statements and key statistical indicators.** Dr. Fisher recommends the use of “The Fisher Dashboard” which tracks year-to-year statistical progress on the “vitals” of the institution (i.e. operating budget, enrollment goals, retention, fund raising, and so forth).

- **Every third year, an outside, tested consultant mutually agreed upon by the president and chair of the board should evaluate the president.** If the evaluator talks with faculty, staff and students, these discussions should be represented as an evaluation of the institution and not of the president. If members of the staff or faculty perceive that their input will be used to either reward or penalize the president, their comments will be skewed and some will be reluctant to participate. Using this format, an experienced evaluator will elicit the appropriate information without either implying criticism of the president or damaging his or her credibility on campus.

- **Timing is critical.** Because most fiscal years in higher education begin July 1, evaluations should be completed no later than February before the start of the next fiscal year. **This same time line should ideally be applied to board evaluations, as well.** Completing the evaluation by this date enables the institution to make adequate budgetary provisions for revised contractual terms or—at the reverse end of the spectrum—provide an appropriate time period to plan for transition. With a growing number of presidents operating on three or five year “rolling” contracts, a good evaluation by February can meet a “rolling” deadline.

When it comes to presidential evaluations, the professional standards and processes that govern the assessment and compensation review of subordinates are sometimes compromised. Using these time-tested processes, governing boards and executive committees can ensure that a potentially awkward presidential assessment is not only seamless, objective, and fair to all concerned, but that it positions the entire university community well for the future.

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