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Board Governance in the Ignatian Tradition

Trustee Reflections

By Debra K. Mooney

To assist board members in their authority and responsibility to “promote and maintain the commitment of the University to the Jesuit Catholic tradition,” trustees at Xavier University engage in a multiyear formation series, “Reflecting on the Mission as a Trustee.” From the series, trustees report gaining a deeper understanding of the Jesuit mission and Ignatian spirituality as well as a heightened appreciation of their role. Each component of the series is centered on a specific theme, such as Jesuit education or Jesuit core values, and includes a video narrated by a trustee, a brief reading, and reflection questions. One component of the series, “Leadership in the Ignatian Tradition: Personal and Communal Discernment,” addresses St. Ignatius Loyola’s spiritual model of making choices, including the identification of values, Ignatian indifference, consolation and desolation, awareness of God’s presence, and a sense of unity. This component is based on the writings of William Byron, S.J. (2000), Wilkie and Noreen Cannon Au (2008), Michael Sheeran, S.J. (1987), and George Traub, S.J. (2012). Consequently, this seminar invites reflection upon the use of Ignatian communal discernment in board governance. Undoubtedly all campus leaders will find trustee perceptions valuable. Thus, their insights follow.

As an important first step in the process, trustees are mindful of their personal values and goals on behalf of the university. They can readily identify convictions that span all of their institutional decision making as well as those specific to the deliberations of a particular committee. Two sweeping examples follow:

- “*Cura personalis* is the reigning theme when, as a board member, I am called upon to consider change or innovation to the working particular of our university. We are not just about finances or grades, but about the growth and

development of the students, faculty, and ourselves – spiritually, practically, and mentally,”

- “Being persons for others has become, I think, the most important thing a Jesuit education can instill. As trustees, we must remain cognizant of that principal goal in all that we do.”

With regards to committee-specific goals, a trustee, as a member of the Academic Affairs Committee, is especially attentive to “Being stewards of an inclusive environment – ensuring that this is reflected in our enrollment,” while a member of the Marketing and Public Relations Committee stays attuned to “using the entire structure of [the university vision and strategic plan] to guide my, or our, decisions to the constituents on the outside.”

In recalling specific decisions resulting from an Ignatian communal process, trustees point to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional benefits. Personal satisfaction and comfort with an agreed-upon choice is described by a trustee in this way: “when there is harmony between thoughts and feelings, I feel good about the decision reached. That is, the thought process and the conclusion feel right.” A Plant and Building Committee member highlights how the process was used to weigh various construction options “with a view to students’ minds, sustainability, financial prudence, and the future. What resulted is truly an analysis of all concerns blended with a great outcome for [the university].”

Trustees identify a number of significant factors for effectiveness, namely trust, patience, Ignatian indifference, and openness. One trustee succinctly summarized these points in this way: “What can’t be emphasized enough is the

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The Gift of Ignatian Communal Discernment

a spiritual approach to decision making that helps us to achieve our mission

1. Outline the pro's and con's of the decision with respect to the University's mission, vision and values.
2. Approach deliberations with an impartial mindset (Ignatian indifference).
3. Share my opinions.
4. Encourage and support the contributions of others.
5. Give close attention to the viewpoints of others – more so if disagreements arise.
6. Be mindful of feelings of unease or agitation (Ignatian desolation).
7. Notice God's presence and will.
8. Deliberate until we have a shared sense of contentment with a decision (Ignatian consolation).



pre-process, having a true sense of openness and willingness to 'listen' to God's spirit and one another. Within the process, it is important not to 'rush' and to make sure all appropriate voices are heard!"

Despite the benefits, trustees clearly spot challenges to the use of discernment in governing, including impediments to full trust and openness as well as a narrowed focus on finances, noting for example that "money is an important factor but not the first one". The most common difficulty identified is the pressure of time coupled with "a lack of patience to engage the process."

Board members underscore three ways to maximize the use and benefits of Ignatian communal discernment and minimize the challenges noted above. First, effective adoption of the approach must be consciously attended to both between meetings, through on-going education, and within each meeting. (See the individual note card that has been used recently in committee meetings to support the Ignatian

milieu.) Second, the communal aspect necessitates active engagement by all involved in the decision-making process; creating a normative environment in which everyone's opinion is solicited and equally valued is imperative. Third, keep the mission of the university, as outlined in its mission statement, foremost in mind throughout deliberations.

In his address to Jesuit university presidents and board chairs on October 12, 2013, Father General Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., called on the leaders to exert spiritual and heroic leadership. The opportunity to understand, deeply engage, and reflect upon the process of Ignatian communal discernment is an effective way to support trustees and other campus leaders in meeting this invitation and responsibility ■

The "Reflecting on the Mission as a Trustee" series can be viewed at: www.xavier.edu/mission-identity/trustees/index.cfm