

Case Studies
March 2017

Shared Governance: Changing with the Times

Case Study: Rhodes College

Background

In the past decade, Rhodes College, under the leadership of President William E. Troutt, has been impressively attentive to issues of governance and decision making. President Troutt had inherited a board structure and practice that were, to say the least, unwieldy: the board had forty-five voting members and twelve emeriti trustees who were faithful attendees. There were eleven committees, and the by-laws necessary to account for all this required twenty-six pages.

In 2008, President Troutt and the board undertook a year-long effort to improve the effectiveness of trustee governance. The results of their work were significant, which the college labeled "Governance 1.0:" the board was reduced to twenty-six, the committees were cut to five, and a separate emeriti council was formed. Committee and full board meetings were restructured to focus on generative issues.¹

Then in January of 2011, the board held a retreat on the Rhodes College campus that included the faculty. The college had a compelling document outlining its collective aspirations for the future, "Rhodes 2020," but at the same time—like institutions all across the country—the college was trying to see its way through the effects of the global financial crisis. They invited several national thought-leaders on higher education governance, including Michael McPherson, Richard Morrill, and Diana Chapman Walsh to participate in retreat sessions. It is Dr. Walsh, the former president of Wellesley College, whom the college gives grateful credit for a statement that had a significant impact on the college's culture of decision-making.

In a discussion about modes of decision making and their relationship to governance, Dr. Walsh said, "It's time for all hands on deck." This deceptively simple statement contains a profoundly important message: although the formal traditions of shared governance assign responsibility and authority solely to the board, the president, and the faculty, the successful management of the challenging contemporary environment for higher education requires the best thinking of *all* of the institution's stakeholders—faculty, staff, students, administration, and board. While the president, of course, retains the ultimate responsibility for the development of strategy (for approval by the board), the engagement of all of the College's stakeholders ensures two things: 1) a high level of confidence that the right decisions have been reached; 2) broad-based ownership of the decisions and their consequences.

Subsequently, the board created an *ad hoc* committee on governance, which they labeled "Governance 2.0." The committee's charge was simple and direct: "Are there steps in governance that Rhodes should take now to advance our performance to the next level in terms of how we are organized or how we work together?" The committee met eleven times throughout the 2011-12 academic year. Their work was intensive and thorough, including a review of the college's previous work on governance, benchmarking their structure and practices against national norms, discussions with governance experts, a literature review, and a review of governance models outside of higher education.

¹ For a full—and personal—account of these efforts, see William E. Troutt, "The Benefits of Good Board Governance," *Trusteeship*, January/February 2014.

Actions Taken

In April of 2012, the *ad hoc* committee issued a report to the board of trustees with five recommendations; Recommendation 4 is the focus of this case study. That recommendation, the realization of the theme introduced by Diana Chapman Walsh, reads,

What is the best approach to mobilize the abundant collective intelligence of all stakeholders in the Rhodes community in the spirit of collaborative engagement?

Answer: That the principle of “all hands on deck” be executed through the creation of a “physical” common table.

The Common Table would “serve at the pleasure of the president,” and would comprise eight to twelve members (faculty, trustees, staff, students, alumni), who would rotate on an annual basis. The charge for the Common Table was the following:

- Advisory to president and through the president to the board of trustees
- Conduct/oversee the processes of collaborative engagement
- Monitor economic, social, and higher education environments as they may impact Rhodes
- Identify generative questions of importance
- Constantly augment assumptions/portraits of the future effecting Rhodes
- Provide “snapshots” of the environment when indicated

Further, the committee recommended that the first efforts of the Common Table include the following:

- Design group discussion processes
- Pull together 5-7 working assumptions about what the future holds for Rhodes
- Circulate and assess assumptions widely through the group discussions within the Rhodes Community
- Develop consensus about portraits of the future against which strategic planning can take place

The Common Table now comprises four trustees, four faculty, and four students and staff. The faculty members were originally appointed by the president, which occasioned some push-back; they are now elected. The president attends all meetings, which take place for several hours before each board of trustees meeting.

In its first summer, the Common Table identified three cross-functional, generative issues:

- Aligning what the college actually does with the promises it makes to its students
- Improving relationships on campus among students, faculty, and staff—and among students themselves
- Improving teaching and learning technology

Three teams were created to address these issues, including over ninety faculty, staff, and student volunteers. In the first year of their creation, the teams met weekly—usually with a member of the Common Table present to help guide the agenda and discussion. All three teams looked at advising and first-year student retention from their respective perspectives—the quality of advising, equity of advising

Shared Governance Case Study: Rhodes College

loads among faculty, peer mentoring, and peer advisors. They also focused on the student life experience, the Greek system and service learning, internships, and community service.

The teams wrote reports for the Common Table, and the Common Table provided the board with summaries of each team's work at board meetings.

The Common Table continues to be a powerful mechanism for bringing "all hands on deck" in discussions about the important issues, strategies and challenges at Rhodes, particularly since the practice of forming *ad hoc* subgroups of faculty, staff, and students to inform their discussions engages the entire campus in substantive and meaningful ways.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the Common Table model range from specific programmatic changes and measurable achievements through positive behavioral and cultural changes. They include:

- The delay of Greek rush until the spring semester, enabling first-year students to more thoroughly integrate into the fabric of the college
- Improved advising processes and greater equity of advising loads
- Implementation of a first-year experience: groups of fifteen students meet weekly to talk about issues that are important to them—deciding on a major, wellness, study habits, etc.
- The first-to-second year retention rate improved
- A revamped system for supporting second-year students
- The creation of a "student life-cycle" map—a process that involved two of the teams and many other faculty and staff, to identify and map the milestones, crises, major changes, decisions, relationship issues, etc. that students navigate throughout their four years at Rhodes; the document that they prepared is still a work in progress, but is serving as a very useful point of reference for administration, faculty and board
- The development of a Quality Enhancement Project for the regional reaccreditation process that focused on students' life after Rhodes

In addition to these concrete outcomes, those interviewed emphasized a significant impact on campus and board culture:

- As a result of interaction in these processes between board members and faculty, faculty confidence in trustees has increased significantly; at the same time, trustees have a much more informed understanding of faculty work and faculty culture, and, as the board chair put it, "We really unleashed this valuable asset that was always there—the creativity and thoughtfulness of all these people."
- Faculty, staff, and student engagement in the college's health and vitality is significantly increased
- Input from the Common Table has informed the board as it focuses much more on generative strategic issues
- A strong sense of good will and sense of community—campus stakeholders appreciate the fact that their voices are heard and that they have consequence

Lessons Learned

Shared Governance Case Study: Rhodes College

- The “all hands on deck” approach—engaging all of the institution’s stakeholders in discussions about the important issues, not only leads to better decisions and to a higher level of confidence in those decisions, but reinforces the sense of community and common purpose
- The “all hands on deck” approach is a powerful model in bringing important campus issues and concerns to the board’s attention
- A high level of ongoing engagement among stakeholders makes an institution more resilient; because people know and respect one another, when a challenging issue arises, there is an assumption of teamwork and goodwill
- Everyone does better work in these cross-functional settings, because they draw people out of their mental models and away from a natural advocacy mode
- Never underestimate the power of what an invitation to participate in the important discussions can mean to board members, faculty, staff, and students