Profile of Women Trustees at Land Grant Institutions: Roles, Responsibilities, and Reflections

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Profile of Women Trustees at Land Grant Institutions:
Roles, Responsibilities, and Reflections
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Abstract
A study of 49 women trustees at land grant universities showed that they were well educated and highly involved in civic and professional affairs. As trustees, they were heavily involved in the life of the campus and were making substantial sacrifices to do so. The data indicated women were being selected for subcommittees but not necessarily the most powerful ones. While some women accepted the position to represent the female perspective, their comments urged women to be cautious if they want to be an effective voice.

Introduction
As public institutions of higher education grow larger and more complex, governing them internally and externally becomes ever more cumbersome. Boards of trustees have a tremendous responsibility to attend to the long term stability, current mission, and future advancement of the institution for the benefit of all citizens within the state (Taylor, 1987; Zwingle, 1980, 1984) “without compromising the community of learning” (The control of the campus, p.72). Traditionally, however, boards have remained homogeneous in nature, attracting white males from the clergy, faculty, business, law, and politics (Kerr & Gade, 1989; Martorana, 1963; Taylor, 1987). Especially among the public universities, women are over-represented as students, but under-represented as trustees, administrators, and
faculty (Muller, 1978; Scollay, Bratt, & Tickameyer, 1997; Twale & Shannon, 1996). Because board composition is done predominantly by appointment or popular election, women are less likely than men to be active (Nason, 1974-75; Paltridge, Hurst, & Morgan, 1973; Rauh, 1969; Taylor, 1986).

Trustee is a role into which women are neither socialized nor trained, nor have many role models to follow or mentors to observe (Bernard, 1964; Kanter, 1977). These factors preclude women from penetrating the ‘inner circle’. Thus, their unique perspective is absent from trustee bodies, not only curtailing the female voice on the board, but also women’s influence in education within their state (Gilligan, 1982; Gleazer, 1985; Hall & Sandler, 1984; Korhammer, 1985; Nason, 1974-75). Contrary to this fact, women indicate their willingness to serve their state and higher education institutions, and be a representative voice for women (Smith, 1976; Taylor, 1987).

The purposes of this exploratory study are: (a) to develop a current profile of women trustees at public land grant institutions; (b) to gain insight into the role these women play on boards; and (c) to gather the reflections of these women on their position and offer their guidance to other women contemplating the role of trustee.

Review of Literature

Historically, higher education boards of trustees were labeled aristocratic, elitist, nonacademic, self-perpetuating, and influential (Howard, 1984; Kerr & Gade, 1989). Prerequisites for service included knowledge of higher education, fund raising, marketing, legal issues, strategic planning, physical plant management, public or community service, and an affinity for and commitment to the particular institution (Gale, 1980; Heilbron, 1973; Martorana, 1963; Rauh, 1969; Steinbach & Pelesh, 1999; The control of the campus, 1982; Young & Williams, 1998). Boards have been vested with significant responsibilities including oversight of the following: accreditation and admission standards, affirmative action, campus size, collective bargaining, curricular standards, enrollment stability, faculty issues, fund raising, investments, lobbying, maintenance, mission, planning, policy formation, presidential search, public and media relations, research policy, state politics, stewardship, students rights, and tuition levels (Burrows, 1999; Fisher, 1991; Gale, 1980; Heilbron, 1973; Ingram, 1980; Michael & Schwartz, 1999; Nason,
Given the criteria, conservative white males secured board positions as a result of their positions in their communities, business acumen, placement in upper socioeconomic sectors, and knowledge of the significant responsibilities (Association of Governing Boards, 1986; Heilbron, 1973; Rauh, 1969). Weaver (1978) and Gale (1980) contended that women lacked the requisite skills, especially in financial, real estate, and plant management, associated with sustaining an institution. Tradition, more than ability, also explained the disproportion of men to women trustee appointees. The paucity of professional women on boards may be attributed to their status and recognition within the professional fields from which women are drawn (Gomberg & Atelsek, 1977). By the mid-1980s, increases were expected as women's achievements and professional success became known (Wood, 1985). In fact, 32% of women trustees had advanced degrees, over 66% were age 50 or over, and 34% were business and industry executives (Korhammer, 1985; Scollay, et al, 1997; Zwingle, 1980).

Boards should consist of a variety of demographic backgrounds and individual talents to maintain a balance representative of the state citizenry and student body, as well as to encourage turnover to recreate themselves (Gale, 1980). Studies showed that women have more representation on boards of private colleges [20%-23%] than on boards of public universities [15%-20%] (Gomberg & Atelsek, 1977; Grigsby & Galloway, 1996; Michael & Schwartz, 1999; Rauh, 1969; Zwingle, 1980). Unlike the private colleges, land grant institutions have a broader selection of alumni from which to choose a more diverse group of trustees (Davis & Batchelor, 1974; Nason, 1974-74; Taylor, 1987; Zwingle & Mayville, 1974). This diversity will subsequently influence agenda items, decision-making, and institutional direction (Paltridge, Hurst, & Morgan, 1973; Taylor, 1987). Unfortunately, these public boards remain small, consisting of 9 to 12 members, compared to 20 to 25 at private colleges (Kerr & Gade, 1989). Therefore, the number of opportunities for appointment is limited.

Furthermore, understanding the role of trustee begins during the orientation with campus tours, presentation of institutional history and university documents, and conferences and workshops (Chait, Holland, & Taylor, 1991; Rauh, 1959, 1969). Michael and Schwartz (1999) found in a study of Ohio trustees that interpreting institutional policy, media and public relations, fund raising, developing an educational vision, and academic leadership were viewed by women as significantly more
important duties to be learned than were viewed by male trustees.

Women need to master “the unwritten tradition, where the power really lies” (Howard, 1984, p. 31). Therefore, Gale (1980) encouraged boards to involve women in a variety of areas which utilizes their strengths but, at the same time, shores their weaknesses through appointment to the influential committees such as finance and presidential search, rather than placing women on the less powerful committees such as public relations and student issues (see also Hall & Sandler, 1984; Sandler & Hall, 1986; Sevier, 1999). Women trustees who were not alumni described themselves as outsiders, both isolated and patronized. This group also needed more careful attention to acknowledge its contributions (Wood, 1985).

This study addressed three research questions: (a) What are the personal and professional characteristics of women trustees serving land grant institutions? (b) What are their role expectations? (c) Based on their trustee experiences, what suggestions do these trustees have for women?

Methodology

Instrumentation

The 46-item survey instrument was developed from an extensive review of the literature and research studies on college and university trustees. First, demographic information was sought including age, race, marital status, current occupation, educational background, and personal and professional involvement in civic, political, business, religious, and educational organizations. This information provided a profile of women trustees as well as established a career path (Chait, Holland, & Taylor, 1991; Davis & Batchelor, 1974; Rauh, 1969). Second, five open- and closed-ended questions gathered information about university and board specifics such as size, composition, and whether the board composition reflected the student body (Rauh, 1969; Taylor, 1987; Trustees and troubled times, 1992). Third, trustee service on the boards covered 11 items including term of office, nature of appointment, years served, reasons for accepting the appointment, preparation for meetings and other university activities, time commitment, and agenda items suggested (Davis & Batchelor, 1974; Gale, 1980; Ingram, 1980; Rauh, 1959, 1969).

Next, participants were
asked to discuss their role as trustee beginning with orientation activities, how they learned their role, rewards they had received, what types of interactions they had with campus constituents and other trustees, as well as leadership roles taken. They were asked to note if their board prepared both men and women for these roles (Chait, Holland, & Taylor, 1991; Gale, 1980; Ingram, 1980a; Kerr & Gade, 1989; Nason, 1974-75). Fifth, women addressed eight questions concerning the committees on which they serve or have served, including those for which they perceived they had expertise, whether the assignments utilized their expertise, if they received a briefing on committee activities, how involved they became with committee work, and on what committees they were interested in serving (Gale, 1980; Ingram, 1980b, 1988; Paltridge Hurst, & Morgan, 1973; Rauh, 1959; Taylor, 1987). Lastly, two open-ended questions asked women trustees to discuss at length what they felt it took to be a trustee and what advice they would give women interested in pursuing the trusteeship (Chait, Holland, & Taylor, 1991; Rauh, 1969; Taylor, 1987).

Population

There are 67 predominantly white and historically black land grant universities in the United States. After searching university catalogs and web sites, 45 institutions were found to have one or more women serving on their board of trustees. A total of 148 women were then identified. After two mailings, 49 usable surveys were returned representing all regions of the country. The unusable surveys that were returned indicated these women were no longer trustees or were board secretaries and not trustees. While the response rate initially appeared disappointing, it may be that some nonrespondents were also ineligible and simply declined to identify themselves by returning the instrument.

Data Analysis

Because of the exploratory nature of this study and the low response rate, frequencies were performed to categorize the closed-ended questions. Content analysis was performed on all but two of the open-ended questions. For the last two questions, information was categorized and predominant themes were noted. Personal responses for open-ended questions were excerpted to enrich the descriptive data.

Results

Personal and professional characteristics

Sixty-four percent of
the respondents were 50 years of age or older, 82% were married, and 78% were white. As shown in Table 1, 67% of the respondents held an advanced or professional degree working typically in business (20%), government (16%), and education (16%); 18% had retired. The women trustees held a variety of roles in civic, educational, political, religious, or business organizations and associations.

Among the respondents, approximately half had served five or more years as a trustee; 22% were new appointees (see Table 2). Participants felt their respective boards were more representative of their campus’ racial composition (46%) than of campus gender composition (40%). Fifty-eight percent indicated they hold/held other leadership roles on their campus, particularly advisory councils and alumni associations. Boards were apt to meet monthly (47%) or bimonthly (32%). Being appointed by the governor (39%), and/or requiring legislative approval (18%) constituted the primary avenues to a seat on a board of trustees.

Trustee Role Expectations

Respondents indicated in Table 3 a variety of ways in which they became oriented to their institutions. Information packets (90%), meetings (80%), and campus tours (76%), were more common than retreats (53%) or conferences (45%). Eighty-four percent of the respondents perceived male trustees were groomed for leadership positions compared to 62% who believed females were being groomed for those posts. In fact, only 8% of the women reported having a mentor. Eighty-two percent indicted they had volunteered for board roles and responsibilities, in addition to devoting considerable time to board meetings, committee work, and just representing the university. Involvement in university life was illustrated by trustee attendance at ceremonies and events (100%) and interaction with fellow trustees (98%).

Women trustees indicated by the time spent the extent of their dedication and the sacrifices they made to assume the role. The most often stated sacrifice was time away from work and family. Perhaps a compelling indication of dedication was the woman who wrote, “I have been taking chemo…and I set up treatments so that they will not interfere with my Board obligations.” This was offset by the fact that 79% received awards for being a trustee. While the key rewards included personal satisfaction and recognition, as well as social benefits and travel, one respondent said of the benefits, “[key administrators] are recognizing my talent and sincere desire to make a difference and focus on the product—students’ education, research, and excellence.”
When asked to list their areas of expertise, women selected management areas, faculty affairs, student affairs, and academic affairs (see Table 4). They felt less familiar with personnel, real estate, fund raising, and plant management functions. Respondents’ committee assignments included academic affairs (65%), executive committee (47%), budget and finance (39%), and the presidential search (37%). Sixty-nine percent felt they were assigned to committees for which they had the expertise.

Seventy-eight percent recognized that they were quickly involved on board subcommittees through “open discussion of previously disseminated materials” and by personal briefings. Of the 22% who were not involved, two said “staff manipulates the agenda” and “there’s little help or encouragement.” While most respondents listed a variety of board activities for which they have volunteered, only a few reported no opportunities to volunteer and one lamented she was “always turned down [as chair of educational polities committee] even though [she] had more qualifications than appointed males.” Women indicated they would like to serve on finance, fund raising, and executive committees during their board tenure. Recalling agenda items they suggested for meetings, women mentioned gender and diversity related items, but no more than the other issues they offered such as academic standards, athletics, and faculty affairs.

Reflections and Suggestions

Women sought a trusteeship at a land grant university for several reasons: “a desire to serve”; “to improve educational opportunities for all”; “to make a difference for women by representing our view”; and a “personal challenge.” They indicated their presence on the board was a means to ensure gender equity as they would probably be the only ones to initiate such issues. Becoming a trustee involved some degree of visibility, that is, “becoming active in university matters especially alumni committees” and being “known in the political or business area,” and developing “leadership qualities in civic affairs” where “political experience and connections are helpful.” Extensive knowledge of the institution was significant to success, so one should “learn, read, [and] visit”, but to fully participate, they stressed the need to “know” the institution, its mission, goals, faculty, students, and culture.

Discussion

Characteristics
According to the data presented in this study, the profile of current women trustees at land grant universities parallels those from previous studies (Korhammer, 1985; Michael & Schwartz, 1999; Scollay, et al., 1997). Under-representation of women trustees continues despite the desire to serve, possession of advanced degrees, lucrative careers, and professional and civic work (Weaver, 1978). However, if time constraints result in sacrifices of family and work obligations, women may be less inclined to pursue trustee positions until later in life. Furthermore, the qualities listed by these women as important to the role show that experience in broad areas is necessary before entering the arena (Howard, 1984). As one woman aptly stated, it takes time to know where all the “land mines are buried.”

Trustee Role Expectations

Although institutions offer various forms of trustee orientation, learning the role of trustee appears challenging given the volumes of information that need to be absorbed. Help from mentors would be welcomed but few women have them. In addition, women perceived that men were more likely to be groomed for leadership roles, placing women at a decided disadvantage. Perhaps they feel this way because, although many were involved quickly in committee matters, the type of committee may not have been their first choice.

Committee assignments in some instances matched trustee expertise, but in others, they did not. Gale (1980) advocated women be placed on committees to learn about an unfamiliar area. While women recognized their need to be on the more powerful committees, such as finance, they are currently under-represented on financially related committees. Ironically, advice to other women, for the most part, failed specifically to stress acquiring prior expertise in this critical area or how to get this appointment once on board. Even though the data indicate that knowledge does not always guarantee appointment on any committee, some prior familiarity would not seem to be detrimental.

Prevalent in the responses are the sacrifices some women made. They also indicate their desire to make a difference in or contribution to the university they serve. Their willingness to serve actively is supported in the Michael and Schwartz (1999) study, but their indication is a desire to participate on the key committees that have previously been male domains.
Reasons why these women sought the trusteeship largely support the work of Smith (1976), with the addition in this study of more far reaching goals, such as improving higher education in their state. But how far does the female voice carry when only a few women are selected who can address issues pertinent to their constituents? Their numbers may need to be more concentrated on boards as opposed to being tokens. Appointment to a land grant university challenges women beyond degree and career pursuits to become more visible in the state and university. Because most appointments come from the governor's office, visibility across a broader realm is critical. Ironically, however, only one woman spoke to that in her comments.

Recommendations

The results of this exploratory study add to the knowledge base in that women are holding their places on boards of trustees. Their focus seems to be on how to break into the trustee ranks through campus visibility, networking, political connections, and related leadership experiences. These women are devoting inordinate amounts of time and energy to the enterprise and trying to make significant contributions. Women are expected to be superwomen; that is, be effective, make a difference, improve standards, be heard and be taken seriously. Yet in so doing they feel they must "not rock the boat" or lose the "credibility and respect of others." Balance was mentioned to encourage women trustees not to show gender favoritism or carry women's rights into every board issue or decision.

In the trustee boards where women are under-represented, mentoring new trustees, networking with others, and guiding the careers of promising trustee candidates are key. For example, if women desire to become familiar with and seek appointment to a specific committee, perhaps shadowing those campus constituents who oversee that function would prove beneficial. Relying on the campus documents provided during orientation may not be enough. Grooming women and men in equal numbers for leadership should be the norm. Demystifying the role of trustee is needed so that women know more about trustee expectations in terms of time and energy, rewards and sacrifices, and develop the savvy needed to succeed in the 'board room.' Before and after their appointments, women should become familiar with the political side of the role that outsiders rarely see so that they are poised to "make a difference."

The literature cited for the most part is from the late 60s through the mid 1980s. A few
pieces have been added in the 1990s. Results support the existing profile of women trustees. While this study lends some insight into the current trustee role for women, further study is needed to fill the gaps surrounding the internal workings of the board, including how women are received and treated by fellow trustees, how their ideas are received and acted upon, and what specific contributions women are making to the institution and the state. Research on women trustees needs to go beyond focusing on the numbers of females present on boards and, instead, examine the effectiveness of the women who are there.

References


Kerr, C., & Gade,


Scollay, S., Bratt, C.,


Table 1: Demographic information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Under 40</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and over</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>Highest degree held</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
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2

BA/BS
15  31

MA/MS/MEd
16  33

JD
6   12

MD
3   6

PhD/EdD
8   16

Occupational area

Law
6   12

Government
8   16

Business
10  20

Education
8   16

Medical
5   10

Retired/Other
9   18

Number of organizations to which they belong

Civic
(1-5)
34  69

Educational
(1-4)
33  67

Professional
(1-4)
33  67

Political
(1-4)
28  57

Religious
Table 2: Board Related Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trustee selection process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legislative appointment</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gubernatorial appointment</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gubernatorial appt/legislative approval</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular election</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty, alumni appointment</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of years served</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New this year</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-9 years</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How often does board meet
10-12 times per year
[monthly]  
22  47

6-9 times per year
[bimonthly]  
15  32

4 times per year
[quarterly]  
10  21

Is your board representative of campus racial composition

Yes  20  46
No  23  54

Is your board representative of campus gender composition

Yes  17  40
No  25  60

Table 3: Board orientation

N  %

Orientation activities in which participants have participated

Read information packet  44  90
Read information on new educational programs and curriculum  44  90
Hear briefing on facilities plans  43  88
Attend meetings with administration/faculty/students  39  80
Take campus tour  37  76
Read Chronicle of Higher Education/Black Issues  36  74
Attend seminars and workshops  34  70
Read information on institutional history  34  69
Hear briefing on campus community activities 29 59

Read information from business, industry, and government 27 50

Attend retreat 26 53

Subscribe to AGB publications 23 47

Attend AGB conferences 22 45

Get a mentor 4 8

Do you receive rewards for being a trustee

Yes 37 79
No 10 21

Have you volunteered for board roles and responsibilities

Yes 40 82
No 7 14

Does your board groom persons for leadership?

Groom men 38 84
Groom women 30 62

Table 4: Committee assignments

Top three ranked areas of participant’s perceived expertise

First Second Third
Management 7 2 5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee Type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>Faculty affairs</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student affairs</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic affairs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal affairs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government relations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgeting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real estate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fund raising</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant management</td>
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Committees on which you have served

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<tr>
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<td>32</td>
<td>65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Executive committee</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Budget and finance</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>39</td>
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Presidential
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<tr>
<th>Committee</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>search</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional planning</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building and grounds</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
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<td>Development</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Investment</td>
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<td>Faculty affairs</td>
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<td>Athletics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nominating</td>
<td>3</td>
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Do participants feel they are assigned to committees in which they have expertise

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>69</td>
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Are participants quickly involved on committees

<table>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
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</table>

Table 5: Time spent on board and campus activities

N %
Do you serve in other campus leadership roles?
Yes 28 58
No 20 42

Are you provided with opportunities to meet with other trustees?
Yes 48 98
No
1
2

How many days per year do you devote to trustee duties?
Less than
20
8 18
20-39 14 33
40-59 14 33
60 or more
7 16

What percentage of participants’ time is spent on university activities?
0-9% 10-19% 20-29% 30%+

Board meetings 14%
18%
68%

Speaking appearances 46%
42%
11%

Fund raising 47%
29%
12% 11%

Univ
related functions 20%
41%
28% 11%

Communicating with
university personnel
20%
47%
23% 9%

Representing
the univ 41%
33%
7% 18%

Committee
work
37% 63%