When I became the acting president of Hamilton College in 1999, I already knew a lot about the college. I am a 1996 Hamilton graduate, the parent of a former student, and I have served for 12 years on the college's governing board. Still, when Hamilton President Eugene Tobin took a much-deserved sabbatical, I learned more about Hamilton during my six months in the presidency than in all my previous time associated with the college. Much of what I learned will make me — and, I expect, my fellow board members — better in the future.

An unusual level of alumni involvement distinguishes Hamilton. Typically, more than 55 percent of alumni contribute every year to the annual fund, and more than a third volunteer to recruit students, raise funds, counsel undergraduates about careers, provide internships, conduct alumni events, and participate in other activities. As is the case at other colleges, Hamilton's board sets the tone for financial and volunteer support.

Yet despite this high level of alumni involvement and my own active participation with my alma mater, I had a superficial understanding about many important facets of the college and wondered whether my fellow board members did as well. Naturally, I recognize it is unrealistic to expect that board members who typically visit the campus just three or four times a year will ever have the same breadth and depth of knowledge as the president and senior administrators who are charged with the daily operations of the institution.

A New Understanding of the College

Soon after I became president, the impact of policy decisions became clear to me — much more so than when I was a board member. For example, deciding to admit an additional 20 to 30 students from the waiting list or planning for a larger class, though attractive from a financial point of view, had significant ramifications in the day-to-day life of the campus. Admitting more students means hiring more staff members. Where would we find additional housing? And if the new hires were adjuncts, how could we be certain they would be as qualified and as committed to the institution as full-time faculty members?

This level of detail rarely makes it to the boardroom, but as president, I could see how a tempting financial solution might create an irritant in campus life.

My experience as a college president has made me much more aware of the nuances of board decision making. Many issues that boards are asked to consider require much broader scrutiny. Switching roles for six months taught me five fundamental lessons that may help boards and board members become more effective.

1. Balance the membership of board member committees.

Hamilton's board of directors, like many governing boards, consists disproportionately of business executives, investors, and successful entrepreneurs. Their acumen is in finance and in running a business, so they tend to be most interested in the issues — fund-raising, endowment performance, and investments — with which they are most familiar and where results are tangible. They tend not to be so comfortable with the other components that make a college successful such as its staff, programs, and facilities.

The tendency among board members to gravitate toward finance is understandable. After all, board members have a fiduciary responsibility to the college, and given today's fiscal pressures, no board can be blamed for being preoccupied with an organization's assets. But a balanced budget and a growing endowment are only two measures of an organization's health.

It is equally important that all board committees have the appropriate firepower if the mission of the institution is to be fulfilled. The committee on board members should look carefully at the distribution of talent and influence among the various standing committees to ensure that every function has an important voice at the boardroom table.

2. Seek, within limits, close encounters with leaders of the organization.

In my six months as president, I met and spent time with most of the faculty, the swimming coach, the chair of the chemistry department, the director of the career center — people board members typically would not encounter. Yet the insights and opinions of such individuals can give board members a much broader understanding of an institution.

Recognizing this untapped resource, we restructured board weekends at Hamilton to facilitate even greater informal interaction between the board and various college...
As the chief volunteer officer, the board chair is responsible for leading the board. This position demands exceptional commitment to the organization, first-rate leadership qualities, and personal integrity. The chair must earn the respect of fellow board members to be able to meet the challenges of this position.

Chair/Chairperson/President?
What should the chief elected officer be called? The least confusing title is chair or chairperson. As many organizations call their chief executive officer ‘president,’ to avoid confusion, it makes sense to reserve that title for a staff position and use chair or chairperson for a board position.

Leader of the board
To function effectively, groups need a leader. A board leader is approachable and available. He or she is objective and listens actively. He or she needs to be a strategist, knowledgeable about the organization and board practices, a coach, and a conciliator. Finally, he or she must be respected in the community. The chair most commonly performs the following functions:

• Serves as the contact point for every board member on board issues.
• Sets goals and objectives for the board and ensures that they are met.
• Ensures that all board members are involved in committee activities; assigns committee chairs.
• Motivates board members to attend meetings.

Facilitator of board meetings
One of the trickiest responsibilities of a chair is to run effective and productive board meetings. Effective meeting facilitators must be able to:

• Create a purposeful agenda and follow it.
• Know how to run a less formal and productive meeting.
• Engage each board member in deliberation.
• Control dominating or out-of-line behavior during meetings.

If the board chair is not able to lead an effective meeting, it is better to delegate that task to someone else (like the vice-chair) rather than risk unproductive or boring meetings.

Relationship with the chief executive
Both the chair and the chief executive of the organization need to support, consult, and complement each other. Both have their own responsibilities — the chief manages the operational activities and the chair leads the board. Both share power in their mutual pursuit to advance the mission of the organization. To make this happen, they need to communicate openly and regularly.

This partnership needs constant attention. Personalities change but the positions remain. Each partner needs to adapt to and cultivate the working relationship.

Think of the chief executive as the gatekeeper for the staff and the chair as the gatekeeper for the rest of the board. This helps to prevent miscommunication and it allows both leaders to stay aware of each other’s needs.

Succession planning
A well-conceived succession plan for leadership positions prevents too much power from being concentrated in the hands of a few. Start by recruiting board members with demonstrated leadership qualities to avoid running out of qualified candidates. Your governance committee should provide continuous opportunities and training for board members to create a pool of leadership candidates when a new election is in order.

Involve the full board in the leadership succession process. Define the necessary qualifications. The governance committee should consult with each board member for nominations and eventually, through feedback, bring a single candidate to the board for election. This process avoids the notion of winners and losers while stressing consensus and group decision making.

References
The Board Chair Handbook
Available at www.boardsource.org or by calling 202-349-2500.

BoardSource © 2013. Text may not be reproduced without written permission from BoardSource. For more information, call 1-877-892-6273 or e-mail learningcenter@boardsource.org.