

Three things to remember when building a board

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Brett Fairbairn, Murray Fulton and Dionne Pohler

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Recent commentary on the appointment of Grant Devine to the board of the University of Saskatchewan misses an important question: What, exactly, qualifies an individual to serve on a board? Public exchanges have focused on partisan issues or on Mr. Devine's career, including his PhD and his knowledge of agriculture, without reference to whether any of these things are needed for the U of S board to be effective.

Our research on governance leads us to make three observations that could guide such processes and reduce future controversy.

First, it matters how a board is put together and for what purpose. In a for-profit enterprise, boards represent the interests of investors; in co-operatives, they represent the members; in a not-for-profit, the community. As the university is quasi-public, its board exists to steer the institution in the public interest. The provincial government, as representative of the public interest and as the largest funder, is rightly entitled to appoint a large proportion of the board — five out of 11. Others are appointed by the university senate, a body representing graduates and professions, or come from the faculty and students. All those who make appointments have the responsibility to choose individuals who do not simply represent that group's interests, but rather, help guide the university to be successful in its public mission. Arguably, this responsibility is greatest for the government because it appoints the most members.

Second, individual board members need to bring qualities such as commitment, ability to contribute and diversity of perspectives. Membership on a board of directors or of governors is a special role — one where the board member exercises leadership not as a separate individual but collectively as part of the board. A passionate commitment to the success of the university will hold board members together through frank exchanges and difficult decisions, motivating them to work through differences and reach consensus so the university is the best that it can be. Board members do not necessarily need knowledge of operational areas since their job is not to manage but to govern; if they do need particular expertise, it is in areas such as finance or fundraising. They do require experience in how organizations work and the ability to ask the right questions.

Third, each member's attributes need to be assessed in the context of the board as a whole. A board is a collective entity that includes diverse perspectives. The value of adding any one individual depends on how that person's strengths are similar to or different from the other members of the board. Each individual appointment should be justified according to how the appointee's abilities and perspectives fill gaps or needs on the existing board.

If the preceding criteria are met, boards will tend to be effective. The outcome is good governance.

The good governance of the university is critically important. Saskatchewan's economy, like most, is skilling up, with growing demand for talented people and ideas. The challenges the world is facing — climate change, food security, income inequality, large-scale refugee migrations, political disillusionment — are becoming more complex. The ability of the university and its graduates to help meet these challenges depends among other things on the university being focused on its mission and making wise choices. This starts with good governance at the highest level — a sense that the board's direction is coherent and well thought out, with the interests of both the university and the entire province in mind.

It is vital that the government communicate its determination to help the university meet the many societal demands it faces. Part of the government's task is to appoint board members on the basis of commitment, ability to contribute, and diversity of perspective, in the context of the needs of the board as a collective entity. These are criteria the people of Saskatchewan should expect to be satisfied when the government makes appointments to the U of S or, indeed, to any important board in the province.

Brett Fairbairn and Murray Fulton are professors in the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan. Dionne Pohler is an associate professor in the Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources at the University of Toronto.