



MISSION ABSOLUTELY POSSIBLE

Higher-Ed Observations from the Front Row

Please forgive the Tom Cruise, *Mission Impossible* wordplay within the title, but with a new film in the series set for release in mid-July, it seemed appropriate and, honestly, a bit of fun. To be clear, though, it is not an appropriate reference because of the challenging environment (or missions) facing higher education, but appropriate because of what is *absolutely possible* when stakeholders, in this context trustees and administrators, aligned by mission and purpose, gather to tackle challenges and craft solutions for the betterment and long-term sustainability of their institutions. Or, in Tom Cruise's case, all of mankind.

In early June, alongside my colleague, David Brief, I participated in a three-day trustee summer summit for one of our OCIO (Outsourced Chief Investment Officer) higher-ed clients. It was three days of *Mission Absolutely Possible* that left both David and me encouraged not only about the future of this particular institution but, more broadly, independent higher education. This is so important given the critical role the latter plays in preparing students to navigate a complex world evolving at unprecedented speed.

This was the second trustee meeting I have attended with this school, and it quickly dawned on me that David and I were there not as vendors, service providers, or even partners but as true members of the team plotting the course forward for this institution for the next ten years and beyond.

Here are three observations from my front-row seat at the trustee meeting.

The OCIO you hire IS your CIO:

If a college or university has an in-house Chief Investment Officer (CIO), he or she has an important voice as a member of the leadership team shaping the future of the institution. This person is hired based not only on the professional qualifications necessary to manage the endowment/foundation but also for the unique context and perspective they bring to the consequential decisions facing administrations and trustees.



My colleague David serves as the de facto CIO for the college, providing the impetus for this blog. Interestingly though, at this early June meeting, investment performance, asset allocation, and market outlook (or look back) were not on the agenda. So, what were we doing there? What role did we play? We were there because we play a key role on the team and have both a seat at the table and a voice in the conversations shaping the future of this institution.

Being a truly effective OCIO involves so much more than asset allocation, portfolio construction, and quarterly performance reporting. When the OCIO model is optimally implemented and leveraged, a college or university adds depth, context, resources, and perspective to the leadership team faced with making consequential long-term decisions. The OCIO you hire **is** your CIO, should be viewed as a senior member of the team and treated as if they were located right down the hall.

The Importance of Generative Dissent and Governance:

Higher education today is an incredibly complex and challenging environment in which some schools face institutional life or death decisions. This environmental dynamic, coupled with the resident passion often found within boards, can create obstacles to debate, decision-making, and good governance, but the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) Principles of Trusteeship, Principle 5¹ provides some ballast by encouraging the following:

- **Constructively challenge and support the chief executive, administration, and committees.** Think for yourself, reach your own conclusions, and share your perspective productively.
- **Speak up on important issues, even if they are uncomfortable or unpopular.** The board and institution lose out—or may even be put at risk—when trustees remain silent.
- **Express your concerns diplomatically to the appropriate person(s) at an appropriate time.** Be intentional about what you communicate, how, when, where, and to whom.

Amidst the minefield higher-ed boards and administrators are navigating today, these principles could not be more important. McKinsey & Company, in a February 2023 article², concurs and invokes the importance of culture and modeling, suggesting, *“In today’s interconnected business environment, companies won’t be able to solve problems effectively without encouraging “contributory dissent”—a healthy approach to gathering diverse perspectives that should be taught to team members, modeled by leaders, and supported by culture.”*

¹ AGB, Principles of Trusteeship, [Principle 5: Think independently and act collectively](#)

² McKinsey & Company, [Into all problem-solving, a little dissent must fall](#) February 15, 2023



What David and I experienced and observed at this early June trustee meeting was leadership expressly encouraging constructive dissent and a culture that created space and safety for all opinions to be heard. Absent such broad and fertile discourse, it is often only the loudest voice(s) in the room that is heard, which can lead to sub-optimal outcomes. It is precisely open and respectful discourse, fueled by equal parts intellect, perspective, and passion, that can optimize outcomes and support long-term sustainability for an institution.

Fortis Fortuna Adiuvat:

The Latin proverb reminds us *Fortune Favors the Bold*, and thinking outside of the box need not be limited to the lab or Silicon Valley. COVID, distance learning, falling enrollment, rising costs, and financial sustainability represent a handful of influences that have prompted colleges and universities to essentially burn the box and think beyond the physical boundaries of campus, traditional learning, and how to attract and retain students.

In the President's opening remarks to kick off the trustee meeting, he noted, "It is more complicated than ever to be a private institution." Today's students are different, and their needs and expectations are different. Eventual employers want to hire students with skills. It is no longer enough to simply educate, but imperative to think differently about preparing students for a world in constant motion with little indication of slowing down. These comments ring true but also hint at an exciting opportunity to take bold actions that reimagine what an institution can mean to students, alums, the community, and even the world. It is precisely those bold considerations, refined through generative dissent, and facilitated through good governance which position institutions on the "bold side of prudent" where growth and sustainability is Mission Absolutely Possible.



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