

# The Strategic Board's Role in Admission and Marketing Communications

As Board Chair, you understand that, because your school is funded primarily through tuition, enrollment is among the most essential factors in determining your institution's financial strength and stability. You also are aware that a strategic Board's primary purpose is to make decisions today that will ensure the viability of the school for the next generation of students.

Because enrollment and financial sustainability are linked inextricably, Boards often find themselves focusing their attention on their school's admission and marketing communications functions. Trustees may want to know the school's specific marketing and enrollment strategies, what tactics are in place to help the school reach its enrollment goals, and whether those efforts yield measurable results.

When a school's enrollment is flat or declining, this scrutiny often intensifies. A frequent outcome is to create a standing or ad-hoc Board committee that includes members who have corporate marketing expertise or experience working in other private-independent schools or colleges and universities.

While these admission and marketing Board committees may be well-intentioned, it is nearly inevitable that members will begin wading into the dangerous waters of the school's daily operations. For example, the committee may ask staff members to present detailed promotional plans and debriefs for each admission recruitment event, including a list of ads placed, the names of feeder schools contacted, the number of registrations, and demographic data about attendees. Committee members may ask if the school has considered advertising with a specific media outlet or why a particular academic success story has not received more publicity.

While the above scenarios may seem innocuous, they can lead to a slippery slope for Board members. The oversight of the admission and marketing communications staff is a role that must be reserved solely for the team's direct supervisors and the School Head. ISM, therefore, recommends against the formation of such Board committees and instead offers the following suggestions for appropriate Board involvement in school admission and marketing efforts.

- With each Board report, request that the School Head include a year-by-year comparison of enrollment data most relevant to budget planning,<sup>1</sup> including:
  - current enrollment;
  - financial aid as a percentage of gross tuition;
  - attrition percentage;
  - the number of new students;
  - the number of applications; and
  - current student-to-teacher/staff ratio.
- Also, ask the School Head to submit a marketing report outlining:
  - total dollars spent on recruitment and re-recruitment activities;
  - the number of inquiries, visits, applications, and enrollments resulting from recruitment activities; and
  - year-by-year comparison showing cost per inquiry, cost per visit, cost per application, and cost per enrollment.
- Invite the Admission and Marketing Directors to share high-level overviews of their enrollment management and marketing communications plans and goals at the first Board meeting each school year.<sup>2</sup>
- Ensure the Finance Committee Chair partners with the Business Manager, School Head, and Admission Director to determine a realistic enrollment projection based on five years' worth of historical enrollment and attrition data.<sup>3</sup>
- Form temporary task forces for specific, short-term initiatives that directly tie to the Board's responsibilities. For example, if the school is exploring the addition of a preschool program, charge a Board task force with analyzing a market demographic study that examines population growth and wealth in your area. Similarly, a Board task force could serve as a focus group during a school-wide rebranding exercise.
- Call on Board members to be visible and active brand ambassadors for the school. Encourage them to post positive comments on school review sites and intentionally engage with your school's social media efforts by commenting on and sharing posts.

Your Trustees undoubtedly bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the Board, often in the form of advice for your school's admission and marketing teams. However, appropriately channeling your Board members' efforts away from daily operations will allow them to focus on what matters most—a strategic, long-term view that ensures your school's viability generations into the future.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Admission Reporting to the Board," *Ideas & Perspectives*, 41-2.

<sup>2</sup> See "Take Your Marketing Communications Efforts to the Next Level With a Comprehensive Plan," *I&P*, 45-10.

<sup>3</sup> See "Estimating Next Year's Enrollment," *I&P*, 43-13.