

# Communicating Up



## An open line of communication with the board benefits reputation management

By LYDIA LUM

As a newly hired University of Colorado communications officer in 2006, Ken McConnellogue was initially startled and confused when members of the board of regents invited him into their executive session meeting. McConnellogue's presence at such a meeting had never been requested by the board at his previous institution, where he had worked for 14 years.

The CU regents sought McConnellogue's counsel on how some of their potential decisions might be perceived by the multicampus institution's audiences. He quickly recognized the strategic value in these closed-door sessions held during board meetings. By advising and building a working relationship with the nine regents, he could help them avoid public relations pitfalls.

"Universities are places where wonderful things happen every day," says McConnellogue, now CU's vice president for communication. "Universities are also places where people say and do stupid things and where they say and do illegal things. Like any university, our board makes decisions on substantive issues the public is deeply interested in, and any notion that these issues lack communication aspects is crazy."

Chief communicators at many U.S. institutions are interested in forging closer ties with governing boards. Proponents say such relationships can increase board trust and confidence in communicators before a crisis occurs, making it easier to manage the institution's reputation and limit negative publicity when one does. At some institutions, such relationships to board members may be formally spelled out and integrated into a communicator's duties; at others, communicators may cultivate them informally. Those who are in

regular contact with board members encourage their peers to initiate similar connections with the institutional board, so long as the president supports it.

The chief communicator "should be included whenever big decisions are being deliberated" by boards, says Teresa Valerio Parrot, principal of TVP Communications, a Colorado-based communications consultancy that works with colleges and universities. "Unfortunately, there's too little interaction nowadays between communicators and boards."

Presidents tend to shield boards from nearly all institutional staff "out of respect for the time constraints and generosity" of board members, Valerio Parrot says. However, presidents often don't realize the merits of communicator-board alliances until a crisis hits, by which time it's too late. "If you ask for just a little more of the board's time, they can be even better stewards."

### LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Meanwhile, the need for institutions and governing boards to step up their messaging efforts, in frequency and depth, to their audiences remains increasingly important. This holds true among public and private institutions alike, particularly as tuition continues to rise throughout higher education, according to Valerio Parrot. "What I see nationally is a call [by stakeholders] for transparency, especially with student loan amounts growing," she says. "The level of scrutiny is, and will continue to be, greater than ever before."

But a communications professional doesn't have to be in direct contact with board members for the relationship to be effective. At the University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill, Nancy Davis, associate vice chancellor for university relations, has been a cabinet member since 1998, serving under four different chancellors. During a crisis, it's common for Davis to suggest communication ideas directly to the

she continues, communicators also should consider seeking out board members who report to governing boards in their own jobs. By meeting with such board members individually, communicators can discuss their similar responsibilities with respect to their dealings with boards and highlight how higher education's organizational culture differs from other industries. "Your board members might not have dealt with anything similar to faculty tenure, shared faculty governance, or student privacy laws before," Valerio Parrot says.

Indeed, a 2010 survey by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges found that 53 percent of board members at private higher education institutions and 49 percent at public institutions had careers in business. Other board members included doctors, lawyers, accountants, nonprofit executives, clergy, artists, and government officials. Only 16 percent of public institution board members were educators by profession. The number was 13 percent for board members at independent institutions.

#### THE CASE FOR COMMUNICATIONS

If the president doesn't approve of such access to board members, experts advise communicators to enlist campus leaders such as the chief financial officer or general counsel to help them make their case. These colleagues, who officially report to the president but frequently provide information and recommendations to the board, can shore up a communicator's rationale for board access and reassure the president that bringing communicators into the inner circle would enhance the quality of information on which the board is basing its decisions. Communicators should emphasize that their inclusion serves the institution's best interests and, if necessary, cite past examples in which communication gaps resulted in harm to the institution's image.

"Insist on having interaction with the board," says Clinton Coleman, director of public relations and communications for Morgan State University in Maryland. "Just as the legal team has a place at the table, I can explain how things might play out in the court of public opinion."

Although he's worked at MSU for 11 years, Coleman never provided communications counsel during the board of regents' executive sessions until after the 2009 departure of an instructor whose

chancellor, who passes them along to trustees for their input and, when appropriate, their decision. This occurred often, for instance, after the NCAA began an investigation in June 2010 into UNC's football program and eventually found multiple rules violations involving academic misconduct and players receiving improper gifts, which led to athletic sanctions including a 2012 postseason bowl ban, the loss of 15 scholarships, and a three-year probation.

But years before then, Davis and her news services staff began sending trustees a daily email containing all news coverage of UNC by local, regional, and national media outlets. "This set up the expectation that we would communicate with the trustees in general," she says, adding that the practice also underscores "how productive our small staff is, because trustees can lack the understanding of exactly what we do here and how we help [the university] get recognition."

In addition, keeping board members informed of important requests for information, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, presents a significant opportunity. Since board members will likely face decisions involving these laws, "even a written quarterly report of how a communications team has responded" in similar situations can quickly educate the board, Valerio Parrot says.

As long as it's sanctioned by the college president,



contract wasn't renewed. The instructor had advised the student newspaper, which had published articles and opinion pieces critical of MSU's administration. Following the instructor's dismissal, she and some student supporters contacted news organizations claiming that her release by MSU officials was retaliatory and an attempt at censorship. Coleman, who learned of the situation from reporters, asked senior administrators about the matter. They showed him documents indicating the instructor had misused a school credit card but wouldn't allow Coleman to disclose this information to the media. He tried to change administrators' minds because the absence of such a disclosure seemed to bolster the instructor's accusations, which the media were already reporting.

Once Coleman secured permission to disclose the credit card issues, *The Baltimore Sun* published the revelation and reporters' interest in the matter quickly faded. But Coleman was so exasperated by the fact that MSU could have avoided the negative publicity altogether that he immediately started making the case to senior administrators that he be given greater, earlier access to information about decisions involving personnel. Soon afterward, the regents began asking Coleman to join them in executive sessions to gain his input.

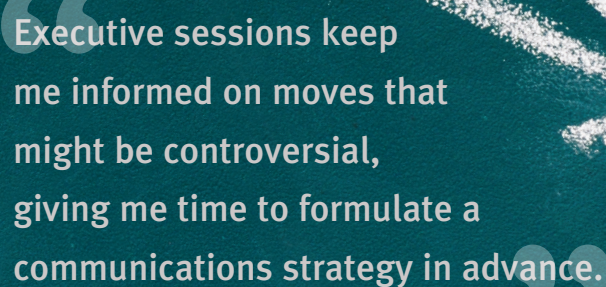
Like the governing boards of many public universities, MSU's regents confidentially discuss litigation, personnel, real estate, and other issues in executive sessions before voting on them during the open-to-the-public portion of board meetings. "Executive sessions keep me informed on moves that might be controversial," Coleman says, "giving me time to formulate a communications strategy in advance."

CU's McConnellogue echoes this sentiment, citing his experience dealing with the well-publicized firing in 2007 of Ward Churchill, then a tenured professor at CU's flagship campus in Boulder, for research misconduct. He contrasts his role at CU, where he frequently attends the board's executive session meetings, with his experience at a previous institution where communication with the board was limited. For example, during the final stage of a presidential search, the board members at his prior institution "opened the door, told me their choice for new president, and asked for a press release," then watched as McConnellogue typed it on his laptop.

A good working relationship with the board can help further the communication office's other strategic

goals, too. For example, Cleary University President Thomas Sullivan asked Amanda Holdsworth, executive director of communications and marketing, to begin meeting with a task force of four trustees so that they could learn more about her division's productivity. Over the course of four meetings in 2011 and 2012, each lasting 90 minutes or more, they discussed electronic newsletters, the redesign of Cleary's website, and the Michigan institution's rebranding. The four trustees reported back to the rest of the board about her unit's work, resulting in a growing interest that was perhaps best illustrated at a board meeting last fall. "One trustee asked me to make a list of five talking points she could keep on hand in order to better promote the university," Holdsworth says. "Other trustees wanted the same, so it was as if they were becoming brand ambassadors."

At Maine's Colby College, interaction with a communications committee of its board of trustees was part of the job description for its new vice president for communications, so Michael Kiser quickly adapted after assuming the post in 2011. At its three meetings last year, Kiser's presentations to the committee, which is composed of nearly half of the board's 37 members, focused on topics such as departmental staffing and the institution's use of



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social media. Feedback from trustees helps him continue reshaping his department into one that makes decisions more strategically. "I come out of these meetings energized," he says.

Kiser values the interaction with trustees so much that when he travels for college business, he requests brief in-person meetings with trustees who live in the area. The strength of these relationships came into

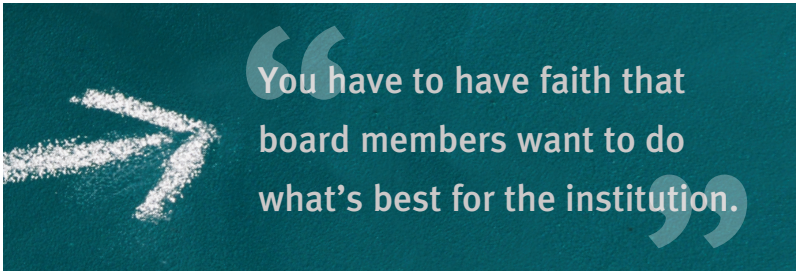
play last year when Kiser faced sensitive questions from the press. Last July, Colby's board chairman resigned as CEO of a multinational bank that was implicated in an interest rate-rigging scandal affecting the global financial system. Some Colby students and other stakeholders demanded that the college's trustees unseat the chairman, a Colby alumnus whose

to Merrill Schwartz, AGB's director of research, although more boards are slowly establishing them. UNC's Davis says her board of trustees, for example, formed an external relations and university advancement committee a few years ago to examine issues related to the institution's fundraising, public relations, and alumni engagement.

In addition, members of governing boards increasingly are recognizing that receiving some media training can help them help their institution. Indeed, Valerio Parrot says that requests for such training have increased in the past year partly because boards got scared after the Pennsylvania State University's child molestation scandal and the University of Virginia board's failed attempt to permanently oust President Teresa Sullivan.

Last year, Valerio Parrot led an AGB session called "Communications Strategies for Boards," which included media-training tips, at its annual workshop for board professionals. The session was so well-attended that information from it will be incorporated into this year's workshop.

CU's McConnellogue proactively addresses the issue by providing media training to his regents, who are elected by Colorado voters. However, it's not necessary, or even recommended, that each board member has a role in communications. But it does make sense for communicators and board members to establish in advance who the board's point person will be when the media call. The board chairs at both UNC and MSU, for example, are as likely to refer



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charitable gifts included a \$4 million donation in 2008. Trustees met behind closed doors to discuss the chairman and subsequently issued a statement that strongly affirmed their support of him continuing in the role, a statement that Kiser repeatedly referred to when speaking with reporters.

"You have to have faith that board members want to do what's best for the institution," Kiser says. "If that's in place, you can comfortably publicize the findings that come out of executive sessions."

#### RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Institutional governing board committees that are focused on communications are rare, according

## in short

**UNDERSTAND THEIR PERCEPTIONS.** When working with board members, it helps to understand their opinions and beliefs about your institution and higher education. The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges' recently released 2012 Survey of Higher Education Governance—*College Prices, Costs, and Outcomes: Who's Minding the Gap Between Higher Education and the Public?*—presents the latest snapshot of board members' attitudes. Compiled from surveys of more than 2,500 board members at both public and independent institutions, AGB's third such survey found a "considerable disparity between board members' views about their own institutions and their thoughts about higher education in general." Download the report at [agb.org/reports/2012/2012-agb-survey-higher-education-governance](http://agb.org/reports/2012/2012-agb-survey-higher-education-governance).

**PROACTIVE PREPARATION.** As we've witnessed in the past year, campus crises involving governing boards grab headlines. Communicators can learn how to prepare themselves, their president, and board members for such situations with the archived CASE webinar *Boards in Crisis: The Impact of Communications and Governance*. Led by Teresa Valerio Parrot, a crisis communications expert who has served as a communicator for a university board, and Paul Fain, a senior reporter for *Inside Higher Ed*, the 75-minute session offers best practices for board communications policies and procedures, ways to prepare board members to communicate both good and bad news, and a discussion of real communication challenges. The webinar is available from the CASE store at [bit.ly/boards-in-crisis](http://bit.ly/boards-in-crisis).

reporters to the respective institution's president or chief communicator as they are to make a comment themselves, depending on the circumstance.

At Northern Illinois University, trustees have long referred press calls to the board chairwoman, who typically defers to President John Peters and other administrators, says Vice President for University Relations Kathy Buettner. This protocol has become increasingly significant since February 14, 2008, when a former NIU student opened fire in a classroom full of students, fatally shooting five people before committing suicide. In the ensuing days and weeks, Peters appeared before the media in news conferences and gave hundreds of interviews, with the board chairwoman occasionally relieving him of his media duties, Buettner recalls.


But because Peters demonstrated such media presence in the aftermath of the tragedy, NIU communicators have strategically limited his appearances when reporters cover other campus-related issues. "If a story doesn't rise to a national level of interest," Buettner says, "one of our vice presidents usually speaks rather than the president because when reporters see the president, they always ask why we have so much crime. We don't have more crime than any other university, but it's a perceptual issue."

The seemingly never-ending challenge of reputation management has been softened by "strong trust and support from our board that the administration and communicators will make good decisions," she says, crediting positive relationships with the board to

efforts by her and others to keep them well-informed, whether it's good news or not. "We can never communicate too much."

Hired in the mid-1990s in part to help the administration with its transition to governance by an independent board, Buettner is among the group of campus leaders that has had the most contact with trustees. As the liaison to the board's legislation, audit, external affairs, and compliance committee, Buettner's presentations to board members include topics as wide-ranging as state and federal legislation that affects the university, website analytics, and direct marketing recruiting initiatives that target high school counselors and parents of teenagers.

While it's natural for staff at any institution to feel intimidated before the board, Buettner reminds other chief communicators that "board members are still human, so we should treat them as humans."

Like so much in communications, effectively dealing with board members comes down to building relationships. Cultivating them with board members can be as simple as approaching them socially at university football games and arts events, Buettner says. "Get to know people personally and you will eventually learn their goals and what they value." 

Lydia Lum is a freelance writer and former reporter for the *Houston Chronicle* and *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

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**GAIN GOOD GOVERNANCE.** Board struggles can stem from a lack of clarity about the role of the board and the part that its members play. These issues can often be addressed by asking the right questions, according to "Governing the Nonprofit Organization," part of the Essays on Excellence series from Georgetown University's Center for Public & Nonprofit Leadership. The article reviews board members' governing and supporting roles, outlines the varied operations of different types of boards, and discusses the relationship between board members and staff. The 15-page primer also examines ways to ensure accountability and how boards can add value. Read the article at [cpnl.georgetown.edu/doc\\_pool/Governance.pdf](http://cpnl.georgetown.edu/doc_pool/Governance.pdf).

**BECOME POLITICALLY SAVVY.** Politics comes with the territory in higher education. Fortunately, longtime advancement professional Larry Lauer, vice chancellor for government affairs at Texas Christian University, wrote the book on helping colleagues negotiate institutional and academic politics while building internal support for advancement. In *Learning to Love the Politics: How to Develop Institutional Support for Advancement*, Lauer analyzes the political dynamics inherent to educational institutions; details the different types, leadership styles, and attitudes of academic and campus leaders; and offers tools and advice for dealing with them, including ways to gain buy-in for advancement's goals. The book is available in CASE's online store at [www.case.org/publications](http://www.case.org/publications).