

A Day in the Life of a Board President: My Lived Experience

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People often aspire to serve on a board, but sometimes it can be elusive what board service is and is not. This is particularly true in organizations where transition from one model of board service (operational) has recently transitioned to another form of board service (governance). I have the unique perspective of having served on three different boards after (or while) they navigated such a change from operation to governance model: AFA, NGLA, and Sigma Sigma Sigma.

A board member needs the ability to think big picture. They are trying to make sure their group still exists in 5, 10, or 15 years, and the group is in a strong and healthy position in the future. A board makes sure the association is financially viable, has capable staff working for them, is ethically conscious, and is following all legal regulations and best practices of board or association management. Governance boards do not pick the educational programs for conferences, plan the menu for a closing banquet, or edit the board's magazine or publication. I've been a board member and had other members ask me, "So you know what's for dinner?" No, I do not. And I did not personally decline any educational sessions either.

A governance board does, however, supervise the organization's highest staff member. In AFA that's our executive director, and during my presidency we did hire a new executive director: Dr. Lynda Wiley. The president supervises this person with feedback and evaluation from both the AFA board of directors and the AFA Foundation, as the executive director is shared by both. The best thing a board can do is hire competent and capable staff. It's similar to the adage of never wanting to be the smartest person in a room. If done right, the board can provide high-level thinking about how they want the organization to progress. Then, they let the staff and volunteer corps make sure it happens. There is an oft used phrase about "getting in the weeds," and that means the board should not be reviewing applications for the First 90 Days program, for example, or micro-managing the staff and volunteers.

I'll confess at times it can feel awkward or counterintuitive to not intimately know the day-to-day operations or occurrences happening when you are part of an association's elected or appointed volunteer leadership. But, that's not the role of a board member. I would argue it can become the role when it is affecting members or the association in detrimental ways. For example, if a member concern arises, board members have the opportunity to bring it up to the staff as necessary. If people emailed me about what I would call operational concerns regarding AFA, I would direct them back to Lynda. That's her paid day-to-day role. Similarly, I'd refer an Annual

Meeting question to Joslyn, a registration question to Jenn, a programming question to Diana, and a marketing question to Andrea or Justin. Additionally, I know if there was anything occurring that was malicious or could jeopardize the organization, the board has the duty to be involved and perhaps made difficult decisions.

For those of us who work on a campus, it's similar to the board of trustees. They are not "in the weeds," but they are making strategic decisions. For example, the board of trustees may decide how much they want enrollment to grow at their university or what they think tuition increases should be, but they aren't reading the Common Applications their institution receives each year. In addition, for those who work at an inter/national organization, you are familiar with preparing reports for your boards.

My vantage point is that I want the staff who are in the weeds day-to-day to share their perspectives and be candid with me about what is or isn't working, what is or isn't needed, and if the board's ideas will or will not work. The staff can also be a reality check when the board wants more done than current resources will allow — human or financial. And, if the board deems it important such thing be done, they can find the resources to accomplish their stated goal or the board can try to identify more resources, like additional revenue streams or more staff or volunteers. The board can also determine what current practices or work to stop in order to give more time and attention to starting something else.

I believe association management best practices are something a board should have. Although this is not my strongest suit, I learned so much from those who had this expertise. The skill set is not exclusive to inter/national staff members, but those I learned from the most in the area of association management were often inter/national staff members. In my personal experience, it's a skill set not well refined on a college campus.

Additionally, I've heard the narrative the AFA president may have a conflict of interest with campuses if they work at an inter/national organization. Yes, I can understand that concern. I also think this could play out if the AFA president is a campus-based professional, too. I work at an Ivy League institution. It is not following the Harvard model. One more time for those in the back: it is not following the Harvard model. But, what if it had? What if it had when I was AFA president? I would also add there are checks and balances. As the AFA president, I was not able to disregard the rest of the board and the staff and make decisions that were things only I wanted. In fact, some things I wanted were not adopted or done. There is not absolute power.

I think one of the reasons so many boards have made this governance transition is that volunteers simply don't have all the hours to give while they navigate life, family, professional roles, furthering their education, etc. And the staff executive director gives you a spokesperson, hopefully historical perspective, and continual support that most presidents and board members just do not have the hours to give. For example, Lynda traveled much more on the association's behalf than I did, and Lynda answered media inquiries on behalf of AFA as well. As president, I was responsible for organizing my fellow board members and leading us during meetings, but even that was not done exclusively by me.

I've been in more than one organization that thinks the path to the board is through volunteering a lot. That's been my own experience in all three organizations I mentioned. I had volunteer longevity prior to board service, and I do believe someone who knows the inner workings of the group and has experience could very well be suited to serve on the board. I also think someone who has not been intimately involved as a volunteer but has other strong competencies, is aware of trends in higher education and the industry, and is a critical thinker can also fill the role. I understand it can feel unfair to those who have put in the time and climbed up the ladder as they say, but we want people with experience and expertise that lend themselves to board service in those seats. And the skills to be in those seats don't come from only one place or prior role.

So, should the AFA president only be a campus-based professional? Well, when I became president there were about 12 people eligible for the role. As a refresher, the AFA bylaws state the candidate for president must also "have been a professional member of the association for a minimum of five years prior to nomination; and have held an elected or appointed role on the board of directors or one prior to their assumption of office." And some of those 12 had already been president. Not to sell myself short, but that's real. And yes, solidifying diverse leadership pipelines is something we MUST improve at doing.

Have I served on boards with inter/national staff members whom I think would be great AFA presidents? Yes. Back to the initial question: Should the AFA presidency continue to be restricted to only those who currently work on a campus? That's hard. That gives me pause. In 2012, I voted no. In 2019, I'm reconsidering. I've learned more as a result of my service and experiences. Whomever serves as president should want to do it not simply because of their paid professional position but because of their skills and abilities and committed desire to steward AFA and leave it better than they found it.

There are people who work at both places who likely don't desire to be AFA president. There are people who want a space only for campus professionals, and while I can understand that feeling

and have had it myself at some times, I'm not sure that helps us further our current state of being. I'm reminded of the African proverb a good friend recited on stage at the 2017 Annual Meeting, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." There are many people who used to work at a campus and now work at an inter/national organization. Our association has grappled with who we are and who we serve for much of our existence. Our members have passion for AFA, our members have ardently considered this issue and in some cases have been thinking about it for years, and to me both opinions have made points that have informed my thoughts. This is a complicated issue. We wouldn't keep having the conversation if it wasn't. Think it through, and be sure to vote for what you believe is truly best for AFA. It's electronic, so no voter cards.

Kara received her Bachelor of Arts in psychology from Gannon University in Erie, PA, and her Master of Education in higher education from the College of William and Mary in 2003. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Leadership at Colorado State University. Prior to coming to Cornell in 2006, Kara worked as the coordinator for Greek Affairs at the University of Miami (FL) for three years. Kara has worked with each of our undergraduate councils at Cornell, but her primary role was the advisor to the Interfraternity Council (IFC) before she became the director of OSFL in Summer 2017.

In her current role, Kara supervises the OSFL staff, helps to plan all programmatic and leadership initiatives for the sorority and fraternity community, is involved in the judicial processes for sororities and fraternities, communicates with sorority and fraternity alumni, and oversees the day-to-day management of sorority and fraternity life. Kara was the 2017-2018 president of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA). She is a member of Sigma Sigma Sigma sorority and serves on their executive council.