Managing Consortium Boards: An ACL Expert Dialog

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What strategies are successful in managing your consortium board through changes in membership and leadership? How do you bring new members up to speed? And how can you energize and engage your board? For this webcast, we have assembled an expert panel representing over 30 years of consortium leadership. They will offer their take on one of the greatest challenges to consortium impact and success: transition. The dialog will be guided by our guest moderator, Dr. Cathy Trower, a consultant, coach, and author of *The Practitioner's Guide to Governance as Leadership: Building High Performing Nonprofit Boards.*

About the panelists:
Neal Abraham is Executive Director of Five Colleges, Inc. in Massachusetts, where he serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the consortium. For the 11 years prior to coming to Five Colleges in 2009, Neal served as vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty at DePauw University. Previously, he held appointments at Bryn Mawr College and Swarthmore College.

Barbara McFadden Allen is Executive Director of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), a consortium of 15 research universities including the members of the Big Ten Athletic Conference and the University of Chicago. Barb has been with the CIC for 21 years, including 5 years as director of their library initiatives, and 16 as executive director.

Christopher Welna is President of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) since 2006. He works with ACM's two boards to set overall priorities and policies for programs to help strengthen the 14 member colleges as leaders, and exemplars, in liberal arts education. Prior to leading the ACM, Chris held appointments at the University of Notre Dame, Duke University, and the Ford Foundation.

About the moderator:
Cathy A. Trower is President of Trower & Trower, Inc., a board governance consulting firm, through which she has provided consulting and coaching services to more than 125 nonprofits. Cathy is author of *The Practitioner's Guide to Governance as Leadership: Building High Performing Nonprofit Boards* (Jossey Bass 2013). She spent 25 years in higher education as researcher, administrator, department chair and faculty member.

Kiernan Mathews: Thank you, everyone, and welcome to this, the second in this year's Professional Development Series from the Webinar Committee at the Association for Collaborative Leadership. My name is Kiernan Mathews and I really am very excited about this group today, excited to introduce them for what promises to be a very special discussion.

So, based on feedback from the Webinar Committee's survey of ACL members, we've organized an expert dialog about working with Consortium Boards. Today's discussion began with an intent to focus on managing board turnover, but you'll hear a lot of other advice for dealing with boards, whether you're a consortium director, a staff member, or even a board member yourself. So if you have questions, as I've said before, if you have questions for this panel, please type them in the chat window and I will raise them at the end of the dialog.

For our panel we've assembled three people who are some of our most experienced consortium leaders at ACL, and I should also note that they're some of the most generous with their time. Neal Abraham is Executive Director of Five Colleges, Incorporated, and a Five College Professor of Physics, positions he has held since August 2009. His board is made up of the Presidents of Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith Colleges, and the Chancellor of UMass Amherst. Neal is also the senior liaison to many other Five College leadership groups, such as the CAOs, CFOs, CIOs, and all of the other letters we like to fit between C and O. Neal is also the Treasurer to the Board of ACL.

Barbara McFadden Allen, our second panelist, is the Vice-President to the Board of ACL. She is the Executive Director of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, that's the growing consortium of 15 research universities, including the members of the Big Ten Athletic Conference and the University of Chicago. Barb has been with the CIC for 21 years, including 5 years as Director of their library initiatives, and 16 as Executive Director.

Finally, on our panel we have Christopher Welna, just back from a trip to the San Juan Islands. He's been President of the 14 Associated Colleges of the Midwest since 2006. He works with the ACM Board of Directors, and with the ACM Advisory Board of Deans to set overall priorities and policies for programs to help strengthen the member colleges as exemplars in liberal arts education.

So, welcome to our panel.

Barb Allen: Thanks.

Kiernan Mathews: Now, for the first time we have invited somebody outside the ACL to guide this webinar discussion with her expertise and fresh perspective. Many of you know Cathy Trower from her 30-year career in higher education, filled with countless presentations, and dozens of books, book chapters, and articles about the issues of academic culture, about shared governance, and making the Academy a great place to work for faculty, with a special focus, I should add, on faculty of color, women in STEM, and those on the tenure track. Cathy now focuses all of her time on improving non-profit board governance through her consulting and coaching work as principal of Trower and Trower, Incorporated. You may have seen Cathy's most recent publication in AGB's March issue of *Trusteeship Magazine*. That article was called Flipping the Boardroom for Trustee Engagement: Why and How. Her how-to book, *The Practitioner's Guide to Governance as Leadership*, is a top seller for Jossey Bass, being read by thousands of trustees and it's content is being featured at many governance conferences and workshops. I can really speak personally to Cathy's work with boards. I've seen her in action. She's really dynamic and really can be helpful in changing the conversation for your boards.

So, in teeing up today's session I was reminded of a great Cathy quote that has gotten some recent play in governance blogs. She said, "We must resist the urge to assume that task and structure are the sum total of governance. We can more easily do this if we shift our thinking from what is governing toward what ends are we governing." Cathy reminds us that, "Why matters first and foremost, and that form follows function so boards are well served to explore the why questions before the how and what questions."

With that I'd like to turn it over to you, Cathy. Thank you so much for leading our panel today.

Cathy Trower: Thank you. What I'd like to do is actually tee up the first question for our panelists and it has to do with one of the big issues that I know is on all of your peers' minds and colleagues' minds when it comes to working with consortium boards, and that is because your boards are comprised of provosts and presidents turnover is an issue. So my first question, and I'm going to put it to Barb first, and then Neal, what are some strategies you have used successfully to deal with board member turnover? So, Barb?

Barb Allen: Okay. Thanks, Cathy. So, first of all, I'll preface this by saying that, again, the provosts of our 15-member universities are the board. We're spread out, these 15 universities, in 11 different states, and I've personally worked for 77 different provosts on our board, with as many as six turning over in one year, so that will provide a little background to what I have to say. I'm going to just give you a couple of points about how we approach the transition, some general advice, and then some specific tips. So I'll proceed in the following way.

First, we recognize and honor the transition of the people in question. So we're very relationship driven in how we work with our board, so honor that transition. We acculturate new members as soon as possible. We craft all of our meetings to ensure that each member receives particular attention and respect on their issues of concern and that they have the opportunity to engage, and we use targeted, personal communication for each board member throughout the year, and by that we mean sort of regular communications, though not frequent, and those might include a combination of calls, visits, or e-mails, sort of depending on, you know, where that person is and how difficult it is to get to them. So that's sort of our general, guiding principles.

For advice on this I think, from our perspective, you have to nurture those relationships, as I've just said, both with the outgoing, and with the incoming members, but you must never, ever mistake the outgoing or previous, in our case, provosts as still being members of the board or representing their university. Because, number two here, is while you honor the people in the transition, we must understand that the university hierarchy is going to change relatively quickly, as soon as the new provost, in our case, is seated. You have to respect that new hierarchy and understand that will change. We never forget who the boss is. We are not the boss, the board is, and when in doubt we ask the board members how they prefer to receive information from us, and who else we should be connecting with on their campuses. Finally, we do all we can to be open to information, suggestions, and communication from the board members as individuals outside of the meeting, because the dynamics of the meeting suggest one way of making decisions, but we often find that in the privacy of their own office that individuals will share more and relevant information about decisions.

Finally, there are two specific tips that we found work very well over the years: Being nice to people is a really smart tactic. Number one, we always give a gift to the outgoing provost, and the gift we've selected over the years is a really nice framed, hand illuminated scroll with the words, you know, committee and institutional cooperation, and CIC real big across it. Most of our provosts, or many of them, go on to be president somewhere, and so it's nice that they have in their office a big, illuminated, framed scroll that has our name on it. We think that's important. We also send a welcome gift to the new provost, a basket of treats to their office is often well received. We call that new provost. We then follow up with a letter, a packet of information, and a briefing book by mail, and then typically schedule a campus visit as soon as humanly possible to get them engaged.

So those are several steps that we take, again, just to nurture the relationships and strengthen our understanding of how decisions will be made in the new office as soon as possible.

Cathy Trower: Thank you, Barb. I think that is just so incredible, because you're right. You know, I think it's funny when we think about we're working with boards and we forget that they're people, right? It's kind of like students. Oh, yes, they're people. So it's really critical to honor those relationships and make people truly feel special. So thank you for those nice variety of suggestions there.

So, Neal, how about from your perspective? Have you got maybe some of the same things that you do and what other things would you add into the mix of how you deal with that turnover?

Neal Abraham: So, I'll begin by saying that in my six years in this Five College consortium I've had 13 different members of my 6-member board, so turnover has been rapid, some expected, some not. Let me begin with turnover, because that's a critical issue for this question.

I think there are some structural considerations that I am reminded of each time I get a new board member, but also another senior officer at one of the campuses, and that is that the newcomer has been hired primarily to serve the newcomer's institution. Often that's with a certain degree of missionary zeal to make the institution better, to patch the holes in what might not have been working perfectly, to listen to the voices of those excluded, and to fix things, to find resources for what couldn't be funded. The consortium is one of those things that is on the list, but not the primary one, so one has to earn the respect and attention of officers or of campuses to the collaborative enterprise, no matter how valuable you have been. I think accompanying that is a certain degree of natural intellectual and administrative suspicion that comes from two sources. One, a new coming officer is expected to do critical analysis of the past and the previous consortia relationships, so part of that past. The other is to the extent that the new officer is expected to do better than, improve upon, correct the flaws of the predecessor, the fact that the predecessor was involved with the consortium may be reason for a little suspicion that that was part of the problem. So we have to, again I say, earn the respect and the attention of each new officer.

I think Barb's described a good set of outreach initiatives. I would go further only in the sense that I think it is never wise in dealing with the board to just send material, whether that's for a meeting or as a briefing about the history. The last thing a new board member needs is an inch thick or a half-inch thick history lesson about the consortium that has a meeting coming up that will take an hour, or three hours, or whatever it might take. That will be too much, so you have to parse the information to make it useful, bullet points, highlights, key takeaways. That's an important part of preparing for each meeting for all board members, but particularly for new board members.

I also think that the extended relationship between a consortium's leadership and senior staff members and the institutions in the consortium or collaboration is very important. So, for example, my executive assistant is on a first-name basis with the executive assistants of the senior officers of the campuses. They work magic in a far different way than I do with the officers directly. By phone calls or e-mails they can find holes in the calendar for a quick phone call. Cultivating the relationships of your senior staff members, or if you don't have an executive assistant, know the assistant to your board members as well as you know the board members would be my advice, because that will be the way you get attention, you get prioritizing of critical e-mails, and they must know what's going on in order for them to help you in your contact with the officers.

Finally, I guess I would say that newcomers bring new perspective, and if you use a acculturation only to train the newcomer you suppress all of their insights and energy and you probably alienate them, so inviting the newcomer to bring fresh ideas, fresh perspective, not to say we've already done that, we've already looked at that, is critical to being welcoming, and therefore, engaging the new members in the life of the board.

Cathy Trower: Thanks, Neal. I love the way that you kind of put it out there at the outset that there is a certain amount of doing better than and a little bit of suspicion perhaps, and being somewhat critical of the past, and then on the book end of that, that that also means fresh perspective, but in a very positive way. I love how you build on getting to know the executive assistants and everyone involved in this, because those partnerships and those relationships are so critical.

Chris, I wonder if you have anything you'd like to add on the topic?

Chris Welna: Sure. Well, just very briefly, I guess I'd mention first our institutions in the ACM are in 5 states and 12 of the 14 presidents on my board are new since I began in 2006, and 13 of the 14 deans on my advisory board of deans are also new since I began.

Echoing, I think, what both Barb and Neal have said, in my experience the main task is getting on the radar of new members. They're very, very busy people and ideas like sending a basket, I wrote that down. I like that. We haven't been doing that. And of course, as Neal said, getting to know and having a good relationship with people's assistants are very, very important.

I would add also, after underscoring those, that it's key to articulate for them why – that is for board members – why their involved with the consortium and participation in the meetings might be personally useful to them, as Barb said. Remember that they're people and they have personal interest as well, and also articulating why it might be significant for their institutions.

Cathy Trower: Fabulous. I love that. Getting back to why is so essential and time, like you said, Chris, back to what Neal said, that they are so very busy, and Barb recognized as well. So I love that tip too, about highlighting what's really important in the packet of materials and, you know, sending out brief briefings and not overwhelming them with material. So thank you, all. That's fantastic.

I'm going to start with Chris on this next question. We have some of this has already come through in terms of dealing with new – with turnover, but how do you get new members up to speed as quickly as possible? You've all mentioned the fact that you've got a lot of turnover and a lot of new people that you're involved with. Chris, how do you get them up to speed?

Chris Welna: Okay. Well, one of the things that I do as new presidents are appointed is I always go to their inaugurations. It's always noted and clearly makes a difference. Often the inaugurations though are sometimes after the first board meeting has occurred, so that can't be the first contact. I usually write a new designated president when they've been announced, and then typically in the summer, before their first academic year gets going, send them a letter of welcome. I send it both in paper and electronic versions so we can have live links, and explain, again, as Neal pointed out, this has to be brief and to the point, because they're being deluged with material, especially at any point, but especially in that first year, but explain the timing and the location of meetings, who it is that chairs the meetings, how agendas get set, and what's at stake for their college in the board meetings.

I also take time describing the value that other presidents have found in being able to – in participating in the meetings, for example, being able to share concerns and ideas with each other about emerging issues from semester to semester about the opportunity to shape consortium programs that serve their students, faculty, and staff. And I mentioned specific ways that specific staff and faculty, that they know, or are going to get to know soon, have been involved in the consortium. So they know who on their campus they can talk to about involvement in the consortium and from whom, I know, by choosing those names carefully, they'll hear about the value of doing so.

I know that I could do much than this and, if so, I would ideally like to have one or more of my senior board members talk to the new member about the value that they see in participating. It's happened informally at times and I certainly encourage that, but I haven't been able to make that a regular practice, though I think it would be valuable. I always try to visit individually with new presidents, following up on the material that I send them, to talk again about their role and their college's involvement in the consortium.

Cathy Trower: Oh, I love that. I really love that, Chris, about trying to have a senior board member talk to one of the new members. A lot of the boards I work with, we have this kind of board buddy system where that can happen. One of the things that I've found really effective there is to ask senior members what they wish they knew or what they know now that they wish they knew when they first came on the board. So I think that can be really beneficial in perhaps institutionalizing something like that.

So, Neal, I'll go to you next and see if you've got any other tips on bringing new members up to speed.

Neal Abraham: Well, Chris has detailed a lot of best practices. Let me add just a couple, which are possible for us, because our campuses are, at most, within a 30-minute drive from each other.

So, we tend to have a welcome dinner for the new board member and spouse or partner and that is usually hosted by one of the other board members. We try to get that on the calendar within the first month of the academic year. That builds a larger personal welcome to the region. Since we are so regionally located that's something that probably wouldn't be as useful in a larger and more dispersed consortium.

We also encourage one of the senior members of the board to have a personal, private lunch or dinner with the new board member to chat about things, but in addition, to address the personal aspects of the board meeting. Usually our most despised part of the agenda is the open time, because it seems to be a waste of time, and at the end of the year the most beloved part of the agenda was the open time for campus updates and sharing. The most despised has become the business items, which were initially the presumed to be reason that we were meeting. So helping new board members see the balance of value between both, taking action, and building relationships, and having confidential peers with whom certain issues can be raised is important.

There's one other aspect for those of us who are in collaborations or consortia that are incorporated. This is a very tricky one, which I try to manage both personally with new board members, and then collectively at the first board meeting of the year. Our consortium, like many others, is incorporated, so we are a separate corporate entity under the laws of the commonwealth of Massachusetts. Board members of such an entity have a fiduciary responsibility to act in the best interest of the corporation. It is hard to have people who represent as they would view it, their own institutions to see the difference between voting the best interest of the institutions of which they are officers, versus voting in the best interest of the consortium. That is necessary, is commonwealth law. If I overplay that hand nobody will want to play in the consortium sandbox. So it is both an important orientation to the existence of our consortium as a corporation, but it has to be moderated by the personal value and the institutional value that would be reasons for participating. It's really a complex situation, but I've learned that if you don't lay some ground work for the legal distinction of an incorporated consortium existing independently of the campuses, it comes back in strange ways to surprise you, so you need a reference point very early in the orientation process.

Cathy Trower: Thank you. I think that is such an important point, Neal, and I'm sure that everybody on this webinar, who are also in that situation of being incorporated, find that to be true.

Barb, would you like to add anything on how you get new members up to speed that you haven't heard yet from Chris or Neal?

Barb Allen: Okay. It will not surprise you to hear that we reach out and have a personal touch, so either a phone call that we have organized in advance, or a campus visit prior to that meeting, personal meeting with the board member, we'll cull our information here at the CIC to figure out which activities that campus seems to be using the most so that when we go to that first meeting we're able to say, "Oh, you may not know that your campus is receiving, you know, $500,000.00 in value back from these five contracts you participate in." So then you're giving them a frame of reference for their institution's participation in the overall organization, because as several have noted here, you have to explain to them how does this organization work and then move as quickly as humanly possible to and how does it deliver value to you personally and to your institution generally. So we use that personal outreach, phone if necessary, since we're often five states away, or in person if at all humanly possible.

As Neal already mentioned, and I think Chris did too, get to know their assistants so you can get on their calendar.

Cathy Trower: Okay. Yes. Fantastic. I love how the consortia delivers value to the campus and to the person personally, and helping them know, because I think that is something that they wouldn't necessarily understand with everything that they're dealing with when they come on to campus. So thank you so much for rounding out that.

So one of the issues that we talked about in preparing for this webinar was this notion of disengagement and the fact that sometimes a board seems disengaged, that is the board seems bored, and sometimes it's a matter of individual board members perhaps feeling disengaged or seeming disengaged. So I hear this consistently from CEOs, that this is a big issue and I'm wondering what each of you, just quickly, with one thought, if you could choose just one thing, what does each of you think leads to disengagement on the part of board members? Barb?

Barb Allen: Yeah. I'd say not co-creating activities that have real impact for the board member's university and for her personally.

Cathy Trower: Okay. Thanks. Chris?

Chris Welna: From what I've observed, I think it's being overwhelmed by the demands of campus matters, together with relatively limited access to setting the board agenda in the early years that someone is on a board so that board members see a tradeoff between what they can do with the board, and what they feel they should be doing on their home campus with respect to issues they face there.

Cathy Trower: Okay. So it's not necessarily a matter of disengagement with the consortium board, it's just everything else that's going on?

Chris Welna: Well, I think it is. It ends up being – well, I've seen people become disengaged then and if there's a single thread it's, I think, for different reasons they are under a lot of stress on their home campuses for one reason or another. Although the consortium could help and their peers could help, they begin not to see that anymore and are just so involved in domestic matters that they can't find the wherewithal and the time to be involved anymore.

Cathy Trower: Right. And often times that's their own board they're dealing with on their own ______.

Chris Welna: It can be. At times it's their own board. That's right.

Cathy Trower: Right. Right. Neal, what would you throw into the mix here in terms of disengagement for board members?

Neal Abraham: Well, I think the biggest single thing that a board can do to disengage board members, particularly newcomers, is to focus on governance. While governance is important and agreements and commitments are important, to join an organization that is talking about its management style and its governance changing its bylaws rather than doing things, is a quick path to disengaging new and old board members. So I think Barb's point about co-creating, engaging board members in the agenda setting, starting the agenda with who had ideas for this meeting, who has ideas for next meeting, is a way to build the space as a shared space or value rather than I'm doing someone else's business, because I'm ex-officio I have to be here.

I think it's particularly hard when the meetings are online, conference calls, or otherwise. I don't have to look you in the eye and be missing and seem to be missing, so it's a particular challenge for long-distance connections rather than in-person connections.

Cathy Trower: Fantastic. Yeah. I agree. This setting is difficult for us to interact with the people on the other end since we can't see each other or them, but that can be so challenging for board meetings. I agree. Yes, there's little that's more boring and disengaging than talking about bylaws, and as you say, kind of focusing on governance, so I would agree.

I think it's great, and you've all touched upon this, the ability to tap into board members right away in terms of the big, messy challenges that they face. Centering some of the conversation around those things and then allowing the consortium and this group of incredible peers and people that they have to help them begin to think through those challenges, so I think I would just add that into the mix as a way to kind of up the ante and help the board see more value in coming to meetings. So thank you, all.

I'm going to pose this next question first to Neal. This has to do with any suggestions you have to energize and engage board members. It kind of builds on this notion of disengagement, but just build on that some more. How do we energize and engage board members, whether they've been around for a while or whether they're new?

Neal Abraham: Well, I can think of three quick strategies and which one you choose and which one I've chosen depends on the circumstances. If there is something really vibrant going on at a different level with the librarians, or with the faculty group, or with the business officers in joint purchasing, or whatever it might be, getting the engaged officer of the institution to convey that value to the board member if a board member is not that person, provides the local heritage story that is engaging and reason to say, "Oh, maybe I could get something similar out of my meeting."

Secondly, I think the context that says what can we help you with, that sometimes is the right question, because there's a list of things that the officer will admit to needing help with. Sometimes it's not the right question, because the officer has no idea of what the consortium can do. Without that idea you're not going to get a mind up of the woes of my life. It will be, let's see, what do you do exactly? You do courses? Well, I don't need help with courses. So you need to find ways to listen and maybe that's not by asking questions; it's by being places. Because I can, I go to faculty meetings at five campuses. I listen to the president's reports. I am signed up on the e-mail listers for the faculty members of all five campuses, so I get the e-mails from the presidents' offices. I read the student newspapers. I am listening to the dilemmas that presidents have and that they're reporting. Then I'm speaking to them, knowing about their context, and saying, "I see you're at this stage on your strategic plan. I could give you some insights about how the consortium could help you with that," so I think it goes beyond listening to the answer of what do you need.

And the third thing, when there is a need, it's inviting the board member to actually provide the reference material and to lead that discussion for the board rather than doing it for the board. Staff members sometimes have to, as much as we can make ourselves do it, blend into the background, be the facilitators, but let the speaking come from board members and let the previously disengaged board member make a presentation, make a pitch for a project that we might do together, even criticize something that we're doing. Ask that person to lead a part of the meeting.

Cathy Trower: Thank you so much. I think those are great strategies and I really love that idea of distributed leadership and asking them to step up and into that, so thank you.

Barb, would you like to add anything?

Barb Allen: Yeah. I guess I've just observed that in my personal opinion the engaged board member may or may not behave in an engaged fashion at the actual board meeting. I'm going to come back to that in a minute. So what we're always trying to push for is an engaged board member, who's really engaged on their campus, connecting us with the problems they're facing and connecting their senior leadership on the campus with our projects.

So, again, this will sound idiotically obvious, and perhaps it is, but in either case, of either a person who's seemingly disengaged at the board meeting, as in they're not coming, or that their campus is absent from programs, you know, I call them. I set up a specific meeting, maybe 15 minutes, maybe 30 minutes, and I pitch sort of softball questions to them.

I felt like last meeting wasn't as interesting or exciting. Did you feel that too, and how can we handle that in the future? So you're asking them.

I've often, by the way, been very surprised when they come back and they'll say, "Oh, that meeting was great," even though they seemed like they were just daydreaming or something. So sometimes my perspective of what is disengagement is different from theirs. So again, just looking at how do they behave in terms of aligning their institutional assets with projects that we have under way that would benefit them, and then how did they behave interpersonally at the meeting, and if there's a problem in either case, my experience is if you ask them they will be quick to tell you.

Finally, I would say, again, Neal, I think it was, made a point earlier. We were talking about acculturation, which you might have surmised we meant when a new board member comes in, you know, you help them understand the existing culture and help them fit in, but it's a two-way street. When new board members, or new institutions, or new projects come on, you're changing the entire culture of the organization, or you should. So it's not just a matter of how do we help that person better understand how they fit something we're already doing, whether it's our board meeting or a project, and really asking them questions about how we can best shape the activities to include their aspirations.

Cathy Trower: Oh, thank you. Love that two-way street idea.

Chris, would you care to add anything to this question on disengagement?

Chris Welna: Yeah. Sure. I also think that's an excellent idea, but I would just pick up on Barb's observation about behavior that might seem like lack of engagement to note that I've observed different styles of engagement from different people, of course, and that it breaks down roughly, in my experience, to three different patterns that as new people come on to a board, one way that they begin, one way their behavior begins is to be to listen and observe at meetings rather than talk in the first year or two, but I find that these people are very responsive to my communications and, as Barb described, often saying that was a very good meeting, you know? I got a lot out of it.

Others begin, you know, many of these are present, so not surprisingly, being very vocal, bringing lots of new ideas at meetings, in fact, more ideas than can be processed by the rest of the group. They, too, are responsive to messages as well, again, brimming with ideas. The third group is occasionally a member starts out being quiet and then also missing meetings and not responding much to communication. So within the different styles, these three groups, and then after a couple of years I see that the presence and the listening group typically become more outspoken. They've got a growing sense of what their campus needs and how they could use the consortium to help. Meanwhile, the highly vocal members early on tend to become less so after a couple of years. I think that's partly because they get more absorbed in their campus work as it becomes an increasing focus of their attention, and also that they see that many of the ideas they voice don't get a lot of traction among members who perhaps don't know them yet, or because agendas go through an executive committee that's populated by people who've been there longer than they have. Meanwhile, the third group of the occasional and I would say really infrequent members, who start by missing, tend to continue missing more meetings than they attend, despite outreach from me or from other board members. Again, as I mentioned before, my sense is that this, that third sub-group is so absorbed in some dimension of their campus work and maybe involves their board, that they just don't see the value or see a way to connect with the other presidents to get help with what they're working on.

And after four or five years on the board, my members rotate onto the executive committee that sets the agendas, and I've seen often that in doing so they typically become much more engaged. In the course of the four years rotating through positions of secretary, treasurer, to vice-chair, chair, and past-chair, they become increasingly engaged, and that's probably the peak of any board member's involvement. But even so, there are exceptions. In the time I've been working with this board one member, who usually missed board meetings, also missed the executive committee meetings, and then simply resigned from the executive committee before it was time to become chair. I have to say that the effect on others was to, you know, it prompted a lot of scratching of heads and renewed engagement on their part and just people throwing up their hands about how to engage some people, who, for their own reasons, were not able to be as engaged as others.

Cathy Trower: Thanks. It really ties into the last question that I have for the three panelists, and in the next five minutes before we open this up to Q&A, and I'm going to ask you first, Chris, and then have Barb and Neal respond, but part of what you're getting at is people are different, right? Some people are more engaged. People are quiet – especially, it may depend on how long they've been around and as they're cycling through, and when they really step up and step in. So it speaks to diversity and we firmly believe that diversity of views, among other forms of diversity, are really good for governance. But one of the issues that I often here from the consortium is that there are huge wealth differences often times among your members that render some issues, you know, huge and a major force on campus. For other campuses it's not even a blip, because of the endowment and the situation at that particular institution. So I'm wondering what thoughts you have on that one, Chris, and handling that kind of diversity. How do you work with the wealth difference?

Chris Welna: Well, I think it's probably the toughest and least openly acknowledged issue for any group of institutions, because no matter what the group there are always going to be wealth differences. No matter what the size of the gaps is between levels of wealth, whatever it is is always going to become salient in discussions. I've tried to promote the principle that all of the member institutions don't have to do everything all together, all of the time; that is that it's okay for sub-groups to collaborate around activities that make sense for them, and wealth differences might shape some of those differences for us, since we're in five states. Geography can as well. Particular interests of – or academic interests of sub-sets, athletics, as well, can be reasons for sub-groups to collaborate. Within our organization, some, but not all, colleges participate in a tuition remission exchange program, and I could go on. There are many other programs where some, but not all, colleges participate. I think in the end this means that the consortium can be institutional, capital, for the colleges to collaborate where it makes sense ideally.

I guess I think it's also probably worth remembering that despite wealth differences and how important these can seem, that they're actually rather trivial compared to the differences between any of our institutions and the wealth and scale of the wealthiest institutions. I think in higher ed we have a culture where we tend to focus on how different one's own institution is from all other institutions, and we don't have much of a culture of looking at the similarities. So that, I think, accentuates the real differences that may be there.

Cathy Trower: Oh, I love that. That is so true. Barb, what are your thoughts?

Barb Allen: Yeah. Actually, this has been much less of a challenge in our universities than one might imagine, so in our universities we range, you know, from a campus with 24,000 students up to 60,000, and so the budgets are similarly positioned on a spectrum. But I think for us anyway, we find that increasingly solutions that require collaborative action happen for reasons other than saving money. They happen to accelerate a particular research program, for example, or to take advantage of technologies, like cloud computing, where the goal is not, you know, it's not to save money. It's to ensure that some particular research project is moving as quickly as it can.

So, with that as a background, I would say that, you know, you have to recognize and respect that not every problem on every member of campus has a collaborative solution or a solution that could be provided by your organization. You have to be disciplined about pursuing strategies that have the greatest impact on the most members. In building our own budget, we have a dual strategy that mirrors, I think what Chris was saying, that everyone pays equally into the basic budget of our organization, so our annual operating budget is essentially divided by 15, and everybody pays the same amount; but then they can pick and choose among particular investments or programs according to their sort of appetite for that on their own campus. So that helps ameliorate some of the immediate challenges so that if two campuses are simply not interested in large-scale procurement for whatever reason, then 13 campuses will participate and they'll invest in that activity separately.

Cathy Trower: Okay. Thank you so much. Neal, any quick last thoughts on that issue of diversity in terms of wealth?

Neal Abraham: Well, two points. Since I've been in institutions of varying means and consulted for many others, my impression is that every institution is spending all of its income and disposable resources to the best possible impact. So in a certain sense, though it doesn't always feel that way, every institution is cash strapped, whether it has a $3 billion endowment or a few hundred thousand dollar endowment. We spend what we take in as institutions and so collaboration has a value added for each institution.

The separate thing that I've learned is it's better not to try to tell the institutions why they collaborate, but to ask. There's no better way to ask with that impact that I'm looking for than to have a stranger ask. Every time we get a visitor who comes and wants to meet with one of our groups, I encourage the visitor to say, "Now, tell me again why you collaborate." I get better answers to that question than when I ask myself. The answers often come from the richest institutions; whereas the suspicion behind the table, under the table, is that the wealthy ones there are really the uncooperative ones and it's the poorer institutions that collaborate out of desperation. In fact, the wealthy institutions have a good, long list of reasons why they collaborate, and it's important to let them articulate it rather than to let the assumption that wealth breeds disinterest to become an expectation and, therefore, the expectation becomes lived.

Cathy Trower: Very nice. Thank you, Neal, and thank you, everyone, all three of you, Chris, Neal, and Barb. This is just so incredible.

I would like to, in a couple of minutes here, for a couple of minutes, open this up to any questions that have come in so, Kiernan, I'm going to turn it back over to you to see if any questions are in.

Kiernan Mathews: Thanks, Cathy. Yes, we have received some excellent questions so far, and I invite the audience to submit others through the chat window. We'll get to them if there's time.

The first one I have comes from Beth Moy, who asks, "What strategies might you use to address a new member, who is not sure if their institution is in the "right" consortium? That is they perceive their institution as perhaps better than the others?"

Cathy Trower: All right. So any one of you want to take that up, want to step in with a quick answer on that? Barb?

Barb Allen: Yeah. I guess, Beth – hi there, Beth, again, I found it useful – I haven't had this particular question, but I have had people ask, you know, hey, I don't want to be in your fiber network, because I'm going to be in my fiber network with my other region, you know, or whatever that answer is. So you know, generally, we'll just ask back some targeted questions to help us better understand their thinking in this situation. So we'll ask them, "Oh, what other partnerships are you looking at? What particular activities appeal to you about that other partnership?" Then call that partnership and say, "Hey, what are you doing?" So that you can better understand what that opportunity is elsewhere. To the extent possible, be responsive to whatever this person perceived as, you know, the lack of opportunity there. But that would be my only experience with that kind of thing.

Cathy Trower: Okay. Thanks.

Neal Abraham: My experience cuts a different way. Let me just say that I think there are institutions that rightfully should be in several different consortium that serve different needs, so I don't feel threatened when some of my institutions join other groups. I think we learn from it. They bring messages back. If it's I wanted to leave then I think you should be listening to the wise, as Barb said, because it may be that there are things that you can do to address those needs, and it may be that you just can't. That kind of departure is a very serious structural concern if your consortium is critically dependent on its current members. You need to have thought through how you will deal with departures, because it can suddenly leave big gaps in the budget that others may be unwilling to fill, and the consortium is often not structured to be parsed out, that we can give up a fifteenth of what we do, or give up a twelfth, or a fourth, or in our case, a fifth.

So the rules of engagement, how long are you in, how much notice do you have to give of departure, are things that ought to be nailed down in the background so the conversation is not about leaving tomorrow because you didn't think about that future.

Cathy Trower: Thank you. Chris, we'll give you a shot at the next question if it's one you'd like to take on. Kiernan, what's another question?

Kiernan Mathews: Thanks, Cathy. The next question is from Irene Burgess, who asks, "How many meetings a year do you have? Are they in person? Do you teleconference? What do you do in your board meetings that might be unique in terms of how the agenda is handled and getting the members to interact in meaningful ways, like interactive activities?"

So the first one is more of a technical question about how many meetings is kind of the right number for your particular boards? Do you teleconference? Then the second one is kind of about engaging members in interactive, interesting ways.

Cathy Trower: Chris?

Chris Welna: Sure. So the ACM Board of Directors, the president meet once in the fall semester, towards the end, and once in the spring semester. In preparation, the executive committee does a conference call before that, before each of those meetings, about six weeks before hand. The Board of Directors also created an Advisory Board of Deans that discusses academic issues and it's primarily an academic consortium, so most things go through the advisory board. They too meet once a semester. In addition, the deans meet once during the summer for a meeting that has no business items on it, as just it tends to be an open mike roundtable for reflection and renewal. Each board meeting has a consent agenda with items that are basically housekeeping. It then has substantive questions for discussion of policy choices, but the part of the meeting that board members seem to value most is the roundtable, for which we always allocate at least 90 minutes, where they can bring up any topic that's on their minds and they often submit topics in advance of the meeting as well.

Besides that, which is a very integrating part of the meeting, we also, of course, have a reception and dinner to begin the meeting the evening before and that also is a place where members just connect with each other as people. And that makes a big difference for the quality of discussion as well.

Cathy Trower: Okay. Thank you, Chris. I see we're running out of time so, Kiernan, I'm going to turn this back to you.

Kiernan Mathews: Okay. Well, we'll just leave with one more question. This one is from Tracy Thompson. The question is, "Should our expectations for engagement within an ex-officio board be different than for an elected board?"

Cathy Trower: Anyone want to chime in? I don't want all three of you to, but Neal, perhaps?

Neal Abraham: Well, I think expectations shouldn't be different, but reality checks in and says, "If I'm there because I hold a title, I haven't decided to be there." So you have a greater likelihood of disengaged board members, so you have to work harder at engaging those who are ex-officio members by virtue of their offices rather than those who stood for election, willing to serve, whether they had to have a platform statement or not. They expressed interest. You should have less expectation or trouble, but you should not take them for granted, but ex-officio will need more cultivation, more listening, more careful briefing and preparation to be sure that they take that ex-officio responsibility with the same degree of care and importance as you wish.

Barb Allen: This is Barb and I just observe that we have ours are all ex-officio by virtue of their position as provost, so we have to work really hard at making sure they're personally engaged, because their institutions are already engaged by virtue of their presidents. Whereas, if these folks were ex-officio, I think we would have to work much harder at making sure that the people at the table really represent the institution and can deploy institutional resources in the way they need to be for the consortium.

Cathy Trower: Thank you so much. Kiernan?

Kiernan Mathews: Well, I think we're going to leave it at that and wrap it up. I'll – Cathy, I don't know if you want to ask everyone to maybe say one last word or if you have a final thought that you want to leave with the audience?

Cathy Trower: I will turn it over to the esteemed panel. Barb, any last words?

Barb Allen: This has been great. Cathy and Kiernan, I really appreciate your involvement in this and I've learned a lot from your work together, so thanks. It's been a pleasure.

Cathy Trower: Thank you. Chris?

Chris Welna: Great questions, I think, too from you and from our audience.

Cathy Trower: Yeah. That's fantastic. I look forward to reading the transcript myself too. So, Neal?

Neal Abraham: Well, I want to say thank you to everyone for participating and to remind us all that we have an ACL List Serve, which is a place where some group conversations may continue, and often when a question is posed it leads immediately to an offline conversation for the follow-up. So this is not the only way to consult with your colleagues, who are involved in collaborative work and collaborative leadership in higher education.

Cathy Trower: That's a great reminder, Neal. Thank you so much. Thanks, again, Barb, Chris, and Neal, and Kiernan, for helping us make this happen.

Kiernan Mathews: Well, so many thanks to you, Cathy. I want to remind the audience that Cathy is donating her time to ACL in this capacity and it really is – we really are so grateful to have the benefit of her excellent questions and her organization and engagement with the ACL on this topic.

Anybody who's interested in learning more about Cathy's work can go to TrowerandTrower.com. We are grateful to her and to the panel. Thank you, everyone, and we'll see you on the listserv.

Cathy Trower: Thanks. 'Bye-bye, everyone.

[End of Audio]

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