

Smithsonian Advisory Boards as an Instrument of Governance

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PREFACE

Understanding the roles of boards in public settings has been an ongoing interest of mine for over three decades. In general, the governance of public institutions has received insufficient attention from researchers and practitioners. Yet, the complexities of governing public agencies in a fast changing world pose several challenges, including the creative use of boards, effective communications among stakeholders, and the dynamic integration of competencies of decision makers at all levels as organizations evolve.

In 2001-2002, the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conducted a review of advisory boards at the Smithsonian. It addressed those challenges and others. OP&A's recent research emphasized the collection of multiple points of view on the recent leadership transition, analysis of findings, adaptation of findings to diverse stakeholders, and a comparison of governance matters at other organizations with those of the Smithsonian.

Work on governance has also given me the opportunity to exchange ideas with many thoughtful colleagues. It is impossible to list all their names. However, three OP&A staff merit special recognition. Whitney Watriss, a senior OP&A analyst, is insightful, highly competent, and an excellent writer. Ioana Munteanu and Lance Costello, also OP&A staff members, are continually helpful, efficient, and attuned to detail. And Kathleen Flahive, a summer intern, did an excellent job of searching for and reviewing the literature on advisory boards as well as teasing out persistent themes. I also wish to express my appreciation to survey respondents who furnished perspectives on governance at the Smithsonian.

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INTRODUCTION

In response to some critical reviews of the performance of the Smithsonian Board of Regents in 2007, the Board asked the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct a survey to solicit opinions about the Board of Regents operations and other topics. Four groups of people—the Regents themselves, the Regents’ Liaisons, the chairs of the advisory boards serving the Smithsonian central administration and individual units, and senior Smithsonian managers—were asked to respond. Among the points respondents made was that the Board was out of touch with the real issues and concerns of the units. A number suggested that better communication with the advisory boards would be one way for the Regents to be better informed about the units and the challenges they face. Further, the advisory boards saw themselves as a resource to the Regents, for example, carrying out assigned tasks that the Regents lacked time to handle in-depth. The chairs in particular expressed interest in assisting the Regents more actively and put forward specific recommendations on how to accomplish that.

In August 2007, the Regents asked the central Smithsonian administration to develop a white paper on ways in which the Regents could use the advisory boards as a resource. This paper from OP&A is one part of that effort. To prepare the paper, OP&A did a literature search for studies on the roles and use of advisory groups set up by nonprofit governance boards and federal agencies. OP&A found very little information, a finding confirmed by Judith R. Saidel, who in 1998 issued a report on her in-depth review of the use of advisory councils by nonprofits in New York State. OP&A also drew on the in-depth study of Smithsonian and unit advisory boards it conducted for the Secretary in 2001-02 (Smithsonian Institution, OP&A 2002). Last, it reviewed the results of the internal survey conducted for the Regents this spring.

The next section of this paper provides an overview of the literature on the use of advisory councils¹ by nonprofits, furnishes background information on the Smithsonian-wide and unit advisory boards, and summarizes the themes that emerged from the Regents' survey as relates to advisory boards. Following that background piece, the paper discusses how the advisory boards might serve as an effective instrument of governance for the Regents and what is required for that to happen.

¹ The literature is consistent in stating that the word "boards" should not be used to avoid confusion with governance boards. Instead, the literature tends to use "advisory councils" or "groups." When referring to advisory boards other than the Smithsonian's, this report follows that convention.

THE ROLES OF ADVISORY COUNCILS OF GOVERNANCE BOARDS

Advisory councils are groups of individuals who typically are asked by organizations or boards to volunteer their time to provide a variety of services to help fulfill their missions. According to McNamara (1997-2007), “An advisory group is a collection of individuals who bring unique knowledge and skills which complement the knowledge and skills of the formal board members in order to more effectively govern the organization” (1). McNamara continues, “[A]n advisory group can be a tremendous complement to the effectiveness of the official, or formal, board of directors as it works to carry out a specific, complex, major role (e.g., financial analysis) or initiative (e.g., construct a building)” (ibid., 1). An information sheet of Geehan Advisory Boards (2001-04) notes, “A Board of Advisors is a **working** as opposed to an **honorary** body that offers **guidance** versus **governance**, which delivers great insight minus legal liability and statutory responsibility.” According to two studies, more than one third of nonprofits had advisory councils in addition to their governing boards, and in many cases the councils had been set up by the organization’s governing board (Axelrod 2004 and Saidel 1998).

The Roles of Nonprofit Advisory Councils

Governance boards use advisory councils in many ways, as described by Saidel:

[A]dvisory groups enhance organizational governance capacity by providing additional programmatic, service delivery, and accountability assistance.

They make specialized expertise available, described by one board president

as “pro bono consultancy.”...Advisory entities augment the advocacy and ambassadorial voice of the nonprofits they serve. And, importantly, they add governance capacity without, in most cases, undermining the strengths of the current board of directors (Saidel 1998, 434).

More specifically, the literature talks about advisory councils serving as:

- *Advisor, consultant, and sounding board.* Members can bring their expertise and acumen to bear on proposed policy, allocation of funds, public relations, community needs assessments, and the like. Advisory councils often are selected because of their ties to particular stakeholder groups, including those served by the organization. They can be invaluable in helping a board assess the likely response of stakeholders to alternative courses of action or proposed initiatives and recommend ways to address opposition. As one nonprofit executive director said to Saidel, “Advisory group members are going to continue to be leaders in knowing and understanding the business environment that we’re going to have to understand well in order to continue serving our people”(Saidel 1998, 432). Another interviewee in Saidel’s study viewed advisory council members as a source of “important objective judgments based on business criteria uncontaminated by more personal involvement with the agency” (Saidel 1998, 433). Advisory councils can also be a source of ideas or approaches to dealing with problems.
- *Governance resource.* Advisory boards can be asked to carry out specific tasks for which governance boards may not have adequate time, such as needs assessments, fact-finding, monitoring, and analysis, for example, relating to the pros and cons of proposed initiatives/actions. They may supplement or expand the technical expertise on the governance board. Axelrod noted that advisory councils “[c]onnect the nonprofit with people who possess unique knowledge and skills, and supplement and complement the board’s work” (Axelrod 2004) Advisory councils can be particularly a helpful resource when

the governance board is faced with a major, current issue/challenge or complex program/product/service, offering their expertise, helping gather the information needed for sound analysis, and critiquing documents.

- *Check and balance.* One nonprofit executive director described his advisory group as “a really good check and balance. It’s also very good because there’s greater distance with the advisory group. You get a different kind of objectivity and feedback from the advisory group. Sometimes with the board of directors....they become very involved as a group and it’s a groupness” (Saidel 1998, 433). Advisory councils provide access to the opinions of informed outsiders about the inner workings of the organization that the board of directors governs.
- *Advocate.* Advisory councils are often referred to as ambassadors, legitimators, and advocates who can build support for a nonprofit, foster a culture of volunteerism in the community, influence or provide access to stakeholders, and help shape public policy affecting the nonprofit. Further, the fact that a highly regarded group of people choose to support a particular nonprofit boosts the nonprofit’s reputation and credibility. As Saidel says, “The legitimacy conferred by the affiliation of high-status individuals through advisory group membership is clearly a valued resource” (Saidel 1998, 428).
- *Bridge/liaison.* Advisory councils can connect the governance board with particular constituents— “Advisory group members...link nonprofits to key stakeholder groups in the environment, and strengthen ties of cooperation and shared purpose with other community actors...In addition, some groups establish new ties to various elites; others connect or reconnect nonprofits to grassroots community constituencies” (Saidel 1998, 421).
- *Fundraising and development.* A governance board may select advisory council members for their social, business, and political connections. Often

they are used to raise money for unrestricted use or for specific programs. In some cases, advisory boards' fundraising roles supplement or surpass the governing board's roles in this area.

- *Access to different perspectives.* Depending on the composition of an advisory council, it can bring to a governance board a variety of perspectives and voices with respect to “gender, class, age, race and ethnicity, religion, geographic location, different consumer groups...artistic discipline, and career field” (Saidel 1998, 434).
- *Accountability.* The observations of advisory council members and the feedback they get from stakeholders can help governance boards hold themselves accountable. In addition, advisory councils are sometimes tasked with actually evaluating aspects of the organization the board governs. Visiting committees are in essence advisory councils appointed by universities (and sometimes required of organizations receiving grants from government agencies such as the National Science Foundation) to critique academic programs or research. Harvard College uses visiting committees in part to provide “reasoned independent analysis of the directions in which the unit is moving and any critical problems it faces” (Board of Overseers of Harvard College 1995). Following criticism of its governance role, the board of The Nature Conservancy set up a Science Council to, among other things, audit the nonprofit's scientific work.
- *Other benefits.* Advisory councils are seen by governance boards as a means of involving people who want to help but have limited time or don't want to commit to board duty, and a “training ground” for future board service

Every advisory council does not carry out all these roles. Their particular areas of service are dictated by the needs of the organization or its board, as well as the board's composition and size. Similarly, there is no “average” size, composition, structure, and

modus operandi, e.g., frequency of meetings. And advisory councils may be standing (with indefinite lifetimes) or ad hoc (one-time), set up for a specific, temporary purpose, after which they go out of business.

The Requisites of Effective Advisory Councils

Despite differences in roles, structure, and operations of advisory councils, the literature is quite consistent on what conditions must be present for them to be effective:

- Commitment by the governance board to make active use of the advisory council. Advisory councils set up as public relations props are a waste of everyone's time.
- Clearly defined guidance for the advisory council, set forth in the bylaws of the governance board. In particular, the bylaws should set forth a specific purpose (mission) for the council: "To avoid misleading implications that the advisory body has a power to make policy, it is wise to limit its actions to making recommendations, providing background for board decisions, furnishing pros and cons for issues, and even listing questions that are appropriate for the situation" (National Center for Nonprofit Boards 2000). Other considerations to be addressed by the bylaws include duration of service of the council, terms of office of members, membership selection guidelines (e.g., knowledge, skills, demographics, and community ties), structure, and interaction with the governance board. One nonprofit offers this guidance: "Before advisory board members can be of service, their organization must prepare a distinct plan for the board and how it will interact with the organization. Advisory boards do not have any legal authority, therefore all of their responsibilities are assigned at the discretion of the executive directors" (ARCH 1993, 2).
- Communication of the roles and responsibilities and limits/boundaries, and expectations for, the advisory council as a whole and for individual members.

These include time expectations and a minimum number of meetings. Orientation for new members is considered essential.

- Defined relationship to the sponsoring organization/board that includes regular two-way communication, person-to-person interaction, and feedback. Advisory council membership may include at least one board member, who, it is cautioned, must be careful not to exert undue influence on the council or compromise its independence. According to Axelrod, “It is also common to invite the chair of the advisory council to attend board meetings as a nonvoting advisor” (Axelrod 2004, 18) or to report at regularly scheduled meetings of the governance board.
- Sufficient access to information about the organization/board and their operations
- Advisory group ownership of and engagement in its role, and freedom to operate independently in carrying out its assigned roles and tasks, within the framework established by the organization/board
- Respect for the advisory council by listening to what it has to say, although with the understanding that the board does not have to follow its advice

Four principal caveats appear in the literature:

- Do not underutilize or overwork council members
- Do not use the council to handle issues the governance board finds uncomfortable
- Do not assign unrealistic or unreasonable responsibilities, including operational or governance responsibilities
- Formally recognize members whose terms of service have been completed

ADVISORY BOARDS AT THE SMITHSONIAN

In 2007, the Smithsonian had 38 advisory boards, of which 34 were attached to units, and four served the central administration. Some go as far back as 1921. There is significant variation across the advisory boards. For example, while most are purely advisory, given that the Smithsonian and its units are federal entities, some have been assigned very limited governance functions (such as approval of acquisitions and disposals). Typically, these governance functions are mandated by the authorizing legislation or the agreement between the Smithsonian and the organization transferring its collection to the Institution. There is no set size, composition, meeting schedule, and structure to Smithsonian boards. The only point of commonality is that none has an overall governance function.

Regents' Guidance on Smithsonian Advisory Boards

In 1995, the Smithsonian Board of Regents issued Smithsonian Directive 123 (SD 123), “Regents’ Guidelines for Smithsonian Advisory Boards,” which sets forth the Regents’ position on the boards and their operations. The directive explicitly acknowledges the benefits of the advisory boards in an increasingly complex governance environment: “the Regents have found it prudent to enlist the advice and assistance of boards that are focused to a greater degree than the Regents on specific activities and operations.” SD 123 states that all advisory boards come under the authority of the Board of Regents, are subject to its general policies, and therefore have no independent governance function. They are not only to provide advice, support, and expertise to unit directors on programs and operations, but also to offer “advice and assistance to the Board of Regents and the Secretary on the programs and operations of the units.” Further, “the breadth of oversight demanded of the Board of Regents and the Secretary requires that their efforts be supplemented and enhanced by a strong system of such boards.”

The directive assigns specific roles to the advisory boards, which include: advocacy with public and private constituencies; advice on strategic and financial planning, budget and other administrative functions; fundraising; and participation in the selection and evaluation of unit directors. The pan-Institutional advisory boards are to carry out these roles for the central Smithsonian administration. Each advisory board is to report to the Board of Regents, through the Secretary, every two to three years about the unit it serves and to provide recommendations that would further its performance. Representatives of the advisory boards may be asked to report in person at the regularly scheduled Regents' meetings. The Secretary is to be the point of contact between the advisory boards and the Board of Regents and the primary channel for advice from the boards to the Regents. Finally, SD 123 encourages the Regents to serve on at least one advisory board. The bylaws of some unit advisory boards mandate that participation, while the chair of the Smithsonian National Board participates as an ex officio member of the Board of Regents.

Smithsonian Advisory Boards—"An Underutilized Asset"

In 2000, the Secretary of the Smithsonian asked OP&A to assess what the advisory boards at the Smithsonian were doing, how effectively they were performing, and how their performance could be enhanced. At that time, there were over 30 advisory boards with an authorized total membership of around 600.

With particular reference to the relationship between the advisory boards and the Regents, OP&A's report, issued in 2002, noted that the bylaws of almost half the boards specifically called on them to serve in an advisory capacity for the Regents. As noted, the bylaws of some boards specified that a Regent be a member. Despite SD 123, the bylaws of half the boards did not specify submission of a report to the Regents every two to three years.

Board members interviewed for the study listed the same roles with respect to the unit they served as are found with advisory councils generally: expert advice, sounding board, advocacy and networking, reality check, buffer with the external environment, fundraising, and accountability. Interviewees defined their advocacy role as encompassing both the Smithsonian and the world outside it. It was clear that the members understood they did not have a governance or day-to-day management role with either their units or the Smithsonian as a whole.

OP&A saw the advisory boards as having three additional roles that interviewees did not emphasize: serving as the eyes and ears of the Regents; facilitating change at a strategic level; and being the public conscience for a diverse America. With respect to serving the Regents, interviewees for the study saw themselves as having no formal or institutionalized relationship. Even in the case of boards that had Regent members, advisory board members said they often did not attend or did not participate actively at meetings. Some advisory board members argued for a stronger, direct line of communication with the Regents, whereas others thought communication should be limited to occasions where a particular issue warranted it. There was uncertainty about the value of the relationship with the Board of Regents—“Some board interviewees questioned the meaning of an advisory role if no one listened to or acted on their advice” (Smithsonian Institution, OP&A 2002, 7). Board members wanted to make their expertise and experience available to the Smithsonian and noted that if they did not have “some meat to chew on,” it would be difficult to recruit high-powered members. According to the report, “Except in the case of a few boards, members who were interviewed generally expressed dissatisfaction with the usefulness and productivity of their boards” and wanted to change that (*ibid.*, 30).

The OP&A study concluded that the boards were “underutilized” by the units, the central administration, and the Regents alike. Commenting on the relationship with the Regents specifically, the report stated that

...at the Smithsonian, an institution often accused of insularity, advisory boards can provide the Regents a valuable outside perspective and reality check, as well as a focus on broad strategic issues, both unit-specific and pan-Institutional. SD123 provides a vehicle for that role—written reports to the Regents. The units have not been providing these reports, nor has there been another channel of regular communication (ibid., 42).

Two recommendations addressed the relationship of the Board of Regents and the advisory boards. One was that the advisory boards “serve in an oversight capacity for the Regents as specified in SD 123” (ibid., 19). The second was that “the advisory boards should serve as the eyes and ears of the Secretary and the Board of Regents.” Specifically, “every three years the boards should submit reports to the Regents through the Secretary within one month of the end of the fiscal year. The reports should highlight the units’ accomplishments and broad challenges and recommend remedial steps as appropriate. They should cover other topics that the boards believe are applicable to improving the operations and functioning of their units.” Further, “the Board of Regents should respond in writing to the unit boards within two months of receipt of the reports” (ibid., 44).

Among the report’s other conclusions that have a bearing on ways the advisory boards might assist the Board of Regents were:

- The membership of the boards was not always consistent with their roles and responsibilities and was unduly homogeneous—the lack of geographic, ethnic, and age diversity was inconsistent with the Smithsonian’s national status (ibid., 31).
- “The operations of most boards are ill-suited to optimize accomplishments or productivity,” citing in particular the absence of clear goals and performance metrics, inadequate orientation for new members, insufficient information relevant to the boards’ work, weak use of committees, and board meetings

“poorly designed for fruitful work” because of an emphasis on presentation of information at the expense of deliberation (ibid., 32).

The 2007 Regents’ Survey

Many of the themes that emerged in the 2002 report on Smithsonian advisory boards resurfaced in the results of the 2007 Regents’ survey. Respondents acknowledged the vast scope of the Regents’ governance responsibility, for example,

Given the number of units, the plethora of programs throughout the Institution, and the substantial differences among the units, it is hard to imagine that the Regents individually or collectively can know much about what actually goes on at the Institution...Overseeing the Institution requires both knowledge about managing a large, non-profit-like, diffuse knowledge-based organization (akin to a multi-campus university or museum or research center) as well as specialist or substantive knowledge about the three principal areas in which the Institution operates: 1) the sciences, 2) the arts and 3) culture and heritage.

The Regents were described as out of touch with the real issues and concerns facing the units and the Smithsonian as a whole, to wit, “Oversight from afar, without direct, first-hand knowledge of the work of the Institution, is not a recipe for good governance or for fostering relationships between the Regents and the organizations that actually carry out the programmatic activities of the Institution.” A number of respondents thought that the advisory boards could be a useful asset to the Regents— “The Boards have many skills that are underutilized but waiting to be tapped and aren’t now.” One respondent recommended that the Regents “draw on the Advisory Councils to provide broader input and for a more culturally diverse body. More museum professional experience needed (ethics, museum professional practice, understanding of changing nature of museum field).” Two other respondents proposed the following model:

...The Regents would, of course, be at the apex of a triangle. By establishing a more direct relationship between the Regents and the units to complement the existing relationships between the Secretary and the Regents and the units and the Secretary, the Institution will be taking significant and productive steps to move away from top-down, hierarchical management. In this way, the units' ability to carry out the Institution's mission of the increase and diffusion of knowledge will be enhanced.

A number of advisory board chairs wanted the opportunity to keep the Regents informed about the particular concerns and challenges their units were facing. Among the mechanisms they proposed were:

- *More direct contact with individual boards.* The greatest number of suggestions addressed this point. They included having chairs of advisory boards attend Regents' meetings; having the Board of Regents meeting sites rotate among the advisory boards, "with two hours dedicated to seeing and listening to unit concerns"; contact, perhaps every three years, that affords the Regents an understanding of "the current status of the museum versus goals, goals of the next three years, impediments to attaining/maintaining excellence, other areas of concern"; and "expanding the number of Regents or appointing Regents with an understanding that more substantial commitments of time are required might, however, increase the likelihood that this option [Advisory Board representation on Board of Regents] would enhance the Board of Regents' understanding of the programs and activities of the operating units." A further suggestion was to have members of the advisory board as full members of the Board of Regents— "a designated unit within each grouping [of Smithsonian units] would elect a member of its Advisory Board to serve on the Board. In this way, a total of three Regents would be elected directly by unit Advisory Boards."

- *Assignment of work to the advisory boards*, for example, have the advisory boards explore and report back on issues the Regents assign them. One suggestion was to

Consider reconstituting the National Board to be the “congress” of the advisory boards...There would be subcommittees on science, art, history/culture, finance, government, information technology, etc. The Regents would decide the major strategic issues for the subcommittees to investigate, and they would report back to the Regents. Members of the Regents would be members of the subcommittees...[help] Regents with good decisionmaking.

Along the same lines, in response to a survey question, “What would most help improve the Board’s performance?” one respondent suggested “[dividing Regents’] responsibilities among the Smithsonian National Board and individual museum boards.”

- *More communication from the Regents*, one means being distribution of (non-confidential) Regent meeting minutes

SMITHSONIAN ADVISORY BOARDS: A POTENTIAL GOVERNANCE RESOURCE

One aspect of Smithsonian advisory boards is unique to the nonprofit advisory board world: they were not set up for the Board of Regents specifically, but rather for the units and central administration. Thus, even though SD 123 and the bylaws of some boards define a specific relationship with the Regents, the primary allegiance of the boards is to the units or central administration, and the defined relationship with the Regents is one of reporting through the Secretary on the status of the units the boards serve. Nevertheless, OP&A does believe, as it did in 2002, that the advisory boards are “an underutilized asset” by the Board of Regents.

The Smithsonian Advisory Boards and Board of Regents: Some Possibilities

Many of the reasons why nonprofit governance boards in general enlist the assistance of advisory councils are equally relevant to the work of the Board of Regents:

- *Expanded governance capacity.* The Board of Regents is responsible for a complex organization that encompasses 19 very different museums and the National Zoo and numerous research centers and offices, in an operating environment that has become increasingly complex. Many of the Regents have professional lives that leave little time for outside duties. The advisory boards, if used appropriately, represent a “work force” that could significantly extend the Regents’ capacity to investigate, fact find, analyze, critique, monitor, advocate, and assess performance. Advisory board members embody a wide range of expertise, including subject matter, museum management, business, education, communications, information technology,

development, and real estate that is directly relevant to the issues with which the Regents are dealing. Based on their own comments, the Smithsonian advisory boards are willing and able to take on assignments from the Regents and to report back to them.

- *Advice and consultation*, which includes the role of sounding board. The advisory boards are well positioned to advise on the impact of proposed actions and major initiatives on both their units and the Smithsonian as a whole, and on the likely responses of the stakeholder groups with whom they interact. One caveat is that the composition of the advisory boards parallels the socioeconomic, age, and ethnic profile of the Regents. Their composition might limit their ability to represent the perspectives of the general public and specific demographic and ethnic cohorts. A second consideration is the ability of the boards to provide unbiased feedback: their primary role is to serve and advance the interests of specific units. It is clear, however, that the boards have a broader commitment to the well being of the Smithsonian and its service to the American public. Moreover, to the extent that the Institution as a whole flourishes, their units are likely to experience benefits.
- *Bridge to local communities*—in this case, the Smithsonian units and central administration—and to key stakeholder groups, such as corporations and the Congress. Many members of Smithsonian advisory boards are selected for their access to influential people, including politicians, and their ability to advocate for a cause. The homogeneity of the advisory boards may, however, limit their ability to reach out to certain communities.
- *Different perspectives and expertise*. Although, as noted, there is similarity in the composition of the Board of Regents and the advisory boards, the latter still bring different perspectives, deriving from their interaction with their units and their own work and personal experiences, for example, as members of governance boards.

- *Accountability*, which includes the role of check and balance. Advisory board members can be a source of honest feedback on the operations of the Board of Regents; they can help remind Regents that the Smithsonian's activities are public, and that members of the public and the media demand certain levels of openness from almost all instrumentalities of the U.S. government.

A reverse benefit of greater involvement of the advisory boards is that it affords them an opportunity to understand the larger picture of the Smithsonian as a whole, a context that is important for their work with the units.

Mechanisms of Involvement

Respondents to the Regents' survey offered a number of ways in which they thought the advisory boards could be more involved. OP&A does not believe that there is a single mechanism that works for all boards or all roles they might carry out on behalf of the Board of Regents, and understanding the various options and where they might be applicable requires more in-depth study. For example, in the case of reporting on the status and challenges of individual units, in some cases written reports every three years might be sufficient, but in other cases, such as major renovation of the physical plant, new construction, or development of a major new initiative, more frequent reporting, both written and oral, may be needed. If the Board or Regents is tackling a real estate or construction issue, it might want to establish an ad hoc committee of members from various advisory boards to work with it. In some cases, the advisory boards might work with committees of the Board of Regents, and in other cases with the Board as a whole.

Some of the mechanisms suggested by survey respondents address personal interactions by members of the advisory boards and Board of Regents, from social events to crossover membership (raising the question of the nature of participation on one another's boards—consultant, listener, voter?). Here, too, there are various options to explore. Given the

number of advisory boards, having a Regent assigned to each one is likely impossible. Might Regents be assigned to key groupings of units, such as art museums, science units, cultural heritage units, and central administrative offices? The level of interaction would again relate to what is happening at each museum. An alternative is for each category of museums/units, such as cultural ones, to have a committee of selected unit advisory board members that meets periodically and represents those units with the Regents.

Defining what roles the advisory boards might play and how they would carry them out of necessity must start with the Regents themselves. A pro forma exercise in involving the advisory boards that involves make-work and inattention to the boards' input would be a disservice. The Regents need themselves to be clear that there is value in engaging with the advisory boards and identify the specific roles they feel comfortable assigning to advisory board members. They need to consider the time commitment involved in working with the boards and whether on balance it is possible and valuable.

Other considerations to be addressed when considering how to involve the advisory boards as a resource to the Regents are:

- SD 123 specifies that the Secretary be the channel of communication between the Board of Regents and the advisory boards. The extent to which the previous Secretary filtered information on the units was a major concern of many respondents to the Regents' survey. How will the Regents ensure that the input they receive on behalf of the advisory boards reflects the intent of the boards? For example, should the Board of Regents structure a series of topics and ask advisory boards to respond? Should they raise questions and elicit answers, or should they be familiar with the goals of units, regularly review their performance, and share the results with the Board?
- How does the institutional context of each unit and its board impose limitations on meeting goals and objectives? For example, does the relative

homogeneity of many of the advisory boards require additional sources of input?

- What transaction costs (including time) are incurred in greater involvement of advisory boards?
- Depending on the nature of involvement by the advisory boards, SD 123 may require revision.

Finding optimal mechanisms to explore the concerns of the Board and advisory boards presents an opportunity for learning how to harness all of the boards' potential while improving decision making.

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