When I became the acting president of Hamilton College in 1999, I already knew a lot about the college. I am a 1996 Hamilton graduate, the parent of a former student, and I have served for 12 years on the college’s governing board. Still, when Hamilton President Eugene Tobin took a much-deserved sabbatical, I learned more about Hamilton during my six months in the presidency than in all my previous time associated with the college. Much of what I learned will make me — and, I expect, my fellow board members — better in the future.

An unusual level of alumni involvement distinguishes Hamilton. Typically, more than 55 percent of alumni contribute every year to the annual fund, and more than a third volunteer to recruit students, raise funds, counsel undergraduates about careers, provide internships, conduct alumni events, and participate in other activities. As is the case at other colleges, Hamilton's board sets the tone for financial and volunteer support.

Yet despite this high level of alumni involvement and my own active participation with my alma mater, I had a superficial understanding about many important facets of the college and wondered whether my fellow board members did as well. Naturally, I recognize it is unrealistic to expect that board members who typically visit the campus just three or four times a year will ever have the same breadth and depth of knowledge as the president and senior administrators who are charged with the daily operations of the institution.

A New Understanding of the College

Soon after I became president, the impact of policy decisions became clear to me — much more so than when I was a board member. For example, deciding to admit an additional 20 to 30 students from the waiting list or planning for a larger class, though attractive from a financial point of view, had significant ramifications in the day-to-day life of the campus. Admitting more students means hiring more staff members. Where would we find additional housing? And if the new hires were adjuncts, how could we be certain they would be as qualified and as committed to the institution as full-time faculty members? This level of detail rarely makes it to the boardroom, but as president, I could see how a tempting financial solution might create an irritant in campus life.

My experience as a college president has made me much more aware of the nuances of board decision making. Many issues that boards are asked to consider require much broader scrutiny. Switching roles for six months taught me five fundamental lessons that may help boards and board members become more effective.

1. Balance the membership of board member committees.

Hamilton's board of directors, like many governing boards, consists disproportionately of business executives, investors, and successful entrepreneurs. Their acumen is in finance and in running a business, so they tend to be most interested in the issues — fund-raising, endowment performance, and investments — with which they are most familiar and where results are tangible. They tend not to be so comfortable with the other components that make a college successful such as its staff, programs, and facilities.

The tendency among board members to gravitate toward finance is understandable. After all, board members have a fiduciary responsibility to the college, and given today's fiscal pressures, no board can be blamed for being preoccupied with an organization's assets. But a balanced budget and a growing endowment are only two measures of an organization's health.

It is equally important that all board committees have the appropriate firepower if the mission of the institution is to be fulfilled. The committee on board members should look carefully at the distribution of talent and influence among the various standing committees to ensure that every function has an important voice at the boardroom table.

2. Seek, within limits, close encounters with leaders of the organization.

In my six months as president, I met and spent time with most of the faculty, the swimming coach, the chair of the chemistry department, the director of the career center — people board members typically would not encounter. Yet the insights and opinions of such individuals can give board members a much broader understanding of an institution. Recognizing this untapped resource, we restructured board weekends at Hamilton to facilitate even greater informal interaction between the board and various college
EXPECTATIONS OF THE BOARD AS A WHOLE
The mission of ABC Organization is to [mission].
As the highest leadership body of the organization and to satisfy its fiduciary duties, the board is responsible for
• determining the mission and purposes of the organization
• selecting and evaluating the performance of the president & CEO
• strategic and organizational planning
• ensuring strong fiduciary oversight and financial management
• fundraising and resource development
• approving and monitoring ABC Organization’s programs and services
• enhancing ABC Organization’s public image
• assessing its own performance as the governing body of ABC Organization

EXPECTATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL BOARD MEMBERS
Each individual board member is expected to
• know the organization’s mission, policies, programs, and needs
• faithfully read and understand the organization’s financial statements
• serve as active advocates and ambassadors for the organization and fully engage in identifying and securing the financial resources and partnerships necessary for ABC Organization to advance its mission
• leverage connections, networks, and resources to develop collective action to fully achieve ABC’s mission
• give a meaningful personal financial donation
• help identify personal connections that can benefit the organization's fundraising and reputational standing, and can influence public policy
• prepare for, attend, and conscientiously participate in board meetings
• participate fully in one or more committees

Further, board members are expected to
• follow the organization’s bylaws, policies, and board resolutions
• sign an annual conflict-of-interest disclosure and update it during the year if necessary, as well as disclose potential conflicts before meetings and actual conflicts during meetings
• maintain confidentiality about all internal matters of ABC Organization