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
Are you interested in becoming a board member of a nonprofit organization but don’t know how to go about it? Here are some practical steps to finding and contacting an appropriate nonprofit, and how to prepare yourself for the commitment.

**Organization**

1. First determine with what kind of an organization you would like to be affiliated. What mission areas are you interested in? Would you like to be involved with groups dealing with health, homelessness, hunger, arts, education, environment, religion, or international affairs? The choices are numerous.

2. Define the scope of your interest. Are you interested in your neighborhood and other local activities, or would you like to have a national focus? As a novice board member you may benefit from starting with a homeowners’ association, a church committee, or a community center board. Many national organizations also have local chapters that would allow you to get involved with larger issues.

3. If you are already a volunteer in an organization, you might investigate the possibility of joining its board. Familiarity is an asset. It is important, however, to realize that direct-service volunteering is quite different from board service.

4. Take advantage of local volunteer centers, United Ways, or regional associations of charities to start locating nonprofits. Visit [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org). This is a valuable database that allows you to search nonprofit organizations by location, mission area, or directly by name. Around one million organizations are included along with information about each.

**Contact**

1. After finding an organization that you would like to know better, contact that organization. Visit the offices. Look at the Web site. Gather as much information as you can about what the organization does.

2. If you are still confident about your choice, make an appointment with a board member or the chief executive and indicate your interest in joining the board. The organization may want you to join a committee or volunteer in another capacity before you are nominated for board service. A willingness to do this will help your chances.

**Information exchange**

1. Be prepared to ask questions. Focus on the mission of the organization, financial stability, constituents and customers, and the structure of the board. BoardSource has a document that discusses in detail what you should know before joining a board. This document is available on our Web site at [www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org).

2. Make sure that the organization asks many questions about you. You want to be part of an organization that has a well-planned recruitment process. Recruitment is a two way street. Both sides need to get what they are looking for. Being willing and able is not enough. You must fill the need in the board at a given moment. Effective boards are composed of various skills, talents, backgrounds, and perspectives and they often rely on their profile as a tool for recruitment. Boards can create their own profile matrix which allows them to determine their present composition and evaluate their future needs.

**Expectations**

1. Educate yourself and expect the organization to educate you on the responsibilities and liabilities of a board member. Visit BoardSource’s Web site at [www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org) for information that deals with board members’ roles and obligations.

2. Make sure that you understand the expectations that the organization places on its board members. What are the fundraising and personal contribution responsibilities? What is the meeting attendance policy? How many committee assignments are you expected to accept?

**Acceptance**

1. If, after all the contacts and information sharing, the board extends an invitation for you to join, you can celebrate a victory. Most organizations are happy to occasionally change roles and turn from the recruiter to the recruited one. Searching and cultivating potential board members is a demanding and time-consuming task. Interested and committed board members are
not easy to find. Willing candidates stepping forward is a promising sign for future productivity.

2. If, during the cultivation, it becomes clear that the match was not made in heaven, you still gained valuable experience for your next search. Don’t give up. There are many other organizations that could benefit from your service.

References
Board Fundamentals
Available at www.boardsource.org or by calling 202-349-2500.