Report

of the

Task Force on

Alumni Trustee

Elections

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Executive Summary

In May 2014, the Cornell Alumni Association (CAA) Board commissioned a Committee on Alumni Trustee Nominations (CATN) Task Force to review the current protocols for communicating the alumni trustee nominations process and reporting results of the annual alumni trustee elections. Between June and September 2014, the task force met to consider and debate a range of hypotheses and potential solutions, following a structured, data-driven approach. This report represents the task force recommendations.

From the outset, the task force worked from the premise that greater participation in the alumni trustee election process is essential to the Cornell community because it lends legitimacy to the process and represents an important form of the engagement of all alumni.

General findings and conclusions included:

- While declining somewhat, Cornell's average participation rate in the alumni trustee election is in line with peers over the past four years.

- Campaigning among peer institutions is discouraged for the most part, either explicitly or in practice.

- The degree of election transparency among peer institutions is basically in line with Cornell's practices, with some enhancements (e.g., use of the alumni magazine).

- There was strong consensus among the task force that greater transparency, candidate differentiation, and greater alumni participation are needed across the board.

- While the task force did not want to allow open campaigning, there was a consensus that allowing the candidates to reveal more about themselves, providing an opportunity to interact with them, and permitting greater opportunity to differentiate among them would be significant enhancements for the electorate.

- In the view of the task force, none of the above process enhancements would violate the prohibition on campaigning as currently written, but the language could be updated to clarify the range of permissible activity.

The task force developed a strong sense that publishing election results by name might discourage "highly qualified and dedicated men and women to serve as alumni trustees," the stated goal of CAA. As a result, the task force believes that election results should be kept anonymous, while at the same time those results could convey a numerical voting spread. The task force adopted a "nomination-to-election" process mapping framework to help structure and sequence four sets of recommendations:

1. Pre-election: Increase transparency of the end-to-end alumni trustee nomination-to-election process to illustrate why it is important to vote.

2. During election: Provide and promote greater access to and differentiation of the candidates.

3. Pre- and during election: Revisit marketing and outreach strategies.

4. Post-election: Increase transparency of the election results to illustrate how close elections are and how every vote matters.

As a further consideration, the task force suggested that language in the current policy on campaigning be revised to allow greater flexibility in the campaign process (such as using social media), thereby supporting the goal of greater candidate accessibility and differentiation, while continuing to maintain the prohibition on campaigning. An implementation strategy and plan are necessary next steps to coordinate these recommendations.

Background and Context

The effort to engage a larger number of alumni in voting during alumni trustee elections has been an important point of discussion among the trustees and others in recent years. Alumni have indicated that voting would be likely to increase if both the process of selecting candidates and the reporting of election results were provided in greater detail. President Skorton has said that he, too, would like to see a "more transparent" process.

President Skorton requested that a group of alumni propose recommendations for accomplishing greater transparency. To that end, CAA established a CATN Task Force to take on this responsibility. In May 2014, the CAA Board commissioned the CATN Task Force to review the current protocols for communicating the nominations process and reporting the results of the annual alumni trustee elections.

CAA requested that the recommendations resulting from this review be forwarded to the CAA executive committee for review and endorsement prior to being sent to President Skorton by December 1, 2014. This report represents the recommendations of the task force on Alumni Trustee Elections that met between June and September 2014.

Process

The task force consisted of 10 current and past members of CATN and/or the Committee on Alumni Affairs of the Board of Trustees (CoAA) and the Alumni Affairs & Development (AA&D) representative for CATN. Task force members included:

- John Boochever '81 (A&S), outgoing CATN chair – Chair of Task Force

- Steven Flyer JD '91(LAW), incoming CATN chair – Vice Chair of Task Force

- Eileen McManus Walker '76, MBA '78 (A&S, JGSM), CoAA representative and CATN member

- Gene Resnick '70, MD '74 (A&S, MED), CoAA representative

- Rochelle Michlin Proujansky '71 (A&S), prior member/chair of CATN

- Debbi Neyman Silverman '85 (A&S), CATN first-year member and CAA Board of Directors rep on CATN

- Simon Krieger '76, MBA '77 (ENG), CATN second-year member and CACO rep on CATN

- Laura Fratt '81 (A&S), CATN third-year member and Cornell Clubs/Alumni Associations rep on CATN (also a member of the CAA Board)

- Carl Jones '03 (A&S), CATN third-year member and CBAA rep on CATN

- Dan Kaplan '84 (AAP) – CATN fourth-year member and AAP Alumni Association rep on CATN

- AA&D Representative – Loreal Maguire, Office of Volunteer Programs

The task force met three times between June and September 2014 following a structured, data-driven approach:

- Meeting 1 - Level-setting: What issues are we seeking to address? What additional information do we need to fully assess them?

- Meeting 2 - Hypothesis-testing: How well do our preliminary answers hold up under scrutiny? What adjustments need to be made in light of the additional data, or practical realities of the process?

- Meeting 3 - Solutions: What changes to the end-to-end alumni trustee "nomination-to-election" process would we like to put forward? How would they work in practice?

These meetings were informed by extensive input and review of foundational data, including: feedback from CoAA; current university policies and practices; current timeline, process, and procedure surrounding alumni trustee nominations through elections; election results; review of peer institution practices and rationale; and review of the empirical literature on voter participation and the role of transparency in elections.

Task Force Mission and Goals

The overarching premise that guided the committee was that greater participation in the alumni election process is essential to the Cornell community because it adds legitimacy to the process and represents an important form of the engagement of all alumni.

The Task Force was guided by the following objective and mission:

- Objective: Foster and encourage greater participation in alumni trustee elections.
- Mission: Identify specific opportunities for greater transparency in the alumni trustee election process and recommend policies, methods, and procedures to achieve transparency and better communication.

The goals of the Task Force included:

- Recommendations for creating a more transparent and informative process

- Review of current policies of the alumni trustee election for comparison with peer institutions and with faculty/student/employee trustee elections

- Reaffirmation of existing policy or creation of new policy governing the alumni trustee nomination process, the nominees themselves, and the election results

- Creation of a process that addresses issues of transparency (e.g., of process and results) and the level of information-sharing (e.g., campaigning, election results) vs. privacy and confidentiality

General Findings – Environmental

The task force conducted a literature review and found that a substantial body of social science research in elections and voter turnout points to a number of premises and conclusions. The task force has sought to incorporate these premises and conclusions in its recommendations, including that greater transparency leads to greater participation; greater participation enhances legitimacy; the level of participation depends on participants' interest and knowledge about the candidates *and* about the election process and results; and having a stake in the outcome, whether through candidate affinity or perception of influence over the results, is a powerful determinant of voter turnout.

This suggests a range of choices about where to increase transparency and sense of influence. The task force adopted a "nomination-to-election" process mapping framework to help structure and sequence its recommendations:

- Before the fact: e.g., Cornell governance, nomination processes

- During the fact: e.g., Does the current alumni trustee website provide sufficient transparency? How could greater understanding of candidates' positions be achieved without undermining the ban on campaigning? How can we make it even easier to vote?

- After the fact: e.g., specific election results, candidate vote tallies (potentially by source), pros and cons of releasing election statistics

General Findings – Peer Practices

The Task Force conducted conversations with peers and reviewed websites to ascertain rates of voter participation, stance on campaigning, and promotion tactics.

Cornell's voter participation rate was 10.6% in 2014 (down almost 20% from 2012), yet our four-year average is 12.4%. While we experienced a drop last year, our average participation rate in alumni trustee elections is in line with peers. According to Election Services Incorporated, the vendor used by Cornell and by many other higher education institutions for elections, the average voter participation rate of higher education institutions is 12.2%. More specifically, Princeton's turnout has been consistently just under 15% for the past 3-4 years since they introduced an online-only ballot. It is also important to note that Columbia's alumni do not vote; an alumni trustee nominations committee votes on candidates submitted by alumni and development staff.

On the topic of campaigning, the Task Force discovered that our peers mostly discouraged campaigning, either explicitly or in practice. Some that did allow it (Stanford and Indiana University) and others did not permit it but did not yet have an official written policy on the topic (Dartmouth, Amherst, and Yale). Princeton indicated they had a written policy against campaigning and after our conversation stated that they would be revisiting that policy.

Many of the peer institutions we spoke with employ the same promotion methods as Cornell, i.e., website, letter from the president, reminder emails, ads in the alumni magazine, etc. Stanford places ads in their alumni magazine, which is mailed free to all alumni, whereas not all Cornell alumni received the Cornell Alumni Magazine.

Task Force Summary Conclusions

There is a consensus that greater transparency, candidate differentiation, and greater alumni participation is needed across the board, thus defining three primary areas of focus in the "nomination-to-election" process:

1. The nomination process itself (emphasis: transparency—how, who, what?)

2. Information about the candidates (emphasis: differentiation)

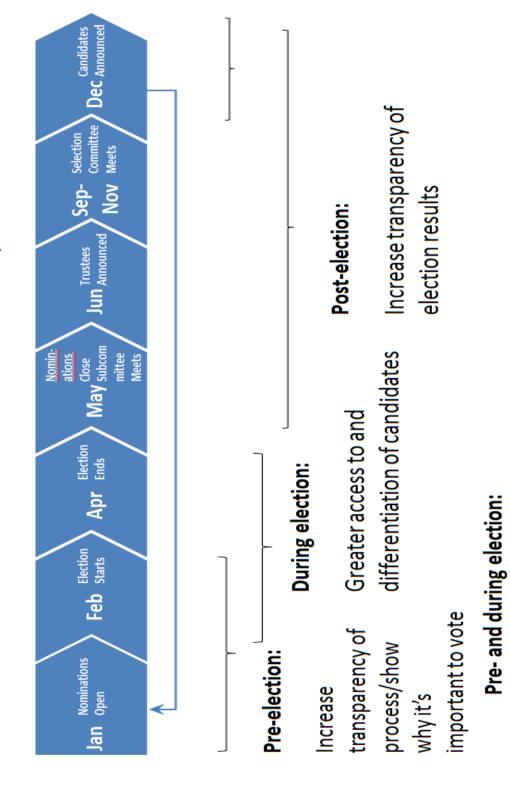3. Election results (emphasis: sense of "stake" and influence)

Of these three focal points for process improvement, the task force recommends giving priority to the first two, with candidate differentiation first. Nomination transparency should be more of an ongoing educational campaign.

While the task force did not want to allow open campaigning, there was a consensus that allowing the candidates to reveal more about themselves, providing an opportunity to interact with them, and permitting greater access and opportunity to differentiate among them, would be significant enhancements for the electorate. In the view of the task force, none of the above process enhancements would violate the prohibition on campaigning as currently defined (see enclosed). To the extent these enhancements might require clarification of permissible activity, the language of the current campaigning policy should be updated.

While conveying the outcome of elections may help convey a sense of "something at stake" and reinforce that every vote counts, coming "after the fact" makes it less of a priority. Because the task force developed a strong sense that publishing election results by name might discourage "highly qualified and dedicated men and women to serve as alumni trustees" (stated goal of CAA), the task force believes that election results should be kept anonymous , although they could still convey range of results, e.g. "2% or 500 votes separated the successful and unsuccessful candidates" (see Appendix).

Lastly, as an observation, Cornell is one of the few universities in the country with alumni, students, faculty, and employee members as full voting members of their boards. The task force acknowledged that if the above conclusion were to be enacted, it would create additional inconsistency in university practices in reporting election results across constituencies: students (published by name), alumni (proposed to be published anonymously), and faculty and staff (not published).

Current Alumni Trustee 'nomination-to-election' process

Jan	Feb	Apr	May	Jun	Sep-Nov	Dec
Nominations Open	Election Starts	Election Ends	Nominations Close Subcommittee Meets	Trustees Announced	Selection Committee Meets	Candidates Announced

Pre-election:

Increase transparency of process/show why it's important to vote

Pre- and during election:

Revisit marketing strategies

During election:

Greater access to and differentiation of candidates

Post-election:

Increase transparency of election results

<p style="text-align: center;">**Task Force Recommendations**</p>

Recommendation One: Increase transparency of end-to-end alumni trustee nomination-to-election process.

This includes providing a timeline for the nominations process, which takes place January through April each year, and ensuring outreach to all alumni. (Have the call for nominations come from CATN vs. AA&D staff). The task force also recommends that the process for adding unendorsed candidates to the ballot be clarified. Finally, the task force suggests that a one-page fact sheet be made available online and that a link be included in all voting communications so anyone can access the information.

Transparency of the CATN process should also occur, including more clearly defining the role of the committee. The committee's work takes place during the months of March through November each year, and a chronological outline of its process would be helpful.

During the election process (January–March for 2015), we recommend sharing information about the current year's election (number of votes, characteristics of voters, etc.); increasing candidate access to voters (to illustrate candidate differentiation), keeping in mind the "no campaigning" policy (articles, videos, meet-and-greet, etc.); providing guidance to candidates and voters about campaigning as it pertains to use of social media; providing updates about the voting process and number of votes received to date on the alumni trustee website and via e-mail; and consideration to shortening the election period to heighten the sense of urgency. Finally, the Task Force would like to give serious consideration to moving voting to an all online format within three years.

Recommendation Two: Provide and promote greater access to and differentiation of candidates.

During the election process, we suggest that Cornell continue its current strategies for featuring candidates (e.g., sharing candidate bios in publications, online, and in the ballot) and in addition, host a special CATN session to meet the candidates. This session could take place during the Cornell Alumni Leadership Conference in mid-January and would be a moderated discussion with the candidates. The session would be videotaped for viewing by alumni (vs. the current canned videotape interviews). Furthermore, we suggest providing greater insight into the needs and functioning of the Board of Trustees, as well as the related perspectives and experiences that individual candidates bring, so voters feel better equipped to vote.

Recommendation Three: Revisit marketing strategies prior to and during the election.

Regular repetition of the message about voting impact and the range of votes – "your vote counts" – illustrates candidate differentiation and gives alumni a compelling reason to care and to vote. All communications should include a link through which alumni can view details about the nomination and election processes. We recommend continuing to include Bob Harrison's appeal to vote in all communications, and consistently employing various media to provide transparency (i.e. greater consistency in messaging from deans and volunteer managers and leaders to their constituencies); targeted outreach not only to volunteer leaders, but also to new alumni entering the electorate; and leveraging the participation of students in the student-trustee election to prepare them for participation as new alumni.

The task force suggests there be increased visibility of alumni-elected trustees, perhaps through a CALC panel ("A Day in the Life of an Alumni-Elected Trustee") highlighting who alumni-elected trustees are and what they do. Another suggestion is to work with the Cornell Alumni Magazine and Ezra Updates to do a series on past alumni-elected trustees: what were they involved in at college? where are they now?

Recommendation Four: Increase transparency of election results.

Prior to the election, Cornell should ensure that the 2015 candidates understand that voting results in terms of percentage differentials will be made public beginning this year.

After the election, the task force suggests that results be announced through a variety of avenues (mass e-mail, website, constituency groups, etc.) and that the announcement share the percentage differentials that separated the candidates. It also recommends that a comparison of the results (voter turnout and % differentials) with previous years be made available to alumni on the trustee election website.

Further Consideration

While the task force believes that none of its recommendations contravenes the current policy prohibiting campaign activity, in the interests of completeness it may still make sense to update the policy language. Specifically, language around enabling the practices regarding candidate accessibility and discernment and/or prescribing the use of social media and other networking technology may be helpful.

The current language on alumni trustee campaigning reads:

"Prohibition on Campaigning by Alumni Trustee Candidates: Reflecting the view of all Cornellians, the Cornell Alumni Association desires that the most highly qualified and dedicated men and women serve as alumni trustees of the university. Many who might be superb trustees are financially unable and/or do not desire to engage in campaigning. It is for these reasons as well as having candidates considered solely on their merits that **the Cornell Alumni Association prohibits campaign activity of any kind by or on behalf of any candidate.** *Campaigning includes, but is not restricted to, soliciting endorsements of one's candidacy, written or oral contact with alumni about one's candidacy, statements to the press, advertising, press releases, etc. If publishers of college, unit, class or club newsletters or their like wish to print any candidate information, they must give the same information in the same space on* <u>all</u> *candidates for that election. Questions should be directed to the Office of Alumni Affairs."*

For example, CAA may wish to consider including "social media and other networking technology" in the language listing the examples of restricted communication or media and in the clause requiring equal treatment of candidates in printed media.

Likewise, CAA might consider inserting language clarifying that the prohibition on campaign activity is *not* intended to preclude live informational discussions involving all four candidates, live or online Q&A involving all four candidates, or greater clarification by the candidates or others of key distinguishing features on issues or merits, nor the use of social media and networking technology in such activities, subject to the restraints above.

Next Steps

Upon approval and authorization, we recommend that the task force or other CAA body be commissioned to determine an Implementation Strategy and Plan in conjunction with the appropriate AA&D representative. The strategy would include a timeline, packaging and prioritization of initiatives, and allocation of resources and budget. The plan would also include detailed working steps, named responsibilities (who will do what), and action planning and tracking.

Appendices

Motion to CAA Board

At President Skorton's request, we seek approval of the following motion to the Cornell Alumni Association (CAA) Board:

Whereas, the Cornell Board of Trustees seeks to encourage the largest possible rates of participation of eligible voters in the annual Alumni Trustee elections, and

Whereas, it has been suggested that greater levels of transparency about the nominations process and results may bolster voting participation, and

Whereas, any recommendations for greater transparency must also protect the long-standing policy barring candidates from "campaigning" during elections, and
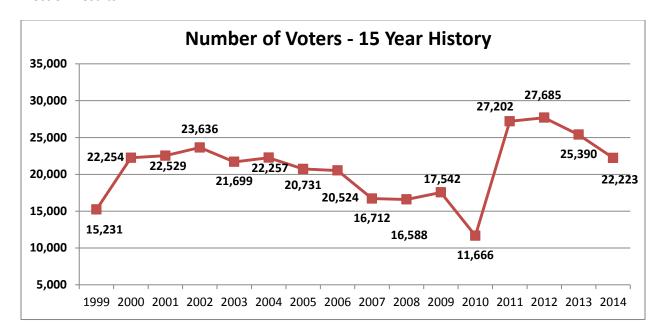
Whereas, President Skorton has asked that the CAA's Alumni-Trustee Nominations committee (CATN) to propose recommendations for accomplishing greater transparency,

Therefore, be it resolved, that the CAA Board empowers CATN to review the current protocols for communicating the nominations process and reporting results of the annual Alumni-Trustee elections. CAA requests that recommendations resulting from this review be forwarded to the CAA executive committee for review and endorsement, prior to being sent to President Skorton, on or before December 1, 2014. - *Passed unanimously by the CAA Board in May 2014.*

Foundational Data Reviewed

- History of CATN

- Criteria for Evaluating Candidates

- Current Policies

    – Alumni Trustee election

    – Staff/Faculty Trustee election

    – Student Trustee election

    – Peer institutions' alumni trustee elections

- Timelines/Process & Procedure

    – Alumni Trustee election

    – Staff/Faculty Trustee election

    – Student Trustee election

- Election Results

    – 15 year history of number of voters

    – Demographic data on voters from 2014, percentage of volunteer leaders that voted

    – Candidate differentiation – percentage of votes for each candidate

    – Returns by day

- Review of Marketing Tactics

- Empirical literature (participation)

- Historical perspective (from Mary Berens)

Election Results

Number of Voters - 15 Year History

Of 6,379 volunteer leaders, 34% voted (a little less than 50% voted in 2013). Even with increased personalized reminders from their own constituents, we could not obtain an increase in our own volunteer leaders' voting rate.
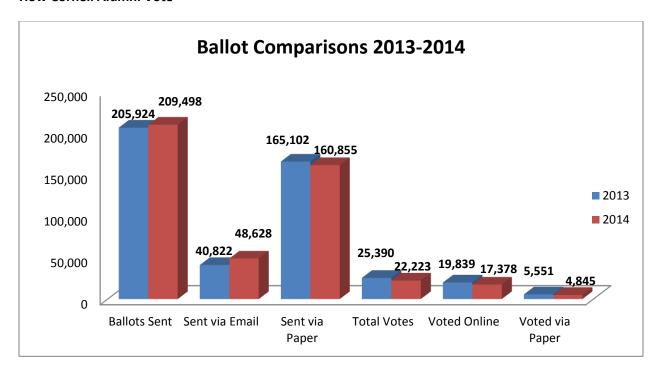
Discussion of Election Results

- Results were close – 2.4 percentage points separated the first and last candidates

Candidate	2011	2012	2013	2014
1	30.2%	28%	28.1%	25.7%
2	25.9%	27.9%	25%	24.9%
3	24.1%	21.9%	24.6%	24.8%
4	18.8%	21.3%	21.3%	23.3%

- Higher Ed avg = 12.2%; CU's 4 year avg = 12.4%

- Decline in voters, despite additional promotional tactics

- Only 34% of volunteer leaders voted

Ballot Comparisons 2013-2014

Approximately 3,000 ballots were returned due to bad addresses (2,500 via paper and 500 via email). 104 paper ballots were invalidated (e.g., because fewer than the required 2 candidates were selected)

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