GOVERNING BOARDS AND DECISION MAKING

by Arthur J. Robins

Governing boards should use a rational process to make decisions even though value judgments influence the process and data are not always available. A model for rational decision making is discussed and illustrated.

The problem solving process is the application of scientific method to a situation in which the usual responses are inadequate. The goal is the selection of a response that promises to be the most effective and efficient alternative, consistent with the values relevant to the situation. A particular response might be effective, but could be rejected if it were counter to one's values. Also, several conflicting values may demand consideration and the decision maker must adjudicate among them.

There are three criteria by which a particular decision should be judged:

1. The likelihood that it will achieve the desired results.
2. The likelihood that it will cost less than alternative responses that also promise to be effective.
3. The decision's consistency with the relevant values.

Based upon March and Simon's (1958) model of the "rational" administrator, this article discusses the application of a generic approach to decision making by governing boards. It illustrates the application of the approach,
emphasizing the role of those values that should inform the process.

Problem Definition

The definition of the problem sets the boundaries for discussion and focuses the search for a solution. Hence, the board must specify the problem in such a way that it is commonly understood. The problem may concern a goal and/or a program to reach a goal. Is the problem in the board's domain? Why the need to consider a departure from current policy or practice? What are the deficiencies of existing policy or practice? The board member may have to ascertain what the current policy or practice actually is. Perhaps no explicit policy pertaining to the situation has ever been formulated. Perhaps the situation may never have occurred before.

The board must specify the problem in such a way so that it is commonly understood.

The board must have a clear understanding of its objectives, even when the problem appears to concern an existing program. The inadequacy of the program can only be determined in relation to the goal toward which it is directed. Making the goal explicit not only facilitates the emergence of alternative responses but also provides a criterion for determining whether the board is the appropriate body to consider the issue.

Robins and Blackburn (1974) have discussed the importance of differentiating the board's areas of effectiveness, i.e., those in which its objectives fall, from those of the staff. The board should concern itself with what Spaner and Windle (1971) have called process objectives. These can be distinguished from program objectives although the desirability of this distinction is not universally accepted. The case for it has been stated earlier (Robins and Blackburn 1974) and need not be repeated here.

The board is concerned, inter alia, with the organization's responsiveness to community needs, funding and fiscal accountability, accessibility of services, and integration with other related community resources. The staff's efforts are addressed to goals of health promotion, specific protection, early recognition and treatment, disability limitation and rehabilitation.

The difference between program and process objectives becomes clear as one contemplates the possibility that a professional service can achieve program objectives, yet be ineffective with respect to process objectives. For example, it is conceivable that an in-patient service may be very effective in achieving its program objectives with respect to the patients who receive treatment; nonetheless, the program may not be directed toward the category of patients whose problems should receive the highest priority, according to the community's assessment of its needs (Robins and Blackburn 1974).

Some examples of problems related to the board's areas of effectiveness are: How should resources be allocated to various service programs? (responsiveness to need); how can we increase the quantity and stability of funding from local constituencies? (local support); should we establish satellite centers or other outreach service delivery mechanisms? (accessibility); and how can conflict with other community agencies or institutions be resolved? (continuity).

Alternative Responses and Consequences

Alternative responses are generated and the possible outcomes of each are predicted. This is similar to the research process in which one formulates hypotheses regarding the