



## Beginning a Career in Board Service: Perspectives on a Consultation

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### Consultant Perspective (CLG):

Since its inception in 2014, I have been a member of the National Advisory Council of the Institute for Nursing Leadership (INL) of the American Academy of Nursing. One commitment of that Council is to assist members of the Academy to nursing prepare for and gain appointment to boards and commissions that engage in work relating to the Academy's mission to use scientific information to inform and improve health policy. The Academy's work has been undertaken in coordination with the larger Nurses on Boards effort, sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's work on the Future of Nursing and administered through the Center on American Nursing, housed at AARP.

My experience as a member of the Council has taught me that many nurses are interested and willing to serve on boards but need some coaching and encouragement to get started, particularly if they have never served on a board. With that in mind, I submitted an offer of an hour of consultation on how to join a board, to be offered at the silent auction at the North Carolina Nurses Association's Annual Convention. The silent auction, like many others, featured gift baskets and weekends in second homes with proceeds to benefit the North Carolina Foundation for Nursing. My donation was distinctly different from those and I was concerned that no one would bid and my donation would not contribute to the fundraising effort.

To my great delight, that someone *had* bid on my donation and I was provided with a name to contact.

**The Problem:** Alison Atwater wanted to serve and just did not know where to begin. We spent 30 minutes on the first phone call, getting to know each other and discussing areas in which Alison thought she could serve

**Client Perspective (AA):** "Alison, you should do this one here!" my friend, Ellie said to me. "What?" I replied, looking at the silent auction form. A consultation for how to get on a board with Dr. Catherine Gilliss. "Okay" I said. Ellie went on to tell me how wonderful it would be to work with Dr. Gilliss, the former Dean at Duke University School of Nursing. It would be amazing, to meet and learn from a person who clearly has had an amazing career. What if this consultation worked? What if Dr. Gilliss and I kept in touch and she would want to mentor me? My imagination took off with these thoughts after finding out that I did, in fact, win the auction.

My auction prize was a one hour consultation with Dr. Gilliss. Soon after, Dr. Gilliss contacted me to begin our consultation. First, an email with introductions, so far very simple. Then emails to agree on a time to meet over the phone were next. Still very simple. Dr. Gilliss suggested two consultations, 30 minutes each. I, of course, agreed to this, "I can do 30 minutes". For two smaller sessions seems a little easier, right? I was excitedly nervous to talk with Dr. Gilliss over the phone. This had become something I now wanted; I had to overcome my nerves to fully gain from the experience.

**Meeting Number One:** Dr. Gilliss told me about her career and the boards that she is or has been on. Her background is full of professional successes. What was surprising to learn is that her success wasn't just her professional position, but her ability and completion of beyond the job initiatives. This includes membership on a variety of boards. During our conversation, it quickly dawned on me that being a part of a board is reciprocal. You give your time, expertise, and other needed assistance and in-turn, you are likely to get

now and later in her career. A nurse, educator and a long-time resident of a smaller community in North Carolina, Alison was modest about her own accomplishments and, like many nurses, was not conversant in the ways the skill set she had developed in nursing and education could translate into a non-nursing, non-health care environment. We discussed different types of boards and the wide range of reasons that could be people are asked to join boards (including time, talent and treasury). Being selected for a board involves matching what you have to give to what a particular board might be seeking with its appointments. For the appointee, an honest review of your current ability to attend meetings (locally or away from home), to spend time outside of meetings, and to donate other services or gifts, is important. Appointees, especially to their first experiences, will want to be able to fulfill the expectations of their board appointment.

After our first 30 minute call, Alison agreed to do some “homework” and signal me when she was ready for her second 30 minute call.

**The Homework Assignment:** Alison was to develop a list of 3 - 4 boards that she thought matched her interests and her ability to contribute. She was to explore the mission, bylaws (if available), current board composition and current undertakings of those boards and prepare a “pitch list” of bullet points on why she would be a good member on the selected boards.

Alison let me know she was ready and sent me her list and her pitch! We started with her top choice, a community board, and reviewed what she had learned. She actually knew several members of that board, some rather well! We discussed how she might contact them to learn more about their current activities and priorities and to let her own contacts know that she would like to explore becoming a volunteer and perhaps even a board member eventually. Given the fact that she was well-known to some of the board members, we discussed joining several for an exploratory coffee or lunch.

**A Wider Audience?** Meanwhile, I know that Alison is someone I would want to stay in touch with. She poses great questions. She listens. She produces. She is coachable! Those are aspects of mentoring/coaching that I find are especially satisfying. Plus, now we are closer to having one more nurse on a board! When I mentioned my experience with Alison, the Academy asked whether Alison and I would be share our experience, so that other nurses who are *would-be* board members can launch their careers as board

things back such as: networking, introductions, awareness, knowledge, respect, accomplishment, and more. So simple!

Dr. Gilliss went on to explain not-for-profit and for-profit boards and the difference that means for a board member. This was a good lesson for me. Although I’ve had not-for-profit and for-profit organization lessons in graduate school, I didn’t realize the complexity of for-profit boards. Without Dr. Gilliss explaining this to me, I possibly could have gotten in over my head by attempting the for-profit for my first board member experience. In the future, committing to a for-profit board is something I would like to accomplish. However in my current life state, it is a better fit for me to serve on a not-for-profit. Finishing our conversation, Dr. Gilliss gave advice on what I needed to be prepared with to seek a board position (homework). Dr. Gilliss was so helpful, kind, patient, and attentive. She understood my current personal and professional needs and the balance I was trying to keep. She gave me great suggestions for where to start looking and didn’t push for something she thought could potentially be too much for me at that moment in time. I didn’t mind having homework. I was eager to start and even more eager to be on a board at this point. I was also excited at how great my conversation with Dr. Gilliss went. How wonderful it was to talk to a prominent figure in my career and to not be intimidated!

**My homework:** I located several boards that I was interested in, all located in my community. While researching the boards, Dr. Gilliss gave me the task of “pitching” myself to them. What was it about me that they would benefit from? This was one of the things that I wouldn’t have naturally prepared myself for prior to my conversation with Dr. Gilliss. I’m not used to talking about my experience or accomplishments like that. Positive accomplishments regarding yourself is not something nurses usually have to consider during their regular workday while taking care of patients. I found this reflection to be a good review of my past and this lead me toward boards that helped children. I began my career as a pediatric nurse and through this experience I realized that I miss working with children. Although I love teaching and wouldn’t change my professional choice now, serving on a board for an organization that is for children would add to my professional satisfaction. Another moment that taught me being on a board can be a reciprocal experience.

members. We hope that other consultants and prospective board members will team up and advance the numbers of nurses on boards.

**Meeting Number Two:** I sent my homework to Dr. Gilliss prior to our second meeting for her review. I decided on five or six boards that I would enjoy being a part of. Dr. Gilliss went through the information with me and assisted with prioritizing my list of boards. Two of the boards emerged as my main priority. After identifying my top priority boards, Dr. Gilliss and I went through a list of the current members on one of the boards. We were looking to see if there were nursing positions involved and the other members on the board. While doing this together, we realized that I knew a couple of the current members. This was surprising to us both but gave me a way to begin the process alone, after the consultation with Dr. Gilliss was through. Dr. Gilliss gave several tips on what to do to approach the board members I knew; she had excellent suggestions and questions to ask for when the day came that I was interacting with the board. Dr. Gilliss also helped me realize that my commitment to the board is vital. I need to agree with the direction of the board and/or organization - it needs to fit me as much as I need to fit the board. This is why it is important to seek information from the board, in addition to pitching yourself. Simple. Reciprocal.

It was the next week that I ran into one of the board members Dr. Gilliss and I had mentioned. I couldn't believe it. Because of my conversations with Dr. Gilliss, I knew what to do. I confidently approached this person telling them how interested I was to be on a board and that I thought the one they were on was a fit for me because (insert my pitch)...She agreed, even said a couple more reasons why I'd be a good member on this board! What a great feeling it was to have this happen!

Yes, Ellie was right - it is wonderful to work with Dr. Gilliss. I guess I just needed the extra push from someone who's been there before. It really is a simple process requiring a little research and reflection on your part. Finding the right board for you can be a rewarding process that can have a positive impact on your nursing career.