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Governing Boards and STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

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MEMBERS OF GOVERNING BOARDS CARRY THE ULTIMATE responsibility for an institution's assets and activities, including its core values, strategic vision, and academic mission. Although the faculty and academic leadership are on the front lines, questions of student success—including learning, personal development, and degree completion—are critical to mission attainment and are therefore central to the role and responsibilities of governing boards. While it is true that boards must exercise restraint when acting in the realm of academic affairs, governing boards also need to be well informed on issues of educational quality and performance and the assessment thereof, and exercise appropriate oversight in this area, as in all others.

TAKEAWAYS

- 1 While it is true that boards must exercise restraint when acting in the realm of academic affairs, oversight of educational quality is a central component of a governing board's fiduciary responsibility.
- 2 Two common challenges boards encounter with regard to assessment of academic performance are unfamiliarity with curriculum and pedagogy and a lack of clarity surrounding appropriate board oversight of academic affairs.
- 3 Through engaged oversight of educational quality and by monitoring evidence of student success, governing boards can make vital contributions to an institution's health and well-being, while ensuring its future vitality.

Overarching Board Duties

The governing board has two basic responsibilities with respect to academic oversight. The first is a fiduciary responsibility for academic quality that is just as important as the better known fiduciary responsibility boards carry for the financial affairs of the institution. Just as it is a violation of fiduciary responsibility for a board to tolerate inadequate financial controls and/or allow an institution to fail financially, it is a failure of board responsibility to ignore poor student academic performance and allow an institution to award degrees or certificates to students who do not meet accepted standards of quality with respect to what they have learned and are able to do.

Boards clearly recognize their fiscal responsibility when they authorize and receive the results of a financial audit, a process that certifies for a given period the credibility of the institution's financial statements and internal controls. The academic counterpart of the financial audit is an accreditation review, a process that periodically certifies the adequacy and integrity of learning outcomes and the academic credentials the institution confers. When board members authorize the granting of degrees or otherwise “stand behind” a graduating class at a commencement ceremony, they symbolically bear witness to this important academic fiduciary responsibility.

The second duty concerning assessment is related to the board's obligation to ensure that academic and administrative leaders possess the skills and dispositions required to perform their respective responsibilities. In this domain, no board function is more important than selecting the president and evaluating performance. With regard to assessment, the key issue is whether the president and other academic leaders effectively use student-learning outcomes as a management tool. Some institutions actually use a set of presidential performance indicators that includes “leading and using assessment” as part of the annual presidential evaluation. We heartily endorse this practice.

These overarching board duties parallel the dual functions of assessment at any academic institution. The first is *summative*, which responds to the public interest for accountability and is typically met through regional or program accreditation. The

second and arguably more important board role is *formative*, whereby the board oversees the information-based quality improvement that effective assessment of student learning should inform and support. Governing boards must do both.

Operational Responsibilities

The board's principal operational responsibilities in terms of assessment are to ensure that adequate assessment processes are in place and that institutional leaders actually use the evidence to monitor and improve the teaching and learning process. The first requires basic knowledge of what these assessment processes are and how they operate—a typical responsibility of the board's committee on academic affairs.

One widely cited source on this topic, Peter T. Ewell's *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality* (AGB Press, 2012), lists these in the form of a set of basic questions that can be asked about any “business”:

- How good is our product (learning assessment)?
- How good are we at making our product (retention and student flow)?
- Are our customers satisfied (surveys of students and employers)?
- Do we have the right mix of products (program review)?
- Do we, ultimately, make the grade (institutional accreditation)?

Board members should expect that information on each of these issues is available and that, at least annually, the entire board reviews and discusses it.

In addition, Ewell offers a handful of principles to guide appropriate board engagement in assessment. The first emphasizes a posture of indirect engagement by enjoining board members that “running the curriculum” is the faculty's responsibility. The board's role, however, “is to remind them of that responsibility” and to make sure it is taken seriously.

A second principle admonishes board members to focus discussion of assessment results on strategic issues, such as maintaining and strengthening educational quality and approving new program initiatives. It is *not* the governing board's role to get tied up in the day-to-day management of academic or student-life programs.

The third and arguably most important principle is that the board should insist that the institution cultivate a culture of evidence in which anecdotes are minimized and assertions of learning outcomes are backed by actionable data. Multiple sources of evidence may well be needed to obtain a comprehensive picture of student performance, including direct evidence of student learning such as work products, student performances, or class demonstrations. Indirect assessment of student attainment is possible through surveys, including those that give insight into how students are spending their time; the nature of student-faculty engagement and interaction; and results from program reviews. When informed by an overview of these results, a governing board is in a better position to be confident that the essential systems of academic-quality assurance and information-gathering are in place at the program and institutional level and that the results of these efforts are used productively to address issues and concerns in areas in which performance falls short.

Taken together, these three principles require boards to ask academic leaders probing questions about the meaning of assessment results. *What are the implications for action?* Board members need to listen carefully to the answers to be assured that matters of educational quality are being addressed and that the campus is nurturing the culture of evidence that sustains continuous improvement.

Two final aspects of the board's operational engagement with assessment deserve mention. As suggested earlier, much of the work related to the assessment of student learning will properly take place in the academic affairs and student affairs committees of the board, comprising a subset of board members who may be joined by key academic leaders and faculty members. Such work is indispensable; still, the entire board must be engaged and receive full and candid reports on key academic and student-learning issues.

Finally, many public universities and colleges have multi-institutional governing and coordinating boards and are part of a larger system. Opportunities for dialogue among board members and academic leaders tend to be limited. Members of system boards must also remain focused on crucial quality

Indicators of Robust Oversight of Educational Quality and Student Success

assurance issues and confirm that essential academic improvement processes are in place as a means to ensure the quality and integrity of the system overall.

Common Challenges

Boards frequently encounter challenges in the exercise of their duty with regard to assessment of academic performance. Two deserve special note. The first arises because the professional and career backgrounds of most board members provide them more familiarity with financial and organizational issues and strategies than with curriculum and pedagogy. This may result in board reticence to deal with topics such as the assessment of student-learning outcomes because they do not feel competent or even comfortable. We see this reticence as unfortunate, because nearly all board members will have important observations to contribute to the board discussion.

Still, this barrier to engagement can be ameliorated in several ways. Faculty and staff should be admonished to avoid using the arcane language and terminology that sometimes typify discussion of evidence of student performance and questions of academic quality. Most of the content that matters in deliberations about assessment methods and findings can be readily translated in terms that are generally understandable, such as Ewell's "five basic questions" noted earlier. Another solution is to engage in frequent, direct contact between board members and faculty members on the academic and student affairs committees and the board as a whole. Greater familiarity and contact, including informal, unstructured interaction between board members and faculty members, tend to diminish barriers and increase comfort levels.

A quite different challenge arises when board members attempt to intervene directly in academic policies and practices. This could take the form of a board member recommending some direct action to address a particular academic deficiency when the efficacy of that action is far from clear and any consultation with faculty has largely been absent. Equally unwise for the board is to appear to mandate a pet assessment approach, a particular standardized test, or specific methodology without consultation with academic leaders and the faculty most

- Educational quality is one of the board's top priorities. More broadly, educational quality is inculcated institutionally as a key strategy.
- Within the board, a high-performing committee or task force "owns" educational quality. Policies and practices for overseeing educational quality are in place. The full board regularly discusses and understands the institution's academic program portfolio. The full board has a working knowledge of the principles of accreditation, student-learning outcomes, and related educational concepts and

practices.

- The board regularly sees, understands, and assesses evidence of educational quality. The board's monitoring of educational quality practices and evidence is systematic. Information pertaining to educational quality is transparent and visible.
- Evidence of educational quality is a basis for continuous institutional improvement and for decisions about resource allocation.

—Excerpted from *Overseeing Educational Quality: A How-To Guide for Boards of Universities and Colleges*

directly concerned and accountable. In their professional or managerial lives, board members may be called upon to take decisive action, and it is easy to become impatient with the sometimes excessively deliberate pace of academic decision making. Still, governance oversight of academic quality and the productive use of assessment results is first and foremost a core responsibility of the faculty and academic leadership, including the president. Clarifying the role of appropriate board oversight of academic affairs in board handbooks and in the orientation of new board members is essential and can be helpful in encouraging active oversight and engagement guided by appropriate restraint.

A Final Word

Our message is simply this: The oversight of educational quality is a central component of a governing board's fiduciary responsibility. Indeed, given the dynamic change in the global economy and the challenging world students will face, governing boards must be confident that graduates are well prepared to survive and thrive following college. This duty is just as important as ensuring the institution's long-term fiscal health, and indeed, these two sectors are intertwined. Approaches to assessing academic quality and using evidence to improve student and institutional performance will vary widely from campus to campus. Defining the responsibility of governing boards, however, is crucial. The most important board duty, we believe, is to make certain that sound processes are in place to assess student learning and that evidence is being

used productively. Through engaged oversight of educational quality and by monitoring evidence of student success, governing boards can make vital contributions to an institution's health and well-being and ensure its future vitality.

This article was adapted from the book Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education (Jossey-Bass, 2015). ■

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