

Richard L Morrill
Governor's Conference on Trusteeship
September 23rd, 2011

The Role of Trustees in Assuring the Quality of Learning

I am both honored and delighted to be back in Kentucky for this important event, and I salute the leadership of Governor Beshear, Governor Patton and other Kentucky leaders in advancing the cause of higher education in the Commonwealth.

I am grateful for my years in Kentucky for many reasons, including the chance to work with the trustees at Centre College. I have never worked with a better governing board, and much of its effectiveness can be traced to the exceptional leadership the board has enjoyed over the past 30 years and more. I learned much about effective trusteeship, governance and leadership from watching James H. Evans, and then David Grissom chair the Centre board. Judge Pierce Lively of Danville, former chief judge of the United States 6th Circuit Court of Appeals was the local member of an exceptional leadership triangle. Jim Evans leveraged his influence as one of America's leading chief executives at the Union Pacific Corporation in the 1970's and 1980's to benefit Centre and Kentucky in countless ways. These three trustees and their colleagues showed how boards can decisively influence a College without controlling its management or getting into the hair of the faculty. They asked informed and penetrating questions that set off a chain of pre-emptive expectation and accountability—as chief executive you anticipated the questions that would focus on the key leverage points and success factors in the College's work. You answered the questions by taking actions and making decisions before they became problems. I often got versions of the question, “What do we have to do to put Centre on the top rung of

excellence.” Their influence rippled through the organization, even though we never received marching orders about how to run the College.

In my view we are now at a time in American higher education when the board’s role in governance and in leadership as a shared process of decision-making around mission and vision will need to become that kind of robust and reverberating source of influence. We find ourselves in a period of structural rather than cyclical change in higher education, and it appears in the wider economy and society as well. In structural change we are challenged to re-make our assumptions, not just our decisions. The business and educational models deep in our minds and imaginations in higher education no longer connect us reliably to the world as we now know and live it. In higher education especially, the process of responding to structural change is really tough since the decision-making process is so decentralized across academic units and the professional autonomy and expertise of the faculty as knowledge professionals is so fundamental. Educators believe that knowledge and learning are intangible values that are good in themselves, but that as well create critical opportunities for improving lives, lifting institutions and driving the economy. Never before has higher education meant more for the future of our society and economy, but never has its future been more clouded. For these reasons and others, we are not good at responding strategically to profound change. Nonetheless, since structural change is inevitable and unforgiving, it will extract a heavy price from those who ignore it. I believe that the board’s role in providing the catalyst for colleges and universities come to terms with structural change will grow in significance in the days ahead. Boards can provide some of the integration that we need to connect the fragmented and dispersed pieces of our decision-making methods. Keeping the agendas of educational quality and financial stability integrated is a tough assignment. Nonetheless, we should look to the board to monitor data, press questions,

conduct meetings and assure accountability in ways that integrate the pieces into a strategic whole that responds to profound change.

Let me illustrate some of these points by looking quickly at two areas where fundamental change is occurring—briefly at the financial models of higher education and then more at length in the educational models. As difficult as change is, the stakes are very high for education itself and the wider society.

I will begin by illustrating the issues around some of the challenges in economic sustainability for private colleges, and then apply those lessons for public institutions. The differences between the two sectors are fewer and fewer with every passing year. Starting some thirty or more years ago, most private colleges decided that the race would be won by those colleges that could provide more and greater resources in programs and facilities, and in faculty and staff, to the most talented and economically and socially diverse student bodies possible. As we conducted this resource race, we grew enrollments, attracted large gifts and most especially raised tuition at about three times the rate of increase of average family incomes and four times the rate of inflation. With some ugly exceptions in several well known years, stock prices and home prices appreciated quite handsomely from 1982 until 2007. So, high tuition and high financial aid got lodged in the financial model of many institutions. In 2008, the recession and financial crisis pulled aside the veil and the model was shown not to be sustainable for many colleges and universities. We had crossed the line of affordability. Tuition, room and board at many private colleges is higher than the average household income in the United States—which as we know from recent census figures has declined in real terms since 1996. The latest figure for 2010 is \$49, 445.

The old model suggests you should increase tuition to increase revenue, but in our new circumstances that doesn't work. Every increase in tuition leads to new levels of aid, and the net tuition revenue is just a fraction of the increase—the average discount rate is 43% in private institutions which means that for many places it is much higher. Unless you cut aid or gap aid—which means giving less aid than the students demonstrated need-- which no one would choose to do in terms of the equity ideals of American democracy, or cannot do because you could not attract a full class without discounts, you have few ways to increase net tuition revenue. So, the pressure to find gifts and grants is constant, as are efforts to find new strategies to grow enrollment, increase graduation rates, and cut costs—often by freezing salaries and using more part time faculty members. In most undergraduate institutions there are only two or three major revenue sources, so the options to increase income are limited.

In public institutions it is often a different chapter in the same book of an unsustainable model. The erratic patterns of support over the past decade in many states where other needs have crowded out state funding have been translated into the draconian cuts of the last three years. There have been big percentage spikes in tuition and the question of affordability arises sharply, just at a different point in the scale of family incomes. Aid funds have been increased in many public institutions, but there are often relatively few endowments or large annual gifts to support aid, so the discount problem of tuition increases has become equally real. In a different version of the problem, many community colleges are now deluged with students with reduced funding. We could go on to suggest all the things that public institutions have done to carry these burdens and reduce expenditures and to increase income. In many cases they work for the short term, like freezing salaries or not filling vacancies, but they do not change the fundamental long-term problem.

In spite of intense efforts in both private and public higher education college graduation is still highly stratified by income. The odds of earning a bachelor's degree by age 24 is about 50% if your family earns above \$90,000, but about 6% if your family earns below \$35,000. (Douthat, *The Atlantic Monthly*, November, 2005, p. 120).

These issues in the financial model connect and intensify questions that have arisen about the educational model in terms of quality and attainment, and of both purpose and form. When the forces of economic change press this deeply they force us to connect hard questions that we would like to avoid. They make us integrate financial and academic questions that reach into the basic missions of colleges and universities. The more prices rise, the more debt students and families take on to gain a degree, the more state and federal governments invest in education, the more intense the questions become about goals and performance—about whether and why higher education of various forms and types is worth it. These questions of purpose and performance touch directly on the board's responsibilities in a period of profound change. A clear and strong sense of the purpose of undergraduate education to form democratic citizens with a broad educational background is receding as a norm in the wider society, and sometimes on campus as well with its deep attachment to ever more specialized fields and research. Job related degrees have understandably become a dominant choice and trend—only about a third of four year college graduates now major in basic arts or sciences disciplines. As Louis Menand tells us in *The Marketplace of Ideas*, twenty-two percent of students major in business, 10 percent in education, 7 percent in health related fields—and 4 percent in English, 2 percent in history and 1 percent in mathematics and statistics. You have heard at this meeting and read elsewhere about the relative stagnation in the rates of degree completion over the past decade, and the drop in US educational attainment compared with other countries. We have all read sharp

critiques of the limited learning for many students in college, from the Spelling's Commission in 2007 to a string of other reports and studies.

One of the most recent and sobering ones about the level of learning is called *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Authored by two sociologists of education, Richard Arum of New York University and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia, the book analyzes the performance of 2,300 students across a diverse range of colleges and universities during their first two years in college. They used the Collegiate Learning Assessment, referred to as the CLA, an instrument developed about ten years ago, to measure gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication. These broad powers of reasoning represent for many today the kind of learning outcomes that a college education should aim to develop. Needless to say, there are lots of ways to construe the term "outcomes" from degrees earned to knowledge of a discipline, to licensure examinations, but the CLA joins other current trends to refer to outcomes as broad powers of reasoning. The CLA is not a fill in the blanks multiple choice test, but requires that students analyze and respond in writing to a "real life" case that involves quantitative, qualitative and narrative data and an open-ended response. The student responses are assessed in terms of how well they give reasons, and create arguments based on evidence to support their written conclusions. The authors claim that they came at the analysis of data from the test and from a set of their own questions with the eyes of social scientists intending to simply interpret what they found. They were astonished to find that student performance showed such little progress over two years, and that students reported such low amounts of time on their studies outside of class and such low expectations of them in reading and writing assignments. Almost half of the students showed no statistically significant gains in reasoning and writing after two years of college. A third of the students reported that

they had no course in a typical semester that required more than 40 pages of reading a week, and half the students claimed that they had no course that required 20 pages of writing over the course of the semester. Students reported that they spent on average 12 to 14 hours of week in studying of all forms outside of class time—this is 50 percent less than a study from the 1960’s of student study time. Other widely used surveys report similar patterns of student study time, and other recently completed studies show a similar degree of relatively low progress on the development of various capabilities of reasoning and logical thinking. The authors make clear that the CLA only measures certain things, and some critics claim that the data set they used doesn’t allow some of their conclusions on sheer statistical grounds. But, the CLA has many fans, including the state of Texas that is now using it as one standard outcome measure in its colleges and universities.

I would add that the CLA also shows that many students show strong progress in learning, which correlates with those who meet higher faculty expectations for spending larger amounts of time on task in writing and completing assignments. There are wide variations in student learning between colleges, but even wider ones within colleges.

If the quality and completion questions about student learning outcomes are intense, so are the changing forms of student learning. Not only what students are learning is changing, but the way they are learning is undergoing a slow transformation. Learning is increasingly “de-localized.” The campus is now not a sanctuary for learning but a hub to which students come and return at various times for various reasons. Learning is not space bound, as the continuing increase in active and experiential learning, internships, field work, case presentations, learning in groups, involvement in research projects, study abroad, and uses of technology makes so plain. The four walls of a classroom no longer define learning, nor does the time-bound

presentation of knowledge by a professor standing at the front of the room. The possibilities and the challenges in these forms of learning are both apparent, especially to understand how these new opportunities play out in the responsibilities of the faculty who already have commitments to a full teaching and research agenda. How is faculty time to be used in this new world? How is faculty responsibility to be calculated? How do we measure the student learning outcomes from these kinds of involvements, especially since they reach into abilities that relate to leadership, skills at working with others, problem-solving, resilience, and creativity? Some commentators suggest that the open avenues for learning by experience and technology make the time and expense of the traditional college years a waste of time, and all of us hear now that you can do just as well in life by forgetting college and pursuing your passion on your own. An irreverent, clever and cheeky book by a young woman writer name Anna Kamenitz has a book called DYI U, or do-it-yourself university, explaining how students might cobble together a variety of ways to learn from travel, experience, technology, work, and college to create their own education at a fraction of the usual price. Since, as she claims, there is really no way to show that the traditional forms of education really accomplish their objectives, everyone should be free to create their own education with the resources that are all around them. Her ideas will get under a traditionalist's skin very quickly, but when we think of providing more opportunities for students of all ages to advance their own learning, they sound much more appealing.

Many of the ideas that I have touched on here about structural change and the strategic response to change are addressed skillfully and thoughtfully in *Stronger by Degrees, the Strategic Agenda for Kentucky*. The implications of this strategy for the trustees of Kentucky's public and private colleges and universities are clear and significant. It suggests a new level of engagement by trustees in the centrality of assuring educational attainment and quality. The goal

to raise completion rates at all levels is a central goal of the strategy, and the sensitivity to do so for adults and under-represented groups seizes on issues on which I have touched. Notably, too, the agenda sees completion not as an isolated numerical goal or as end in itself, but as the consequence of assuring both wider access and quality in Kentucky's post-secondary and adult programs. The agenda emphasizes the features of engaged learning that motivate and enrich student experience, build leadership abilities and lead to success after graduation. In effect, the quality of student learning is the bridge between access and completion. Powerful student learning creates educational value that is made public, visible and secure in completing a credential. The credential serves as a critical threshold and indicator of achievement that must be attained, and it becomes a worthy goal especially at the macro level of state and national educational performance, but it does not stand alone, especially at the level of institutions and individuals. Completion by itself does not tell us the level of learning that has been achieved or whether a transformational form of educational value has been reached by individuals or groups of students. Pressure to raise completion rates in isolation from other measures could even lead to distortion and provide perverse incentives to manipulate the data or lower standards if rewards are not carefully designed. So, in addition to completion rates, we need other measures and indicators of achievement and student learning, of what are often called the indicators of value-added education. These kinds of measures are not easy to come by in any human activity like learning that depends on human behavior and motivation in all its complexity and variability. Yet we have learned at the Teagle Foundation after an investment of 20 million dollars over six years that faculty members will buy into approaches to gather evidence to improve student learning that connect with the goals that they set for their classes and that resonates with the work of their colleagues and their disciplines. Typically, the work that students produce

themselves in capstone courses, research projects, theses, papers, exams, reports, presentations, recitals, and the like are the stuff of effective assessment, buttressed by rubrics of evaluation that specify objectives and examples of student work increasingly collected in electronic portfolios. All this kind of evidence is framed by hard data on student retention and graduation, time to degree, by studies of grading, by surveys of students, alumni, employers, graduate schools, academic program reviews by external experts, accreditation self-studies and reports, and by performance on instruments like the CLA. In some ways we are drowning in data about student performance, we just don't know how to use it effectively to improve learning.

Consistent with the Council's strategic agenda, engaging governing boards more systematically and consistently in the oversight of educational quality is a possibility coming more fully into view. The Association of Governing Boards recently issued a statement affirming the importance of the board's ultimate responsibility for the quality of the learning experience. Authorities and leaders in the field are recognizing the place as part of a total process of assurance. Peter Ewell, one of the nation's senior scholars on educational assessment notes as a college board member himself that the oversight of educational quality "is as much a part of our role . . . as ensuring that the institution has sufficient resources and is spending them wisely." No less an authority than the twice president of Harvard University Derek Bok suggests that "if trustees ignore the subject (of teaching and learning) there may be no one to press academic leaders to attend to those aspects of the educational program that are in greatest need of reform." The role for the trustees is not to do assessments of learning or to tell administration or faculty how to do it, but to ask, "How are we doing it at our university?" It is to encourage and support, to question and to assure that the faculty and administration make student learning a priority. To be honest, student learning has not always been at the top of the academic agenda. Our dominant

incentive systems signal that honor and duty first surround what we faculty members often call “our work,” by which we mean our research. Again, Derek Bok suggests that ultimately boards and presidents can influence the incentive and reward systems in their institutions. I would add that it is realistic to hope that better documentation of the educational value that we add to the experience of students can lead to competitive advantage in the marketplace, which is about as powerful a motivator as you can find in a period of threatening change.

In a time of change, and with the objective that Kentucky has adopted for its colleges and universities, new possibilities are at hand for boards to make a decisive difference to their institutions. The Teagle Foundation is consulting with the Association of Governing boards about how to develop concrete examples of how governing boards are focusing on student learning in effective ways. In our time together, I would enjoy hearing from you as trustees about what you would like to know or to see or to do that would make your oversight of learning more robust. How can boards of lay trustees put hard but respectful questions about the quality of student learning, press to assure that problems are addressed and solutions found by the proper authorities and academic professionals on campus. Boards need to know more about the processes of assessment that are used on campus, not in the deadly jargon of the day, but in ways that an informed and conscientious board can identify with. I can illustrate this point. I’m on the board of a specialty chemical company, and I have to learn the names and uses of a lot of chemicals that I never studied in graduate school in religious studies. The executives meet me and other lay board members half way and are always willing to translate, and faculty and administrators can do the same for you—but you will have to learn a few acronyms. We also need to know more about how to bring these issues of student learning constructively into board and committee meetings, so that we can understand their new strategic importance for the future.

We eventually have to figure out how to add educational value at lower cost, or we will become even more socially stratified than now, at enormous cost to our prosperity and our democracy. All this suggests that we need as well to find the right metrics and dashboards to communicate consistently to the board about key indicators and interesting findings. With the right information and processes of deliberation, board members can influence the quality of student learning by a continuing conversation that carries over from committee to committee and from one board meeting to the next. We cannot sharply segregate financial oversight from academic oversight in a mission driven organization like a university. The money is there not to make more money but to fulfill the mission at the highest level of performance. That is the new and vital role of the board in a time of structural change. In a Commonwealth known for its egalitarian spirit and its graciousness, this moment calls for Kentucky's colleges and universities to show the way to the nation to improve student learning and attainment. Kentucky's leaders and trustees can be the guarantors of this vision.