

Asking Questions Getting Answers

A Guide for Higher Ed Trustees



AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI
Institute for Effective Governance

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Launched in 1995, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is a non-partisan, non-profit educational organization dedicated to working with alumni, donors, trustees, and education leaders across the country to support liberal arts education, high academic standards, the free exchange of ideas on campus, and high-quality education at an affordable price.

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance, founded in 2003 by college and university trustees for trustees, is devoted to enhancing boards' effectiveness and helping trustees fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities fully and effectively. IEG offers a range of services tailored to the specific needs of individual boards, and focuses on academic quality, academic freedom, and accountability.

Asking Questions Getting Answers

Thank you for serving as a trustee. You have assumed a most important role—that of a fiduciary—and you have the final say over the direction your institution takes. The job is a weighty one, demanding time and commitment. And you are expected to learn on the job.

At a minimum, it's your obligation to know the governing documents, mission statement, and strategic plans that underlie institutional operations. It's your responsibility to know and shape the budget and budgeting process. And it's up to you to become familiar with the special protocols of the academy—academic freedom and shared governance.

The president and administration will help you. But our experience tells us that you will be left wanting more. And well you should. To do your job as a trustee, it's essential that you ask questions, obtain independent information, examine all the perspectives, and reach thoughtful decisions. As a trustee, it's your responsibility to insist on high academic standards, academic freedom, and student achievement—all the while acting in the best interest of students, parents, alumni, donors, and, in the case of public institutions, the taxpayers.

To be sure, many in the academy will tell you that trustees intrude on faculty prerogatives when they take an interest in academic affairs. Others will insist that the role of the trustee is to go along to get along—no questions asked.

But don't be fooled. Higher education governance is coming under increasing scrutiny in these challenging economic times. Students, parents, alumni, and the public are raising concerns about costs, quality, and ethics. More and more, trustees across the country are

finding themselves on the hot seat for failing to hold higher education to the same level of accountability that we demand from other institutions of comparable size and importance.

This publication is designed to help. In the following pages, we've outlined some key questions related to the academic and financial operation of your institution—questions designed to help you and your fellow trustees address the central concerns of the educational enterprise: academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; institutions vary significantly in terms of size, audience, and purpose. But by asking questions and following up, you can play a pivotal role in ensuring that the next generation receives a quality education at the lowest possible cost.

Let's get started.

Questions on Academic Affairs

Trustees are made to feel unsure about the oversight of academic affairs. And this is deliberate. Many in the academy believe trustees should remain hands off when it comes to academic affairs; according to them, academic matters are solely the prerogative of the faculty. Be assured: Nothing could be further from the truth. Colleges and universities are above all academic institutions, charged with educating the next generation of citizens. In order to be responsible fiduciaries, trustees must ensure the quality of the educational enterprise—after all, education is the prime purpose of the institution for which you are responsible.

But there are limits. Trustees have no right to develop curricula or prepare syllabi. That is up to faculty experts in the various academic departments. But trustees do have the obligation to ascertain what graduates are expected to know, to find out what and whether they are learning, and to ensure that students are getting an education that will prepare them to be informed

citizens, effective workers, and lifelong learners. Not all issues are narrow matters of academic expertise. And trustees are often more strongly committed to liberal education and a coherent curriculum than faculty members who are understandably focused on their narrow disciplines.

Thus, asking the following questions will help you appropriately address academic matters at your institution.

What are the institution's admission requirements? Are standards high? Are standards consistent with the university's mission?

The board should determine whether admission practices are consistent with the mission of the university. What are the selection criteria, average SAT scores, GPA, and selectivity rates over time? Trends downward or upward demand explanation. Is the university offering remedial student programs? If so, what are they, are they effective, and are they a good use of institutional resources? Are admission requirements aligned with college preparatory high school graduation requirements?

What courses must students take in order to graduate? How many credits are required for graduation? How many credits do students actually take? What are the four, five, and six-year graduation rates? How many freshmen return for their sophomore year? What is the average time to obtain a degree? How have these rates changed over time?

Board members should know the requirements for graduation. And they should be familiar with related matters, such as how many credits are required for graduation, whether students are taking more courses than they are required to, and, if they are, why. Are courses that are required for graduation unavailable and thus increasing the time it takes to obtain a degree? Are employers satisfied with student preparation? Are graduation requirements consistent with employer needs?

Trustees should establish and enforce policies that encourage program progression and degree completion at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. When undergraduate students take more than four years to graduate, or take more credits than necessary, costs to both the student and the taxpayer increase, and opportunities for incoming students decrease. If graduation rates are stagnant or declining, the board should examine these trends to see if corrective action is called for. If the average time for a student to obtain a degree has increased, it's important to understand the underlying reasons and to decide whether board action is appropriate.

What courses fulfill the core or general education requirements? Are there many choices or few? Are the courses general or narrow? Be sure to ask for a list.

The purpose of general education is to provide students with a foundation in core areas of knowledge. And while many institutions claim they offer a strong general education, there is often quite a gap between the promise and the practice. ACTA's annual What Will They Learn?™ study, available online at WhatWillTheyLearn.com, evaluates the core requirements at colleges and universities across the country. It shows that students are graduating without the slightest exposure to U.S. history or civics, math, economics, literature, or science—even as their institutions claim to give students a solid grounding in essential subjects.

Board members should regularly review the list of general education offerings and requirements. A strong general education curriculum limits options to a relatively small number of select offerings designed to provide a broad foundation in the arts and sciences. Accordingly, trustees need to learn how many—and what kind of—courses can satisfy the credit requirements. If the number is enormous, the curriculum is likely to be a hollow core.

Internal campus decision-making often results in a fragmented and ineffective curriculum. Trustees

can help break the deadlock by asking questions and facilitating the adoption of stronger and more effective core requirements. ACTA's guide, *Restoring a Core: How Trustees Can Ensure Meaningful General Education Requirements*, provides practical steps boards can take to help strengthen their institution's general education program. The guide is available at www.goacta.org.

What are the average grades across the institution, in both colleges and departments? How does this compare to grades 10 to 20 years ago?

Grade inflation is a growing trend with troubling consequences. When grades are inflated, students know they can “get by” with minimal effort. It also means students may avoid certain subjects—like science and math—where objective tests make grade inflation less likely.

Trustees have the responsibility to ensure that students *deserve* their degrees. By comparing grades across the university to those 10 to 20 years ago, trustees can determine if grade inflation is a significant problem and, if so, where it predominates. If there is a problem, trustees can consider a number of options. They can adopt an average grade point across the school, insisting that professors not exceed that average in their classes; they can ask that the median class grade be recorded on each student's transcript; they can limit the number of students graduating with honors; or they can change the grading system entirely, moving to an honors, pass, and fail system that emphasizes “pass” as the average. ACTA's booklet, *Measuring Up: The Problem of Grade Inflation and What Trustees Can Do*, examines this topic in greater depth and is available at www.goacta.org.

Is the institution producing qualified teachers through its school of education and its teacher certification programs? How can the potential classroom effectiveness of prospective teachers be assessed?

Most universities have schools of education that produce teachers for grades K-12; colleges and universities may also have teacher certification programs that allow

undergraduates to qualify as teachers while they complete their majors. And yet there is mounting evidence that new teachers lack the broad-based training necessary to become excellent educators.

Trustees are ideally placed to review teacher training programs and promote excellent teacher education that centers on ensuring student learning. Here are just a few questions trustees could fruitfully explore: Has the teaching program set a minimum GPA for participants? Does it require students to take courses in basic subjects necessary for quality instruction in any classroom, including English composition and literature, college-level mathematics, natural sciences, American history, and Western civilization? Are prospective teachers introduced to the kinds of classroom management skills they will need when they enter the classroom? Do student teachers receive hands-on experience in the classroom before receiving a teaching certificate? These and other questions are outlined in *Teachers Who Can: How Informed Trustees Can Ensure Teacher Quality*, available online at www.goacta.org.

Questions on Student Learning

How does the institution measure student learning and general education competencies? Can students frame rational arguments? Are they competent communicators—orally and in writing? Can students do math? Do they know history, understand essential scientific principles, or grasp the fundamentals of economics? How do you know?

If the point of a liberal arts curriculum is to educate students broadly, there should be a means to measure how much—and how well—students learn. The effectiveness of a liberal arts education is not apparent unless students' skills and knowledge are actually assessed. As a trustee, you have a right to know whether students are learning and to insist on methods that document real results. Assessments should reliably measure students' competency in written and oral communication, quantitative and scientific reason-

ing, critical thinking, historical and technological literacy. Is your institution engaged in assessments? If not, why not? Data from qualitative and quantitative assessments should be reviewed by the board—not only to evaluate student progress, but also, as former Harvard University president Derek Bok has noted, “to determine if faculty teaching approaches facilitate maximum learning.” Trustees can “urge the president to work with the faculty to make the college a more effective learning organization.”¹ And this means the board can insist that the institution provide faculty professional development when necessary.

How does the college or university ensure academic freedom and intellectual diversity in the classroom and at university events? Is the institution promoting the robust exchange of ideas—in class and out? Does the institution have speech codes or other policies that regulate expression or limit free inquiry? If so, why? What policies govern the selection and invitation of speakers? Over the last five years, what speakers has the institution sponsored?

A campus environment that intimidates students or stifles the free exchange of ideas violates the very essence of a college education—in Thomas Jefferson’s words, “to follow truth wherever it may lead.” Colleges and universities have an obligation to expose students to relevant and accepted scholarly perspectives, and to ensure that both professors and students feel free to raise questions and debate them. Trustees should determine whether institutional policies adequately guarantee diverse viewpoints—both inside and outside the classroom. Good places to start include commissioning an institutional self-study or outside review of the campus atmosphere; where appropriate, incorporating into institutional statements, procedures, and activities respect for intellectual diversity and dissenting opinions; eliminating any policies that restrict freedom of speech; and including intellectual diversity concerns in university guidelines on teaching.

¹ Derek Bok, “The Critical Role of Trustees in Enhancing Student Learning,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 December 2005.

Trustees should be vigilant about protecting campus newspapers from censorship and theft. They should also ensure that intellectually diverse speakers are invited to campus. These and other issues are outlined more fully in ACTA's publication, *Free to Teach, Free to Learn: Understanding and Maintaining Academic Freedom in Higher Education*, available at goacta.org.

Questions on Faculty Hiring, Review, and Promotion

How does the institution hire, review, and reward faculty? Does it ensure that hiring, review, and promotion are based on teaching, scholarship, and service? What is the basis for faculty salary increases and how are increases allocated? What incentives are available to reward faculty who are exceptional teachers, who do excellent research and scholarship, or who make remarkable service contributions? Are the incentive systems consistent with the board's priorities and desired outcomes?

Faculty are integral to the academic enterprise, so hiring, review, and promotion procedures should be beyond reproach. The board should periodically review these procedures to ensure their integrity. Do criteria for hiring, promotion, and tenure reflect the mission statement, so that appropriate incentives are placed on teaching, research, and service? Does the board have in place any policy designed to review and reward faculty based on merit and achievement of institutional goals? If not, should it adopt a faculty salary allocation policy that does so, rather than simply providing "across the board" salary increases? Does the institution conduct post-tenure review? If not, why not?

Intellectual diversity and academic freedom are central values. Does the institution have hiring, tenure, and promotion guidelines designed to protect individuals against discrimination on the basis of viewpoint? Are there procedures in place to ensure that hiring and promotion processes are open to the fullest range of legitimate scholarly perspectives?

Questions on Financial Oversight and Costs

While most trustees are presented with reams of financial information, the “big picture” is not usually transparent. The 10-pound briefing book is often so big and so filled with data that trustees are literally “overwhelmed”—making a meaningful discussion about the underlying priorities and fiscal allocations difficult. As a consequence, trustees too often have only a minimal view of the overall university finances. The following questions are designed to help trustees pinpoint key budget areas and to examine the underlying reasons for tuition and other university expenditures.

Are all financial statements available to trustees? Are budget priorities in line with the university’s mission and board-approved strategic plan? How does the college or university control costs? Is the institution cost-efficient? How do you know?

Trustees should demand full access to accurate financial reports, including balance sheets, income statements, records of cash flow, and audit reports. They should ensure that expenditures are in accord with the institutional mission, and resist simply rubber-stamping administration proposals. What are the biggest budget drivers and how has the administration attempted to curb costs? How do actual expenditures vary from the budget and what is the cause of particular variances? Is cost-efficiency being maintained, and, if not, what options are there for increased efficiency such as expanding teaching loads, reducing administrative staff, increasing space and classroom utilization, and combining or eliminating programs? The board should look at expense categories, and it should assess comparative trends in how funds are allocated to such categories as “instructional support” and “administrative support.” If administrative costs are going up, it’s important to ask why, and to determine what can be done to ensure that education remains a top priority.

How does the institution calculate its tuition needs? Does the college or university consider all sources of revenue and expenditure reductions and/or operating efficiencies prior to raising tuition? What efforts has the institution made to keep tuition affordable/low?

College costs are outpacing the rate of inflation, year in and year out. And trustees have an obligation to address rising public concern. For starters, it's imperative that board members know how the institution's tuition is calculated. And while many administrators try to keep this information private, trustees have an obligation to understand how tuition is set in order to determine whether it is both prudent and affordable. Too often, trustees are told they must increase tuition to compensate for lost state revenues. While ups and downs in state funds are a reality, tuition should not be the only means of balancing budgets. The board should examine both sides of the budget equation—controlling costs and enhancing revenues. Trustees should analyze tuition increases over time, as well as tuition increases vis-à-vis inflation; they should also compare their institution's tuition to that at similar institutions. When boards approve tuition increases, they should do so as a last resort.

What criteria govern the introduction of new courses and programs? Are the new courses and programs in sync with the institution's mission statement and with its strategic plan? How are new courses and programs funded? Are other courses and programs eliminated if new courses are added?

New academic fields and new concentrations bring with them new courses. Trustees should evaluate how new courses are introduced and ensure that only courses relevant to the institution's mission and board-endorsed strategic plan are approved. If too few general education courses are offered, new courses should be curbed and the availability of core courses expanded so that students can fulfill necessary requirements. Boards should insist on regular productivity analyses of existing programs. This entails examining course

enrollment and numbers of degrees granted in the programs. When new courses are added, the budget increases—unless cuts are made elsewhere. So trustees need to consider closing ineffective or undersubscribed programs as a means of funding new programs. Too often in higher education, new programs are created without doing the necessary parallel work of eliminating unproductive or obsolete ones.

Questions on Board Effectiveness

Just as the board should ask questions of the administration, it should also ask questions of itself.

Does the board have active committees working on specific issues? Has the board adopted policies to ensure adequate review of key issues (e.g., regular review of the general education curriculum and program productivity)? What policies are in place? What delegations of authority are in place? Are they appropriate? Has the board reviewed its bylaws recently? Is there a process for periodic review of the bylaws? Do the current bylaws meet the board's needs? How does the board hold the president and administration accountable for responding to its requests for information?

Boards should assign committees to do much of the in-depth review and analysis of key issues. Committees, in turn, must obtain the data and analysis necessary to develop policies and initiatives for the full board's consideration. The board should also ensure that it has the right structure and policies in place to enable it to achieve its goals and operate effectively. Thus, periodic review of board bylaws, rules, and policies is recommended.

ACTA has been the leader in outlining best practices for higher education boards. ACTA resources include helpful guides on trustee responsibilities as well as recommendations for board structures and operations. For further information, contact ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance at 202/467-6787.

Next Steps

Hopefully, this guide has provided some useful tools to help you fulfill your fiduciary responsibilities. As governance in general—and higher education governance in particular—comes under increased scrutiny, trustees must step up to the plate, asking questions and insisting on the information they need to act in the best interests of the institution's stakeholders and beneficiaries. With pressures mounting for greater accountability at both the state and national level, to do otherwise is unacceptable. Trustees have little choice but to be active and engaged. Going along to get along just won't work.

Asking the questions in this booklet is an important first step. But getting the answers and following up are equally important. Not all administrations are forthcoming, so board members need to be persistent. They must hold the president and administrators accountable for responding to the board's questions and requests for information fully.

Call ACTA's IEG for Help

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance supplies information trustees can use in making decisions for their institutions, including best practices from across the country. Drawing on a broad network of higher education experts, IEG also offers a wide range of services including orientations and retreats, board management seminars, institutional assessments and presidential searches and evaluations, at little or no additional charge.

To learn more, go to www.goacta.org or call 202/467-6787.





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