

# Assessing the President's Performance

A "How To" Guide for Trustees



**AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI**  
Institute for Effective Governance

## **AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI**



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.

# Assessing the President's Performance

## A "How To" Guide for Trustees

Assessing the president's performance is one of the board's primary responsibilities and its importance is second only to selecting the president. The evaluation of the president is critical to the success of the president and the university. Assessments help to clarify the president's responsibilities and board's expectations. Neglecting this primary board duty can be costly to the university. While there is no one way to conduct an evaluation of the president, the board must always retain control over the evaluation process. The following is designed to assist boards with this task.

### Goals

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A presidential evaluation should:

- Provide the board of trustees and the president with an honest assessment of the president's strengths and areas that need improvement, in a manner that is fair, objective, confidential, and constructive.
- Follow fair procedures agreed upon in advance that are informed by relevant information and input.
- Protect confidentiality of all discussions among board members so that individual statements cannot be identified.
- Provide a fact-based assessment that relies as much as possible on documentable results as well as subjective assessments.
- Provide a fact-based assessment that evaluates actions and leadership style in terms of their results and impact on the institution and its mission.

- Relate the assessment to achieving the college mission, goals, and objectives as expressed in the board-adopted strategic plan.
- Help to identify ways to improve future performance.

## Steps to Conducting an Assessment

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### 1. Decide who will lead and participate in the assessment.

Who on the board will lead the assessment effort? Will the board appoint a presidential assessment committee or will it assign responsibility to an existing committee of the board? Will the entire board participate in completing the assessment tool? What other input should the board seek beyond that of board members?

### 2. Develop the assessment criteria.

A presidential evaluation must be responsive to the board of trustees. The best vehicle for articulating the goals and objectives of the board is through its strategic plan. The evaluation criteria should be directly tied to the expected outcomes in the university's strategic plan. The board should also supplement the expectations embedded in the strategic plan with other relevant issues or concerns. In addition to the board-adopted strategic plan, the president's job description, previous development plans (resulting from prior evaluations), and any specific directives articulated to the president by the board can be used to develop the assessment criteria. Once the criteria are adopted, the board usually develops an assessment instrument, i.e., a survey, to obtain feedback from members of the board.

Elements in the assessment instrument will likely include the following:

- a. *Vision, mission, and strategies.* Has the president worked with the board to develop

a clear vision for the university and does the president understand his/her role in implementing the vision? Has the president established an effective long-range planning process for developing goals and objectives? Does the president keep the board informed about progress made toward the university's goals and objectives?

- b. *Accomplishment of board objectives.* Has the president selected and cultivated qualified senior staff? Has the president ensured that appropriate systems are in place to facilitate the day-to-day operations of the university? Does the president promote institutional goals and objectives?
- c. *Academic leadership and management.* Does the president understand the various educational programs; recognize the role of scholarship, intellectual diversity, and academic freedom; focus on the students and the curriculum; maintain high academic standards; work constantly for better retention and graduation rates; recruit and retain able faculty on the basis of solid scholarship; encourage good teaching; and sustain a vision of what the institution should be?
- d. *Administrative management and leadership.* Does the president support appropriate staffing, delegation of authority, adequate supervision, and good personnel policies? Has the president demonstrated the capacity to surmount emergencies, a willingness to consult with others when time permits, and to act decisively when action is needed?
- e. *Budget and finance.* Does the president understand and control the finances of the institution? Does he/she maintain a balanced budget and clear financial accounting with a keen eye to affordability? Does the president handle funds responsibly and ethically, set

appropriate priorities, and allocate funds to programs and salaries in a fair, objective way conducive to the growth and advancement of the institution?

- f. *Fundraising.* Is the president diligent and effective in securing private gifts and public appropriations? Is the president an innovative creator of partnerships? Does the president understand the institution's financial needs and is he/she able to articulate them?
- g. *Relations with the board.* Is the president responsive to board policies and priorities? Does the president keep the board informed on a timely basis, give the board candid judgments, and present the board with resources and information necessary to make informed decisions? Does the president create an environment conducive to the board's fulfillment of its policymaking responsibilities? Does the president make staff available to assist the board (and its committees) with its work?
- h. *External relations.* Does the president maintain adequate communication and good relations with alumni, legislators, state and local officials, businesses, community leaders and local citizens, high schools, potential students, and the media?
- i. *Personal and leadership qualities.* Does the president bring strong personal qualities to the role, such as vision, sense of purpose, charisma, fairness, concern for others, balance, perspective, and willingness to listen? Does the president have the ability to make tough decisions and take responsibility for decisions? Does the president's personal style fit the particular institution and community?

**3. Have the president complete a self-evaluation.**  
In addition to the board's assessment of the

president, usually done with a confidential board survey instrument, it is important to allow the president to conduct his or her own self-evaluation—similarly aligned to the board’s survey instrument. This allows for a comparison between the board and president’s perceptions on each of the aforementioned elements.

#### **4. Review progress/performance indicators.**

The president is responsible for seeing that the mission and goals of the institution are achieved and for raising the institution’s quality. Data on performance indicators pertaining to institutional progress in admissions, program quality, faculty quality, financial management, capital plant, fund-raising, and other areas identified by the board should be regularly measured and monitored.

However, during the presidential assessment process, the board has an opportunity to review these measures and results in the context of the president’s performance. Performance indicators usually provide good information about the direction of the institution particularly in areas of interest to the board. However, performance indicators should not be the sole basis for any evaluation.

The indicators should be used as only one part of the larger assessment process described here.

#### **5. Conduct campus interviews (*optional for short-term evaluations*).**

While input from both campus and outside constituencies is not always necessary for short-term evaluations (i.e., annually), it is recommended that such feedback be solicited for longer-term evaluations (i.e., every four years). A representative sampling of administrators, faculty, staff, students, and alumni should be interviewed.

Interviews should be conducted in a low-key, balanced, and confidential way, typically using an outside interviewer. The aim is to gather honest impressions from diverse constituencies and determine the facts on which they are based. Infor-

mation should be sought about how the president actually performs his or her duties and what steps he or she takes to achieve institutional goals.

**6. *Conduct off-campus interviews (optional for short-term evaluations).***

The president represents the institution far beyond the campus. Telephone interviews should be conducted with relevant legislators and government officials, local, business and community leaders, higher education leaders from other institutions, and others suggested by the board. This type of feedback is usually appropriate for the longer-term evaluations (i.e., every four years); interviews typically are conducted by an outside consultant.

**7. *Compile the results.***

Once all the board surveys, president's self-assessment, performance indicators, and internal and external feedback are obtained, a report should be generated summarizing the president's strengths and areas of weakness. The report should make clear the procedures used and constituencies interviewed, and recognize the president's achievements while identifying areas that need attention. The report should be designed to inform the final board evaluation of the president's performance. Large gaps in perceptions between the board and president's responses should be highlighted as these might indicate an area of miscommunication. The president should receive a copy of the report in advance of meeting with the board.

**8. *Meeting with president.***

In the spirit of fairness and collegiality, the board should meet with the president for a discussion of the report's findings and give the president an opportunity to respond and provide perspective. The briefing should be helpful to the president in documenting his or her strengths, identifying

areas that need to be addressed, and offering a discussion of ways to improve presidential and institutional performance.

## **9. Board review.**

The board should review the report's findings, particularly addressing areas it has indicated as priorities. Following up on its evaluation, the board of trustees should discuss ways to improve presidential, board, and institutional performance.

## **Formulation of a Development Plan**

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After the evaluation process is complete, the whole board, if appropriate, should approve a development plan for the president. The plan should include steps the president needs to take to improve performance and board deliverables and timeframes related to those actions. The board should monitor regularly the progress made in meeting the deliverables expressed in the development plan.

## **Timeframe for Completion**

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A presidential evaluation inevitably creates some stir on campus and should be completed as rapidly as is compatible with a thorough process. The entire process typically should take no longer than six weeks.

## **Managing University and Public Perceptions**

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Conducting assessments of the university president can lead to speculation about the future of the presidency. It is important that the board convey within and outside the university that evaluating the president is a normal course of board business and is done for the benefit of the president and the university. All discussions pertaining to the evaluation should remain confidential; however, the board should be open about the process.

## Using a Consultant

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Often times, boards will choose an external evaluator or consultant to assist the board in the assessment process. This third party can help ensure that the process is fair and balanced.

## Call ACTA's IEG for Help

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ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance (IEG) advises boards of trustees on presidential assessment procedures and assists boards with the actual assessment. Services include working to develop the evaluation criteria and board survey instrument(s), the president's self-assessment tool, the processes for obtaining feedback from university constituencies and others external to the board of trustees, as well as the final assessment report. IEG also assists the board and president with formulation of a development plan.

ACTA's IEG supplies information trustees can use, including best practices from across the country. Drawing on a broad network of higher education experts, the Institute offers a wide range of additional services including orientations and retreats, board management seminars, institutional assessments, and assistance with presidential searches.

To learn more, go to [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org) or call 202/467-6787.



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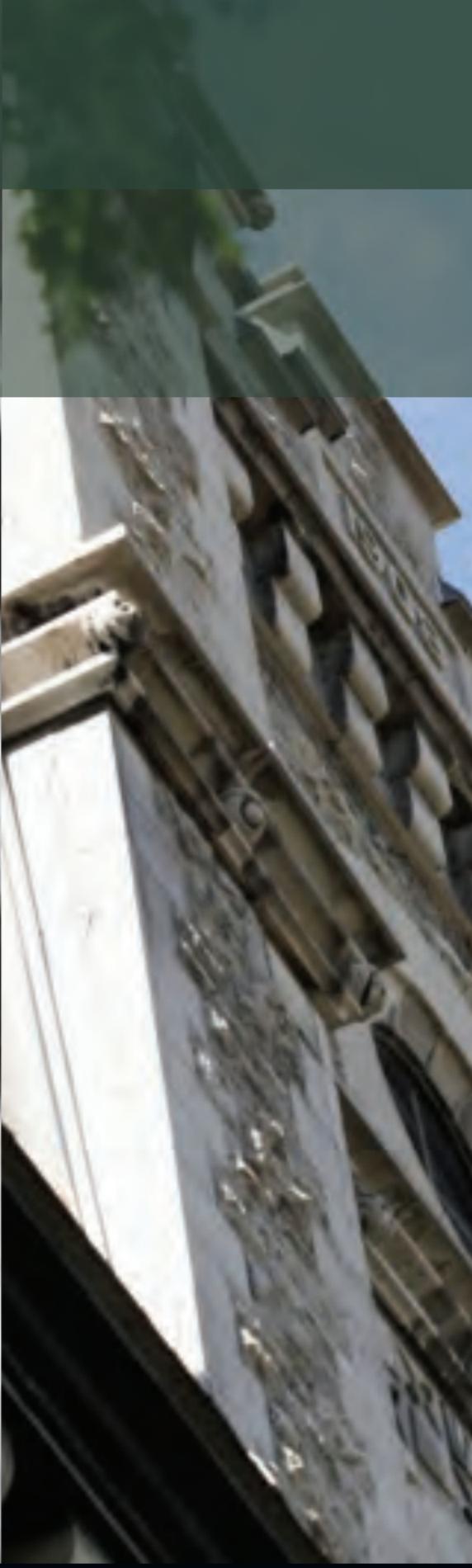
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