



Implementing
Governance
for a NEW ERA

An Action Plan for Higher Education Trustees



ACTA
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

An Action Plan for Trustees

“New realities require new strategies.” That’s the message of *Governance for a New Era*. Outlined below are questions higher ed trustees must ask—and actions trustees must take—to implement the new strategies developed by this project, chaired by Benno C. Schmidt.

Articulating the Mission

How can we best serve the nation, the state and our students? Trustees must define the special role their institution plays and lay out strategic goals. Goals could be such things as teaching and learning; STEM preparation; serving an immigrant community; or advanced research. But a lack of clarity—and mission creep—are major contributors to institutional ineffectiveness and to the rapidly rising cost of higher education.

Whom do we represent? The board of a public institution has a primary duty to the public to ensure high quality, affordable education.

To what degree should our school engage in scholarly research? Define and understand the level at which you engage in research and the significance of research for your institution. With very few exceptions, the teaching mission must always come first.

What role should athletics play? Withstand pressure to grow athletic programs that are a net drain on resources. Have your president report in detail the revenues of your athletic program and the degree to which it relies on institutional resources and student fees to operate.

How do we know we are achieving our goals? Set clear goals in writing with benchmarks against which to measure all senior managers. Board meetings should be structured around major goals, with appropriate performance measures tracked regularly.

Protecting Academic Freedom and Intellectual Diversity

Are we protecting the free exchange of ideas on campus? Eliminate all speech codes and other policies that restrict free expression. Ensure that the institution’s commitment to academic freedom and responsibility appears prominently on official materials, such as course catalogs and course syllabi.

What evidence do we have that the institution is protecting students’ academic freedom? Institute a campus climate survey, as trustees at

the University of Colorado have recently done, to ensure that the free exchange of ideas is welcome on campus.

How do we ensure that students are exposed to an appropriate range of disciplines and viewpoints? Insist on receiving, annually, a report from the president or provost which outlines a description of new hires and tenure and promotion decisions in each department. Does the history department have faculty teaching the American Revolution and Constitution, for example? Can students find courses in military history? Insist on clear answers. In rare but urgent circumstances, demand action if you believe a department places limitations on the range of academic fields and viewpoints.

Do we have policies regarding campus speakers? Trustees should work with administrators and faculty to develop policies to stop the disinvitation of college speakers and define the boundaries of responsible dissent. They must establish clear sanctions for disruption of scheduled campus events. A model policy, adopted by Yale University in 1974, can be found in ACTA’s *Free to Teach, Free to Learn: Understanding and Maintaining Academic Freedom in Higher Education*.

Setting the Educational Strategy

What skills and knowledge do we expect our graduates to have? It is essential that trustees review and approve the standards for what graduates should know and be able to do. Do trustees want every graduate to acquire an accurate and fluent command of written English and a college-level ability in mathematics and science? Do they want graduates to gain proficiency in a foreign language, or be familiar with American history and Western Civilization? If so, they should make those guidelines clear. In this way, you help to signify to employers and others the validity of a diploma from your institution. Trustees do not create course content, but help establish the expectation and benchmarks for outcomes.

What courses fulfill our core or general education requirements? Are there too many choices, or is there a well-defined core? Board members should regularly review the list of general education offerings and requirements. If a large number of courses satisfy the credit requirements, then there is no real core. See how your school ranks when it comes to a core: WhatWillTheyLearn.com.

What criteria govern the introduction of new courses and programs?

Proliferation of courses is a major cost driver. Ask your president annually to provide a list of the courses and programs added and subtracted and the criteria for determining course viability. See ACTA’s report, *Florida Rising: An Assessment of Public Universities in the Sunshine State*, to learn how Florida trustees oversee this process.

Which of our majors graduate fewer than ten students each year? While the number alone is not dispositive, this information can provide a threshold for further board review as to whether programs are still viable and cost effective. For more information, see ACTA’s *Setting Academic Priorities: A Guide to What Boards of Trustees Can Do*.

Demanding Transparency in Performance and Results

How are we performing? Trustees should demand a set of dashboard measures at every meeting. Trustees need this to advance specific strategies for reducing administrative bloat, curricular bloat and underutilized capital facilities. Higher education’s greatest budgetary challenge is not reduction in state funding, but inefficient use of the resources that it already has.

Be sure you make decisions based on data and insist on the following:

- Tuition over the last five years: has it exceeded the annual Consumer Price Index?
- Tuition as a percentage of median household income over the last five years: has it increased?
- The ratio of administrative vs. instructional spending over the last 10 years: has the growth of administrative spending exceeded that of instructional spending?
- What are the salaries of top administrators and athletic department personnel? How have salaries for these positions changed over the last 10 years?
- What are the four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation rates of our students?

Do we expect our students to work hard? Request a copy of your institution's results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Find out how much reading and written work are typically assigned to students.

Is there grade inflation? Ask for the percentages of A, B, C, D, and F grades awarded to students over time in each department and program and determine whether there is evidence of grade inflation.

What is our building utilization, Monday through Saturday, and during the summer? Trustees should demand that the academic week reflect life in the working world. They should also examine the level of utilization of existing buildings whenever asked to approve any major capital expenditure.

How many courses do faculty teach per year? Trustees should have this information disaggregated by department, and by tenured, tenure-track, and adjunct faculty status.

How do we know that students are learning? Call for use of a nationally-normed instrument—the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the Proficiency Profile, or the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency—to assess the value-added factor of a college education and to show attainment of skills relative to other institutions. See ACTA's *Are They Learning? A College Trustee's Guide to Assessing Academic Effectiveness*, which outlines the instruments you can use and their price.

Are budget priorities in line with the university's mission? Insist on full access to accurate financial reports, including balance sheets, income statements, records of cash flow, and audit reports. Make sure this information comes well ahead of any budget votes.

Improving Presidential Selection and Evaluation

Will trustees control the selection process? Trustees must not delegate away their most crucial responsibility to select the president by allowing themselves to be outnumbered on the search committee.

How will the board ensure an excellent group of applicants? Boards should resist the temptation to use executive search firms, which often eliminate promising non-traditional candidates. They should insist that the full board be presented with multiple finalists for its consideration.

Do we have to use a headhunter? Boards should consider using an expert consultant instead of a search firm to organize the presidential search. Such an approach can significantly lower cost and



ensure more direct involvement of board members in decision-making. For further information, see ACTA's *Selecting a New President: What to Do Before You Hire a Search Firm*.

What metrics should we use to assess presidential performance?

Metrics should be directly tied to institutional priorities in the board's strategic plan, including academic growth, the integrity of the tenure process, responsiveness to requests for information, assurance of intellectual diversity, and efficient and productive use of institutional resources. The board should tie the presidential compensation to key performance metrics. See ACTA's *Assessing the President's Performance: A "How To" Guide for Trustees*.

Strengthening Trustee Education

What are we doing to educate ourselves about higher education issues?

Being well-informed is a prerequisite to thoughtful policy-making. Effective boards recognize the difference between information generated for public relations and the objective information they need for decision-making.

Do we have contact with students, faculty and staff? Trustees should develop intermediate levels of discourse at their institution. Read the school newspaper and website regularly and visit classes and school dining halls. Let the president know you intend to do so.

Do we have independent information and resources? Informational and organizational resources should go beyond those provided by the president and organizations selected and funded by the president. If you are a public trustee, demand a line item for these resources; private boards can provide for such resources in their bylaws.

Are we protecting our institutional autonomy? Be prepared to push back publicly against accreditors that encroach upon the management and governance of the institution. See ACTA's guide *Accreditation: A Call to Action for College Trustees*.

Read the full *Governance for a New Era* report on GoACTA.org.



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