

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 nonpartisan, nonprofit 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[®], launched 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—one that requires you to act decisively as an independent arbiter who ensures that your institution remains healthy and loyal to its mission. The job is a weighty one, demanding time, commitment, and the expectation that you will learn on the job.

At a minimum, it is your obligation to know the governing documents, mission statement, and strategic plans that underlie institutional operations. It is your responsibility to know and shape the budget and budgeting process. And it is up to you to become familiar with the special protocols of the academy, including 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 is essential that you ask questions, obtain independent information, examine all perspectives, and reach thoughtful decisions. It is your charge to foster high academic standards, academic freedom, and student achievement—all while acting in the best interest of students, parents, alumni, donors, and the public, which supports higher education and depends on it for the next generation of citizens and leaders.

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 do not be fooled. Higher education governance is coming under increasing scrutiny in these challenging economic times. Students, parents, alumni, lawmakers, 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 have outlined some key questions related to the 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 by making sure that the next generation receives a high-quality education at the lowest possible cost.

Let's get started.

Questions on Academic Affairs

Trustees often feel unsure about their oversight of academic affairs. And this is not surprising. Too 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. Above all, colleges and

universities are academic institutions charged with educating the next generation of citizens. In order to fulfill this responsibility, trustees must safeguard the quality of the educational enterprise—as this is the primary function of your institution.

There are limits. Trustees have no role in choosing course material or preparing syllabi. That is up to faculty experts in the various academic departments. Trustees do have the obligation to ascertain what graduates are expected to know, to find out what and whether they are learning, and to assure 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. As a trustee, you are better positioned than faculty members (who are understandably focused on their narrow disciplines) to certify that your school is providing a rich, well-rounded education with a coherent curriculum. In the words of former Harvard president Derek Bok, your role is to act “as a mediating agent between the interests of the institution and the needs of the surrounding society.”

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 making efficient 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 have these rates changed over time? If full-time students are not graduating in four years, why not?

Board members should know the requirements for graduation, including how many credits and which specific courses are required for graduation. Are courses that are required for graduation unavailable, thus increasing the time it takes to obtain a degree? Do students take more courses than they are required to, and if they are, why?

Trustees should establish and enforce policies that encourage program progression and degree completion at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The trend of students taking excess credits can lead to delayed graduation, is a major contributor to student debt, and decreases opportunities for incoming students. If the average time for a student to obtain a degree has increased, it is important to understand the underlying reasons in order to decide whether board action is appropriate. Likewise, if graduation rates are stagnant or declining, the board should examine these trends to see if corrective action is called for.

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 requirements 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 promise and practice. Every year, ACTA evaluates the core requirements at colleges and universities across the country and publishes its findings at **WhatWillTheyLearn.com**. This study shows that students are often graduating without the slightest exposure to U.S. history, civics, math, economics, literature, or intermediate-level foreign languages—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 core curriculum has a carefully curated selection of course offerings designed to provide a thoughtful foundation in the liberal arts. Accordingly, trustees need to learn how many—and what kind of—courses can satisfy the credit requirements. If the number is enormous, the general education curriculum is likely to have 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 institutions' general education programs. The guide is available at **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. The long-term value of a degree relies

on consistent standards of quality, and colleges shortchange students when they do not provide them with feedback that genuinely reflects their academic performance.

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.

The problem presents an excellent opportunity to partner with the faculty and discuss expectations, responsibilities, and standards. Can the general education requirements be reformed to make it harder for students to avoid challenging courses and departments? Do student course evaluations inappropriately incentivize grade inflation?

In addition, trustees should be aware of how their peer institutions are addressing these problems. For example, faculty at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill have implemented “contextual transcripts,” which report each class’s median grade and the percentile range of a student’s grade. At Wellesley College, the faculty mandated that most introductory courses have average grades of B+ or lower. The University of South Florida publishes data on grade distribution over time by department.

None of these methods should be viewed as one-size-fits-all solutions. Trustees should know what data is readily available at their institutions, and regularly review it. In ACTA’s booklet, *Measuring Up: The Problem of Grade Inflation and What Trustees Can Do*, we examine many of these cases in greater depth. This guide is available at 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 departments or schools of education that produce teachers for grades K-12, or teacher certification programs that allow undergraduates to qualify as teachers while they complete their majors. Yet there is mounting evidence that new teachers lack the rigorous liberal arts foundation necessary to become excellent educators.

Trustees are ideally placed to review teacher training programs and promote excellent teacher education that focuses on promoting student learning. There are several ways trustees can protect the quality of these programs including: setting a high GPA for entry into the program, insisting on evidence-based classroom management training, and supporting apprenticeships with hands-on experience throughout the teacher education program.

It is particularly important to make sure that students take courses in basic subjects necessary for quality instruction in all classrooms, including English composition and literature, college-level mathematics, natural sciences, American history, Western Civilization, and foreign languages. These topics are among many outlined in *Teachers Who Can: How Informed Trustees Can Ensure Teacher Quality*, available online at 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? How do they perform on nationally-normed tests? Are we teaching them the skills needed to succeed in our global environment?

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 reasoning, critical thinking, historical understanding, and technological literacy.

These assessments are critical to making sure that your graduates are equipped for success in their fields. Recent studies have shown that employers value the skills a liberal education provides, yet only 50% of managers think recent college graduates are prepared for the workforce, and 60% believe that recent graduates lack problem solving and critical thinking skills. Value-added tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) can be used to analyze student growth over his or her tenure at an institution, as well as show the efficacy of particular educational practices. Objective, qualitative and quantitative assessments can be powerful tools for trustees to measure how well their graduates are being set up for success in the workplace.

Is your institution engaged in reliable assessments? If not, why not? Data from nationally-normed assessments should be reviewed by the board—not only to evaluate student progress, but also, as 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.” And this means the board can insist that the institution provide faculty with professional development when necessary.

How well does the institution support free speech, academic freedom and intellectual diversity? Is the institution promoting the robust exchange of ideas—in class and on campus? What policies govern the selection and invitation of speakers? Are these policies clear, viewpoint-neutral, and easily accessible by staff and students? Over the last five years, what speakers has the institution sponsored?

A campus environment that discourages students from challenging mainstream opinion or stifles the free exchange of ideas violates the very essence of a college education. Colleges and universities have an obligation to expose students to relevant and accepted scholarly perspectives, as well as to create a culture where professors and students feel free to raise questions and engage in reasoned debate.

Trustees should determine whether institutional policies adequately protect diverse viewpoints—both inside and outside the classroom. Good places to start include commissioning a campus climate survey; where appropriate, incorporating into institutional statements, procedures, and activities respect for intellectual diversity and dissenting opinions; narrowly tailoring any policies that restrict freedom of speech; and including intellectual diversity concerns in university guidelines on teaching. These principles are clearly outlined in the University of Chicago’s 2015 “Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression,” or simply the Chicago Principles. You can find a copy of this report at GoACTA.org.

Trustees should be vigilant about protecting campus newspapers from censorship and vandalism—something that unfortunately can occur when controversial matters are at issue. 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*. In addition, ACTA partnered with Dr. Joyce Lee Malcolm to offer several clear recommendations for trustees in *Building a Culture of Free Expression* and *Guarding the Freedom to Speak, Freedom to Hear*. All of these works are available at GoACTA.org.

Questions on Faculty Hiring, Review, and Promotion

Does the institution 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 the heart of the academic enterprise, so hiring, review, and promotion procedures should be beyond reproach. The board should periodically review these procedures to affirm their integrity. Criteria for hiring, promotion, and tenure should reflect the mission statement, and excellent teaching, research, and service should carry appropriate rewards.

Does the board have a policy that puts in place a faculty reward system 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? Has the institution taken the steps needed to verify that the post-tenure review process is public, regular, and robust? If not, what can be done to improve transparency and fairness for both the faculty and the campus community?

Intellectual diversity and academic freedom are values central to education itself. Does the institution have hiring, tenure, and promotion guidelines designed to protect individuals against viewpoint discrimination? 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. Briefings on institutional finance are often so dense that trustees can feel overwhelmed—making meaningful discussions about the underlying priorities and fiscal allocations difficult. As a consequence, trustees too often have a suboptimal knowledge of university finances. The following questions are designed to help trustees pinpoint key budget areas and examine university expenditures that drive cost increases.

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? What is the ratio of administrative to instructional spending? How has it changed over time?

Trustees should have full access to accurate financial reports, including balance sheets, income statements, records of cash flow, and audit reports. They should

make certain that expenditures are in accord with the institutional mission, and resist simply rubber-stamping administration proposals. It is important to identify the biggest budget drivers and steps the administration should take to curb costs. How do actual expenditures vary from the budget, and what is the cause of particular variances? Are operations cost-efficient, 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 “instruction,” “academic support,” and “institutional support.” If administrative costs are going up, it is important to ask why, and to determine what can be done to ensure that education remains a top priority. This data is reported to the federal government yearly, and is available at **HowCollegesSpendMoney.com**, a website ACTA designed to equip trustees with the tools to perform their own analysis of spending trends, and to create benchmarks in comparison with other institutions.

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?

College costs are outpacing the rate of inflation, year in and year out. And trustees have an obligation to address rising public concern. When boards approve tuition increases, they should do so only after examining other possible solutions. For starters, it is imperative that board members know how the institution calculates tuition. And while some

administrations limit access to this information, trustees have an obligation to understand how the institution sets tuition in order to determine whether the level 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 relative to inflation; they should also compare their institution's tuition to that at similar institutions. ACTA's HowCollegesSpendMoney.com web tool provides resources to help trustees analyze these issues.

What criteria govern the introduction of new programs and majors? Are the new academic areas in sync with the institution's mission statement and with its strategic plan? How are new majors and programs funded? Are programs eliminated when new ones are added?

New academic fields and concentrations bring with them new courses and ultimately entail the allocation of additional resources. Trustees should evaluate how new courses are introduced and ensure that only academic areas relevant to the institution's mission and board-endorsed strategic plan are approved. For example, if too few general education courses are available, the institution should curb the addition of new areas and expand the availability of core courses, so that students can fulfill graduation 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 may need to consider restructuring ineffective or undersubscribed programs as a means of funding new programs without increasing costs. Too often in higher education, trustees allow institutions to create new programs without doing the necessary parallel work of eliminating unproductive or obsolete ones. To help with this difficult task, ACTA's *Bold Leadership, Real Reform 2.0* highlights several innovative approaches taken by institutions to limit costs and improve institutional performance, while *Setting Academic Priorities* shows how program prioritization can reduce expenses and raise curricular quality. These publications are available at GoACTA.org.

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 necessary 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 crucial.

ACTA has been the leader in outlining best practices for higher education boards. Through its Institute for Effective Governance® (IEG), ACTA publishes helpful guides on trustee responsibilities as well as recommendations for board structures and operations. For further information, contact IEG at 202-467-6787.

Next Steps

We hope that 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 will not work.

Asking the questions in this booklet is an important first step. But getting the answers and following up are equally important. Board members need to be persistent. They must take independent responsibility for informed oversight, allowing no obstacles to their full understanding of the institutions they govern.

Call ACTA's IEG for Help

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance® (IEG) 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 GoACTA.org or call 202-467-6787.





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