



## Open to the Public

*Making public universities leaders in government transparency—a checklist of questions and answers*

Trustees are fiduciaries. A board of trustees is responsible for both the fiscal well-being of the institution it governs and the quality of the education it provides. At the heart of fiduciary responsibility is transparency—and in the case of public colleges and universities, this is all the more appropriate and necessary, since taxpayers fund these institutions and have a right to know whether those funds are used effectively and responsibly.

Public universities are highly visible functionaries of state government. In their own communities and throughout Illinois, the state's universities are often better known to families and taxpayers than most social service agencies, local governments or state constitutional offices. Given that fact, university trustees have a unique opportunity to advance principles of good government for the entire state.

Illinois state government recently has taken some important steps toward greater transparency. However, the common activities of Illinois institutions are still often difficult for taxpayers to observe. By posting basic financial and operational information on a single webpage, universities can give the public greater insight into how they operate—particularly how they are performing and how they are allocating taxpayer dollars. In doing so, they can set an example for all of state government.

The following is a checklist of key indicators that state public university boards should report to their stakeholders, the most important of whom are taxpayers, parents, and students. Some of the information below is information that all governments should make available, such as financial transaction records. Other items are unique to the missions of universities, but no less vital for the public to know.

- 1. Meeting notices and minutes.** Since boards of trustees for public universities are entrusted with a duty to the public, they should adhere to accepted frameworks of accountability and transparency—and act according to the spirit and letter of the law. Prior to September 2009, the University of Illinois had failed to post over a year's worth of board minutes, even after the Illinois Policy Institute filed a Freedom of Information Act request. The university refused the FOIA request due to a loophole in Illinois's Open Meetings Act that allows public bodies to avoid public disclosure by delaying approval of minutes. The Illinois State Legislature is taking action to close the loophole in the law with HB 5483, requiring that the meeting minutes be approved within 30 days or by the second subsequent regular meeting, whichever is later, and the minutes must be available for public inspection within 10 days of approval. Whatever the legal requirements, universities should post proper and timely meeting announcements and minutes of proceedings online.
- 2. Trustee contact information.** University trustees are public policymakers in every sense of the word. Since board

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members are accountable to the public, they also should be accessible to the public via personal email or mailing address. Unfortunately, for many boards, communication is filtered through the board secretary, which is an administrative office. Allowing the public to contact trustees directly helps ensure trustees receive input from many sources.

3. **Regular financial reports.** How do administrative and instructional expenditures compare, and how much is each category growing? Is the importance of teaching and learning evidenced by a growth in academic programming, as opposed to administrative salaries? And how have executive-level administrative salaries fared at a time when many institutions have eliminated faculty positions and terminated academic programs? Taxpayers and tuition-paying students deserve to know, and the public deserves to see how a public university prioritizes its spending. Regular, comprehensive financial reports are already compiled by most public universities and colleges. Those reports should be readily available to the public with a click of a mouse.
4. **Administrative Staff Salaries.** Most salaries for university employees are public record, as administrators, staff, and professors are public employees. While this information is accessible through the Freedom of Information Act, taxpayers should have access online, without having to resort to legal action or FOIA requests.
5. **Student data, including admissions statistics, demographics, retention/graduation rates.** Most universities have an office of institutional research, but how much information is actually displayed publicly varies from institution to institution. Parents and taxpayers have a rightful interest in student data such as admissions statistics and retention/graduation rates, and institutions should make such data clear and accessible. Graduation rates represent one of the

most important indicators of university effectiveness, and four-year, five-year, and six-year rates should be posted prominently on the institutional website.

6. **The core curriculum, and which courses are actually required.** As the American Council of Trustees and Alumni has demonstrated with its national research of university core curricula, available at [WhatWillTheyLearn.com](http://WhatWillTheyLearn.com), there is often quite a gulf between what a university says about its general education program and its actual requirements. A Humanities requirement, for example, might require students to take a broad survey course in literature, or it might allow students to choose from hundreds of courses, many of which are narrow in focus and scope—hardly guaranteeing the “well-rounded” education that the mission statement promises. Many institutions allow students to pass an examination, often an in-house test, in lieu of taking the required coursework. What, if any, exemptions from “required” courses are allowed? What subjects does the core stipulate as requirements, not just options among other choices? The institution should outline its core requirements in language that students and their parents can understand.
7. **The grade distribution at the institution overall, and by department or program.** A range of national studies show widespread grade inflation at institutions across the country. To mitigate against this trend, the institution should disclose changes in the average grade over a five year period, not only for the institution overall but for each department or program. It is important, moreover, to show the distribution of A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s, and F’s for the institution and the individual departments or programs, allowing stakeholders to identify pockets of grade inflation.
8. **How well candidates for professional licensure do on their licensure exams.** One of the best and most objective means of determining the effectiveness of an

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academic program, and particularly a pre-professional one such as education or nursing, is to see the passage rates on state or national licensure exams. A program that is adequately preparing its students for their chosen field should have a reasonable passage rate for licensure exams. A low passage rate indicates that the program is failing to train students or that it has accepted students into the programs without appropriate qualifications.

**9. Level of student aid awarded, over various periods of time.** Scholarships represent a crucial element of student access to public higher education. The public needs to know how institutional, state, and federal scholarship funds have changed over time. Institutions should disclose overall funding amounts each year and average support per student. Institutions should also differentiate between need-based and merit-based scholarship funding.

**10. Changes in tuition and fees over the past five years.** Increases in tuition and fees are an obstacle to student access, absorbing increasing percentages of household income. Stakeholders need to see how tuition and mandatory fees have changed over time.

**11. Expenditures on athletics compared to instruction.** Universities are well known, in part, because of the prominence of intercollegiate athletics. But very few athletic programs operate at a profit. Does the athletic program require subsidies from other sources, and if so, what are its sources of revenue? University stakeholders need to know the real costs of athletic programs and also how funding for athletics compares with funding for educational expenses.

**12. Accreditation reports.** Beyond a mere notation of accreditation, probation, or non-accreditation, does the public have access to the accreditor's findings? By making the accreditation self-study and reports public, institutions receiving

public funds can satisfy the public demand for more information about academic standards and quality.

**13. Newly opened/closed and ongoing academic programs.** Inventories of academic programs are often kept by the state higher education coordinating board, although some lack accurate records of programs started or terminated in a given year. Universities should maintain records annually, especially since trustees have final authority over academic programs. While minutes of Illinois governing boards frequently note votes to eliminate, approve, or redesignate programs, there is no publicly accessible database with this important information.

**14. Institutional performance standards that govern program approval and funding.** The public needs to know what quality measures are in place to ensure that academic programs and departments are accountable for their performance. These standards and procedures should be clear and available for review, including findings of program evaluation.

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