



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS
Essay 11**

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Asking About Campus Life

Thoughtful discussions of campus life can show trustees that college or university leaders are in touch with the changing lives of students. A student's before-college experience is very different now from what it was 20 years ago. Many students and their parents expect to maintain close electronic contact. Fathers and daughters chat online regularly. Students expect the college to provide a second home, not a Spartan barracks. Commuters expect their own special areas where they can snack, heat a lunch from home, connect to the Internet, lounge, study alone, or study with their groups. While students once drifted from religion while in college, now campus life brings many closer to faith. The world has changed greatly in a short time.

In order to successfully compete for and retain students, institutions are bestowing more attention on them. With the promise of more attention, student expectations rise. Expectations include funding, amenities, and relationships. Campus life can mold and encourage the kinds of relationships that build student retention and success. Careful attention to student life can improve the chances of student success and college competitiveness. Attentiveness requires thoughtful preparation for each new issue as it appears on the horizon.

Trustees will want to be informed about student life in several areas: orientation, residence hall life, community structures, and student government. Much student success rests on a beneficial student orientation to campus. At many institutions more of the challenges of life transpire in residence halls than in classrooms. Careful attention to programs and policies for residential students can leverage educational benefit. A campus is also a community within a community. Communities do not "just happen." Structures bring people together in useful ways. Finally, the chapter suggests that trustees take an interest in student government. Student offices and organizations make a great learning



opportunity for engaged students. Trustees need to challenge the college or university to ensure that the student leadership experience is more than perfunctory.

Orientation

A college or university's values are expressed in the attention and concern given to new students. Orientation ought to be more than a listing of "do's and don'ts." Orientation is an opportunity to demonstrate an institution's most central values. If these initial, prescribed activities fail to take advantage of this opportunity, trustees may wish to express concern. While many activities may sound useful, trustees should expect assessment. Orientation is a tiny fragment of the overall career of a student. As the first experience of campus life, however, the chance to begin the dialogue on how one must live one's life should not be missed. Even distance learners need an initiation into their special campus life. These questions help trustees demonstrate their high standards for the responsibility of the college to facilitate student growth.

What initial experiences lead to success? In other words: Preparation and first impressions are important. Are we prepared? Many institutions are converting their Initiation Rites to Welcoming Ceremonies. The tradition of the initiation rite may no longer be appropriate on a more diverse campus. Initial activities, such as spoken orientations, should give students the information, comfort, and attitudes that can help them succeed. Improved first-semester retention would be excellent evidence, for example, that this experience was successful and assessed.

How will student orientation reinforce our institution's values? In other words: How will college values be made tangible on a student's first day? Many institutions recognize the importance of enunciating their values. Most higher education Web sites now contains excellent values statements. The college or university should go beyond reciting values, however. It should show students how to engage with these values from their earliest campus experiences. The experiences should help keep the values rich and dynamic.



Colleges and universities that value service to the community, for example, may structure a community service experience as part of the first week. Activities that lead a new student to be more comfortable with diversity are another often-employed exercise in values development.

Residence Life

The young's responsibilities for learning differ from their responsibilities for living. The effects of poor learning accumulate slowly over time. But a failure of an institution's responsibility in residence halls can be immediately catastrophic. Colleges and universities must be prepared for today's challenges, some of which can, unfortunately, end in tragedy. Trustees need to be certain that the institution is not waiting for an incident to happen before preparing for new challenges.

Residence halls give students the opportunity to build social skills and to take on responsibility. Colleges and universities, however, need to manage the growth process. Leadership attitudes have cycled in recent decades from assuming parental authority for campus students to abdication of that authority. The cycle continues with a concern for proper authority now replaced by a concern for a proper growth framework.

How well does the residence life plan mesh with institutional strategic priorities? In other words: Will residence life make a difference? When a primary strategy of the college is to improve retention, for example, a residence life plan that rests on the social scene and parties may be in contradiction. Campus life intentions should be aligned with college or university strategic priorities.

What is our strategy for dealing with substance abuse? In other words: Is there ownership of the problem of substance abuse? Substance abuse, especially the abuse of alcohol, has a history of undermining the goals of many colleges. Programs should be in place that invites everyone on campus from the president on down to take responsibility for ameliorating this problem. Trustee insistence that the college or university not ignore this problem can be critical in efforts to head off risks.



What aspects of our residence life program are designed to diminish sexual promiscuity and what factors may promote it? In other words: What's going on in the dorms?

Trustees should not hesitate to ask this question. They have been asked to be trustees because of their values and standards. Difficult issues should not be avoided when the issue concerns a prominent institutional principle. College and university leaders must be concerned and willing to work against trends that, at the very least, are increasing the incidence of sexually transmitted disease on campuses.

How are residence life policies meeting the needs of an increasingly varied student body?

In other words: Are any students being excluded from campus life? There seemed to be a time when all students fit a type. Now students come as single parents, as older adults, and as people with differing physical abilities and sexual orientations. Some students look for more interaction with people of similar ethnicities and backgrounds. Others look for contact outside their family background and ethnicity. Accommodating both intentions without tension can be tricky. Students of different backgrounds have always challenged institutions with a variety of holy days. Now, many dress traditions, food restrictions, and days and times of worship also must be accommodated. Some colleges are now facing the challenge of finding appropriate living arrangements for students entering into a gender change. The world never seems to stop tossing out new challenges.

Trustees do not want to find that their college or university is not prepared to handle these issues. Some require legal preparation. Others may call for a college or university to confront new moral dilemmas. Trustees need to know that their institution has prepared policies in anticipation of new challenges or has initiated a dialogue on how to approach the latest issue. The institution should also be watching other campuses for signs of new challenges.

Community

The following questions address the college or university's role in developing and maintaining a campus community. College and university communities are complex



social organizations, embedded in complex local communities. A healthy community fosters the free flow of ideas and trust. Colleges and universities can contribute to the structuring of relationships among individuals and collections of individuals based on social, political, ethnic, and many other similarities of interest. They have many options for making a contribution to the structure of this framework. In almost all cases there is no obvious “correct” role for the institution. Each question below addresses an area in which identifying the appropriate college role can be challenging. Trustees should understand the process by which the college is dealing with each challenge and encourage careful assessment.

How is interaction between students, staff, faculty, and the community fostered? In other words: What have we done to break down the walls of separation? Trustees should anticipate campus life planning with strategies for promoting interaction among groups that often stay apart. Members of the nearby community should feel invited and comfortable on campus. There should be space and programs that promote informal meetings between students and faculty. The planning might also consider the idea that students can benefit from interactions with staff and should consider how to bring current students into contact with potential and previous students.

How is the college measuring student social, emotional, spiritual, and physical growth? In other words: How do we know “the whole person” benefits? Most colleges take some responsibility for, as it is called, the whole person. Without a plan of assessment, however, there can be no assurance that this objective is being fulfilled. To devise an assessment an institution must be able to define growth in dimensions as abstract as social abilities and emotional health. The interventions that assist this growth should be specified. Growth along some of these more abstract dimensions requires person-to-person contact. The institution may foster mentoring, advising, supervising, or peer relationships, for example. A good student life program will make clear how the college or university defines, carries out, and measures the success of its responsibilities for the dimensions of student growth beyond that of the intellect.



How has the college or university maintained civility and orderliness on campus? In other words: Are we limiting free speech? College or university leaders must stand visibly and strongly behind freedom of speech, while abhorring expressions of hate. Unfortunately, achieving a balance between support of free expression and inhibition of expressions of intolerance has always been challenging. Previously accepted policies such as time and place limitations for the distribution of flyers or amplified speeches are being challenged. Attempting to limit student newspaper content always ruffles feathers. Failing to protect speakers with unpopular views infringes on freedom of speech. The college or university should be prepared to deal with these issues in a moral and legal manner, engaging trustees in this discussion before a crisis hits. Lacking clear principles, an institution may stumble when challenges arise.

How does this college or university know that students are becoming “lifelong learners”? In other words: Is lifelong learning more than a nice phrase? The college or university should be able to describe what “lifelong learning” means locally. The institution should show how it is expanding its understanding of the skills and attitudes necessary to increase one’s knowledge as a matter of habit even after college. Then the response should demonstrate how the college is assessing its success by measuring graduates’ predilection for absorbing new ideas and knowledge. Catchphrases are not reality. To create a reality requires understanding, a plan of action, and an assessment of success.

Student Government

Clumsy handling of a renegade student government can become the flashpoint for major campus collisions. Students generally understand only the broad advantages of democratic government and rarely the hard responsibilities and nuances. Board concern expressed, perhaps, through direct interaction with students can be an important factor in student growth.

The process for determining the financial support of student clubs, for example, fits the prototype of a startling new issue that has erupted as the world has changed.



Conflicting court decisions on partial fee refunds, because students demand the right to refuse support to certain clubs, illustrates the area's murkiness. College or university leaders should be able to demonstrate familiarity with these emerging areas of potential conflict and the changing legal background. College or university mission, student government independence, and freedom of speech often collide over outwardly simple issues such as campus club support.

Is student government representative? In other words: Who do student officeholders really represent? A good student life program will include discussion of the manner in which democracy is taught and lived on campus. While a laissez-faire attitude toward student government may be the best way to stimulate student leadership skill growth, a careful pull in the right direction may sometimes be necessary. At many institutions the number of students who vote in a student government election is now so low that student government is more theater than participation. Trustees should verify that falling interest is not a result of structural failings. Unless students feel represented by other students who listen and have a voice in governance, little interest will be generated. Structural weaknesses such as representation that favors small cliques and responsibilities that go no further than having meetings need to be addressed by the administration.

What is the club approval process? In other words: Am I going to be embarrassed by the college's support of a particular club? Recognition of a club often means that the club will share in funds set aside for student activities. A good student life program will help trustees understand this recognition procedure. Officials must outline a club recognition process that negotiates possible conflicts between the goals of the student organization and the values of the college or university. A good program grapples with the moral and legal implications of the process.

_____ Trustee motivation to probe student life planning grows out of two concerns: the possibility of tragedy or embarrassment if the area is poorly managed; and institutional responsibility for the growth of the whole person, especially when the goal is explicit in the institution's mission.