



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS
Essay 13**

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Asking About Leadership

Leadership planning is a broad and amorphous. There are many other excellent resources that trustees can call upon for help in evaluating the overall leadership of the institution. Topics such as organizational structure, task delegation, responsibility clarification, and succession planning are well covered in the literature on organizational development. In these areas, the advice given to executives of for-profit organizations applies quite well to the complexities of leadership in a higher education not-for-profit.

Three leadership areas demand greater focus and intensity of concern from colleges and universities than from business enterprises: integrity, leadership team building, and safety. These are areas in which a college or university leader must exhibit particular skill. The necessity of integrity is obvious in all sectors, but society expects it to be especially high and broadly viewed in colleges and universities. Excellent area management is expected of the standard leadership roles in higher education, including fund-raiser, financial expert, academic leader, and student services organizer. The emphasis on specialization, however, can undermine the effectiveness of the leadership team as an integrated whole. The safety of the campus community must also be of grave concern to leadership, especially the president. Colleges and universities hold themselves to very high standards of safety. The pervasiveness of this concern in society is revealed by the unique requirement placed on colleges and universities to publicly report the rate of crime on their properties.

Integrity

Failures of integrity may take many forms. Misappropriating institutional resources and favoring parties with connections are clearly harmful situations that apply to both the for-profit and non-for-profit sectors. In addition to applying higher standards



to these aspects of integrity, institutions of higher education have other self-imposed and societal expectations, for example, integrity of authorship, integrity in the treatment of individuals, integrity of academic freedom, integrity in the treatment of experimental subjects, integrity of information, integrity of relationships, and integrity in the treatment of college athletes. A university officer with an “exaggeration” on his or her resume brings shame to the institution. The failure to develop a process that blocks medical research experiments harmful to human subjects can jeopardize federal funding. Institutional failure to systematically and seriously respond to all complaints when a person with superior power attempts to force an intimate relationship can result in civil and federal penalties. Failure to cull misleading information on academic programs from catalogs and Web sites may result in an accreditation challenge.

Trustees model and set standards for integrity. Trustees should confirm that the information they receive has not been cleansed of integrity concerns.

What is the administration doing to ensure the integrity of the college? In other words: Is there a culture of integrity? No greater damage can be inflicted on an institution than that which comes from a hint of impropriety. Trustees should know that the institution pursues every whisper. Trustees should be able to peruse the information given regularly to employees on standards on fair dealing, honesty, and use of institutional resources. Trustees should see policies and procedures for discrimination, protection of research subjects, and protection from harassment. Policies and procedures for highlighting conflicts of interest should also be available. Trustees are models of ethical behavior. Colleges and universities should have standards for academic freedom and plagiarism. The college or university should also have a visible process for ensuring the accuracy of official information found in brochures, catalogs, and on the official Web site.

How can the president demonstrate that trustees have independent, reliable, and broad sources of information from all campus constituencies? In other words: Is board information unbiased? Trustees might wonder when they hear the same glowing story with the same “spin” from every source. The president must trust the board sufficiently to allow them to hear dissenting opinions. At institutions whose board members have no



difficulty contacting their choice of members of the campus community, the formal information given to the board is less likely to be distorted. [[WE SURE BOARD MEMBERS SHOULD BE PHONING AROUND WITHOUT THE PRESIDENT’S KNOWLEDGE????—CSC]]

What process is the president using to foster propriety and transparency? In other words: Is the college or university “headline-proof”? Even a minor ethical violation can become a major headline if the institution appears to be limiting information. Being accused of a “cover-up” is particularly damning. This perception may be true if leadership is indeed attempting to manage the news, or it may just be the result of the administration’s poor preparation for these pressurized situations. Poor preparation can mean a clumsy response. Colleges and universities should anticipate difficult situations and train their leaders in formulating solid responses to media inquiries while also being internally responsive.

Team-Building

Trustees are usually given insight into the strengths of each member of the leadership team in managing his or her area. Trustees should also understand how these leaders work together and foster synergy among themselves and among their areas. Leadership teams that work well together are a wonderful advantage when an institution-wide obstacle must be overcome. The problem-solving success of a team results from an orchestrated blending of viewpoints and skills, not stereotypical turf-guarding.

What are the team strengths of the members of the president’s team? In other words: Is this team a winning combination? The creative member of a team is not always the vice president for enrollment management. The analytic person is not always the chief financial officer. Strong teams recognize and leverage the problem-solving assets of each member. A brief description from the president on the ways that his or her leadership group works on challenges can be reassuring. A description that focuses only on



organizational responsibilities may indicate that the leadership group exists only to exchange information.

How is the team building effectiveness? In other words: Are cabinet meetings a waste of time? The goal of building team effectiveness is an important piece of the leadership plan. College and university leadership teams attend retreats, bring in organizational consultants, and work through skill-building organizational effectiveness exercises. These efforts build trust, increase respect for different thinking styles, and improve meeting effectiveness. Trustees should encourage the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts.

Safety

The design and continuous improvement of systems to keep the campus community safe is a grave trustee concern. The leadership plan should demonstrate that the ranking members of the college community accept this responsibility. Campus safety is more than just preventing crimes. A safe university is one that also promotes and perfects programs to reduce destructive behavior, including hazing, and responds quickly to the concerns of the despondent student (who may be on the road to suicide). The success of these programs requires the tangible support of institutional leadership. Concern, creative thinking, and resources must come from campus leaders. Given the very human desire to avoid bad news, safety issues go right to the heart of leadership integrity.

What are crime statistics? In other words: Is the college and neighborhood safe? Trustees need to be informed about the challenges to maintaining safety on campus. They should be reassured that the protections developed by the college or university at least match the degree of threat. The first step in responding to this question is the provision of the neighborhood (or precinct) crime rate compared with that of other neighborhoods and the college or university rate compared with that of other institutions. Beyond the response to crimes, trustees should receive an assessment of the level of problem behavior and a description of the programs that combat it.



How does the college show the effectiveness of the safety program? In other words: Do students and staff feel safe? Members of the campus community must also perceive that they are not in a threatening environment. Even the perception that a campus is not safe can harm an institution as it attempts to maintain enrollments and hire the best people. Unfortunately, such perceptions can be closer to reality than relative crime statistics might seem to indicate. Trustees will want to know the results of surveys on the perception of campus climate (in many dimensions, besides safety) and the interpretations of these surveys by campus leaders as they work to understand them. A good response will also note the programs that the college is using to promote and maintain safety.

The challenges of leading a college or university are daunting. Trustees need to understand the preparation of leaders for the challenges of maintaining integrity, developing team effectiveness, and improving the safety of the university community. The standards that the board evidences through its questions will be necessary for institutional success and perhaps survival.