



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS
Essay 5**

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September 2005**

Asking About Academic Affairs

The academic program is a university's heart. The academic plan describes the shape of future offerings and future academic strengths. The plan is implemented by adding, deleting, or redesigning programs, majors, and concentrations. The profile of instruction is laid out in this plan: future offerings, future methodologies, and the qualities of future graduates. If the plan calls for strategic change, the changes will be felt from departmental structure to future catalogs.

Academic plans should be the primary drivers for financial and master plans. Future finances for what? Future buildings to house what? While financial and master plans ideally would be driven by exact layouts of future programs and learning modalities, such precision is seldom possible. At its best, an academic plan is limited to prescribing desirable directions and the criteria that will be used to assess proposals to move in those directions. In recent years, colleges and universities have pursued broad strategic academic directions, such as giving coherence to student academic careers, introducing technology-assisted learning modalities, emphasizing liberal arts, and combining the strengths of liberal arts and career preparation.

The effectiveness of an academic plan is evident in the quality of the proposals for program addition, program improvement, and program deletion that it engenders. While boards should avoid making judgments about content, their wisdom can help improve the quality of the academic plan through the expression of strategic, financial, and assessment concerns. The academic plan must reinforce the institution's strategic intentions. The shape of majors, the selection of requirements, and the choice of specializations build strengths into the strategic core of the institution.

The academic plan is a strategic "investment" plan. New programs require resources. Implementation success will be determined by the incentives, disincentives, and guiding rules that are developed in the plan. New program development should not



be precluded by accidental punishments. Taking up a strategic thread and investing in its development should not leave a faculty member exhausted and forgotten.

This chapter presents questions in three areas, board assistance in assessing the coherence of an academic plan, the framework for evaluating new on-campus academic programs, and the framework for evaluating new programs in the increasingly challenging field of off-campus delivery. The heart of an academic plan will be the standards for developing new courses, new majors, and new departments. While the details of new course proposals should be below trustee scrutiny, a new program is not. New programs can mean new academic majors and a change in the structure, number, and relationships of academic departments. Trustees should assure themselves that the decisions concerning new programs in the academic plan have included careful strategic and financial considerations.

Plan Coherence

A coherent academic plan acknowledges institutional responsibility for bringing all graduates through a learning process to at least minimum levels. Incoherence occurs when institutional plans represent welded together academic department plans. To the extent that academic divisions are more independent, such as the law or medical schools, some divergence is not harmful. In many cases, however, student majoring in one area take courses in other areas. This produces an interdependence that requires alignment.

A coherent plan will acknowledge broad learning expectations and levels of accomplishment. Academic plans should give attention to outcomes and methods of assessing outcomes. Responsibilities for assisting students in reaching these standards should be broadly accepted and not solely relegated to quick “intro” courses. Finally, the plan should be more than a wish list. It should discuss how implementation will be guided, possibly by adding incentives or removing disincentives. Resource distribution processes, for example, can kill attempts to start new service programs or courses by starving areas that are too new to have political clout. The planned methods for the distribution of resources should promote rather than hinder new ideas.



Are there learning standards? In other words: What can we expect our graduates to know and do? Institutions vary on the specificity of their learning goals. Institutions that can attract accomplished students may have more amorphous goals. Other colleges and universities should aim to have clearer achievement expectations. These expectations can, for example, be given in terms of levels of critical thinking, writing clarity, computational skill, and technological comfort. A strong answer will present these ideas in terms of a goal for a student's transformation. Expectations, whether amorphous or carefully delineated, should tie back to strategic ideas about what the college or university intends with its education. What can the world expect from this college or university's graduates?

How will outcomes be assessed? In other words: How will we know if we are reaching our standards? Outcomes in higher education are difficult to measure. Attraction of students with higher test scores (an input measure) is only a rough indication that outcomes are good. What have students learned *in addition to what they knew when they entered?* Have their attitudes broadened in expected ways? If there is a goal to increase the international understanding and tolerance of students, can changes in the skills and attitudes of students in this area be measured? College and university engagement with broad assessment is a recent phenomenon. The area is in its infancy. The academic plan should not only have provisions for assessing the learning standards discussed above, but it should also have a creative process for improving assessment. Tests can be used to measure the concrete, but the process of gauging artistic development, for example, requires careful and innovative consideration. Trustees will do their college or university a service by engaging academic leaders in a conversation on the institution's progress with assessment.

How have responsibilities for basic learning goals been apportioned? In other words: Who is responsible for bringing students up to the institution's learning standards? If critical thinking, for example, is given as an expected characteristic of a graduate, institutions ought to be considering who will be responsible for this. Critical thinking might be introduced in a new-student course, or aspects of critical thinking might be built into a larger set of basic courses. The development of critical thinking skills might also be



a conscious effort in all courses. “Writing Across the Curriculum,” for example, continues as a movement where all faculty members build writing expectations into courses and send students to writing laboratories for assistance. The responsibility for writing skill development in students is broadly owned. Academic leaders must develop a careful approach to the support of and responsibility for all learning expectations. This approach should be described in the academic plan.

What are the incentives and disincentives for faculty members who wish to develop new academic programs? In other words: Should academic entrepreneurs be supported and rewarded? Living up to the mission of the college or university often requires that institutions respond quickly to the educational needs of their populations they serve. The college or university should have a clear process for evaluating these individually motivated ideas. Colleges and universities should manage and reward the efforts of individuals or teams to develop new academic programs of the required quality. Trustees should become acquainted with how this is done.

What are the incentives and disincentives for offering or using non-major “service” courses? In other words: Should every department have majors? The board should be assured that departments do not feel pushed to offer more and more programs for majors. The allocation of resources should balance incentives for offering courses that serve those students who are that department’s majors with incentives for meeting the needs of students who are majoring in other subjects. Ignoring the needs of departments that offer many service courses can lead to inefficiencies as all departments attempt to capture majors.

New Programs On-Campus

Colleges and universities renew themselves through the creation of new academic programs. New academic programs respond to students’ perceived needs and to the needs of the economy for new expertise. A new program may also respond to the needs of scholars in their quest for new knowledge. While questions on the intrinsic merit of a new



field are enjoyable to discuss, responsibility rests with the faculty for judging academic merit. Trustees must look outside the kernel of knowledge that a new program brings. Trustees are responsible for the integrity of the new program assessment process. They should feel comfortable with the manner in which the college or university has assessed the fit of the program in the context of the world outside the campus, within the institution's strategic context, and in its financial context. The academic plan should delineate a framework for evaluation

How will the addition of a new program be assessed against the priorities of the strategic plan? In other words: How do we know this program should begin now? The structure guiding academic program development and the ensuing approval process should ensure thoughtful integration of the academic program into the institution's strategic framework. If an element of the strategy is to serve the needs of a growing minority population, for example, proposals should be evaluated on their strengths in addressing this priority.

Strategic plans move institutions to serve better. "Consumed in Service" was the motto of the Sisters of Mercy in Westchester, N.Y., for their college. New audiences bring new needs and must be served with new ideas in new ways. Academic plans are ideas on how to better invest resources to serve better. A good new program evaluation process will measure investment success by calculating the increased momentum toward the institutional vision brought by the investment.

What are the financial standards for assessing a new program? In other words: How will we know there is a market? There are three ways to secure a program's financial viability: through funding brought in by the new program, through outside funding in support of the new program, or through funding reallocated from an existing program. The academic plan should demonstrate how these alternatives will be assessed. By policy, new program proposals dependent on the support of new tuitions should give evidence of the existence of interested students and the program's competitive superiority to similar programs. Any program funded by expected new tuitions should not simply draw students from other programs. The academic plan should require that new program proposals have elements of a good business plan. Such a plan should provide strong



assurances of interest in the idea, supported by research and reasonable funding plans. The process should assure that every proposal will demonstrate that the institution is capable of conducting the program.

Will a contingency plan be required for the possibility that enrollments or research funding may not materialize? In other words: How will investment risk be assessed?

Every investment brings risk. The college or university should have a process to measure the risk associated with starting a new program. The academic plan can also assure that performance standards will be put in place that warn of failure and that the warning is followed by a procedure for reacting to failure. If enrollments are far below predictions, for example, the college or university should be ready to take action.

What is the process for evaluating the success of a new program? In other words: Will we know whether the academic program development process is working? The case for a new program should project financial, enrollment, and student learning achievements. The case should also identify the ways that each of these projected achievements can be measured and reported. A strong assessment process will assist the college in determining whether additional investment in the program will bring better results or whether the results are sufficiently discouraging to suggest closing the program.

New Off-Campus Academic Programs

Some institutions have turned to off-campus, or distance-learning, programs as a way of generating needed revenue. For a few, too little consideration of the difficulties and too much attention to “follow the leader” trends have led to programs with academic standards and administrative operations below the quality of the on-campus programs. Most accrediting associations have heightened scrutiny of these programs. The college or university needs an effective evaluation process for proposed off-campus programs.

Many off-campus programs are delivered with expensive digital technology. Before distance education can “save this college by opening up new markets,” a college or university should determine whether the proposed distance education program would



efficiently serve currently enrolled students well (or at all). A few for-profit institutions have identified underserved groups and have successfully provided educational services. Other institutions have not been successful matching their services to an existing, underserved group. The best opportunities may begin at home. Technology should not drive the provision of service. The mission, derived from a visible need, should drive the provision of service.

Will off-campus programs be required to identify an audience? In other words: Will there be an actual market? New off-campus academic programs should be designed around recipients, not around a technology. Too many colleges and universities have gone into distance education, for example, to attract the “worldwide market.” Too many of these efforts have failed because they did not identify a real target and a real means of reaching that target.

For many institutions, online course offerings and satellite bricks-and-mortar campuses have been a way to better serve existing students. Their students may have family and work responsibilities that require them to acquire some less structured educational time or shorter commutes. These students may “go to” one of their courses at their own computer after work and after the kids are in bed. Other institutions have been able to reach out to new segments of their traditional population located in a sparsely settled and far-removed section of the college’s service area. Other institutions have been able to offer unique programs to students located around the world. In many instances, success in this endeavor has resulted from working with an identified population that has always been, in some way, a target of the institution’s mission. At other times, the institution has gone beyond its mission in pursuit of new students. If this is successful, then the trustees should perhaps reexamine the mission. If not, the institution may be guilty of pursuing audiences before establishing a history of success and before figuring out how to attract those audiences. Many such adventures have been discontinued when the hoped-for students did not appear.

How will competitors and competitive advantage be evaluated? In other words: Can we attract this market? New off-campus academic proposals are not adequate if they ignore



institutions that already serve the target group or area well. The academic plan must set standards for competitive evaluation and minimum levels of competitive advantage for proposed off-campus academic programs. Newly proposed off-campus programs should have desirable educational or service products that the particular college or university is in a good position to offer.

Will admission standards be the same for external programs as they are for on-campus programs? In other words: Are we staying true to our mission, or are we considering a change? Too many institutions have allowed distance-learning efforts to disrupt standards. Quality cannot be allowed to slip when a program is new and out of sight. The program evaluation process should make clear if a new program is focused on serving a type of student different from those included in the college's historic mission. When new off-campus programs can bring a change of service or a change of mission, the institution should consider including the trustees early in the endorsement process.

How will the college or university attend to these kinds of programs? In other words: How will the additional complexity be managed? Often, a new on-campus academic program fits neatly under the umbrella of existing administrative systems. A non-traditional off-campus program, however, presents new challenges to many administrative systems. The true cost of an off-campus program can be more than its new revenue. The added complexity can burden and push up the costs of many other systems, including registration, billing, and financial aid. Trustees should understand how the college or university evaluates these pressures and how incremental costs are to be evaluated.

Will the process of program assessment be different for off-campus programs? In other words: How will we find out what we have gotten ourselves into? As with a potential change in the makeup of people served by the institution, off-campus programs present the potential for an inadvertent change in the quality of instruction. The standards of instruction should not be compromised by a program that is "out of sight," implying "out



of mind.” Traditional monitoring systems may not be effective. The academic plan needs to create procedures that monitor the quality of these programs.

Academic plans and their implementation should be more than reflections of changes at other institutions. Colleges and universities should be designing programs that meet the changing needs of their audiences, not copying those of an “aspiration peer.”

While many of these questions will be challenging to answer, they are not designed to demonstrate distrust of the academic judgment of college faculty or administrators. The questions are true “trustee questions.” How can we maintain our quality? How can we remain financially viable? How should we be changing to best secure our future?