



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:  
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS  
Essay 6**

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## **Asking About Accreditation**

Regional accrediting commissions assess an institution's current level of performance and its future prospects. The commissions' primary concerns are the quality of the academic experience and the quality of all systems that support this experience. The yardsticks that they use are most often institutionally devised—the institution's own goals. Nevertheless, many activities, especially the awarding of degrees, are judged with an external referent. An accredited bachelor of arts degree cannot be obtained after 120 credits all in painting instruction. The standard requires more breadth.

Accrediting commissions expect a board's active participation in the presentation of institutional standards and in demonstrating the commitment and competence of the institution to continue to uphold these standards. Receipt of accreditation indicates that a group of peers from higher education have found that the institution achieves its purposes at a level that justifies the awarding of degrees to graduates. Accreditation is what gives worth to diplomas proclaiming associates, bachelors, masters, and doctors. Participation in federal student financial aid programs is offered only to accredited institutions.

Accrediting commissions and the teams of peers that they send to institutions seek assurance that trustees understand their role in holding institutions to these standards and that boards foster the creation of processes that maintain or raise these standards. While these processes must be continuous, the presentation of their adequacy to accrediting commissions is periodic. The presentation of the case for institutional reaffirmation of accreditation requires the periodic participation of all constituencies, especially boards, and it requires planning.

The plan to win accreditation reaffirmation should grow out of the strategic planning process. That process should include an assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses similar to that which commissions solicit as part of the accrediting process. Quite often, the two processes are not thought of as continuous and are not dovetailed.



Perhaps this is a wasted opportunity. In these cases, the accrediting process is a separate effort to present accomplishments and ideas for the future and to initiate processes to ameliorate any institutional shortcomings discovered during the preparation for accreditation. Strategic planning has very similar aims.

The questions below are designed to help trustees put forward their guiding role to visiting teams, to prepare trustees for the types of inquiries that peer teams may make, and to assure trustees that institutional standards will meet the expectations of accreditors.

### **The Board's Role**

Accrediting teams seek confirmation that boards of trustees are fulfilling their purposes: to guard and guide each of these public trusts. The questions below are more self-assessment than external assessment questions. The leadership team at a college or university, often with long experience in higher education, should be prepared to assist trustees in making the judgments called for below.

*How can trustees participate in the ongoing process of building institutional competency?* In other words: What is expected of the board during reaffirmation of accreditation? The purposes and goals of the college or university must be clear and consistent with national standards for higher education. There should be nothing new in this. Any board should be instrumental in guiding the goal development process and setting standards of quality. The board should also understand how the college will be showing progress in the areas cited as “needing improvement” from previous accrediting commission reports. The board should have already worked closely with college or university leaders on any previous recommendation that touches on board responsibility.

*What should the board's role be in guiding the ethical conduct of this college or university?* In other words: What will the board be asked about integrity? Trustees should review their own commitment to institutional integrity and the ways that they as trustees have both modeled ethical conduct and guided the institution toward clear ethical



standards. The review should include the extent to which the board is a driving force behind processes that guard the integrity of information provided to students, the integrity of dealings with outside vendors, the integrity of financial information, and the integrity of academic programs.

*What is the board's relationship to other institutional governing bodies?* In other words: What will the board be asked about governance? Before any accrediting visit, a board should be assisted in a review of its relationship with and effect upon faculty governance and student governance. Campus common wisdom about current relationships should be heard and understood by the board before it is picked up by an accrediting team. For example, if faculty members believe that their appropriate influence in academic affairs has eroded, the issue should be confronted before an accrediting team arrives on campus.

*How effective has the board been in plotting the direction of the institution?* In other words: What will the board be asked about its responsibilities in guiding the college or university? The board should be prepared to relate its participation in the development of strategic plans and the extent of its guidance in other policy and planning arenas. If many of the questions of this book have been asked, for example, and if institutional leadership has reacted to these questions with higher levels of performance, then the board has good evidence of its impact.

*What do the bylaws say about presidential selection and evaluation and have we been carrying these out?* In other words: What will the board be asked about hiring and retaining presidents? Variances from board procedures as detailed in institutional bylaws can undermine the confidence of a visiting accrediting team. College or university leaders should review current procedures and compare them against bylaw guidance. Before a visit, the board should build a rationale for any variances, begin a process of updating the bylaws or prepare a plan to shift procedures back into alignment. A board that deviates from its own standards may be regarded with suspicion when its participation in institutional guidance is examined, especially if the procedures call for formal, regular presidential evaluations and few have been done.



## Preparation for the Study and Visit

The planning for winning reaffirmation of accreditation should hold answers to each of the questions below. In some cases the answers will take time to develop and the institution should show that it has developed the processes that will create them. Preparations should make plain what the purposes and consequences of accreditation are at all levels of success or failure. Three important aspects of a successful institutional presentation during reaffirmation are assessment, participation, and honesty. A successful institution can demonstrate that it continuously assesses itself to find ways to improve, that the entire institutional community values self-assessment, and that flaws are openly admitted and examined squarely.

*What is the range of possible accreditation outcomes, the impact of each outcome, and the reasons that such outcomes might occur?* In other words: Besides having accreditation reaffirmed, what else could happen? College or university leaders should acquaint the board with all possible accrediting commission actions and the potential impact of each. Institutional leaders should be acquainted with situations where unfavorable outcomes have occurred, and they should have pursued a strong course to avoid any such outcome. A complete response from the administration will prevent the board from being surprised in the event of a negative outcome. The administration should have, in response to this question, informed the board of any weaknesses that might precipitate a negative outcome.

*What documentation exists that this college or university has developed ongoing processes for continuing assessment and performance improvements?* In other words: Do we view accrediting as an event or a process? The self-study process should be closely linked to all the processes that enrich the college or university. The processes for examining progress, finding weaknesses, designing improvement programs, and moving toward goals should not be new to the college or university.



*How has the president been able to guide the reaccrediting process, while encouraging and remaining open to both critical and constructive advice?* In other words: Is the president the only author of the self-study? Accrediting commissions want the reaffirmation of accrediting process to involve all members of the campus community. An accrediting presentation by the institution that has been developed by a small group with little consultation will be treated as a warning that institutional values, goals, standards, and ideals may be weakly held by the broader community. The processes of assessing outcomes, setting standards, and devising improvements should have college-wide attention.

*How does this college or university use standards, open inquiry, and assessment to foster movement toward institutional goals?* In other words: Can this college learn? Educational entities are expected to be learning organizations. The college or university should be able to demonstrate that it has used assessment tools to improve teaching, research, service, and administration. This question can be a standard one to ask following any presentation to the board. No area can be excused from assessment and improvement.

*How does this college or university foster continuing, frank self-examination that may reveal problems?* In other words: Does bad news travel up? A good response will list the weaknesses, however natural or small, that the reaffirmation process of self-study and peer visit may uncover. The response should also demonstrate that the college or university is currently working to correct each weakness. A response that does not bring forward significant weaknesses that are then uncovered by a site visit team raises doubts about the college or university's willingness to listen to bad news and to seek improvement. The recent space shuttle disasters at NASA led to criticisms that the space agency's leadership punished bearers of bad news. Colleges and universities are expected to have a culture of assessment and inquiry.



## Institutional Goals

Regional accrediting commissions measure institutions against minimum standards for degree preparation, and they measure institutions against their own goals. An institution that is unable to make progress toward its own goals evidences a weak ability to maintain standards. Credence in an institutional promise to maintain standards is more readily given only when institutional effectiveness has been demonstrated.

Commissions and peers are particularly concerned with standards in three areas where non-higher-education organizations may be held to lower standards. A college or university is expected to maintain exceptional standards of academic freedom, diversity, and fact-based decision making within its own purposes and goals. Society holds colleges and universities to the highest standards for freedom of thought, belief, and inquiry. These freedoms are basic and can be fostered in many ways. While there are some who might debate the educational benefits of a diverse environment, few will question that broad societal responsibilities are imposed by the status of colleges and universities as public trusts. Most institutions see this responsibility as synonymous with the quest for diversity. Finally, colleges and universities exist to search for truth. To guide an institution in deliberate ignorance of critical evidence is to deny the worth of that noble search.

*How is this college or university fostering the responsibilities of faculty in instruction, instructional design, and inquiry?* In other words: Is there academic freedom?

Accreditation challenges institutions to demonstrate that the role of faculty in developing curriculum, monitoring academic quality, and monitoring instructional performance is meaningful. At the very beginning of the reaffirmation process, trustees should feel comfortable that academic freedom and other traditional responsibilities of faculty are well understood and have not been compromised.

*How has this college or university been effective in fostering racial, ethnic, and income diversity?* In other words: Is diversity real? Boards need to ascertain whether there has



been difficulty in pursuing the ideals and values of diversity. Accrediting groups are dismayed when little progress is made against lofty goals.

*What demonstrates this college or university's "culture of evidence"?* In other words: Does this college or university rush to arbitrary decisions? The college or university should be able to link important decisions with the information that is valuable for making each decision. The college or university should have steadily upgraded the quality of information that it uses in setting policies, examining the environment, and viewing the future. Trustees should feel comfortable that they can demonstrate to a visiting team that the institution pursues a factual basis for its policies.

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For many institutions the approach of an accreditation reaffirmation merely means gathering and presenting the plans and the progress against those plans from each of the areas of this book. For others it is a stimulus to begin this planning. For "challenged" institutions it begins a drive to demonstrate that the institution is meeting minimum standards and that it is capable of maintaining those standards. In all cases the central goal of the effort is to demonstrate that the results, or "outcomes," generated by the college or university—especially the knowledge, skills, and all other strengths held by graduates as a result of their higher education—can be said to give meaning to the phrase, "a degree from an accredited institution." The great concern of commissions and peers is with the level of preparation for life fostered by the transformational powers of the college or university. Assuring the effectiveness of those powers is a major responsibility of a board of trustees.

Failure to maintain effectiveness, as judged by the peers of an accrediting team and by an accrediting commission, can have serious consequences. Federal financial support to students, for some institutions their lifeblood, is discontinued if the institution loses accreditation. Any degrees subsequently awarded are discounted by employers and society as a whole. Even those degrees awarded while the institution maintained accreditation are tainted. The incentives are thus strong for boards to participate in the process of preparation for reaffirmation of accrediting.