



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:  
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS  
Essay 9**

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## **Asking About Human Resources**

People are the central asset of a college or university. Board responsibilities include safeguarding this precious treasure. Good evidence that high standards are in place for sustaining this resource can be found in training and development policies, hiring strategies, and benefits structures. In today's workplace, the complexity and challenge of managing an organization and maintaining intellectual mastery of one's field keeps increasing. Fulfillment for most people comes from gaining skills and intellectual command, being recognized for those gains, and putting these gains to good use. The feeling that personal progress will not be recognized and is not encouraged in an organization can result in frustration, anxiety, and even anger. Attention to task may then fall and turnover may increase, with real economic consequence to the college.

Trustees may use the questions below to encourage higher standards and to broaden the college's approach to developing and maintaining the resource of its people. Too often, human resources departments become overwhelmed with day-to-day human crises. An organization that is failing to develop its people, and is thus facing dissatisfaction and greater turnover, is an organization with an HR office under pressure and unable to find time to plan. The office's inability to plan a way out of trouble is ironically initiated by its original failure—the inadequate development of people as a resource. Somehow the response, "I don't have time to plan" does not seem appropriate, if a missing plan is a cause of the lack of time.

In many ways, the collected personnel policies of an institution are its HR plan. The questions below have been developed under that assumption, though formalizing them as a plan could bring more attention to how these policies are shaping the college or university's strategic future.



## Human Resources Development

A strong organization is one in which employees gain the skills necessary to move up in the organization. Strong organizations create these opportunities and foster managers who know the challenges from the bottom up. Strong organizations broaden the view of employees with structures that promote broad organizational understanding. Employees that know the tasks and challenges of others, perhaps through cross-training, can solve problems that cross boundaries, as most problems do.

Trustees can highlight the ways in which successful organizations have attended to the needs of their people. Colleges and universities should move away from a breathless focus on the emergencies of every day, toward planning for the programs that mitigate these emergencies. Resources, expertise, tact, focus, and strong support from the top must all come together to produce excellence.

*How does the college or university develop and reward teaching?* In other words: Are we attending to core process? At most institutions today the centrality of teaching has been increasingly recognized. Graduate students are instructed in teaching effectiveness and evaluated. Young faculty members and part-time faculty are given mentors. Good teaching is formally discussed; outside evaluation and assistance are sought. Great teaching on the campus may be recognized locally and even nationally.

Faculty members are the primary resource of an institution. Trustees should ask the faculty leaders how they themselves have structured the development of this resource. Faculty members should have the resources to leverage teaching with technology and the resources to learn successful instructional techniques from other colleges and universities.

*What proportion of current staff has moved up from lower-level positions?* In other words: Are there visible “career ladders”? While there is no correct ratio between internal promotion and external hiring, tracking the rate of internal promotion indicates concern. Indeed, some organizations over-rely on internal promotion. The balance is difficult, but attention to the issue remains the key. Preparing people for greater responsibility requires



ingenuity and patience. It also requires hiring procedures that look beyond immediate job qualifications to the potential for promotion. Institutions with little internal promotion are institutions that look only for the minimum in people. People with little hope are only too willing to give nothing more than the minimum. Institutions may be able to provide benchmarks, like peer rates of internal promotion, that can give an idea of comparative success in preparing people for promotion.

*How are cross-departmental teams used?* In other words: How are we breaking down the silos? One of the basics of the business world's concept of Continuous Quality Improvement is the formation of problem-solving teams from many departments and levels of an organization. Bringing a range of viewpoints to problem solving increases the depth of analysis and the number and creativity of proposed solutions. At the same time, the inherent resistance by team members to working with other areas of the organization begins to break down under this rubric. Seeing problems from a number of vantage points fosters institution-wide solutions. Colleges and universities support these kinds of task forces with techniques such as rewards for effective outcomes, training for effective group dynamics, and high levels of attention from leadership. Such support may also include creating time-conflict-free meeting hours and providing technology for asynchronous, "virtual," committee work.

### **Appointments to the Faculty**

Faculty appointments are regularly approved within a board's consent agenda—a list of items requiring approval, but not generally discussed at full board meetings. Indeed, trustees should avoid discussing the details of individual appointments. They should be concerned with the quality of the process and its integration into the strategic direction of the college. Rather than delve into the details of experience and background, trustees should affirm that the college or university has also taken a broad view.

Trustees can be comfortable approving a slate of appointments if the planning that guides institutional actions is appropriate and effective. The appointment process should assist the institution in reaching its goals. Strategic, academic, and financial plans guide



many aspects of the appointment process, but, in a more specific way, human resources policies and procedures should be designed to enhance the institution's central asset, its faculty. The following questions address the effectiveness of the process of bringing new people into the organization.

*How does the faculty hiring process advance institutional strategic priorities?* In other words: Will faculty appointments be strategic and feasible? All searches for new faculty members should be guided by strategic priorities. The required structure for proposals to search for new faculty members should include an analysis of how a new appointment or a replacement appointment meets strategic requirements, including diversity, enrollment growth, service to students, and improved quality of education. If, for example, undergraduate teaching has strategic importance, new faculty search proposals ought to be required to demonstrate how candidate teaching skills will be evaluated.

Position searches should be authorized only when they are within the constraints of the financial plan. The method for determining the number of searches to be authorized should be part of the hiring planning. Similarly, the planned hiring process should give strong attention to integration with the academic plan. The faculty hiring process section of the human resources plan should indicate how search proposals are sifted to obtain those that leverage the strengths and priorities indicated in the academic planning.

*What stage in the faculty search approval process calls for the assessment of benefit to students?* In other words: What's in it for the students? Faculty hiring justifications should not be limited to demonstrations of improvements in intrinsic disciplinary coverage. Institutions with a priority on student development should include in the proposal process a stage that explores how the proposed appointment will better provide students with needed competencies, allowing graduates to be better prepared. New faculty appointments not only fit into a departmental and a disciplinary structure, they also improve the college or university's capacity to prepare students. Majors will have greater depth and breadth in the study of their subjects. Students will be better able to assume lives outside of the college.



*Does the process allow the evaluation of ways of improving the college other than hiring new faculty?* In other words: Are there other ways to fix this problem? Most new faculty members are recruited into existing departments. Implied in this question is the principle that the addition of resources to a program should be examined with the same care used when the investment is in a new program. The process should be more than an evaluation of the benefit of the new appointment itself. The process should include a stage in which the investment of the resources into other areas is compared with this one. Existing programs may be measured for value to the college and for the potential to return to the institution value when new resources are added. Policies should discourage requesting an additional faculty member for a program that elicits little student interest. Search approval processes should encourage consideration of the potential affect of an appointment on the prospects of the college as a whole.

*How will the success of the faculty hiring process be evaluated?* In other words: How will we know whether the process produces good decisions? While every faculty member may be reviewed in some way, the decision process itself should be reviewed. The college or university should evaluate its judgment with respect to its choices about where to place new resources and its judgment with respect to furthering the strategic direction of the institution. An effective evaluation will help the institution improve the process for making these decisions in the future.

### **Appoints to Staff and Administrative Positions**

Trustees should understand how the process keeps appointments within the larger picture. Trustees can assist college and university leaders in keeping the long view in mind as well as the short-term challenges.

*How does the non-faculty appointment process meet the priorities of the strategic plan?* In other words: Will hiring be strategic and feasible? College strategic priorities have direct implications for the placement of administrative and staff resources. For example,



many institutions are affirming the strategic importance of providing higher quality service to students. Added staff can improve this service. The college or university can demonstrate how it measures levels of service and how it evaluates the prospective improvement of service promised by an additional position.

Institutions may have also included in their strategies recognition of the usefulness, necessity, and importance of diversity. There are many possible points in the search process that can be broadened to allow appeal to a less traditional range of candidates.

*How does the hiring process take into consideration changes in the skills needed? In other words: Can we think outside the box about the way we perform functions? All service industries now increasingly rely on people with higher skills. Word processing, electronic calendars, online meeting scheduling, and desktop access to copy functions have changed the nature of positions that leverage the strengths of faculty and managers. Administrative assistants now need counseling, technological, and managerial skills. The college or university's position evaluation process should not be locked into filling jobs that are no longer useful.*

*How does the hiring process remove unnecessary barriers built into job descriptions? In other words: Are we engaging in discrimination through habit? Systematic scrutiny to open position job descriptions should be a key step in hiring. This evaluation should encourage ways of imagining how people with different abilities could accomplish the goals of the tasks. The examination then looks for limiting and unnecessary job requirements. Colleges and universities need the best available human resources and should move beyond practices that have limited job searches in the past. Many organizations have structured positions in ways that unthinkingly, yet systematically, eliminate candidates with particular ethnic, religious, or disability characteristics. Greater flexibility in work times, for example, are needed to enlist the skills of people from a number of religions and others with particular life demands, such as single mothers.*



*Should our priority be improving the hiring process or improving staff retention?* In other words: What is the staff turnover rate? The college or university should monitor staff turnover and have programs to pull the trend downward. A regular, long slate of staff appointments may indicate high turnover and a major drain of resources from the effects of learning curves, training requirements, and rebuilding social networks. Many colleges and universities include the staff turnover rate as one of the “dashboard” indicators regularly sent to trustees.

### **Employee Benefits**

Employee benefit programs are absorbing a rising share of college resources. As an employer, a college is making a strong commitment to its people. At the same time, trustees need to understand how this commitment is measured and, perhaps, restrained.

*What should a typical retiree of this college or university expect in a benefit?* In other words: Do we need to rethink our retirement benefit? Most colleges provide a defined contribution plan for faculty and many staff classifications. The institutional contribution and matching requirements vary greatly (almost unbelievably) among colleges. A good response will show the results of typical investments of retirement contributions over the working life of a set of typical employees. Given the uncertainty of the benefits, colleges and universities should construct plans that provide the opportunity for a comfortable retirement. Plans likely to provide an extremely generous and costly retirement, however, should be reexamined.

*How are we managing health benefit costs?* In other words: Is our challenge medical insurance or genuine health maintenance? A good response will detail the college’s health promotion efforts and show, through studies of insurance experience (the amount paid by insurance for medical treatment), that the fine health of the college or university employees is keeping costs down. Comparisons against similar institutions and the relative performance of insurance pools can add to this response.



*How does our benefit (including education benefits) package compare to that of other institutions? In other words: Do we need to rethink the structure of our benefits? A good response will show the proportion of compensation spent on employee benefits in comparison to similar colleges. Benefit burdens far above the norm may indicate a need for the college or university to reexamine benefit options. (High ratios may also indicate that employees have traded salary increases for better benefits, however.)*

*How can we help develop the children of our campus community with the same concern that we show for our students? In other words: What does the college or university see in its future for child care assistance? Providing high-quality child care at a reasonable cost is a difficult challenge for any community. A good response will give the options that the college has examined to improve the developmental health of campus community children.*

Trustees should not wait until there is an evident morale or turnover problem at the college or university to ask about human resource development policies and planning. The area has been difficult for many organizations. Trustee concern and interest in human resource development processes can be an encouraging sign to the campus community. Higher education institutions are expected to hold high standards for employee development and for the processes that bring in new people. Everyone would prefer to work for a good employer.