



Essay Series

QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS

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Introduction

Many college and university trustees have enjoyed successful careers as top corporate officers, foundation leaders, skilled professionals, and entrepreneurs. In these dynamic roles they grew accustomed to asking direct questions aimed at sharpening strategies or pinpointing problems. For many of these trustees, however, asking similar questions of officials at their colleges or universities feels awkward.

These essays are intended to assist board members who may be new to higher education trusteeship in shaping their questions and to help administrators prepare responsive and useful answers on topics “across the waterfront” of a modern college or university. It has been my experience that these questions can, in fact, prompt highly useful probes, if phrased in ways that conform to the argot and constraints of higher education. College and university trustees should refrain from “giving orders,” of course, but they are duty-bound to ask questions.

As a team member on a number of accrediting visits where the board of trustees had not asked the right questions, I became concerned over the years about board education. I have seen trustees passively consent to practices that undermined an institution’s integrity, continuity, and educational impact. As a member of accrediting teams, I have recommended that a number of these institutions be put on accreditation probation or, for a handful of severe cases, that accreditation be withdrawn. On other occasions, I have seen board members ask questions that were right on the mark. These experiences moved me to record the questions that good trustees can ask.

The questions in these essays are most directly intended for independent universities and colleges (though many would apply equally at public institutions). The questions do not spring from assumptions that administrations intend to mislead trustees or that trustees intend to manage or administer institutions (though on very rare occasions both occur). Nevertheless, as public trust guardians and financial fiduciaries, trustees are



required to ensure that assets are not squandered, that purposes are achieved and that public and private investments in these trusts are put to use with care and efficiency.

A trustee can fulfill his or her responsibilities by understanding and perhaps shaping the missions of these public trusts, by evaluating the success of the institution against its mission, by comparing trustee organizational performance standards with the performance of this institution, and by shaping the direction of change in the organization so that it points toward mission fulfillment and performance excellence.

The varying plans being carried out at any given institution describe its intended direction of change, the degree of this change, and its strategies for implementing the planned change. The burden of failure falls on trustees if the direction of change harms the institution, the implementation is ill-conceived and fails, or evaluations are too weakly formed to reveal whether the change produced any benefits.

Four Types of Questions

Judgments about the adequacy of institutional plans begin with questions. In many cases the questions are answered in the substance of the planning. Others will require research or reflection by campus leaders. In either case, the questions generally fall along the following lines: Is this the best direction that we can take? Will the implementation bring this portion of the college or university up to our standards? How will we know?

These essays strive to delve below the broad lists of trustee responsibilities, below the commonly prescribed and often superficial questions, to the specific inquiries that allow boards to judge whether the institution is being well administered. For example, trustees are apt to know the tuition rate, but rarely do they know anything about true, student out-of-pocket costs, which are a better predictor of college affordability than tuition price. More broadly informed trustees may thus guide the administration to monitor the entire pricing picture, not just the tuition rate, when examining the student recruiting plan. Such observations throughout these essays are provided as background for the reader's use in judging the eventual answer to the questions presented.

Many of the questions echo four themes: direction, standards, risk, and assessment. "Direction" questions can include: Are these really the changes that this institution must make?; or, Will the benefits of this change really be worth the effort?



“Standards” questions might include, Are we doing enough to address our institution’s low graduation rates? or, Is this health plan as solid as the one I set up at my own company? “Risk” questions might include, Is this investment plan consistent with our general financial risk tolerance?, or, have we conducted sufficient staff training to minimize the potential for sexual or racial harassment suits? “Assessment” questions might include, How will know that you have been successful? or, How will you learn to do this better next time?

Skillful wording can differentiate a question in which a listener hears, “What will go wrong?” from one in which a listener hears, “How can you assure me that this is right?” While perceptions are indeed the responsibility of the listener, the intent that does so much to shape that perception is the responsibility of the questioner. A questioner who has internalized appropriate reasons for asking a question will favorably affect perceptions. Listeners should be reassured that the questions are not intended as grist for the mill of competence evaluation. Evaluations are structured processes. Ad hoc, on-the-fly evaluations are usually more damaging than beneficial, because only a portion of effectiveness can be viewed. Listeners should also be assured that the questions are not intended to evaluate methods or procedures, which is best done by experts. Trustees, of course, are generally not expected to be experts and should not spend time in an expert-type evaluation.

More realistically, members of the board and the president’s leadership team are being asked to review the ways in which they have gathered the facts that have convinced them that the intended direction of change is best. Trustees will judge whether the fact-gathering process as a basis for choice meets their standards. Trustees know what information they would need to make these choices. They may find the process to be an adequate basis for choice or may ask that additional evidence be gathered. Trustees may disagree with the “facts,” the interpretation of the facts or the conclusion drawn from the facts. Their primary responsibility, however, is not to solve these problems, but to judge whether the effort and scope of evidence gathered is or will be adequate. The “direction, standards, risk, and assessment” questions in these essays all carry this intent.

Some of the questions seem to examine implementation design. The intent of these questions, nevertheless, is to better understand the basis for choosing the design—



sometimes the facts are hidden in the details of the design. Additionally, questions that ask, “How will you know when you have been successful?” should be the friendliest that can be expected by an administration. Which dial on the dashboard are you watching to monitor progress? What is our definition of success in this planning area? How is that success connected to the college’s success? Trustees have the responsibility to discourage plans with difficult-to-describe outcomes. The judgments rendered are not of individuals and their competence, but of the plans and the provisions built in for the assessment of progress and success. Without assessment there can be little learning. The next plan should be built on an understanding of the successes and failures of the last.

The questions in these essays are intended as responses to the presentation of a plan, not as tools to use during a crisis. Failing administrative computing systems, cash crunches, key personnel turnovers, or snow storms are not the situations best for applying these questions. While a major level of crisis may indicate problems with planning, these situations require operational responses. Trustees may ask to be kept informed or may ask about planned responses, but use of the questions above would probably only muddle an already-difficult situation.

When and Where to Ask

A busy full board meeting often is not the best situation for posing the majority of the questions. Except when dealing the broad areas covered in the strategic plan, the full board should expect its committees to assess the adequacy of plans in most areas for which these questions apply. The questions are organized as responses to the presentation of plans, and college and university plans are generally presented and discussed in board committees (or subcommittees). When committees summarize their actions to the full board, their remarks rarely go further than, “The administration presented the college’s technology plan. The committee discussed the plan and asked many challenging questions. The committee was very satisfied with the responses and voted to accept the plan” or required an updated report later.

Effective boards have confidence in the committee structure. Boards are organized such that the academic plan would be presented to the board academic affairs committee, and the financial, budget and risk management plans would be presented to



the finance committee or to a subcommittee of that committee in the case of the budget plan. Many boards also maintain facilities and technology committees. The former would receive the master plan; the latter would receive the technology plan. A few of the plans in the framework found in these essays would be “orphans.” For example, a board may have no obvious committee for student services. But that does not mean that the board should waiver from the belief that urging their institution to purposively think about the quality of the provision of service strategic terms and to pull together these intentions into a plan. The board should then assign responsibility for reviewing the service plan to a new or an existing committee.

Beyond the main audience of trustees, presidents and other administrators should also gain from these essays. Preparing responses to these questions will give them a greater understanding of their own institutions. Because the questions are based on basic organizational probes and translated into the circumstances of higher education, they can only make communication between administrators and trustees go all the more smoothly.

Learning the answers to the questions in these essays will make a trustee a better board member by improving his or her understanding of the broad and diverse workings of a 21st-century college or university. The right questions allow a trustee to communicate his or her ethical and performance standards, sense of institutional mission, expectations for success and concern for the college. Meaty questions help a trustee translate his or her skills and knowledge into college and university principles and policies that guide action, change, and success.