



Quality

BY CYNTHIA JACKSON-HAMMOND

EVERY SO OFTEN, new questions arise about the value of higher education, affordability, presidential leadership, governance, and even quality assurance. Questions regarding institutions of higher education are generally responded to by administrative leadership or boards often referred to as trustees. Responses can be complex and difficult to explain to the public. Nevertheless, there must be clear and definitive responses. An underlying question is, Are trustees able to respond with clarity and depth of understanding to questions regarding the academic integrity and quality of the university or college they represent?

Institutional governance boards come to their positions in different ways. Trustees are either politically appointed, elected, or for many religious colleges and universities, selected by an internal governing council. Trustees are generally from the public sector, diverse in their service experiences, and they often represent corporate, business, and community leaders. Generally, there are time limits associated with the appointment.

What is often missing in the selection and training of trustees for their new role is an in-depth understanding of higher education, the institutional mission and structures, and the fiduciary duties of each trustee. These trustees are highly skilled professionals in their respective fields but may enter this new responsibility with limited understanding regarding the scope of the responsibility. Consequently, trustees are learning “on the job.” There are many functions required of trustees. Three of the most important functions include ensuring the academic quality of the institution; ensuring

financial solvency; and serving as a supportive public spokesperson. Perhaps the most critical of these three is ensuring the academic quality of the institution.

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges in the 2011 *AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality* stated:

A governing board is the steward of the institution it serves. As a fundamental part of its stewardship, the board is responsible for assuring the larger community and stakeholders to whom it is accountable that the education offered by the institution is of the highest possible quality.

The statement further asserted that most trustees are often unsure how to achieve this task. Educational quality has several modifiers but, in principle, educational quality is the demonstration that an institution can provide evidence of effectiveness that results in student success. The process that provides support for the demonstration of effectiveness is accreditation.

Accreditation in higher education is voluntary and is the undertaking of self-study conducted by the administration, faculty, staff, students, public partners, and yes, the board of trustees. Accreditation as a means to demonstrate educational quality should be viewed as a continuous improvement activity in which trustees should engage regularly and maintain current discussions with campus leadership.

Trustees have a duty to engage with two different types of organizations that provide standards of accountability for accrediting organizations. The U.S. Department of Education gives “recognition” to accrediting organizations to confirm that these accrediting organizations can serve as gatekeepers

Assurance

for federal funds provided to the institutions they accredit. The U.S. Department of Education requires accountability by regulatory compliance. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is the only nongovernmental institutional membership organization that recognizes accrediting organizations using rigorous standards to ensure “educational quality.” CHEA recognizes that accrediting organizations have educational quality as a primary standard of accountability.

Accordingly, AGB and CHEA are aligned in underscoring educational quality as the major focus of board governance. Trustees must come to terms with their role in responding to the public about educational quality. They must know the principles of accreditation, engage actively in periodic review of institutional evidence of quality, assist the administration in determining factors that promote student success, and be strong advocates in the public arena for establishing confidence in higher education institutions.

As part of onboarding of new trustees and employing the “continuous improvement” model for governance, CHEA proposes the following:

- a) Engage CHEA in board retreats to specifically address key principles of accreditation and quality assurance.
- b) Maintain a consistent board agenda item with the institution to discuss institutional and program accountability and student success.
- c) Engage with academic affairs and student affairs periodically to review institutional, program, and student performance data.
- d) Establish an expectation with campus leadership that quality assurance through accreditation is critical to institutional values.
- e) Encourage accreditation accountability through institutional strategic plans and goals.
- f) Stay abreast of recognition processes and affirmations provided by the Department of Education and CHEA. These are two different types of recognitions—both of which are critical to institutional identity and support for student success.

Boards must be actively engaged, keenly knowledgeable, and willing to ask critical and sometimes difficult questions of institutions. Educational quality and student success are inextricably linked, and boards must extol the linkage to the campus communities. Furthermore, boards have an opportunity to influence campus academic culture greatly by establishing policies regarding accreditation, accountability, student achievement, and overall educational quality. Specific expectations, metrics, benchmarks, and evidence must be a consistent part of the dialog with campus leadership.

When a campus culture of educational quality, academic strength, continuous improvement, self-study, and accreditation reviews is embedded in the operations of the institution and its teaching and learning activities, student success is the result. Credibility is established by evidence of meeting accreditation standards, and the public and stakeholders become more confident in the mission, values, promises made, and the students who graduate from the institution. ■

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