STATEWIDE CONFERENCE

*Trustees*

of Massachusetts Public
Higher Education

## Session Handouts

## Measuring Quality in Education

**September 23, 2014 Trustees Conference**

# Contents

# ASSESSING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

**Jeremy Haefner**
**Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs**
**Rochester Institute of Technology**

**A presentation for the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education Conference for Trustees**

**September 23, 2014**
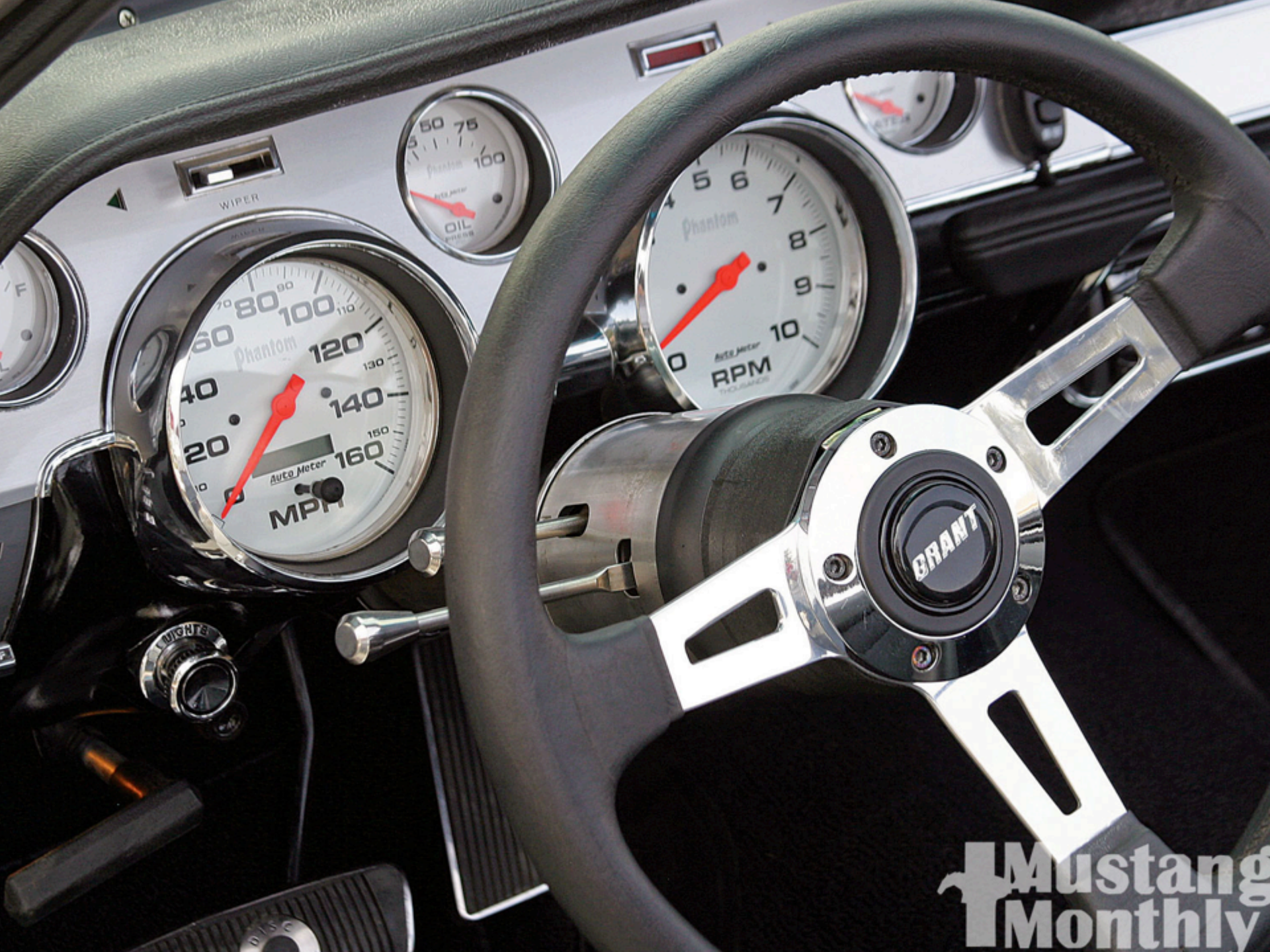
# ANATOMY OF AN AUTOMOBILE

rearview mirror

window frame

seat

windshield wiper

sterring wheel

windshield washer

air filter

battery

distributor

radiator

alternator

trunk

tail light

spare wheel

wheel

transmission

muffler

line shaft

oil filter

disk brake

body side moulding

**E✺TRADE° MOBILE PRO** ))) Delayed Quotes 4:06 PM ET 04/20/10
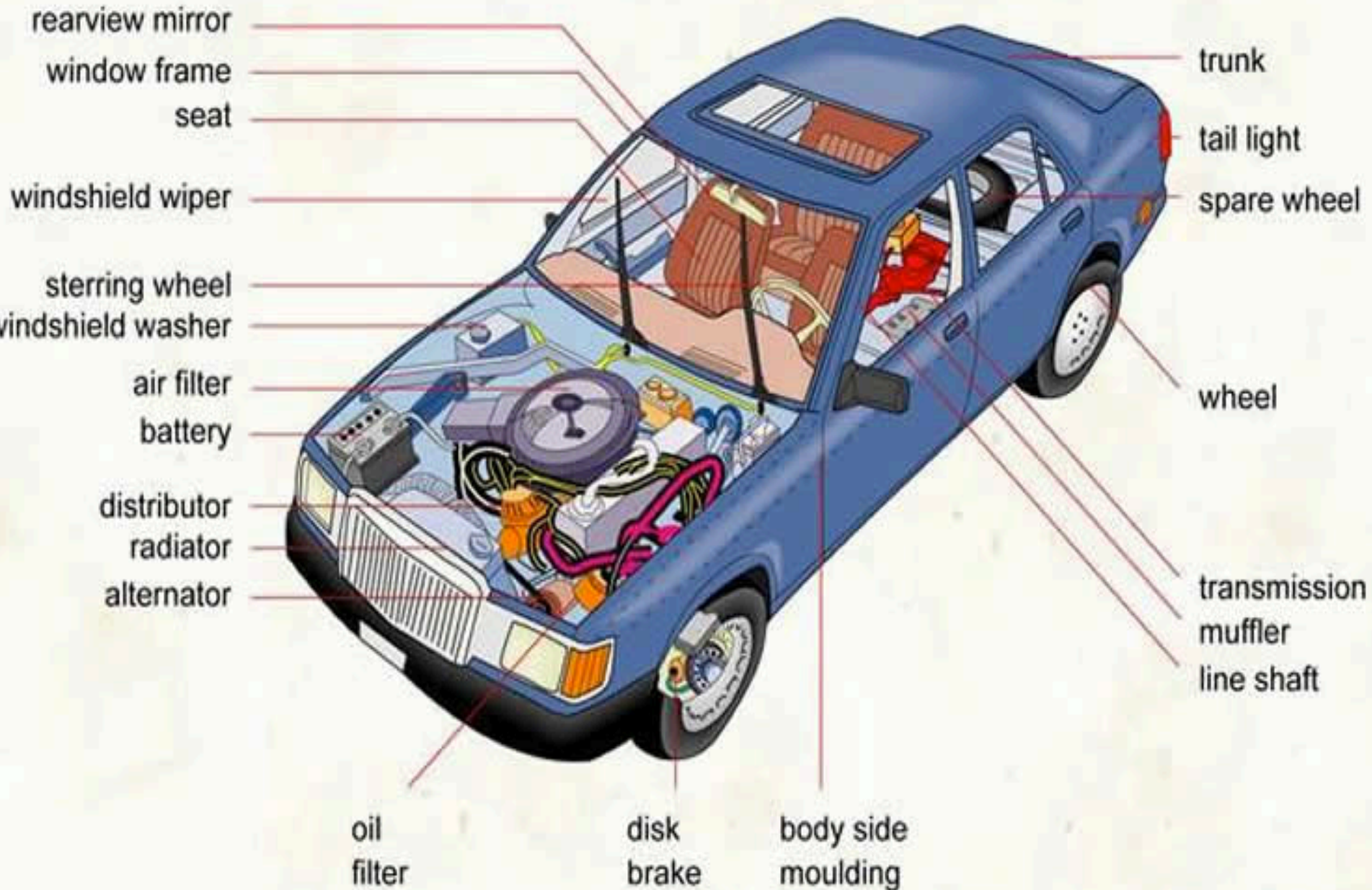
## Charts 🔍 ↻ ✕

| POWERSHARES QQ... | | QQQQ: NSDQ |
|---|---|---|
| Last | Change | Volume |
| 49.80 | 0.30 (0.61%) | 53.71 M |

49.80
49.70
49.60
49.50

10:00a  12:00p  2:00p  4:00p

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## Quotes 🔍 ↻ ✕

| POWERSHARES QQQ... | | QQQQ: NSDQ |
|---|---|---|
| Last | Change | Volume |
| 49.80 | 0.30 (0.61%) | 53.71 M |

| Bid (Size) | 49.80 x 84100 |
|---|---|
| Ask (Size) | 49.81 x 127700 |
| Day Range | 49.43 - 49.88 |
| 52 Week Hi | 50.19 (4/15/2010) |
| 52 Week Lo | 32.06 (4/20/2009) |
| Market Cap | 20.93B |

| P/E | 34.8x | EPS | 1.42 |
|---|---|---|---|

## Markets ↻

DOW | NASDAQ | S&P 500

| Last | Change | Volume |
|---|---|---|
| 11,123.03 | 30.98 (0.28%) | 139.01 M |

11140
11125
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**1d** 1w 1m 3m 6m 1y 2y

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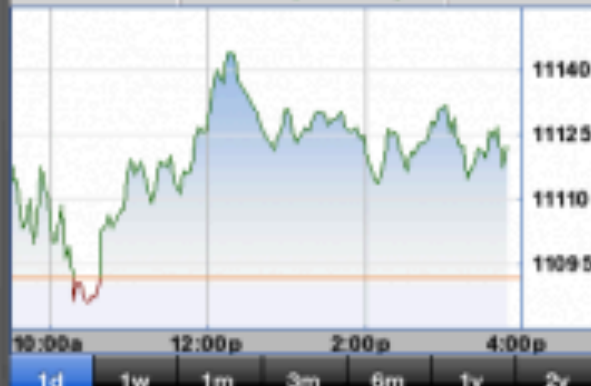
## Watch Lists ↻

[ Device Watch List ▼ ]     🔍 Add Symbol     [ Edit ]

**AAPL - APPLE INC COM**

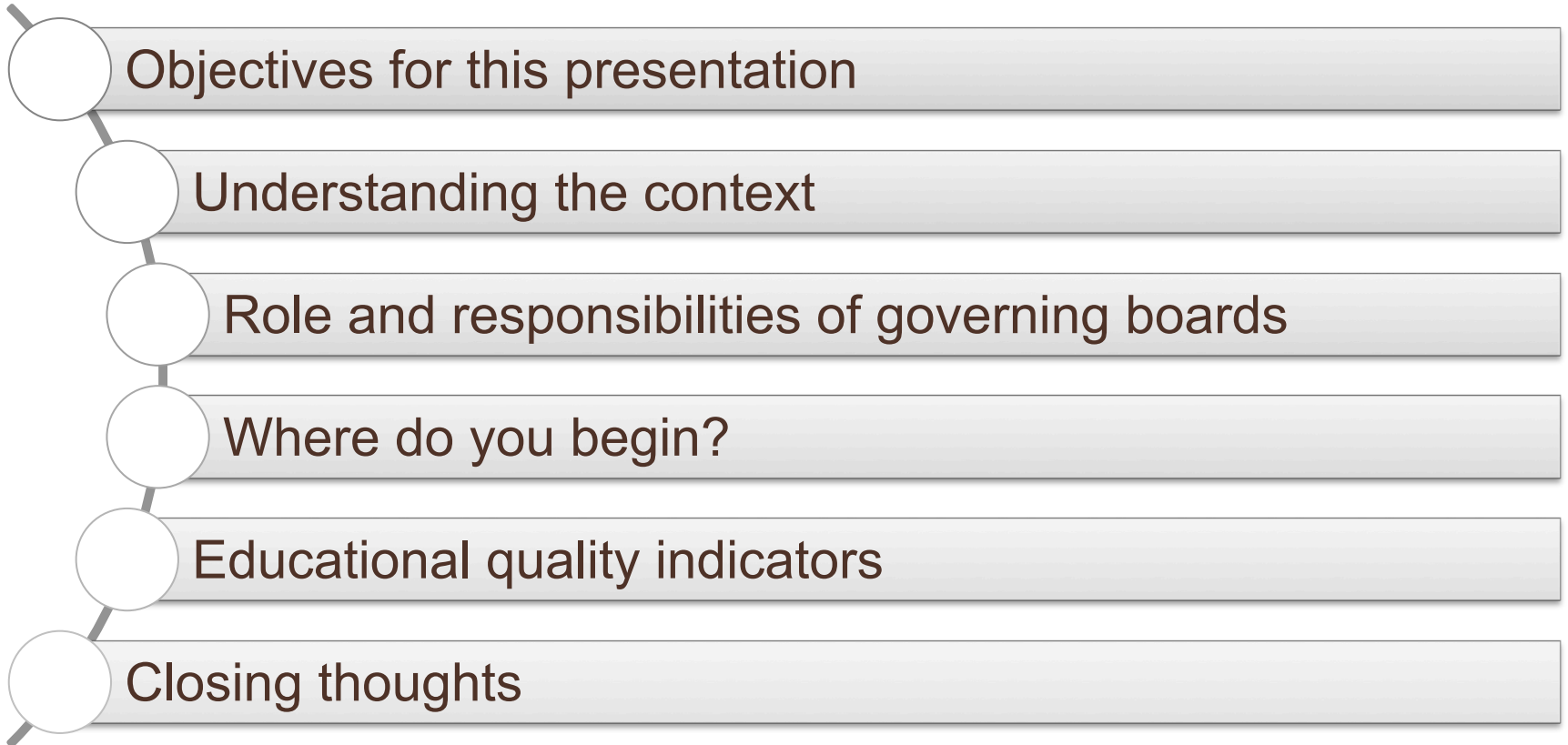| 245.24 | -1.83 (-0.74%) | 245.23 x 300 | 245.25 x 1100 | 19,167,406 | 242.96 - 249.25 | 118.60 - 251.14 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Last Trade | Change | Bid (Size) | Ask (Size) | Volume | Day Range | 52 Week Range |

**SPY - SPDR S&P 500 ETF TR UNIT SER 1 S&P**

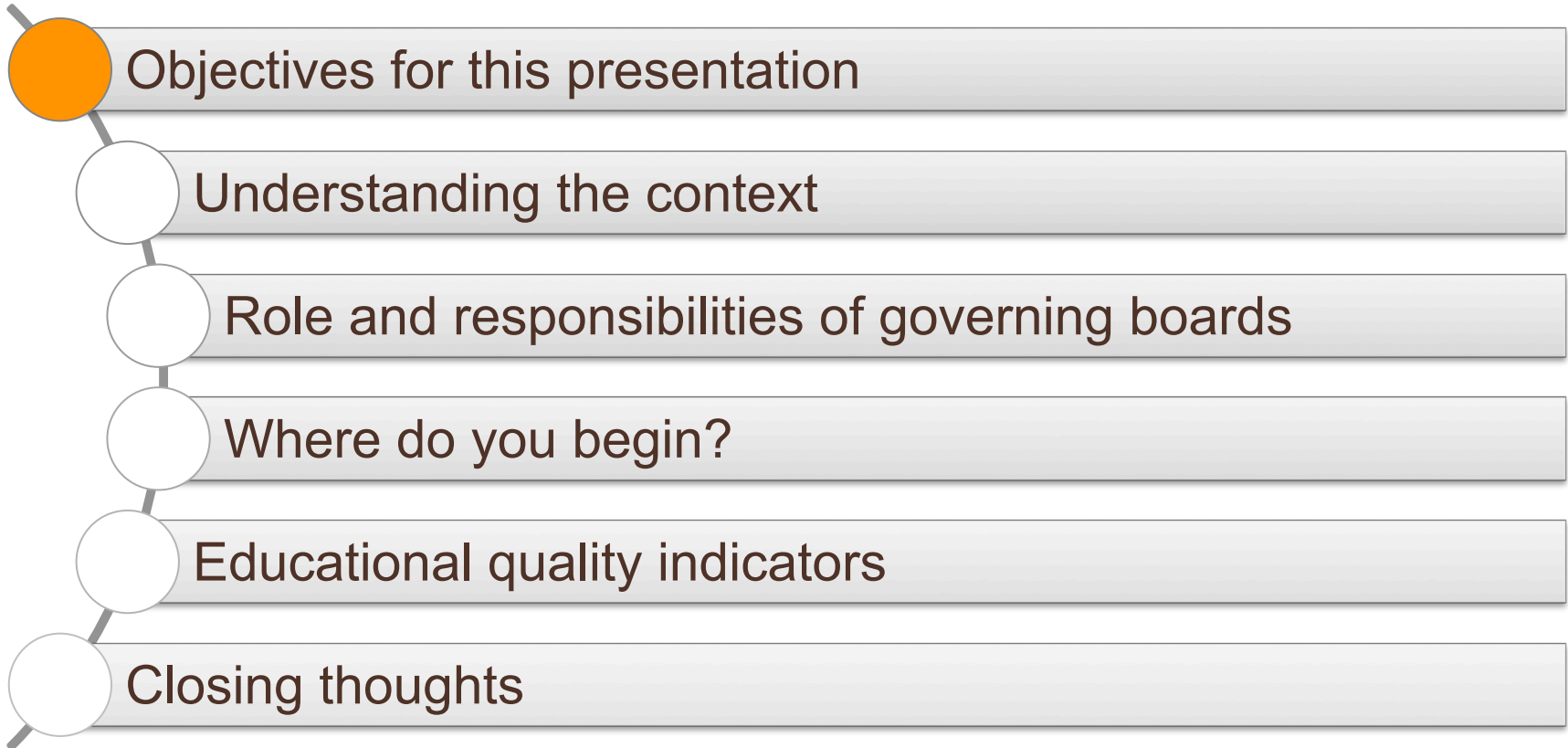| 120.84 | 1.03 (0.86%) | 120.84 x 14200 | 120.85 x 44100 | 134,028,749 | 120.17 - 120.98 | 82.75 - 121.57 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Last Trade | Change | Bid (Size) | Ask (Size) | Volume | Day Range | 52 Week Range |

**QQQQ - POWERSHARES QQQ TRUST UNIT SER 1**

| 49.80 | 0.30 (0.61%) | 49.80 x 84100 | 49.81 x 127700 | 53,706,698 | 49.43 - 49.88 | 32.06 - 50.19 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Last Trade | Change | Bid (Size) | Ask (Size) | Volume | Day Range | 52 Week Range |

□■□

# ROADMAP

Objectives for this presentation

Understanding the context

Role and responsibilities of governing boards

Where do you begin?

Educational quality indicators

Closing thoughts

# ROADMAP

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# PRESENTATION OBJECTIVES

To ensure educational quality is central to our roles and responsibilities

- Be well informed
- Understand fiduciary responsibility is linked to educational quality

To provide the tools and questions you need to fulfill your role

- Materials for an engaging discussion
- Ideas for a dashboard
- Best practices

To advance educational quality @ your institution

- Ensure strategy and policy are set
- Ensure processes are appropriate and in place
- Advocate

# ROADMAP

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Closing thoughts

Educational Quality - Jeremy Haefner

# WHY IS EDUCATIONAL QUALITY IMPORTANT?

Educational Quality - Jeremy Haefner
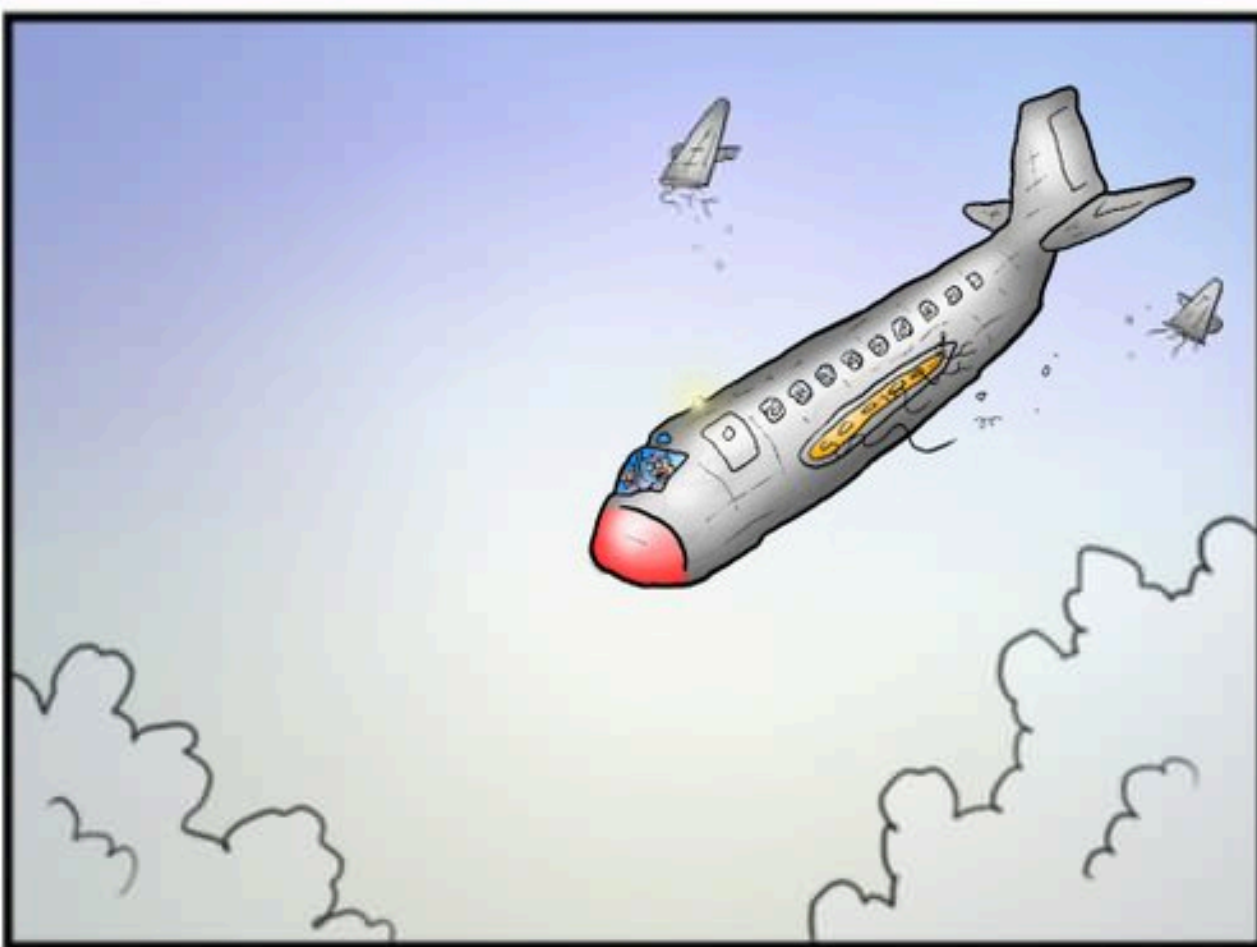
"Well, ladies and gentlemen, we skimped on maintenance a tiny bit, and look what happened: our wings fell off, and we're going to crash. We've learned from this experience, and we'll apply what we've learned to improve the flying experience for our future passengers."

# Because it is mission-critical …

Enrollment growth and change
- Demographic and geographic
- Use of technology

Rising tuition costs and the need to be efficient and productive

Competition from 'for-profits' and distance learning

Faculty workload, student preparedness, and the list goes on …

# Because higher education faces enormous challenges …

… such as student debt

Educational Quality - Jeremy Haefner

The federal and                    The public
state governments

"… legislators and the public are losing confidence in the promise that colleges can collectively guarantee their own quality without external regulation."

- Douglas C. Bennett, the president of Earlham College

Because we are accountable to …

The Business Higher Education Forum is

 "convinced that improved performance on student learning … is central to the national imperative to maintain economic growth, improve worker skills, enhance the diversity of the workforce, and increase educational productivity within higher education."

Industry

# Because we are accountable to …

"… a requirement that accrediting organizations emphasize [is] the assessment of student learning in their reviews of institutions."

*Making the Grade*, Peter Ewell

Accrediting bodies

# Because we are accountable to …

Because education is not all about numbers ...
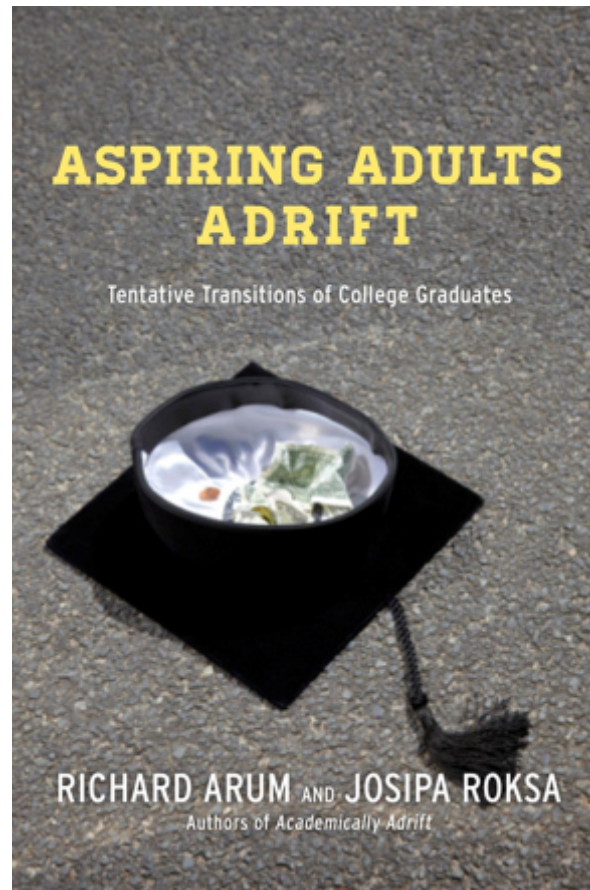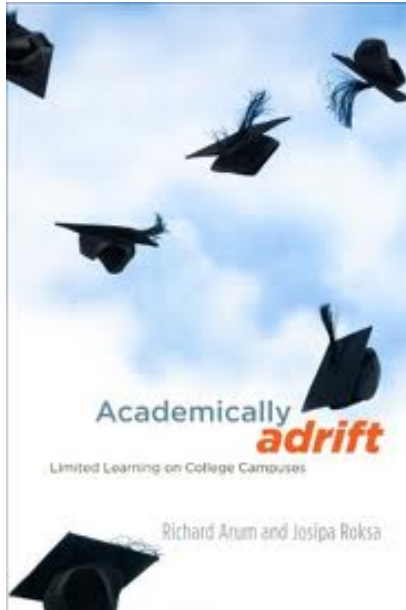
# Finally, because we can do better …
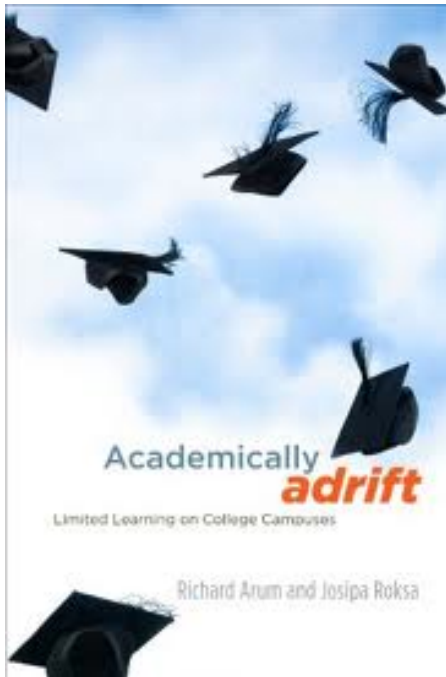
"How much are students actually learning in contemporary higher education? The answer for many undergraduates, we have concluded, is not much," write the authors, Richard Arum, professor of sociology and education at New York University, and Josipa Roksa, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia. For many undergraduates, they write, "drifting through college without a clear sense of purpose is readily apparent."

- 'Academically Adrift', *Inside Higher Education*, Jan. 18, 2011

The culture of college needs to evolve, particularly with regard to "perverse institutional incentives" that reward colleges for enrolling and retaining students rather than for educating them.

- 'Academically Adrift', *Inside Higher Education*, Jan. 18, 2011
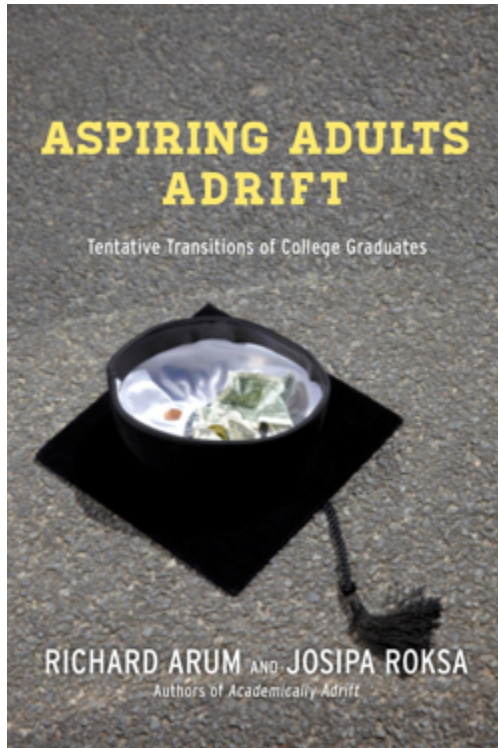
Arum and Roksa later surveyed the same students about their lives in 2011, two years after they graduated. Their latest book, **_Aspiring Adults Adrift_**, draws from those interviews. They argue that students' failure to learn led to a failure to launch. Kids these days are underemployed, stuck in their parents' basements, and overly optimistic about what their futures will hold.

And the argument that colleges focus too much on the experiences they provide and too little on the education students receive is persuasive, and worrisome.

- "Why hasn't the class of 2009 grown up?", Libby Nelson, Sept. 4 2014; http://www.vox.com/2014/9/4/6101987/aspiring-adults-adrift-roksa-arum-millennials-academically-adrift?utm_source=Jeff+Selingo+Newsletter&utm_campaign=56565579db-September14_Newsletter9_4_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_201d0b9b05-56565579db-325625173#story

# ROADMAP

- Objectives for this presentation
- Understanding the context
- Role and responsibilities of governing boards
- Where do you begin?
- Educational quality indicators
- Closing thoughts
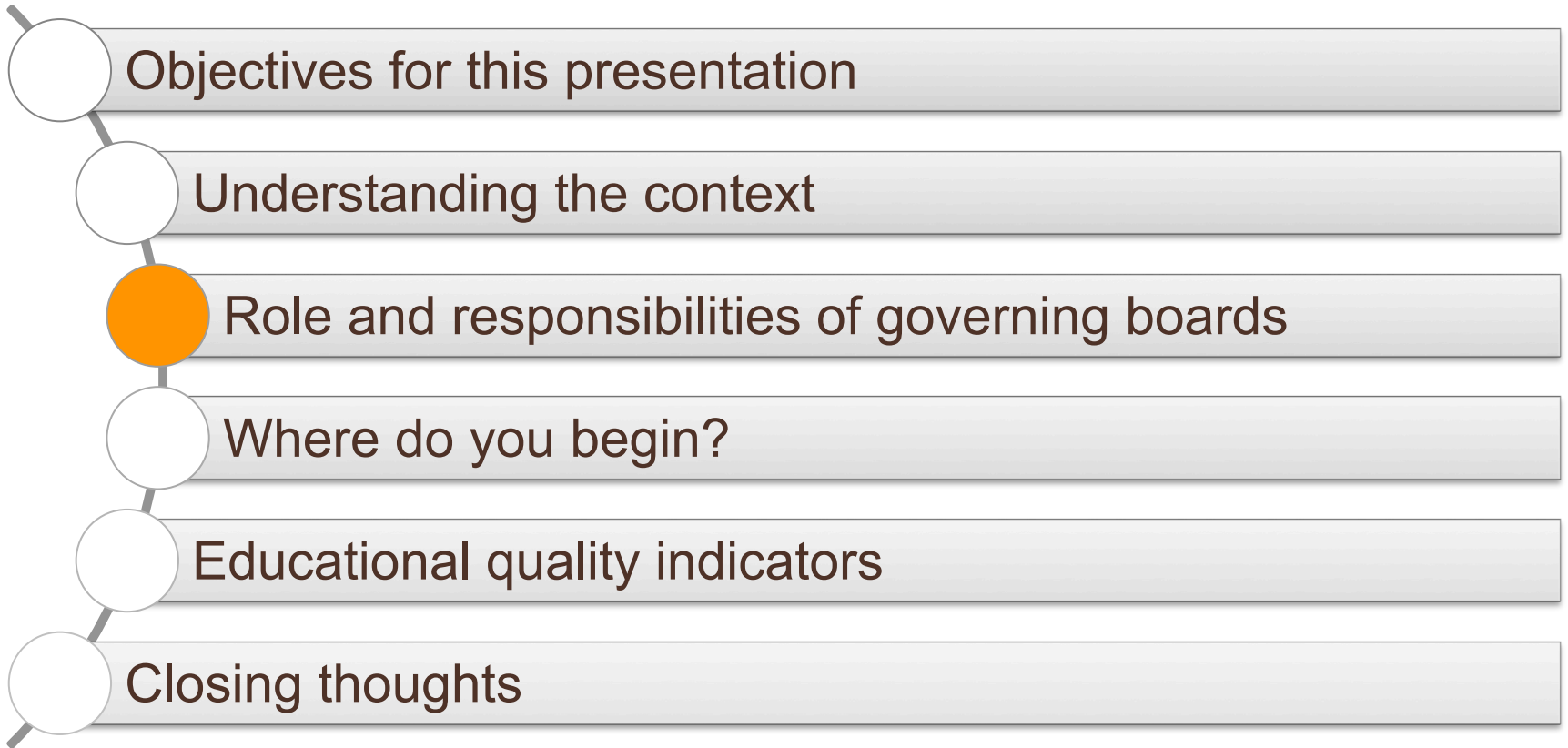
… it is up to the faculty and administration to uphold and improve academic quality. But it is up to the board to understand it and to see that it gets done.

*Making the Grade*
Peter Ewell

Ensuring academic quality is a fiduciary responsibility; it is as much part of [the] role of board members as ensuring that the institution has sufficient resources and is spending them wisely.

Should provide the board with policy-level, strategic summaries of the assessment information it receives

Has a fiduciary responsibility to monitor processes to ensure quality

Adds value by addressing issues of mission, programs, and quality …

Should delve more deeply into student-learning assessment practices and findings

# The Education Committee …

# WHO DOES WHAT?

## Trustees

- ☐ Oversee processes to insure and improve EQ
- ☐ Hold administration accountable
- ☐ Questions with the understanding of improving end product

## Faculty

- ☐ Constructs curriculum
- ☐ Sets learning outcomes and assessment
- ☐ Continually improves

# SIX GREAT PRACTICES

◣ Charge the Education Committee to oversee educational quality

◣ Set aside time on the agenda cycle to learn about and discuss educational quality

◣ Discuss educational quality with faculty representatives

◣ Understand how accreditation relates to educational quality

◣ Consider the use of a dashboard of indicators of educational quality

◣ See and discuss the results of periodic academic program review

# SPEED DISCUSSION ...

- Q1: Is your education committee specifically charged with overseeing educational quality?
- Q2: Does your board (or committee) set time to annually discuss educational quality?
- Q3: Does your institution use a dashboard of educational quality indicators?
- Q4: Does your board see and discuss the results of periodic academic program review?
- Q5: Is your board involved with the accreditation review cycle in a meaningful way?

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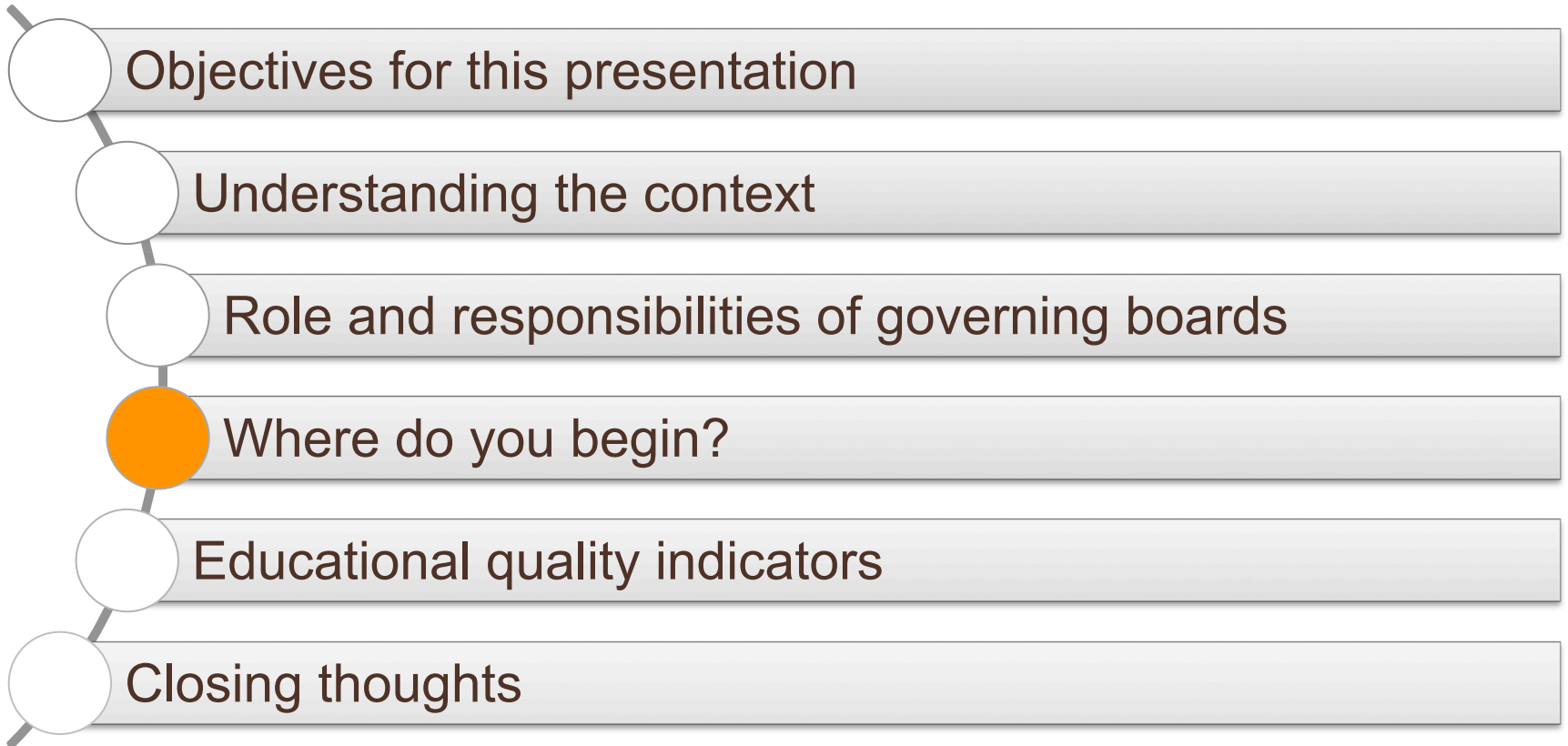
# THE RIT EDUCATIONAL QUALITY DISCUSSION TRILOGY

- Global fiscal crisis of 2009 raised concerns about impact on RIT
  - Would students still come?
- Board needed deeper engagement to feel comfortable with their role
- Board needed appropriate understanding of what constitutes educational quality, especially student learning outcomes
- Structural changes to the way the Board looks at their role and responsibilities
  - Annual review and discussion of educational quality dashboard
  - Engagement with faculty

# PROCESS

**April**
- Setting the stage
- Understanding quality through indicators
- The reading assignment

**July**
- Data and processes
- Discussion
- Initial take-aways and ideas

**November**
- Principles, processes, and practices
- An Education Committee dashboard

# READING ASSIGNMENT
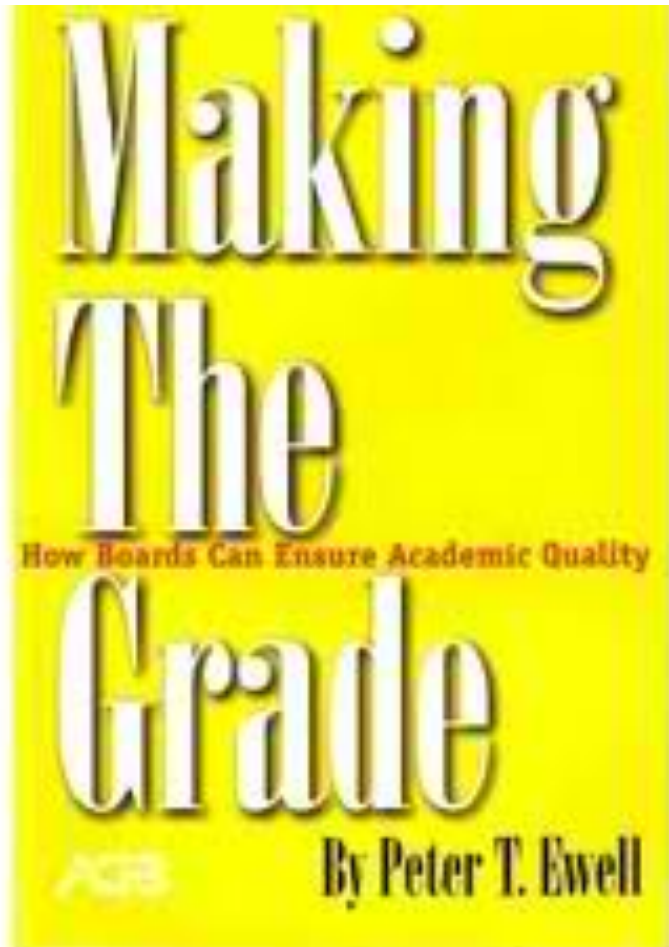
Contents organized around indicators

- Educational quality
- Student-learning outcomes
- Retention and graduation
- Stakeholder input
- Program review
- Accreditation

*How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality*

*Making The Grade*

*By Peter T. Ewell*

# FIVE CORE QUESTIONS

▼ How good is our product? (student demand, employer demand, student learning)

▼ How good are we at making our product? (the learning environment, retention, degree completion)

▼ Are our customers satisfied? (surveys)

▼ Do we have the right 'mix' of programs? (to fulfill our outcomes and satisfy stakeholders)

▼ Do we make the grade? (Accreditation)

# SPEED DISCUSSION ... (AGAIN!)

▼ Q1: How well do you know how good your 'product' is? [Really well, so-so, no idea]

▼ Q2: How well do you know how good your institution is at making the 'product'? [Really well, so-so, no idea]

▼ Q3: Are your stakeholders satisfied? [yes/no]

/ How well do you know your stakeholders are satisfied? [Really well, so-so, no idea]

# SOME QUESTIONS YOU WILL SEE

- Do we say what and how much students should learn?
- What kinds of evidence do we collect about student learning?
- Are we benchmarking performance against external standards?
- What progress have we made in addressing recommendations from the last accreditation review?
- Who is responsible for assessment and how it is accomplished?
- How do we use assessment results?
- How does our performance measure up?
- What do student responses tell us about the quality of their academic experiences?
- Are we considering other stakeholder views?

# OUTCOME #1: REVISED BY-LAWS FOR THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

# NEW BY-LAWS

**Section 2: Powers and Duties of the Education Committee**

10
11      **Revised entire section to read:**
12 The Education Committee shall assure that the Institute's portfolio of academic programs
13 reflect the Institute's mission, strategic priorities and educational quality expectations. To this
14 end, the Education Committee shall work closely with the administration and faculty to
15 receive appropriate and timely information that enables the Committee to provide the
16 necessary oversight and support to ensure that:
17     (a) Academic program planning and implementation appropriately respond to student
18         interests, support the needs of a diverse student population and are sensitive to the
19         ever-changing requirements of the global marketplace and society;
20
21     (b) Internal and external assessment of academic program quality and expected student
22         learning outcomes are ongoing and systematically scheduled, reviewed and acted upon;
23
24     (c) Research, scholarship and the general intellectual climate of the Institute are strong and
25         active;
26
27     (d) Effective policies and procedures exist related to faculty recruitment, appointment,
28         evaluation, development, compensation, tenure and promotion;
29
30     (e) Other matters of academic import, as the Board or President may request, are
31         appropriately considered.

32 The Committee shall report its activities periodically to the Board of Trustees, through the
33 Committee Chair, and make recommendations to the Board with regard to policy, quality and
34 resources needed to support the Institute's academic goals and educational programs.

# OUTCOME #2: EDUCATION COMMITTEE PLAN OF WORK

# ECC PLAN OF WORK: 2013-2014

| Topic | July 2013 | November 2013 | April 2014 | July 2014 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Global education – a discussion trilogy | 35 min | 45 min | 45 min | 10 min |
| Annual review of academic quality | 30 min | | | 30 min |
| Report from Graduate / Research subcommittee on Graduate Education strategic plan | | 15 min | | |
| Review of tenure and promotion policies and processes | | 60 min | | |
| Review of RGHS-RIT Alliance | | | 30 min | |
| Review of Co-op program | | | | 30 min |
| Annual selection of Trustee Scholarship Award winners | | | 45 min | |
| Annual selection of the Education Core Committee Plan of Work | | | | 10 min |
| Possible Ph.D. reviews (report from Graduate / Research subcommittee) | | | | TBD |
| Report from Provost on academic programs approved during 2013-2014 | | | | 15 min |

# OUTCOME #3: EDUCATIONAL QUALITY WORKSHEET

# ROADMAP

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Closing thoughts
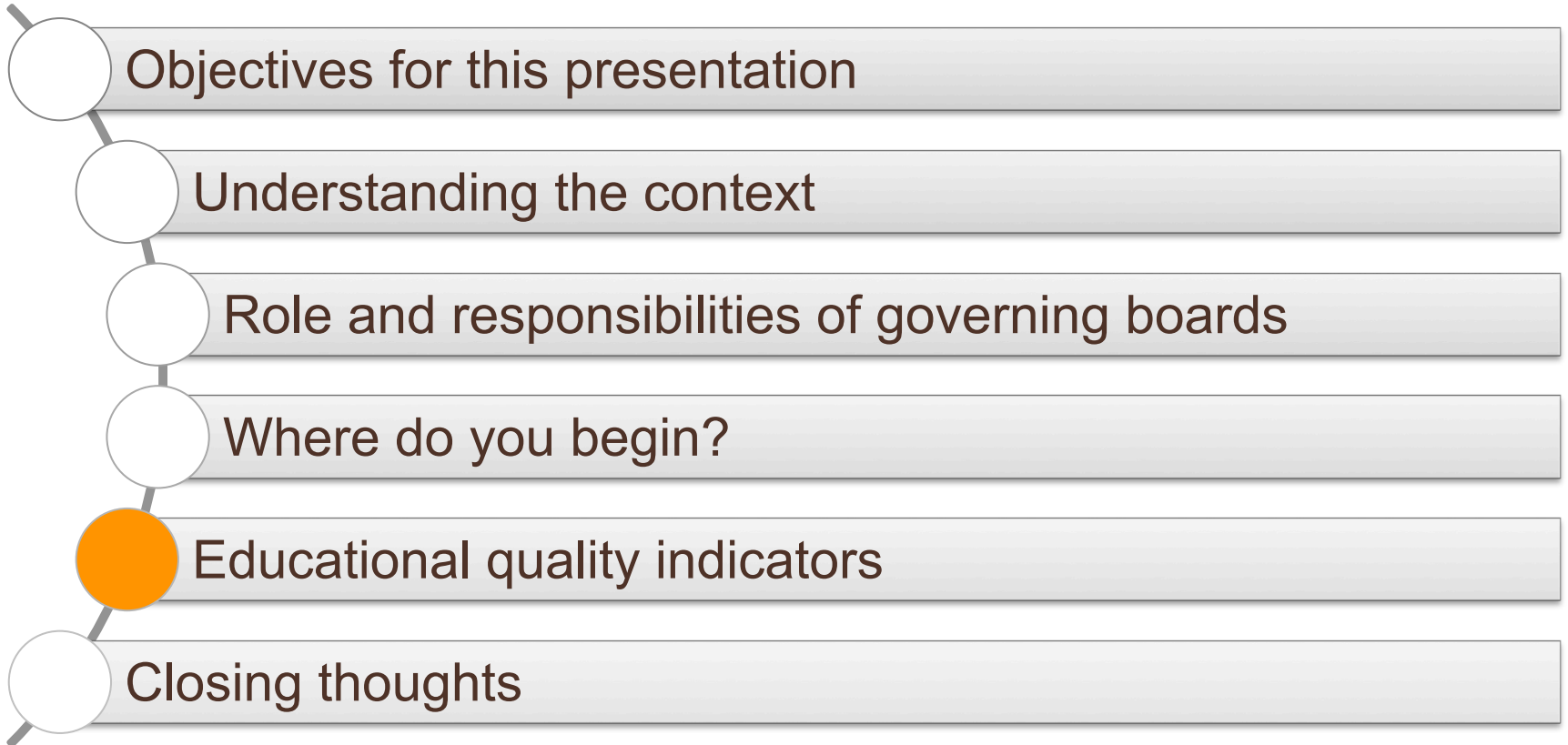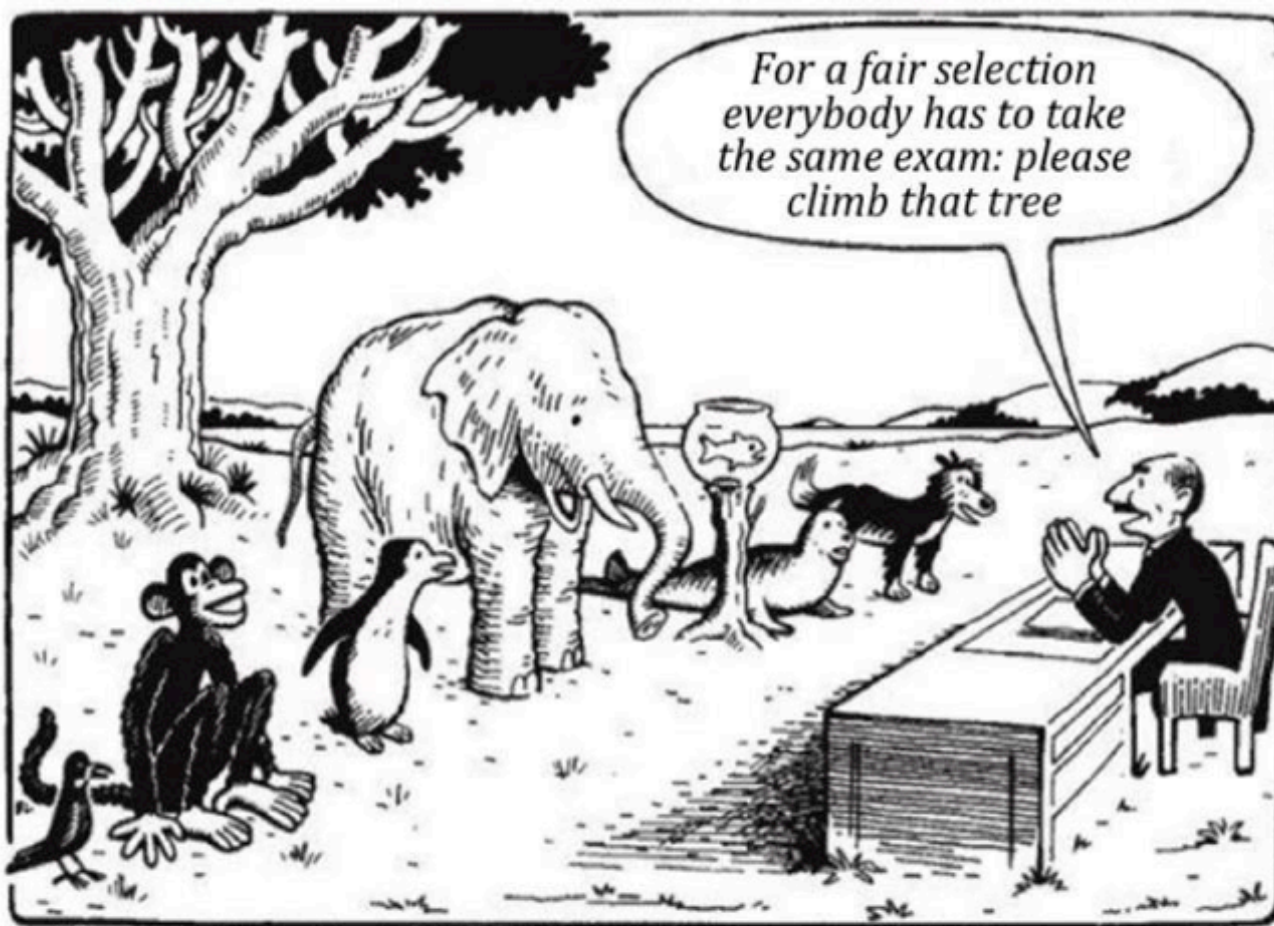
# Our Education System

"Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

— *Albert Einstein*

# CLASSIFYING INDICATORS

Environmental

Inputs

Outputs

Educational Quality
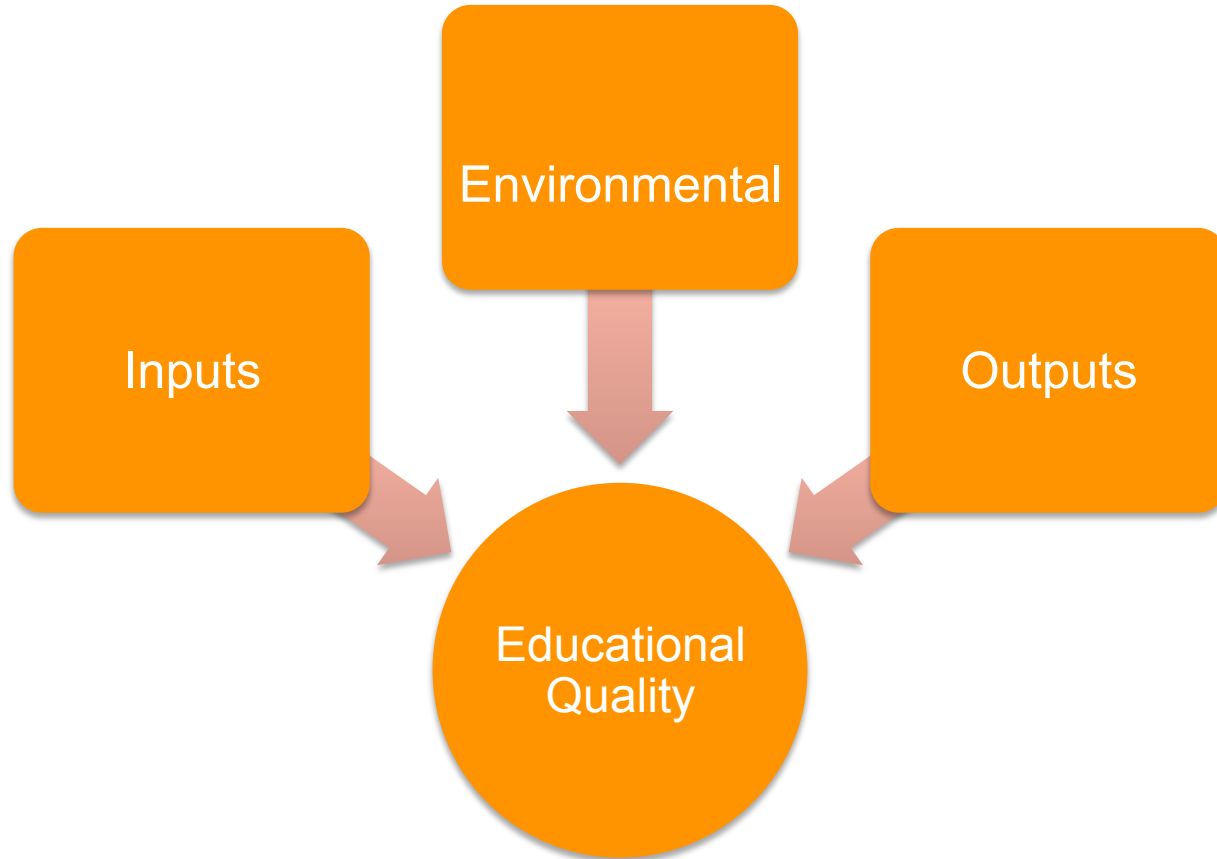
# INPUT INDICATORS

Incoming student quality
- ACT/SAT scores
- % of graduating class
- Diversity

Incoming faculty quality
- % with terminal degrees
- Diversity
- Prior teaching and scholarship experience

# ENVIRONMENT INDICATORS

Retention/Graduation
- ◥ Persistence rate
- ◥ Graduation rate

Student engagement and satisfaction
- ◥ NSSE
- ◥ Noel Levitz

Teaching/Learning
- ◥ Student to faculty ratios
- ◥ Class size

Faculty engagement
- ◥ Faculty workload
- ◥ Faculty salaries
- ◥ Faculty development
- ◥ Faculty satisfaction
- ◥ Faculty teaching evaluation

"Without reliable information about postsecondary learning outcomes, policymakers can not determine which investments or strategies are most cost-effective, and students, families, and employers do not have information that can improve their decisions about the quality of different providers of higher education."

http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/
0702HIGHERED.PDF

# OUTPUT INDICATORS

Student learning
- Student learning outcomes achievement
- Program review

Stakeholder satisfaction
- Employer
- Alumni
- Accreditation

Placement
- % student in jobs
- % in graduate schools

# RIT EDUCATIONAL QUALITY DASHBOARD

# ROADMAP

Objectives for this presentation

Understanding the context

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Educational quality indicators
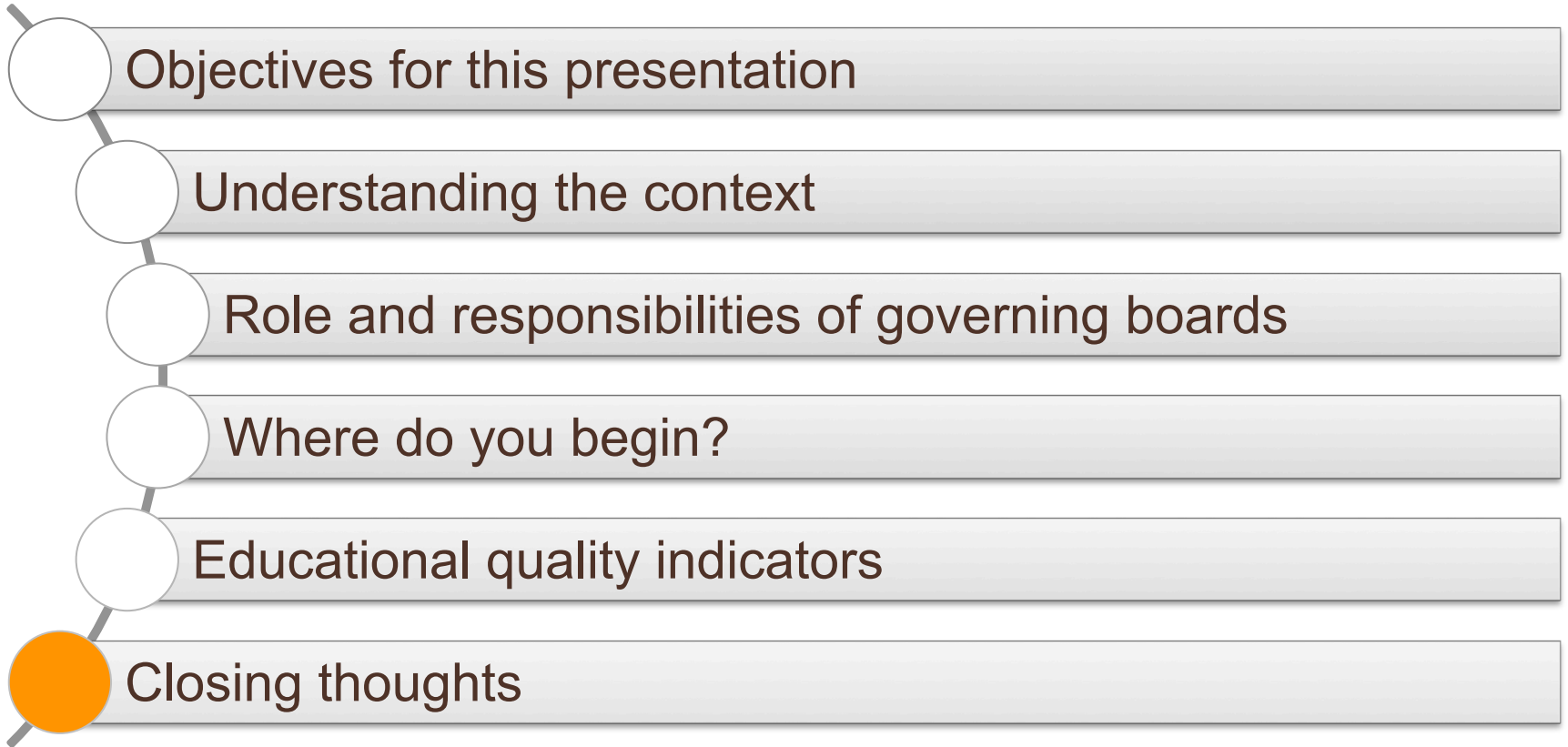
Closing thoughts

Your moment of zen take-home swag

# CLOSING THOUGHTS

# REVISITING SIX GREAT PRACTICES AT RIT

- ☑ Consider the use of a dashboard of indicators of educational quality
- ☑ Discuss educational quality with faculty representatives
- ☑ Charge the Education Committee to oversee educational quality
- ☑ Understand how accreditation relates to educational quality
- ☑ See and discuss the results of periodic academic program review
- ☑ Set aside time on the agenda cycle to learn about and discuss educational quality

# CHALLENGES

▼ There may be … reluctance

/ Board members may not feel confident to engage in academic issues

/ Faculty may feel that quality is their purview

/ Leadership may want to keep the boundaries between trustees and the operations distinct

▼ This discussion and engagement takes time

▼ There are no clear cut answers – just processes, evidence, and willingness to discuss

# KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Trustees have a responsibility to insure educational quality is a priority
  - / Processes, policies and evidence
- There are core questions to be asking
- There are best practices for how boards engage with this issue
- An educational quality dashboard with educational indicators is one way to frame the board engagement

Educational Quality - Jeremy Haefner

# QUESTIONS?

# YOUR ZEN TAKE-AWAYS ABOUT EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND THE ROLE OF THE BOARD

**Know the roles**
- <u>Trustee</u>: Ensure there are adequate educational quality processes
- <u>Trustee</u>: Insist on regular reports on educational quality
- <u>Trustee</u>: Hold administrators and faculty accountable for educational quality but work with them to define educational quality for your institution
- <u>Administration and faculty</u>: Sets curriculum, learning outcomes and assessment
- <u>Administration and faculty</u>: Continually improves the educational quality through assessment and the curriculum



KEEP CALM AND KNOW YOUR ROLE



**How well can you answer these questions?**
- How good is our product? (student demand, employer demand, student learning)
- How good are we at making our product? (the learning environment, retention, degree completion)
- Are our customers satisfied? (surveys)
- Do we have the right 'mix' of programs? (to fulfill our outcomes and satisfy stakeholders)
- Do we make the grade? (Accreditation)

**6 Great Practices for Boards**:
- Consider the use of a dashboard of indicators of educational quality
- Discuss educational quality with faculty representatives
- Charge the Education Committee to oversee educational quality
- Understand how accreditation relates to educational quality
- See and discuss the results of periodic academic program review
- Set aside time on the agenda cycle to learn about and discuss educational quality



**Best Practices**
Learn from the mistakes of others!

Educational Quality - Jeremy Haefner

# How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality – A Worksheet

| Questions for Boards to Consider (FROM Making the Grade) | How Would/Does Your Institute Answer These Questions? |
|---|---|
| **Assessing Student Learning Outcomes** | |
| 1. Do we say what and how much students should learn? Where do we say it? | |
| 2. What kinds of evidence do we collect about student learning? | |
| 3. Are we benchmarking performance against external standards? | |
| 4. Who is responsible for assessment and how is it accomplished? | |
| 5. How do we use assessment results? | |
| **Retention, Graduation, and Student Flow** | |
| 1. What are our basic indicators of student progression and success? | |
| 2. How does our performance measure up? | |
| 3. What does success look like for different kinds of students? | |
| 4. Who is accountable for student success and what are we doing to improve our performance? | |

**Listening to Stakeholders and "Customers"**

1. What do student responses tell us about the quality of their academic experiences?

2. How confident can we be about what we've found?

3. How are we considering other stakeholder views?

**Taking Stock of Program Assets**

1. Do we have the right mix of programs?

2. How are we managing program costs?

3. What counts as program quality?

4. Who reviews General Education?

5. How does program review drive program improvement?

| Accreditation: The Quality Test |
| --- |
| 1. What progress have we made in addressing recommendations from the last review? |
| 2. What progress have we made in assessing student-learning outcomes? |
| 3. Are our accreditable programs accredited? |
| 4. What do we hope to learn from our engagement with accreditation? |

# BOARD RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE OVERSIGHT OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

This statement was approved on March 17, 2011, by the Board of Directors of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. The following principles are intended to guide boards in the governance of colleges, universities, and systems, inform them of their roles and responsibilities, and clarify their relationships with presidents, administration, faculty, and others involved in the governance process.

AGB Board Statements are intended to affirm and clarify specific core principles of board governance. As with all AGB Board Statements, this Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality is not limited to any one sector of higher education or type of institution, and it is not intended to be prescriptive. It presents principles and recommendations for boards and institutional leaders to consider and to adapt to their own unique institutional circumstances.

**About AGB**

For 90 years, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has had one mission: to strengthen and protect this country's unique form of institutional governance through its research, services, and advocacy. Serving more than 1,200 member boards and 36,000 individuals, AGB is the only national organization providing university and college presidents, board chairs, trustees, and board professionals of both public and private institutions with resources that enhance their effectiveness.

In accordance with its mission, AGB has designed programs and services to strengthen the partnership between the president and governing board; provide guidance to regents and trustees; identify issues that affect tomorrow's decision making; and foster cooperation among all constituencies in higher education. For more information, visit *www.agb.org*.

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AGB **ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS** OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

# INTRODUCTION

A governing board is the steward of the institution[1] 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. Yet AGB's 2010 survey on the engagement of boards in educational quality revealed that board members often are not sure how to provide stewardship in this area, and some even doubt that they should.

In *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality* (AGB, 2006), Peter T. Ewell affirms that the oversight of educational quality "is as much a part of our role as board members as ensuring that the institution has sufficient resources and is spending them wisely." The educational mission of colleges, universities, and systems makes this a primary obligation for their boards, and the significant fiscal investments made by these institutions, by their students and donors, and by state and federal governments underscore its importance. Governing boards should recognize that assuring educational quality is at the heart of demonstrating institutional success and that they are accountable for that assurance.

The current environment makes this responsibility more pressing. Today's technological, pedagogical, and economic forces, along with increasing public skepticism about the value and cost of education, make board accountability for quality crucial. And with only 38 percent of America's adult population now holding a degree from a college or university, it is clear that much more needs to be done if we are to ensure the country's economic and civic future.

Our efforts to confront that contemporary reality for higher education are complicated by a number of formidable challenges, including:

- A significantly older and more ethnically and racially diverse student body;
- Increasing numbers of contingent faculty members;
- Revenues that have not kept pace with institutional need;

- Dramatic escalation in demand for admission while certain fixed costs are skyrocketing, straining institutional capacity;
- Competition for students, faculty members, and resources that diverts available funding away from educational quality and toward less critical functions;
- Tension between issues of workforce preparation and intellectual development;
- Large numbers of students needing remedial courses; and
- Declining confidence that higher education is capable of meeting its commitment to students and its obligation to serve the public good.

Some of these challenges directly affect educational quality; others intensify the need for institutions to demonstrate quality. If we are to effectively broaden opportunity and increase success among our students, then we will need to address these challenges head-on and with some urgency.

## BOARD ACCOUNTABILITY

AGB's "Statement on Board Accountability" asserts, "[A governing] board broadly defines the educational mission of the institution, determines generally the types of academic programs the institution shall offer to students, and is ultimately accountable for the quality of the learning experience." While academic administrators and faculty members are responsible for setting learning goals, developing and offering academic courses and programs, and assessing the quality of those courses and programs, boards cannot delegate away their governance responsibilities for educational quality. The board's responsibility in this area is to recognize and support faculty's leadership in continuously improving academic programs and outcomes, while also holding them—through institutional administrators—accountable for educational quality.

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[1] Throughout this document, references to institutions are intended to include colleges, universities, and systems.

In fulfilling this responsibility, the board should work within the governance structure of the institution. For some boards, significant change may be required in how they interact with academic administrators and faculty members on matters of educational quality. AGB's "Statement on Institutional Governance" stresses that "Governance documents should state who has the authority for specific decisions—that is, to which persons or bodies authority has been delegated and whether that which has been delegated is subject to board review." Governing boards should make a conscious effort to minimize ambiguous or overlapping areas in which more than one governance participant has authority, particularly in the area of educational quality, where faculty members, administrators, and the board all have important responsibilities.

This "Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality," approved by the Board of Directors of the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) in March 2011, urges institutional administrators and governing boards to engage fully in this area of board responsibility. The following seven principles offer suggestions to promote and guide that engagement.

# PRINCIPLES

### 1. THE GOVERNING BOARD SHOULD COMMIT TO DEVELOPING ITS CAPACITY FOR ENSURING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY.

According to AGB's survey on boards and educational quality, a little more than one-third of board members receive information related to oversight of educational quality during their board-orientation program. Additionally, while most have experience on boards of either corporate or nonprofit organizations, they are less familiar with academic trusteeship. To fulfill this specific area of oversight responsibility, a board should commit to a strategy for educating itself.

Board leadership and senior administrators should intentionally incorporate discussions of educational quality in new-trustee orientation programs, board education programs, and the annual agendas of the board and its various committees. Structured discussions with faculty members, key administrators, and outside experts on learning goals, as well as reviews of the institution's current student-learning assessment practices, student retention and graduation rates, and information about program and institutional accreditation, can help develop the board's understanding of these issues.

Both the board and its appropriate committees (for instance, the Academic Affairs or Education Committee and the Committee on Student Affairs) must make understanding the elements of educational quality a central feature of their agendas. Adding regular reports on student-learning outcomes to those that the board already receives on finances and endowments will round out the board's understanding of its essential oversight responsibilities.

### 2. THE BOARD SHOULD ENSURE THAT POLICIES AND PRACTICES ARE IN PLACE AND EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENTED TO PROMOTE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY.

The board is ultimately responsible for the currency of policies and their implementation, including policies related to teaching and learning. With the president and chief academic officer, the board, either through an appropriate committee or as a body, should ensure that institutional practices for defining and assessing educational quality are current, well communicated, and used for continuous improvement of students' educational experience. The board should receive reports—annually, if not more often—on the appropriateness of these practices, their results, and any changes needed.

Because faculty members are responsible for the important work of setting standards for educational quality, creating and implementing processes for assessment, and responding to the findings, the board should encourage a focus on these responsibilities in new faculty orientation and through faculty development programs. Additionally, the board should ensure that faculty work on learning assessment is recognized and rewarded.

### 3. THE BOARD SHOULD CHARGE THE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER WITH ENSURING THAT STUDENT LEARNING IS ASSESSED, DATA ABOUT OUTCOMES ARE GATHERED, RESULTS ARE SHARED WITH THE BOARD AND ALL INVOLVED CONSTITUENTS, AND DEFICIENCIES AND IMPROVEMENTS ARE TRACKED.

Practices in assessing student learning differ from institution to institution based on mission and experience. A board needs to understand how assessment is done at its institution, what the educational goals are, whether the goals align with the institutional mission, and how well the institution performs against those goals. And the board should understand the challenges associated with measuring learning, especially those dimensions of education that are less easily quantified.

With leadership from chief academic officers, board committees—where they exist—should delve more deeply into student-learning assessment practices and findings. Involving faculty leaders in these discussions is critical in conveying the board's support for the endeavor and its commitment to quality.

A board committee, such as the Academic Affairs or Education Committee, should provide the board with policy-level, strategic summaries of the assessment information it receives. It should report regularly to the full board on the learning-assessment data collected, the significance of the data, institutional responses to those findings, and improvements over time.

## 4. THE BOARD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR APPROVING AND MONITORING THE FINANCIAL RESOURCES COMMITTED TO SUPPORT A HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE.

Ordinarily, the delivery of educational programs is the largest institutional expense. Also, because an institution's finances are directly tied to enrollment, retention, endowment, and external support of its programs, boards should monitor regularly the connections between academic programs and financial sustainability. The board should advocate for sufficient resources in support of educational priorities. It also should monitor the cost effectiveness of financial commitments to these priorities and be certain that the investments are consistent with institutional mission, plans, and overall financial trends. Boards of public institutions, which may lack the authority to determine overall institutional funding levels, should help make the case for sufficient state support of educational quality.

Although improved educational quality is not necessarily the result of increased spending, the board should consider the allocation of new funding or the reallocation of existing funding to address academic needs identified through learning assessment, program review, or reaccreditation. Additionally, the board should encourage and be prepared to invest in academic innovation, including the development of new delivery models, to advance the institution's educational mission. Institution-wide efforts to contain expenses can help to facilitate investment in academic-program priorities. On occasions when a board is required to make decisions about academic programs based on financial circumstances, it is best done with candor and consultation with stakeholders.

To be fully accountable, the board needs information about the institution's educational outcomes to assure the public, students, parents, donors, and other funders of the return on their investment of tuition dollars, philanthropy, and state and federal aid. The board should ensure transparency in reporting this information to stakeholders.

## 5. THE BOARD SHOULD DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE INSTITUTION'S ACADEMIC PROGRAMS—UNDERGRADUATE, GRADUATE, AND PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS.

An institution fulfills its mission primarily through its academic offerings—its general education program, academic majors, and degree programs. To ensure that the mission is being met, board members need to understand the broad structure of these offerings. Orientation for new board members should include an overview of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs. Boards should be aware of how the mix of programs reflects the institution's history, is suited to its mission and student profile, and compares to those of peers and competitors. The board should also be aware of the learning goals the institution has established for students.

Also, because an institution's finances are directly tied to enrollment, endowment, and external support of its programs, boards should monitor regularly the connections between academic programs and financial sustainability.

## 6. THE BOARD SHOULD ENSURE THAT THE INSTITUTION'S PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES ARE FOCUSED ON THE TOTAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE, NOT JUST TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM ACTIVITY.

With few exceptions, a student's education involves more than classroom experience and the formal curriculum. It also includes a range of learning experiences and academic-support activities outside class that have proved to have significant effect on student development, education, retention, and graduation. An understanding of an institution's educational quality includes an appreciation for the value added by such experiences beyond the classroom.

The board should develop a holistic understanding of the opportunities and services that the institution provides to complete students' educational experience. Some of these—for instance, internships, learning communities, student-faculty research opportunities, and service learning—can be among the most distinguishing features of an institution. Boards should be informed about the quality of these experiences and other support activities, and their effect on students' learning as well as on recruitment and retention.

## 7. THE BOARD SHOULD DEVELOP A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF ACCREDITATION—WHAT IT IS, WHAT PROCESS IT EMPLOYS, AND WHAT ROLE THE BOARD PLAYS IN THAT PROCESS.

Accreditation—the periodic, peer-based system of review of higher-education institutions and programs—is designed to assure the public of an institution's commitment to academic quality and fiscal integrity. It also serves to stimulate continuous improvement by the institution.

As part of its attention to educational quality, the board should become familiar with how accreditation works at the institution. The board's own ongoing educational program should include an overview of the accreditation process, the various types of accreditation that the institution holds, and the key findings from accreditation processes. The board should also be clear about its role in the institutional accreditation process. Most regional accreditors require contact with members of the board, and some include standards for the effectiveness of board governance.

The board should require from senior administrators a timely preview of forthcoming re-accreditation processes and periodic progress reports on the required self-studies. It should review key elements of the accreditation self-study, the visiting team's report, and formal action and decision letters from the accrediting organization, and it should consider their implications for the institution's strategic goals, mission, and resources.

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO STAKEHOLDERS

## FOR INSTITUTIONAL AND SYSTEM CHIEF EXECUTIVES

- Work with board leadership to ensure that educational quality and student-learning assessment are part of the agendas of the board and its appropriate committees, and that sufficient time is provided for discussion.
- Be sure that orientation programs for new board members include a conversation about educational goals and student-learning trends and challenges.
- Encourage the chief academic officer to foster full board engagement in discussions of matters related to educational quality; assist him or her in understanding board governance responsibilities.
- Working with the chief academic officer, establish goals related to educational quality and learning outcomes to serve as benchmarks for the institution and for the chief executive officer's performance.
- Include the board in the accreditation process in appropriate ways; be certain that the board remains informed as to current accreditations held by the institution as well as the status of anticipated accreditation reviews.
- Remain transparent with the board as to risks and opportunities facing the institution related to educational quality and outcomes, including the link between fiscal and educational decisions.
- Provide regular opportunities for discussion with the board on how the campus defines educational quality.

## FOR BOARD MEMBERS

- Become informed about the board's responsibility for overseeing educational quality.
- Expect to receive strategic-level information and evidence on student-learning outcomes at least annually, including longitudinal data from the institution and, where appropriate, periodic comparisons with peer institutions.
- Hold institutional administrators appropriately responsible for goals that were mutually established for educational quality.
- Use information from the accreditation processes, program reviews, and the assessment of student learning to inform decision making, including financial decisions.
- As appropriate in board and committee meetings, ask strategic questions related to educational quality—goals, processes, outcomes, improvements, trends, and any adjustments needed to improve results.
- Recognize that faculty members and academic administrators shape the approaches to assess the outcomes of student learning, and that boards should not micromanage this work, but that the board is ultimately responsible for ensuring that assessment takes place and that results lead to action for improvement.
- Make service on your board's Academic Affairs Committee part of a regular committee rotation for board members.
- Include the chair of the Academic Affairs Committee as a member of the board's Executive Committee.
- Where possible, consider including one or more academic experts, such as former presidents, administrators, or faculty members from other institutions as ex officio members of the committee charged with oversight of educational quality.
- Schedule opportunities for the Academic Affairs Committee and the full board to discuss educational quality and learning outcomes.

### FOR CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICERS

- Contribute to the orientation and continuing education of board members regarding academic programs, student-learning goals, assessment practices, and educational quality.
- Working with the board or relevant committee, create a board-level set of dashboard indicators related to educational quality. Update it regularly and present it to the board for discussion annually.
- Work collaboratively with the chair of the Academic Affairs Committee to set a committee agenda that emphasizes institution-specific academic questions and concerns, as well as a review of important academic policies and procedures.
- Ensure that academically related information for the board is clear, concise, free of jargon, and at a strategic level.
- As appropriate, include representatives from the faculty and academic administration in board and committee discussions of the institution's educational goals, approaches for measuring student learning, and progress against goals over time.

## QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS TO ASK

- How does this institution define educational quality? In addition to measures of student learning, what is considered in answering questions about educational quality?
- Does the institution say what and how much students should learn? Where is this said?
- What kinds of evidence does the institution collect about learning?
- Is the institution benchmarking performance against external standards as well as tracking institutional performance over time?
- How are assessment results used?
- What do students and alumni say about the quality of their educational experience?
- How do the institution's retention and graduation rates look over time, and how do they compare to those of other institutions?
- What does success look like for the types of students enrolled at this institution?
- Does the institution define college readiness, that is, the skills and knowledge that students must possess to be successful at the institution?
- How do faculty members and administrators keep abreast of innovative ideas for curriculum redesign and teaching?
- What progress has been made in addressing recommendations from the last accreditation review?
- What can the institution learn from its engagement with accreditation?
- Do financial allocations reinforce academic priorities as necessary and appropriate?
- In meeting its oversight responsibility for educational quality, is the board functioning at the policy level or trying to micromanage specific educational programs?

# THE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE OF THE BOARD: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CHARGE

Boards with standing committees should have a committee charged with oversight of educational quality. Such committees have traditionally been called the Academic Affairs Committee, but they go by other names as well, such as the Education Committee, the Educational Excellence Committee, and a range of others. They may or may not be combined with student life or student development committees.

Each board committee needs a charge that clearly identifies the scope of its responsibilities. For the purpose of simplicity, this illustrative charge is for an Academic Affairs Committee.

## ILLUSTRATIVE CHARGE

The Academic Affairs Committee facilitates the governing board's ultimate responsibility for educational quality. It does this by working closely with academic leadership and by regularly monitoring the following:
- learning goals and outcomes;
- program quality, institutional and program accreditation, and program review;
- student retention, graduation rates, graduate school acceptances, and job placements;
- policies and procedures related to faculty compensation, appointment, tenure, and promotion—and when appropriate, the committee makes recommendations for action;
- academic planning;
- the structure of the academic programs—and when appropriate, the committee reviews proposals for adding, modifying and deleting programs; and
- budgets for academic programs and services.

The committee should report regularly to the board and frame recommendations on matters of policy, quality, and funding that require the board's consideration and action.

The committee must receive appropriate and timely information and data to meet its responsibilities. Working at the nexus between board oversight and academic prerogative, the committee should recognize and respect the central role of the academic administration and faculty in academic planning, curriculum development, faculty development, the evaluation and academic advising of students, and recommendations for faculty appointment, tenure and promotion. However, the committee must also be mindful that, in its oversight role, the board is ultimately accountable for ensuring educational quality.

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These resources can be found at: *http://agb.org/resources-boards-and-educational-quality*.

# AGB BOARD OF DIRECTORS*

Inside
The New
Schoolhouse:
**What Boards Can
Do to Improve
Student Learning**

# Lessons Learned about Student Learning: Eight Test Cases

## TAKEAWAYS

The progress—and setbacks—of eight institutions that served as test cases have yielded a set of lessons about board oversight of educational quality from which others can benefit:

1 Ensure a sufficient institutional-assessment capacity.

2 Start with what you already have.

3 Make academic quality a priority of the board and institutional leaders.

4 Attach the effort to other activities.

5 Educate the board on education.

6 Find the right focus.

7 Allow for targeted deeper dives.

8 Develop new board processes and use time differently.

9 Deepen the engagement of the board with faculty.

FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS, AGB, WITH THE GENEROUS support of the Teagle Foundation, has been engaging eight diverse institutions to improve their boards' oversight of educational quality and student learning. Specifically, the project has had four pillars of focus:

- Metrics of student learning (direct and indirect student learning outcomes);
- Board assurance that institutions are engaging their students in high-quality learning experiences;
- Changes in the work of the board to better focus on student learning and academic quality; and
- New ways that faculty, administrators, and board members should engage one another.

MARTY BLAKE

The eight institutions—Drake University, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Morgan State University, Rhodes College, Rochester Institute of Technology, Salem State University, St. Olaf College, and Valparaiso University—have served as test cases to understand what information can be valuable to the board and how boards can adopt new practices to better oversee student learning. (See article on student learning metrics on page 15.) The experiences of each of these eight institutions provides insight into the elements that contribute to successful board engagement in the oversight of student learning and educational quality as well as potential pitfalls to be avoided. Their progress—and setbacks—have yielded a set of lessons from which others can benefit:

**Ensure a sufficient institutional-assessment capacity.** The starting point for any institution and board is the capacity to assess student learning and academic quality. Without such institutional capacity—which consists of agreed-upon student learning goals and outcomes, an assessment infrastructure, and an institutional commitment to act on the findings—the board will have little foundation upon which to establish its work. While regional accreditation requires some degree of student learning assessment, not all institutions can provide boards with the necessary, comprehensive information about the institution and its various programs on a regular basis.

The first question boards should ask of academic leaders is: To what extent do we have adequate assessment data? Depending on the answer, the follow-up questions at many institutions may well be: What must happen in order to develop and maintain that ability? And when will this capacity be in place?

**Start with what you already have.** Because most institutions have made at least some progress assessing student learning outcomes and academic quality, a board would be wise to start by asking the institu-

tion what data it currently collects and how it uses it. **Drake University** in Iowa began its efforts by undertaking an audit to catalogue all the assessment data that it already had. The administration and staff identified 16 different student learning assessments currently in use or recently used, including standardized national tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), student licensure examinations in professional fields such as pharmacy, and institutionally developed assessment efforts that already existed and had legitimacy on the campus. That saved the institution from having to simultaneously build, test, and validate new assessment methods.

In addition, all institutions already have data related to student success and academic quality—such as persistence and graduation rates—that they can draw upon to share with the board on a regular basis. This data can be reported by variables important to the institution such as major or field of study, or race/ethnicity and gender.

Alumni surveys can also prove to be a source of valuable information. **Rochester Institute of Technology** in New York modified a fairly traditional alumni survey to add dimensions of student learning outcomes and educational impact. The survey now asks alumni to note the levels of effectiveness and importance of outcomes such as critical thinking, ethical reasoning and action, oral communication, and creative and innovative thinking.

**Make academic quality a priority of the board and institutional leaders.** Institutions that made the most progress in the AGB-Teagle project had a strong partnership between the chief academic officer and the chair of the academic affairs committee. The chief academic officer and the academic affairs committee chair can assemble the right working group and create time in busy agendas to identify valuable metrics and collect needed data. Those individuals are central to creating new board processes

and restructuring board committee agendas. When both leaders make the board's oversight of educational quality a priority, progress happens.

Furthermore, the board chair and president need to be publicly committed to the effort. They may not play a direct role, but their blessing is important to keeping efforts on track and ensuring that attention to educational quality remains a priority for the institution and the board.

Successful efforts to engage the board must also rely on assessment staff, faculty leaders, members of the academic affairs committee, and other campus administrators. That is especially the case because board oversight of educational quality is an endeavor that is likely to take more than a year to launch and embed. Some institutions in the project had turnover in key positions that impeded their progress. While boards cannot avoid that, they can work to ensure some stability on the academic affairs committee and in major leadership positions, recognizing that such efforts require many consistent hands.

**Attach the effort to other activities.** Boards of the eight participating institutions learned that by linking the oversight of educational quality to other priorities or activities, they were able to make more tangible progress. For example, **Salem State University** in Massachusetts found value in linking to a statewide "Vision Project" led by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. **Morgan State University** in Maryland linked its work on educational quality to its strategic planning work. Similarly, **Metropolitan State University of Denver** linked educational quality activities to its strategic plan and to a "Performance Contract" signed with the State of Colorado. By tapping the momentum of other efforts, boards and institutions can benefit from assessment work done for other purposes, find synergies, and avoid having to re-create the proverbial wheel.

**Educate the board on education.** Institutions that participated in the AGB-Teagle project found that they needed to educate board members on academic issues, educational quality, student learning goals, and outcomes assessment. They had to explain how and why they do program review, for instance, and the particulars of high-impact

> Boards of the eight participating institutions learned that by linking the oversight of educational quality to other priorities or activities, they were able to make more tangible progress.

educational practices and the research supporting them. They spent time briefing board members on the language and practices of assessment, as well as the current debate surrounding its application.

**Rhodes College** in Tennessee sought to educate board members about the concepts of student achievement and educational quality and how these issues are currently thought of across higher education. They wanted boards to understand the topic they were being asked to discuss and the nuances surrounding it. Unlike other issues, such as finance, to which board members often bring deep understanding and personal expertise, academic quality and student
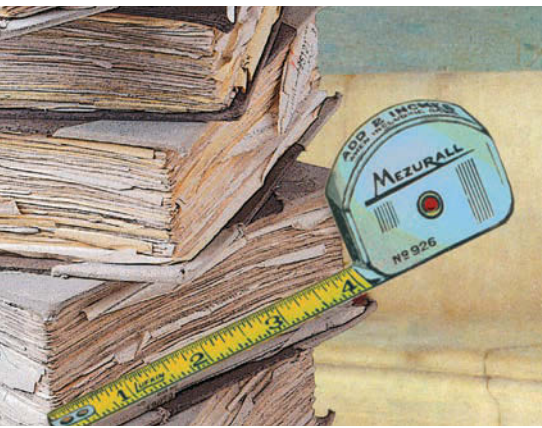


learning, in particular, require additional education and information.

Institutions participating in the project took a variety of approaches to helping board members get up to speed. At some institutions, this education was embedded into committee meeting work. Other boards used retreats to convey this information. **Rochester Institute of Technology** gave Peter T. Ewell's book, *Making the Grade* (AGB Press, 2nd edition, 2013), to the education committee and discussed several key questions: What matters when judging academic quality? What does the education committee see its role as? What type of indicators does the board want to receive?

**Find the right focus.** The challenge at many institutions is not too little data, but rather too much. Institutions have no shortage of folders of data related to student learning and educational quality, ranging from grades in individual courses to student academic portfolios to nationally normed

# 8 Ways to Gauge Student Learning

By Maurice C. Taylor

A team from Morgan State University participated in the AGB-Teagle project and, based on our experience, we recommend that boards and senior administrators follow these practices:

1. **Know the major institutional assessments due each year.** Over the course of the AGB-Teagle project, we at Morgan had two significant assessment initiatives underway: 1) a request that each college and school develop a strategic plan with outcomes metrics, along with a dashboard to benchmark progress towards the goals of the university's overall strategic plan, and 2) a "Periodic Review Report" to accreditors that included mission-based assessment goals for student learning, academic programs, services, and administrative processes. Those initiatives contributed to the regents' oversight of student learning outcomes during the project.

2. **Provide board members with professional-development opportunities.** Boards should ensure that their members attend meetings and engage in other activities focused on educational quality and student learning outcomes. At Morgan, the chair of the academic and student affairs committee participated in the AGB-Teagle project and made sure that other regents were briefed on the university's efforts to develop metrics on student learning outcomes, as well as raised other issues about and called for reports on academic quality.

3. **Include experts on information technology on board task forces.** The Morgan team also benefitted from having a member who could translate the project goals of developing board-level metrics on learning outcomes into data that could be routinely gathered. Equally important was that person's ability to explain to regents the scope and limitations of metrics.

4. **Develop university-wide student learning outcomes.** While a university-wide report and those for accreditors and legislators are important, they produce far more data and measures than board members need. As a result of the project, we began to try to develop a concise set of measures related specifically to academic quality and student learning outcomes, linked to Morgan's mission and vision statements.

5. **Make metrics inform board members' questions.** The purpose of reporting data and metrics specifically related to student learning outcomes is to assist board members in raising the right questions about academic quality at the institution.

6. **Use meeting agendas effectively.** Often board meetings are organized around hot topics that rarely relate to academic quality or student learning outcomes. Instead, they focus on budgets, facilities, athletics, and capital campaigns. Questions about curriculum, academic performance, and student learning outcomes should be a key part of the agenda.

7. **Rotate the memberships of the board's standing committees.** Board members are often nominated or selected to serve because they possess a particular skill or expertise. For example, the academic and student affairs committee is often reserved for trustees who work in higher education. But boards should rotate the committee memberships so all board members have some experience with the issues concerning academic performance and student learning outcomes.

8. **Take the long view.** Board chairs, in particular, should take a view of the institution that extends beyond that of the president and other board members. It is ultimately the chair who is responsible for the board's meeting agenda, committee assignments, the nature of the metrics the board receives, and whether it gives sufficient attention to the long-term measurement of student learning outcomes.

*Maurice C. Taylor is a vice president at Morgan State University in Maryland and a board member at Juniata College in Pennsylvania.*

tests to academic program review reports. The challenge is to figure out how to "roll up" that data in a meaningful way so as to allow the board to focus on the right top-line data.

**Rochester Institute of Technology** has two indicators of student learning outcomes in its strategic plan. They roll up program-level assessment data of student learning outcomes from an annual progress report and provide the board with two core met-

rics: 1) the percentage of programs that meet or exceed the established benchmarks of student learning outcomes and 2) the percentage of programs that practice data-driven continuous improvement.

**Allow for targeted deeper dives.** While the goal is to create high-level metrics for the board, institutions found it beneficial to focus more deeply on some key issues (critical thinking, for example) or on key program areas (graduate education or general education). The opportunities to go more deeply into an issue or a degree program, coupled with the broader, topline overview, helped boards feel comfortable with two levels of oversight.

For instance, the board at **Morgan State University** focused on its junior writing proficiency exam. This focus helped the board concentrate more intentionally on student learning across the institution. At **Metropolitan State University of Denver**, the board undertook an intensive investigation into its aviation programs. The provost's office provided significant data on that program and engaged the board in a discussion of its strengths and areas for growth.

**Rhodes College** focused its deeper dive on "high impact practices" that have been shown to lead to deep learning. Examples included the percent of students within each class that have participated in efforts such as learning communities, undergraduate research, study aboard and internships, and senior capstone projects.

At **Metropolitan State University of Denver**, the board held a retreat that dedicated the entire morning to student learning and educational quality. They created a topline summary report (supported by 70+ pages of appendices) that focused on academic goals, strategies, and measures of success to support the discussion. They also piloted a new academic dashboard to begin to build consistent reports over time. As part of the retreat, they developed a "Jeopardy" game of academic issues to engage their nine

board members in creative ways without overwhelming them with data.

**Develop new board processes and use time differently.** The oversight of student learning by most boards requires that they do things differently, such as developing new processes and habits. A place to start is with the charge of the academic affairs committee. **Valparaiso University**, for instance, realized that it needed a new committee charge that reflected an intensified focus on educational quality. (See box on page 27.)

While student learning and academic quality are important, time must be intentionally scheduled in committee and board agendas to sufficiently engage the board. Otherwise such tasks tend to get short-changed, as boards meet infrequently and often for short periods of time. Complex and nuanced issues and those in which the board has little experience simply require more time.

Institutions also developed the practice of intentionally structuring a 12- to 18-month calendar of topics related to educational quality for their boards to address. For example, at **Rochester Institute of Technology**, the first and third meetings of the education committee now highlight a particular academic quality practice or issue, such as academic program-level assessment, online education and academic quality, or international programs and global education. During each of these meetings, the committee engages in intentionally structured, focused discussions. The committee's middle meeting of the year focuses on the academic quality dashboard—the institution's overall indicators of academic success and student learning. Such intentional scheduling helps embed student learning firmly into busy meeting agendas. It also allows institutions and boards to create a long-term and integrated view of educational quality that can touch upon many elements.

**Deepen the engagement of the board with faculty.** The boards of the participating

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## Framing Board Work

At **St. Olaf College** in Minnesota and **Valparaiso University** in Indiana, board leaders and administrators crafted a discussion around what the work of the academic affairs committee should be. To help frame that conversation, they identified a set of action verbs—for example manage, oversee, monitor, ensure, approve, facilitate, review—and topical areas—such as student learning, retention and completion, program quality, academic planning, educational environment. They then had the committee work through their charge by defining, discussing, and applying action verbs to content areas. They discussed, for example, whether the board *monitors* student learning, *ensures* student learning, or *reviews* student learning. What does each of those terms mean in relation to the work the board should be doing? In relation to academic quality?

### St. Olaf College's and Valparaiso University's Matching Template

Board Work: The *Process* of Finding the Right Verbs and Subjects

❏ Monitor          ❏ Student learning
❏ Ensure           ❏ Student success
❏ Oversee          ❏ Retention and
❏ Measure             completion
❏ Evaluate         ❏ Program quality
❏ Approve          ❏ Accreditation
❏ Facilitate       ❏ Academic
❏ Review              planning
                   ❏ Educational
                      environment

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*By tapping the momentum of other efforts, boards and institutions can benefit from assessment work done for other purposes, find synergies, and avoid having to re-create the proverbial wheel.*

institutions were more easily able to oversee academic quality when they and the faculty created new ways to interact. All too often, faculty-board interactions are confined to faculty presentations or "dog and pony shows." Through this project, institutions experimented with new ways to more deeply expose board members to faculty and to student learning.

For example, at **Rhodes College**, the president initiated "The President's Common Table," an informal working group of three board members, three faculty members, one staff member, and one student to serve as a conduit between the board members who charged the group with strategic questions and tasks and the internal college community. The president then, in response to board requests, structured nine additional faculty members, student, and staff cross-functional common tables that further discussed strategic issues related to educational quality. The college developed a



structured way to engage various constituencies, including the faculty, in strategic conversations important to the board.

At **Drake University**, board members participated in "Mini-College," an experience in which select board members took short, interactive courses consisting of high-impact pedagogies. Board members got to experience cutting-edge education and then debriefed the faculty on their experience during a lunch meeting.

## Conclusion: Still Incomplete

The work of the eight teams yielded many insights and helpful materials that other

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## Valparaiso University's Revised Academic Affairs Committee Charge (an excerpt)

As its overarching responsibility, the Committee shall foster such policies that contribute to the best possible environment for students to learn and develop their abilities, and that contribute to the best possible environment for the faculty to teach, pursue their scholarship, and perform public service, including the protection of academic freedom.

To that end, the Committee is responsible for the following areas:

- **Academic Programs**. The Committee shall review and recommend to the Board approval of significant academic program changes or administrative changes established in conjunction with such programs that have substantial impact upon either the mission or the financial condition of the university. Such changes might include (a) creation of new academic programs, (b) significant revision of existing academic programs, and (c) discontinuation of academic programs. The Committee shall receive and may endorse reports on other academic program changes.

- **Academic Organizations**. The Committee shall review and recommend to the Board approval of significant academic organizational changes that have substantial impact upon either the mission or the financial condition of the university. Such changes might include (a) the establishment of new academic organizations (e.g., campuses, institutes, colleges or schools), (b) significant changes to existing academic organizations, and (c) the discontinuation of academic organizations. The Committee shall receive and may endorse reports on other academic organizational changes.

- **Academic Relationships**. The Committee shall monitor the policies and practices that govern the many different kinds of academic relationships between the University and other entities, such as joint ventures or contractual relationships with other academic institutions.

- **Assessment**. The Committee shall periodically review the University's practices in assessing the performance of its academic programs and practices and receive reports of such assessments.

- **Accreditation**. The Committee shall monitor the University's participation in all accreditation processes.

*(For full version, see www.agb.org/improving-board-oversight-student-learning.)*

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boards might use to engage constructively with academic quality and student learning. Yet, the teams of board members, administrators, and faculty leaders found that progress also raised new and often more difficult questions. Two particularly challenging ones that surfaced and will need attention were:

- How should institutions balance the competing goals of assessment for accountability purposes and for improvement? These two goals easily come into conflict. Assessment findings that show areas of improvement might not be those that the institution wants made public.

- How can institutions demonstrate the value-added of the education they provide? Most assessments focus on a level of demonstrated student proficiency. While that is important, institutions may be better served by understand-

ing how much students learn and the approaches through which they learn the most. Correspondingly, they should know the areas in which students learn the least.

The institutions in the project made tremendous progress in the oversight of educational quality, but all would clearly acknowledge that their work continues. Even those institutions that started the two-year project with robust assessment efforts and growing board engagement would admit that they are only beginning to engage the board in the right way on student learning and educational quality.

Indeed, the work to engage the board appropriately in student learning and educational quality will be a long and complex journey for most colleges and universities. Those that find the work straightforward are probably not asking the necessary questions. ∎

Inside
The New
Schoolhouse:
**What Boards Can
Do to Improve
Student Learning**

# Competency-Based Education:
## What the Board Needs to Know

BY REBECCA KLEIN-COLLINS,
STANLEY O. IKENBERRY, AND GEORGE D. KUH

THE NEW LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IS MARKED by potentially disruptive developments surfacing almost daily: escalating college costs, unacceptably low degree-completion rates, and the advent of new technologies and competitive new providers, among others. Further fueling the disruption discourse is the uneasy sense that despite soaring college costs, the quality of student learning is falling well short of what the 21st century demands of our graduates and the needs of the economy and our democracy. Traditionally, a college degree has been considered in terms of "seat time"—students completing a stipulated number of courses and credit hours. Increasingly, that concept of higher education is being replaced by teaching and learning approaches that specify desired outcomes and focus squarely on evidence of *student performance*—what students actually know and can do with what they know.

## TAKE*AWAYS*

1   Increasingly, higher education is moving away from "seat time"—students completing a stipulated number of courses and credit hours—toward an approach that focuses on what students actually know and can do with what they know.

2   Competency-based education may have an even bigger impact than online earning in continuing to broaden student access to a college degree.

3   The lesson for governing boards is that sound academic process alone is no longer sufficient to ensure quality or guide continuous improvement. Attention to learning outcomes is equally important.

MARTY BLAKE

One prominent model representing that shift is competency-based education (CBE), which some observers suggest might have an even bigger impact than online learning such as MOOCs (massive open online courses) in continuing to broaden access to a college degree. In March 2013, the U.S. Department of Education released a letter endorsing competency-based education, encouraging institutions to seek federal approval for programs that don't rely on credit hours as a measure of learning. In December, the department invited institutions to submit ideas to test innovations like competency-based education in "experimental sites." The field responded quickly.

Lumina Foundation is supporting two efforts: 1) the Competency-Based Ed Network (CBEN) coordinated by Public Agenda that will include up to 20 institutions, and 2) the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) that will work with another 20 institutions at an early stage of developing competency-based programs. In addition, with Gates Foundation sponsorship, Educause's Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) initiative will work with selected institutions using a Breakthrough Models Incubator to create such programs. Public Agenda, CAEL, and Educause are coordinating their efforts to learn from one another going forward in order to maximize the benefits.

As growing numbers of institutions are considering launching some form of competency-based education, accreditors are engaging in conversations with institutions and one another about how to review such new programs and ensure their quality. Clearly, the CBE movement is gathering momentum. What should boards know about competency-based education and—equally important—what should they do about it in their fiduciary role?

## Understanding the Basics

Competency-based education is a term that can apply to a range of different kinds of postsecondary degree programs. At the same time, every CBE program has two distinguishing features:

- **A competency framework.** Competency-based programs start by defining the competencies required of their graduates. The competencies are statements describing what graduates should know and be able to do. Those competencies included in a framework will vary by area of study or major, with different levels of the same competency distinguishing an associate's degree from a bachelor's degree. Think of a competency framework as the skeleton around which the degree program is designed.
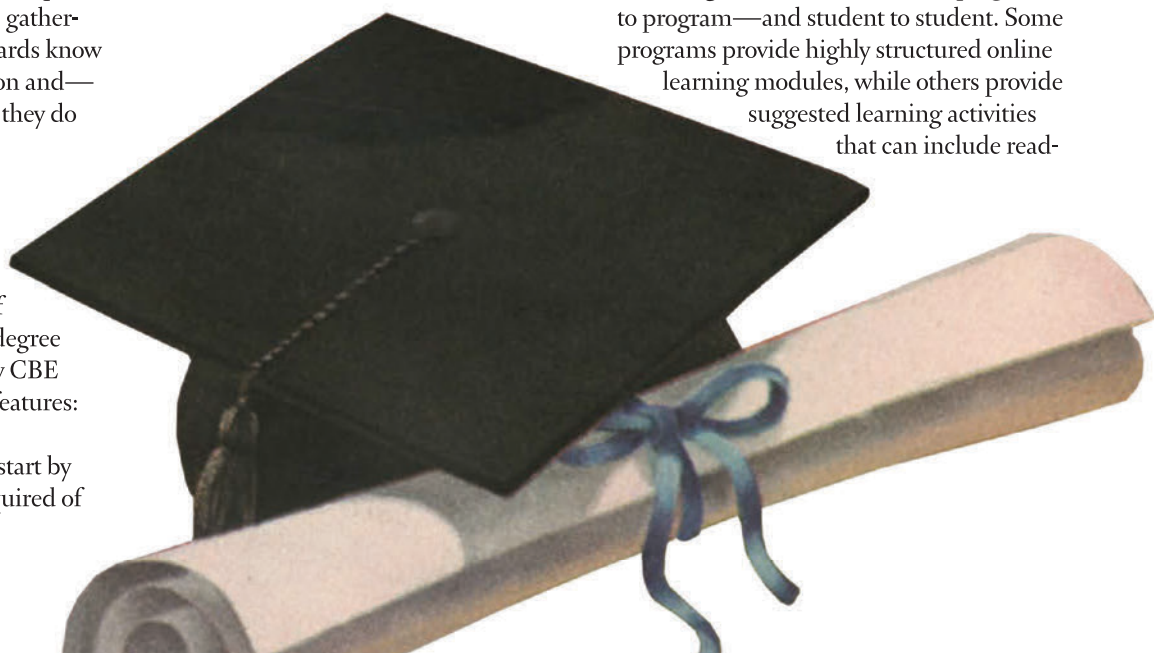
For example, the competencies for Western Governors University's (WGU's) bachelor of science in information technology, software emphasis, are organized in "courses" such as foundations of college mathematics, which addresses the following competencies:

- The student utilizes the operations, processes, and procedures of basic numeracy and calculation skills to solve quantitative problems in arithmetic and basic algebra.
- The student applies the operations, processes, and procedures of basic algebra to solve quantitative problems.
- The student utilizes the operations, processes, and procedures of basic geometry and measurement to solve problems in mathematics.
- The graduate evaluates quantitative data by interpreting statistical and graphic representations and solves basic probability problems.

(See complete program guide at www.wgu.edu/online_it_degrees/information_technology_degree_software.)

- **Competency-based assessments.** It is one thing for an institution to assert that its graduates have a specific set of competencies. It is quite another for it to verify that claim through valid and reliable assessments. CBE programs invest significant time and resources in competency-based assessments through which students demonstrate what they know and can do. Reaching the predetermined proficiency levels in those assessments is a requirement for graduation, so graduates who go on to work or further study are able to say with confidence (and have the data to prove) that they have demonstrated all of the competencies in the program's framework.

Individual CBE programs can vary quite a bit in how they operationalize the competency framework and the associated competency-based assessments. Some institutions follow a conventional path: They develop a competency framework from which the curriculum and individual faculty lesson plans are designed, and then integrate assessments into the regular credit-based course offerings. Other institutions do something entirely different by relying on competency-based assessments only. That is, students aiming for a baccalaureate degree do not necessarily accumulate 120 credits or take an average of four to five semester-length courses across the equivalent of eight semesters. Rather, students need to successfully pass the institution's series of program-related, competency-based assessments in order to graduate. How they acquire the requisite knowledge and skills varies from program to program—and student to student. Some programs provide highly structured online learning modules, while others provide suggested learning activities that can include read-

ings, lectures, project-based learning, or short online courses. Students also may have acquired some of the learning from their previous life, work, or military experiences. The same approach applies to associate's degree programs and certificates.

## Degrees through Assessment

Of course, assessment is not the only defining feature of CBE programs. The assessments are not easy; they require students to demonstrate college-level learning outcomes. And to do that, students need to gain additional knowledge to build on what they already know. Faculty members play an important role in guiding and coaching the student to acquire the learning they need, and there are many other support functions, such as advising, incorporated into these programs. But the important underlying premise of CBE-based programs is that what students know and can do is more important than how they learned it or how long it took to learn.

While colleges and universities have many CBE approaches from which to choose, it is the assessment-based model of CBE that has been getting a lot of attention in recent years. Perhaps the best-known assessment-based program is Western Governors University, which has been operating since the late 1990s. WGU does not offer traditional courses. Instead, students make progress toward their intended credential through online resources curated by WGU faculty. They work independently and at their own pace to learn what they need to successfully complete a series of assessments, with guidance from WGU faculty and coaches. Current offerings include teaching licensure and graduate programs, as well as bachelor's and master's degrees in business, information technology, and nursing.

WGU students are charged a flat rate of around $3,000 for a six-month term, during which they may complete as many competency-based assessments as they can. Students coming to the program with prior learning—whether from the workplace, military, or MOOCs—can use what they already know and can do to complete the assessments more quickly. Five states (Indiana, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas, and

Washington) have formed partnerships between WGU and their public postsecondary systems.

In recent years, several new CBE programs have emerged using variations of the assessment-based model:

- Since 2008, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) has offered its online Learn on Demand modules that are mapped to associate-degree and certificate-program competencies. The modules are designed to be completed within three to five weeks, but students have the option to complete them more quickly. The assessments are individualized based on a student's prior learning. At present, Learn on Demand offers two-year degrees in business, IT, and nursing; certificate programs; targeted skill training; and college-readiness programs.

- The Northern Arizona University (NAU) Personalized Learning program offers bachelor's degrees in liberal arts, computer information technology, and small business administration. Students take online courses or work through lessons that map to their program's competency framework. As with the Kentucky Learn on Demand program, the learning module and assessments are calibrated to the student's prior learning, which allows students to advance quickly through topics and competencies that they have already mastered. Launched in spring 2013, the NAU program costs $2,500 for a six-month term.

- In early 2013, Southern New Hampshire University introduced College for America, which offers an associate's-degree program based on 120 competencies. Students learn through online resources curated by the faculty and demonstrate competency mastery by completing tasks or projects evaluated by faculty members. The competencies are broken into "task families." For instance, the task family of "using business tools" focuses on tasks like "can use a spread sheet to perform a variety of calculations." Students pay $2,500 per year and can continue to work on a competency until they achieve it.

- In November 2013, The University of Wisconsin (UW) began offering

the UW Flexible Option, developed from a partnership between University of Wisconsin System campuses and UW-Extension. The UW Flexible Option is similar to the other self-paced, assessment-based models, with coaches available to work with students to create a learning plan and prepare for assessments. At present, the programs include bachelor's degree in nursing, biomedical sciences, diagnostic imaging, and information science and technology; a business and technical communications certificate through UW-Milwaukee; and an associate of arts and science through the UW System network of 13 two-year campuses.

Several other institutions have already developed assessment-based CBE programs, including Westminster College and Capella University.

## Is CBE Really Something New?

The first CBE programs emerged more than 40 years ago in response to the significant changes underway in the demographic profile of American college students. The Higher Education Act of 1965, along with other federal programs at that time, prompted institutions to become more accessible to adults. One approach to serving adult students incorporated a focus on competencies—acknowledging a student's previous learning and emphasizing performance rather than time in attendance. In the 1970s, the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) provided substantial grant support to develop competency-based programs at institutions with adult learning programs, including Alverno College, DePaul University School for New Learning, Empire State College, Regents College (now Excelsior College), Thomas Edison State College, and others.

This focus on *learning* rather than on *time spent in a classroom* also led to advances in prior-learning assessment (PLA) for college credit. Among the more popular PLA approaches were the assessment of student portfolios promulgated by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL); standardized tests such

as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), first administered by the College Board in 1967; and the Regents External Examination Program, launched by the New York Board of Regents in the 1970s. Excelsior College exams for nursing are still used today, and Excelsior's exams in other areas are now called UExcel. Students who participated in training offered outside of an academic institution, such as the military or their employer, may also be eligible for PLA credit through credit recommendations from the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) or American Council on Education (ACE).

While such assessment-based approaches were important at the time and continued for the next four decades, they existed largely on the fringes of higher education, almost always at "adult-focused" institutions or in special departments of continuing studies. The programs were virtually invisible in mainstream higher education.

Today, however, CBE is no longer ensconced in the adult-learning bubble; instead, it is the topic of frequent news-media coverage and congressional hearings fueled by a rapid expansion of new program offerings across the country. As illustrated in the earlier examples, many of the newer programs are based on assessments of demonstrated learning—not accumulated credit hours—to validate student progress toward degree completion.

At lower levels of competence, multiple-choice and other tests of objective learning may be appropriate. At higher levels of competence, however, getting at more complex and analytical thinking requires differ-

ent kinds of assessment, such as student narratives, demonstrations, simulations, or performance-based assignments. An example of the latter might be an assignment that requires students to develop a memorandum that examines the proposals from two vendors—a task through which the student demonstrates written communication, computational, and analytical reasoning proficiencies applied to a concrete problem situated in a business context.

## Implications for Boards

Most governing board members don't think of their institution as "competency-based education" campuses, as we use the term in this article. Western Governors University, Southern New Hampshire University, The University of Wisconsin, and other pace-setters employ specially designed assessments of incoming and enrolled students to determine what they know and can do as a result of work and life experience, studies at other institutions, and current learning activities. For the entire higher education enterprise, the CBE movement signals a shift in focus away from a reliance on the *processes* of learning (courses, credits, grades, years enrolled) as the primary indicator of quality toward the confirmation of student accomplishment (the actual knowledge, proficiencies, and dispositions students have acquired).

In fact, over the last decade, various groups, both in America and abroad, have devoted substantial effort to defining more precisely desired learning outcomes. Among the best known and most influential are the Essential Learning Outcomes promulgated in 2007 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as part of its multi-year Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) campaign, and the five proficiency domains defined

by Lumina Foundation in 2011 in the Degree Qualifications Profile (DPQ).

What does all this mean for governing boards? Without question, the processes of learning—student and faculty engagement, curricular rigor, richness and coherence, and other time-honored ways in which students learn—remain important. The lesson for governing boards, however, is that sound academic process alone is no longer sufficient to ensure quality or guide continuous improvement. Attention to *learning outcomes* is equally important.

Some of the questions that a board should consider about competency-based education include:

- Is this approach appropriate for our institution?
- What does it mean for us competitively if other institutions are offering this approach?
- What would it take for us to pilot or adopt this approach?
- Does this approach work better for some of our students than others?
- How does our institution develop such a program while maintaining or improving quality and academic rigor?

Boards should also:

**Make student learning a high, continuing priority.** Even though presidents and boards have limited powers, they can exert influence by framing the agenda and shaping board and campus conversations. Beyond faculty giving students grades in individual courses, what data are collected to obtain evidence of student performance and used to improve it? How is this evidence shared within the institution? Is this information available in a meaningful form to prospective students, employers, and accreditors? Presidents and governing boards can make sure these issues are given proper priority on an already crowded institutional agenda.

**Clarify the roles and responsibilities for ensuring academic quality within the board's structure and processes.** Most boards assign special responsibility for academic matters to an academic affairs or educational policy committee, but the board as a whole must be involved. The question of what constitutes academic quality too often takes the form of

program reviews that focus on curricular offerings and faculty credentials, with too little attention to evidence of what students are actually learning. Understanding roles and responsibilities for the oversight of academic quality through the assessment of student learning outcomes can be a significant step forward in positioning the board, the administration, and the faculty to work together in this key arena.

**Appreciate the promise but understand the limits of assessment.** Those who advocate greater attention to the assessment of student learning (count us among them!) would do well to do so with humility. Assessment tools, especially standardized tests, have their limits. Students may not be motivated to do their best in assessment exercises, especially if the results are of no personal consequence. Relevant learning outcomes are not always easy to define. The aim of some learners is self-actualization; for others, it is liberal learning and critical thinking. Still others may have career goals that take primacy, and, for others, the aim may be further education in graduate or professional school. Even those institutions that count themselves as "competency-based education" campuses face the daunting challenge of meaningful assessment. Boards can help by setting a tone of informed inquiry rather than suggesting judgmental certainty.

**Stay focused on the big picture and key actions that should flow from evidence of student learning.** Colleges and universities tend to be highly decentralized. Authority and responsibility for the assessment of student learning are distributed among members of the faculty, various colleges, departments, academic programs, and in student affairs units. Some studies, such as student and employer surveys, are conducted annually; others, only periodically. And, occasionally, evidence may be assembled and used in connection with accreditation and academic program reviews.

Too often, however, the results of assessments of student learning outcomes do not lead to action. To what ends is this information being used in institutional decision making and to improve student

outcomes and institutional performance? The board should expect that examples of productive use of assessment be presented in an understandable, coherent way so that it can be confident that the internal academic-quality controls of the institution are operating effectively. The chief academic officer and president are central actors in this effort, with the board providing the enabling authority while also benefitting from the periodic, comprehensive summaries of student accomplishment and institutional effectiveness.

## Final Words

As new kinds of students with new needs are admitted, as technology continues to transform teaching and learning, as institutional missions evolve and priorities shift, and as new financial models are required, evidence of student learning will become even more important. In part, the competency-based education movement is a response to growing concerns about both the quality and the cost of higher education. CBE's sharp focus on student learning outcomes is designed to validate the quality of the degree, while its technology-based approach to learning has the potential to lower cost for students and their families.

Even though CBE is not yet in the mainstream of American higher education, the odds are that many of its fundamental lessons soon will be. It has much to teach us, as these programs tend to serve nontraditional students who are learning in nontraditional ways. Confirmation of learning outcomes—competence—is a fundamental issue confronting every higher education institution and every learner. Whatever the challenge—defining the essence of what it means to be an educated person, improving student retention and graduation rates, or dealing with shrinking budgets and disruptive technology—integral to crafting a strategic response will be evidence about the extent to which students have learned what the institution promises and its students and society need. What is happening with regard to teaching and learning and the nature of the student experience? What are the outcomes? And how can they be improved?

Boards and institutions must continue to search for answers to these perennial questions. The quality of American higher education depends on it. ∎

**AUTHORS:** Rebecca Klein-Collins is the senior director of research and policy development at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Stanley O. Ikenberry is co-principal investigator of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) and the former president of the American Council on Education and the University of Illinois. George D. Kuh is Chancellor's Professor Emeritus of higher education at Indiana University at Bloomington and, with Stanley O. Ikenberry, co-principal investigator of the NILOA. He is also the founding director of the National Survey of Student Engagement and past president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

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# Notes