

Academic Oversight:

Asking Questions, Building Bridges

BY E.B. WILSON



TAKEAWAYS

- 1** The best way for trustees to fully understand and fulfill their responsibility to ensure that their institution is providing quality education and meeting academic goals is by asking appropriate questions.
- 2** Collaboration among trustees, faculty members, and administrators is essential to framing questions from a strategic perspective.
- 3** The process of such collaboration can have favorable consequences that are crucial to the success of any board's governance practices: enhanced trust and an orientation toward measurable outcomes.

WORKING AS AN AGB CONSULTANT, I WAS recently struck by a deceptively simple truth that emerged from an animated discussion with a client about board responsibilities for the oversight of academic policy. It is that *trustees are unlikely to fully understand and fulfill their responsibilities if they don't learn to ask the "right" questions.*

I was struck at the conclusion of the workshop by the collateral benefits that flowed from this simple and obvious expression of wisdom. The process that led to identifying the right questions, as developed for this particular client, was firmly rooted in cross-cultural collaboration. It caused the board to reorient its governance habits away from passive, silo-like oversight and toward the exploration of working engagements with faculty and institutional leadership. The reward on both sides of this governance equation, now more sharply focused on achieving institutional strategic outcomes, was greatly strengthened trustee skills, developed in a trust-building partnership with the faculty members.

What we learned is applicable to many other boards as they grapple with how to best ensure their college or university is providing educational quality and meeting its academic goals. In fact, while every institution must develop its own unique “right” questions, the process and the lessons learned with this client can apply to almost any governance issue—and can help bridge cultural gaps among trustees, faculty members, and administrators and ultimately improve the board’s performance.

And even though the client in this case

leadership, and members of the president’s cabinet. A private academy of liberal arts, founded in the mid-19th century, with 1,600 students committed to the rigors of a demanding curriculum in an urban residential setting, it boasted considerable knowledge and governance experience around the table. But even so, this was a highly experimental format for this board, and people were not at all certain at the beginning of the workshop what conclusions to expect at the end of it.

The trustees started the conversation and quickly revealed two widely opposed points of view about academic oversight. On one side were those who adamantly declared that the board had no business attempting to exercise academic oversight because they were not qualified by experience to tread in those waters. Typical sentiments went like this: “*We should look to the faculty as the institution’s professional teachers,*” or “*The president comes from a distinguished career in academe; what can we possibly add to that equation?*”

The contrarian arguments were just as colorful: “*The institutional mission is clear: We are dedicated to the education of students placed in our trust.*” “*We trustees are responsible for the integrity and the sustain-*

content of American History 101. Nor, of even greater concern, is it to insert trusteeship into the procedural rules that guide the election of the faculty’s leadership. These examples could go on and on. The important understanding is that prerogatives have their implicit presence in all organization or governance structures. For each participant, governance relationships are very much defined by boundaries that need to be, and should be, jealously guarded and not crossed.

So where does that leave the dialogue about the board’s responsibilities? We decided to challenge the board to work with the president, the faculty members present, and the senior staff members to frame questions from a strategic perspective. What topics related to academic performance should be legitimate preoccupations of a board of trustees? What does the board need to know to assess the academic performance of the institution it serves? By extension, what are the metrics with which to apply consistent and transparent measurements? And finally, where does this relatively unprepared board go, what process does it use, to generate the understandings necessary to the framing of those questions?

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was in the private sector, there are no reasons why the lessons learned in the course of finding the “right” questions should not be equally beneficial to public institutions. Why should a collaborative search by trustees, faculty members, and administrators for common ground on which to isolate mission-serving strategic imperatives and their “right question” metrics not also serve to bridge what often is a deep and seemingly intransigent governance divide?

Raising the Dialogue to a Strategic Level

The workshop, by design, brought together the full board with the president, the academic dean, members of the faculty’s

ability of that mission. How can we possibly abdicate that responsibility and never know with certainty whether the promises of our mission are actually fulfilled?”

I decided that the best way to reconcile such divergent and sometimes heated exchanges was to cause the conversation to ascend to strategic heights. I suggested that academic (or any other kind of) oversight does not, must not, imply that the board is invited to rummage around in the operating or professional prerogatives of the faculty or, for that matter, of the many other professional disciplines present on all campuses.

Effective academic oversight, I reasoned, is not a summons to intrude with questions about, for example, the course

A great conversation ensued. We had a long plenary discussion followed by three breakout groups composed of all participants. The groups were challenged to debate and recommend a list of questions, not to exceed 10 in number. The answers to those questions would generate a coherent database that, over time, would help the board measure the strategic vitality of the academic program.

Asking the “Right” Questions

The early going was a bit rough. It was quickly evident that the board’s and faculty’s cultures, indeed the institution’s culture, were put in play by the “10 ques-

10 Sample Questions about Academic Performance

Every board should know the answers to certain key questions while exercising its mandated authority to govern, fully respecting the professional prerogatives of the faculty. The following is a sample from one university.

1. Are we fulfilling the promises of our educational mission? How do we measure student outcomes? What are the metrics?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum? How do we measure those differences?
3. When we are asked to approve new academic programs, how do we judge the strategic fit?
4. Do our enrollment strategies attract the “right” students? Can our students do the work? Are they purposeful learners?
5. What do our retention metrics demonstrate about the quality of our teaching, learning, and advisory services?
6. Are we competitive in the market for new faculty members? Are there barriers that prevent hiring the first choice in faculty searches? Does our faculty compensation rank us competitively with peer institutions?
7. What are the most-current professional accomplishments of our faculty members? How has their scholarship influenced the academic field in which they practice?
8. What are our most recent pursuits of innovative pedagogy? How have we adopted and integrated state-of-the-art technology in the classroom?
9. What is the age profile of our faculty? How many faculty members have terminal degrees? What percentage have tenure-track appointments? What is the ratio, current and historic, of full-time to adjunct faculty?
10. When we are asked to approve annual financial budgets, are resources being allocated consistent with the institution’s academic mission and the approved strategic plan?

tions” charge to the groups. It became apparent that the first step must be to achieve clarity through an open dialogue about legitimate interests and time-earned prerogatives.

The trustee body language exhibited a variety of high-level discomforts: “*Why am I here?*” but with an unarticulated pretense that “*I think you (the faculty) have something that I need in order to govern, but I’m not sure what it is!*” Faculty members’ attitudes, more judicious but just as strongly expressed, were protective of the status

quo: “*We have never before been asked to justify our professional work, why now?*” They also strayed into a more rigorous defense: “*We are professional educators, you are not; why not just let us do our work and you do yours?*”

We began to find the solutions to the cultural dilemma by carefully, but clearly—no allowance for ambiguity—defining the mission of trustees. Words and phrases like “*mandated by the bylaws*” and “*stewardship of institutional resources*,” or “*integrity of the mission*,”

“*overarching strategic vision*,” and “*sustainable in perpetuity*” were fleshed out to describe the responsibilities if not the burdens of trusteeship.

We were as thoughtful and, I believe, equally penetrating when we also examined the mission of faculty members. What emerged was a parallel contrast of responsibilities illustrated by this sampling: “*We are at the center of the institution’s mission to educate; we are responsible for taking the raw material of entering students and preparing them intellectually and professionally for participation and leadership in an uncertain world; we must counsel and advise so that each student achieves his or her optimal educational experience.*”

Another dynamic also emerged and should not go unnoted: The academic leadership of the senior staff, the academic dean, served in a critical role to help bridge the two cultures. At times a broker, at times an advocate and source of fresh ideas, the dean understood both cultures and had the skills and knowledge with which to constructively intervene so that the meeting jumped over some otherwise insurmountable hurdles.

Now the tone was set, and a cross-cultural deal slowly emerged. The board began to articulate its role at the strategic level, but it discovered that it needed the faculty leadership to help frame the questions with which to generate a rich and sustainable database. The board

What we learned is with how to best educational quality and

found comfort in the fact that it was beginning to fulfill responsibilities from a strategic-outcomes perspective. The trustees concluded that the only route to achieving this level of comfort was found in a collaborative relationship with faculty members and administrative leaders who were the only credible and professional sources of data and information.

A second phenomenon quickly developed: The board, now that it was focused on what questions to ask, had little interest in exploring the depths of everyday

academe. Intrusive questioning was out, strategic dialogue was in.

While I do not pretend that it is a one-size-fits-all template, I've listed the 10 questions that this institution decided were its key indicators of academic performance. (Please see "10 Sample Questions about Academic Performance" on page 32.) The board's committee on academic affairs now focuses its agendas on a regular rotation of those questions and generates an interactive exchange of ideas, data, perceptions, and conclusions with the faculty and administrative representatives to the committee. This is done to better inform board judgments about mission success and decisions about strategic-resource allocations. It also helps frame condensed reports to the full board so that trustees can think strategically about their responsibilities for the intellectual health of their institution's students.

Two Unintended Consequences

The process of board-faculty collaboration spawned two unintended but favorable consequences that are crucial to the success of any board's governance practices: enhanced trust and an orientation toward measurable outcomes.

- **Building Trust**

The absence of trust is a frequent and fundamental barrier to effective governance in higher education. As a

and immediate reactions are to defend against perceived incursions. Ingrained doubts persist. Disdain can prevail on both sides.

But the search for the "right" questions that I am advocating has the potential to begin, or add to, the building of trust. Just the act of board members sitting down with faculty members and administrators to seek collaboration in the framing of questions about academic policy at a high level of strategic inquiry might become the first plank on the cross-cultural bridge. Given the cultural separations that divide boards and faculty, finding common ground and recognizing the realities of interdependence may promote the growth and nurture the continuity of trust. Remember what a wise man once said: Trust must be earned over time but can be lost in an instant.

- **Shifting to Oversight that Measures Outcomes**

The pursuit of the "right" questions at the strategic level has another important byproduct: It should force boards to reorient their work toward outcomes. By developing over time a database from answers to the 10 questions I posed, the trustees with whom I worked now know whether the academic program and the many interlocking strategies, programs, and initiatives actually pay off as student

entries into each other's worlds. The faculty members found that their voices were not only respected but needed. The board realized that a partnership with faculty was not only essential but strategically productive—it increased geometrically the board's base of knowledge within which to consider issues and make decisions. The experience was the birth of collaborative governance.

So the seemingly simple act of learning to ask appropriate questions is far more than just an interesting intellectual exercise. Yes, it should lead to getting the information needed to exercise effective trusteeship. But in today's environment, one that forces all boards of trustees to meet the complex demands of higher governance performance, the consequential rewards are compelling.

Learning to ask the "right" questions is a good start. But the process for arriving at those questions contains an array of governance prizes. Cultural bridges begin to shape the relationships between the board and the faculty, committee missions and agendas shift from passive oversight to energized strategic engagement, and the board's leadership is obliged to think about innovative ways to structure its work so as to arrive at a new and higher level of governance that advances institutional outcomes. The added value of trusteeship is strengthened, and governance practices are reoriented and reformed.

The board becomes an active instrument of strategic governance. The beneficiaries are the institution and its students. ■

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T'SHIP LINKS: Derek Bok, "Seizing the Initiative for Quality Education." March/April 2006. Roger G. Baldwin, "Don't Forget the Faculty." July/August 2008.

OTHER RESOURCES: AGB 2011 "Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality," www.agb.org. Susan Whealler Johnston and Kyle Long, "How Boards Oversee Educational Quality" (AGB Press, 2010).

applicable to many other boards as they grapple ensure their college or university is providing meeting its academic goals.

result, boards and faculty members have historically not shared a common understanding about or respect for each other's roles and responsibilities within the structure of institutional governance. Administrators come closer to understanding both sides of the cultural divide, but even so, it is no wonder that the cultural gap between trustees, faculty members, and some administrators not only exists but that it resists even the most thoughtful and genuinely willing attempts to bridge the gap. Instinctive

outcomes. The old model of passive board responses to rote and routine reports is replaced by dialogue about data, quantitative and qualitative, that measure academic achievements for goals connected to the strategic future of the academy.

For the college I have described, something culturally profound emerged. Because the trustees, faculty members, and administrators were now engaged in a continuing dialogue about their respective missions, they also discovered welcoming