

AGB STATEMENT ON

BOARD RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE OVERSIGHT OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

AGB ASSOCIATION OF
GOVERNING BOARDS
OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

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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.

Acknowledgments

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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.

Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality

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INTRODUCTION

A governing board is the steward of the institution¹ 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.

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>.

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