

HOW BOARDS
OVERSEE EDUCATIONAL
QUALITY: A REPORT ON A
SURVEY ON BOARDS AND
THE ASSESSMENT OF
STUDENT LEARNING

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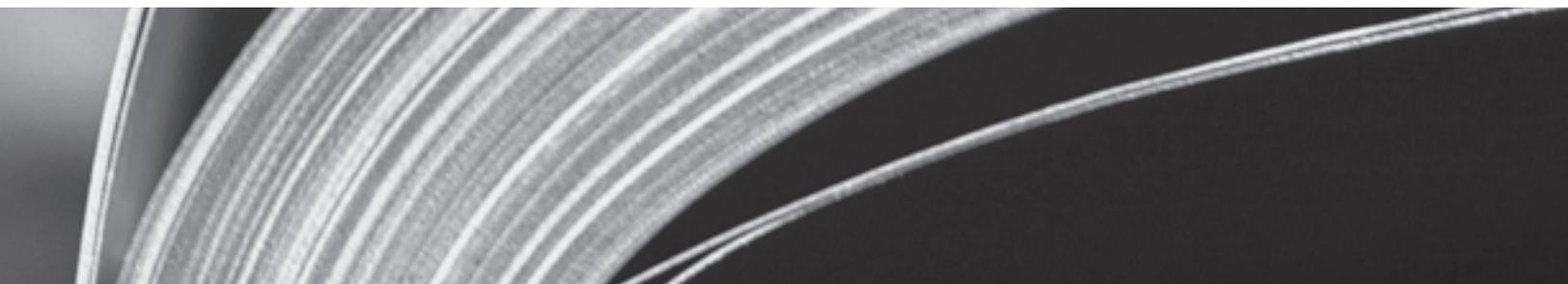
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HOW BOARDS OVERSEE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY: A REPORT ON A SURVEY ON BOARDS AND THE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

With generous support from



Acknowledgements

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Lumina Foundation for Education, an Indianapolis-based private foundation, strives to help people achieve their potential by expanding access to and success in education beyond high school. Through grants for research, innovation, communication and evaluation, as well as policy education and leadership development, Lumina Foundation addresses issues that affect access and educational attainment among all students, especially underserved student groups such as minorities, students from low-income families, first-time college-goers and working adults. The Foundation believes postsecondary education is one of the most beneficial investments individuals can make in themselves and that a society can make in its people.

How Boards Oversee Educational Quality: A Report on a Survey on Boards and the Assessment of Student Learning

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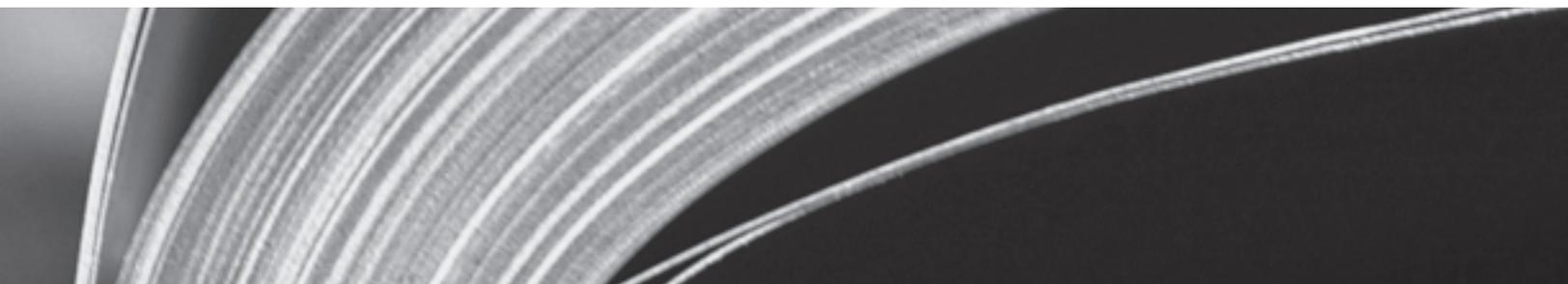
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FOREWORD



Over the last decade, assessment of student learning has moved beyond being a topic of discussion solely within the academic community and into the public discourse. Institutions are expected to measure student achievement both to inform and provide accountability to the public, as well as to assure the success of institutional mission.

We regularly hear board members ask how they can learn whether students are receiving the quality education the institution promises. What measures will help them understand student achievement? What information should they have to answer important questions about the academic enterprise? In this era of increased demand for accountability in higher education, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) was interested in better understanding the role governing boards currently play in monitoring policy making related to educational quality.

With generous support from Lumina Foundation for Education, AGB launched a two-year project—*Governance for Student Success*—that emphasizes the role of governing boards, working in collaboration with institutional presidents and chancellors, in helping to achieve the nation’s educational needs. Chief among these needs are increasing access, improving graduation rates, and addressing affordability.

Because significant information about the quality of education can be found in assessments of student learning, AGB sought, through a survey of provosts and chairs of academic affairs committees that resulted in this report, to develop a better understanding of how boards receive information on student learning, and what they do with the information they receive. The survey findings are mixed. While the majority of boards receive some information about student-learning outcomes, they are often unsure of how to respond to or interpret that information. Orientation to the information is relatively rare, and frequently, institutional leaders and board members do not share an understanding of the value boards can bring to discussions on student-learning outcomes and educational quality. Often, boards do not make the link between their financial responsibilities and educational quality.

Yet unless boards fully engage in discussions about the assessment of student learning, and understand the implications of that assessment, they will not fully carry out their fiduciary responsibility and add value at the policy level. Boards should not lead such an assessment, just as they should not be overly involved in deciding what to teach or how. But there are ways, highlighted within the report, for boards and administrators to work together more effectively on these central issues that ultimately determine institutional effectiveness. For example, in board and committee meetings, time should be devoted to consider what the institution is doing to assess and improve student learning. The board should set high expectations for receiving relevant and

useful information on student-learning outcomes, as well as actions taken to address any findings that should be improved. Board members should ask questions and expect candid responses about academic quality. For their part, administrators should include an introduction to the oversight of educational quality in board orientation and provide regular education and ongoing reports to the board on findings of assessment.

We believe that these and the other specific recommendations made in the report will stimulate the appropriate conversations between the board and administration on this primary purpose of our colleges and universities. As the report states, “For colleges and universities to respond fully to the demands of the public and the needs of students, they must continue to address the question of what difference a college education makes, and boards must be their partners in this.”

I’d like to take this opportunity to thank AGB staff members, including Executive Vice President Susan Whealler Johnston and Project and Research Coordinator Kyle Long, who wrote the report; Merrill Schwartz, director of research, and Philip Bakerman, research assistant, who conducted the research; and Julie Bourbon, who edited the report. I also extend my gratitude to Lumina Foundation for Education for its support of this important work.

We look forward to your comments. For more information, please contact me at rickl@agb.org or 202/296-8400.

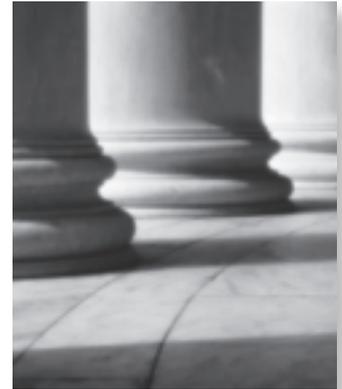
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard D. Legon', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Richard D. Legon

President, Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

August 2010

INTRODUCTION



How do we know that students are achieving the academic goals that institutions claim? Or, to put it more baldly: How do we know that students receive the quality education they pay for? As public concern about the cost of a college education has grown, so too have the demands for greater accountability for quality. For the last 10 or so years, this focus on assessment of student learning has extended beyond the academic community and into the larger public, with policy makers, parents, corporate leaders, and others raising questions about educational quality. Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), showing a decline in educational attainment, and from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, showing a decline in the ability of college graduates to read newspapers and other prose, have sparked demands for greater transparency in institutional reporting of student learning outcomes, as well as demonstrable improvements.

Assessment of student learning has long been a major activity of the academic community. For the past 35 years, conferences, workshops, scholarly research and publications, and institutional projects have examined the how's and why's of assessing what undergraduates have learned, the connections between student learning and institutional goals, and the use of assessment to improve teaching and learning. Changes in the requirements for regional accreditation have served to make this work universal among American colleges and universities.

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education produced “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education,” the report of the commission appointed by then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and commonly called “The Spellings Report.” The report, controversial in its making and bold in its recommendations, probed a range of topics, including educational quality and accountability. Among its recommendations, the report urged institutions to measure student achievement, “which is inextricably connected to institutional success” (p. 4), not only to improve teaching and learning but also to inform and provide accountability to the public.

“Lack of preparation and understanding of academic culture may be a reasonable explanation for the lack of trustee involvement in discussions of educational quality, but in a period of increased public demand for accountability from higher education—and its governing boards—that excuse is no longer sufficient.”

To address the accountability demand, higher education groups have developed electronic tools for sharing information with the public about educational quality, most notably U-CAN (University and College Accountability Network), by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), and the Voluntary System of Accountability, by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Others, such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), have provided guidance to campus leaders and faculty for enhancing assessment of undergraduate student learning as well as tools for benchmarking student learning and comparing outcomes.

Institutions have responded aggressively to these demands for greater transparency and accountability. Student-learning assessment has become a priority for many, often with new offices and positions to organize and guide the effort. Many organizations and institutions offer faculty training on best practices in assessment, and committees have formulated plans and strategies for implementing those practices. Institutions have gathered and shared data both within and among themselves. And yet despite all this, questions remain: What do we really know about student learning at our institutions? Based on what we do know, how is student learning being improved? Despite all the planning and data gathering at the institutional level and the calls for reform at the national level, studies reveal uneven results. While much has been done to advance assessment, much remains to be accomplished to ensure that student learning is appropriately assessed and that outcomes of such work are used for improving educational quality.

During this period of institutional activity and public debate about student-learning outcomes and educational quality, board engagement has been a missing piece. It is often observed that trustees lack professional experience in higher education academic programming and delivery and come to board service more commonly from business and industry, with a focus on fiscal oversight. This lack of preparation and understanding of academic culture may be a reasonable explanation for the lack of trustee involvement in discussions of educational quality, but in a period of increased public demand for accountability from higher education—and its governing boards—that excuse is no longer sufficient. Among the critical responsibilities of governing boards of colleges and universities is oversight of educational quality, and significant information about the quality of education can be found in assessments of student learning.

AGB's 2007 "Statement on Board Accountability" affirms that "Boards should determine that systematic and rigorous assessments of the quality of all educational programs are conducted periodically, and board members should receive the results of such assessments" (p. 7). Peter Ewell, assessment expert and trustee, states in *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality* (AGB, 2006) that 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" (p. vii). When boards approve candidates for graduation, they are in essence certifying that the students have met the institution's educational standards. But without conversations about those standards, an understanding of how they are met, and evidence about performance, that certification lacks authenticity and credibility. Additionally, when boards fail to ensure educational quality, they fail to fulfill their larger fiduciary responsibilities of ensuring that the institutional mission is met, the institution's reputation is protected and enhanced, and its resources are wisely spent. By engaging in discussions of assessment of student learning outcomes and focusing on understanding the lessons of this assessment and their implications, boards deliver on their fiduciary "duty of care" while also ensuring that the important process of assessment is ongoing, accountable, and meaningful to the institution.

Let us be clear. This is not a call for boards to direct academic programming or to interfere in any way with the prerogatives of academic administrations or the responsibilities of faculty for the design and delivery of the curriculum. Nor is it a call for boards to *lead* the assessment of student learning. In well-functioning institutions and systems, boards delegate such responsibilities to the administration and faculty. But delegation does not absolve the board of its responsibility to be well informed about matters related to educational quality and to ensure that assessment takes place. It is clear that board fiduciary responsibility for an institution's mission is fundamentally linked to educational quality and success.

THE SURVEY



In November 2009, AGB sent a survey to over 1,300 member chief academic officers (vice presidents and provosts) and chairs of board committees on academic affairs from public and private institutions, asking about board familiarity with and understanding of institutional assessment of student learning. The goal of the survey was to develop a picture of how boards currently understand this assessment and their relationship to it, the kind of information they receive on student learning and the use to which they put it, the degree to which they are engaged in meaningful discussion and decision making related to undergraduate student learning, and what, if anything, limits their involvement in this important topic. This and other work will lead to the development of a formal AGB advisory statement for boards focusing on this area of their fiduciary responsibilities.

The response rate for the survey was 38 percent, with 28 percent of responses from trustees, 58 percent from chief academic officers, and 10 percent from others. More than three-quarters (77 percent) of respondents were from independent institutions, and 23 percent were from public institutions, similar to the distribution of AGB member institutions. Unless otherwise noted, responses from board members and administrators were similar.

FIRST, THE GOOD NEWS.

The majority of respondents (77 percent) said that their institutions have a statement of expectations for what undergraduate students should learn. Such a statement is the baseline requirement for meaningful assessment of learning, providing standards against which performance can be assessed. Three-quarters said they learned about this responsibility through their service on the board's committee on academic affairs.

About half of the respondents pointed out the link between accreditation and assessment, indicating that board members most commonly learn about their fiduciary responsibility for monitoring student learning when their institutions prepare for re-accreditation. Half of the respondents reported that the board receives information about student learning at least once a year. In terms of data received, over two-thirds of respondents (68.5 percent) reported that the board receives results of standardized exams, such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), or graduate school entrance exams.

The results from alumni surveys are also commonly shared with boards. Somewhat less commonly provided to board members are results from more homegrown assessment tools such as employer surveys, discipline-specific assessments, and student portfolios.

TABLE 1

DOES THE BOARD OR ANY OF ITS COMMITTEES RECEIVE THE RESULTS OF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING MEASURES TO MONITOR STUDENT-LEARNING OUTCOMES?

Standardized examinations	68.6%
Alumni surveys	60.6%
Discipline-based assessments	45.5%
Institutionally-developed tests	37.4%
Employer satisfaction surveys	36.0%
Capstone courses	24.4%
Student portfolios	17.1%

A very positive sign was that over 60 percent of respondents reported that boards receive both trend and comparative data on such indicators as graduation rates, number of degrees awarded, time to degree, and average GPA. Such data provide useful information about degree attainment and can provide boards with good data for accountability and improvement purposes. However, these are important measures of student success, not of student learning.

GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS.

More than half (53 percent) of respondents reported that the board spends more time discussing the outcomes of student-learning assessment than it did five years ago. By role, the results showed consistency of opinion: 56 percent of board members cited this compared to 51 percent of administrators. Despite this increase, however, 62 percent of all respondents reported that the board does not spend sufficient time on such discussions.

TABLE 2

HOW HAS THE BOARD'S ATTENTION TO STUDENT-LEARNING OUTCOMES CHANGED IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS?

More attention now	53.2%
Less attention now	0.6%
About the same	31.4%
Don't know	14.8%

“Without a clear understanding of how assessment works at their institutions and without the necessary time to gain that understanding, boards will not be able to oversee it effectively, fulfill their fiduciary responsibility, or be as fully accountable as the times demand.”

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TABLE 3

IS SUFFICIENT TIME SPENT IN BOARD MEETINGS ON STUDENT-LEARNING OUTCOMES?

Yes, sufficient	38.5%
Too much	0%
No, not enough	61.5%

Asked how board time is spent in relation to academic issues, 79 percent of respondents said more time is devoted to discussions of finance and budget than to academic matters, while only 4.9 percent said the board spends more time on academic issues.

TABLE 4

WHAT IS THE RELATIVE BALANCE IN TERMS OF TIME SPENT DURING BOARD MEETINGS ON ACADEMIC ISSUES AND FINANCIAL ISSUES, INCLUDING BUDGET?

Much more on finance and budget	56.9%
Slightly more on finance and budget	22.0%
About even	16.2%
Slightly more on academic issues	2.8%
Much more on academic issues	2.1%

NOW FOR SOME CONCERNS.

Board preparation for monitoring student-learning outcomes. Over 20 percent of all respondents said that monitoring student-learning outcomes is not a board responsibility (see Table 6). This response was consistent by role, with 10.4 percent of board members and 12 percent of chief academic officers answering this way. A little more than one-third of respondents reported that board members learn about their responsibilities in this area during board orientation. In contrast, AGB’s 2009 “Survey on Higher Education Governance” found that 85 percent of board members were introduced to the institution’s finances during orientation; additionally, nearly 75 percent of boards receive training in higher education financial literacy.

In this survey on boards and student learning, the majority of board members (72.7 percent) reported that they learn about their fiduciary responsibility for monitoring student-learning outcomes during committee work. If all new board members were appointed to the academic affairs committee of the board, this approach for introducing them to this oversight responsibility would perhaps suffice. However, because this is not typically the case, the result is that board members are systematically unaware of and unprepared for this important fiduciary responsibility.

TABLE 5**HOW BOARD MEMBERS LEARN ABOUT THEIR FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITIES FOR MONITORING STUDENT-LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Committee work	72.7%
In preparation for (re)accreditation	51.6%
Faculty presentations to the board	38.5%
Orientation of new board members	36.6%
Continuing education of the board	36.3%
Board retreat	34.8%

Board understanding of assessment. Forty percent of respondents reported that the board does not understand the process of student-learning assessment at their institutions. By role, the responses differ significantly: 29 percent of board members say they do not understand the process while 48 percent of administrators say the board lacks this understanding. Another 10 percent of all respondents said that assessment of student learning is not discussed with the board. “I can’t remember a serious discussion about this in my 12 years on the board,” commented one private-university trustee. Twenty percent said that the process of assessment is still too new at their institutions for the board to be well informed.

Asked about the impediments to the board’s understanding of student-learning outcomes, the majority of respondents cited a lack of time at board meetings, particularly when other priorities require attention and time. The lack of adequate measures of student-learning outcomes also impedes board engagement and understanding, as does the perception that this information is simply not appropriate for the board’s role.

TABLE 6**WHAT ARE THE IMPEDIMENTS, IF ANY, TO YOUR BOARD’S UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENT-LEARNING OUTCOMES AT YOUR INSTITUTION?**

Other priorities/crises require board attention	63.8%
Not enough time at board meetings	44.9%
Inadequate measures of student learning outcomes	29.8%
This is not appropriate to the board’s role	21.5%
No impediments	15.5%
Lack of interest among board members	13.1%

Without a clear understanding of how assessment works at their institutions and without the necessary time to gain that understanding, boards will not be able to oversee it effectively, fulfill their fiduciary responsibility, or be as fully accountable as the times demand. And, they will be less well prepared to consider policy decisions that require a clear understanding of the strategic relationship between education issues and fiscal oversight.

Information received. While college rankings provided by *U.S. News and World Report* and Peterson’s do not offer information on student-learning outcomes, all survey respondents said board members are as likely to receive rankings data (61.3 percent) as they are alumni surveys (60.6 percent) or even grade point average data (58.1 percent). When looked at by role, the picture changes somewhat, with board members saying they receive more on college rankings, and administrators saying board members receive more on alumni surveys.

TABLE 7
OF THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION, WHAT DOES THE BOARD RECEIVE?

	All	Trustees	Administrators
College rankings data	61.3%	72.2%	54.5%
Alumni surveys	60.6%	54%	63.1%
Grade point averages	58.1%	57.8%	57.4%

Further, more than three-quarters of all respondents consider rankings somewhat important (60.8 percent) or very important (15.9 percent) to the board’s monitoring of educational quality. Because rankings data are easily accessible and offer comparisons, boards may find them convenient substitutes for indicators of the quality of learning, and indeed this is often the way they are treated. However, retention and graduation rates and student/faculty ratios are as close as rankings come to descriptors of learning. Boards need much better assessment information.

Despite this, slightly more than half of respondents reported that the information the board receives is either satisfactory (43.1 percent) or very satisfactory (11.1 percent) in meeting its needs to monitor student learning. Only 18 percent said they found the information either unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory. The board chair at a private institution noted that “We get spotty anecdotal information, but we don’t see comprehensive data.” The academic affairs committee chair of a private institution remarked, “I have a perception that there must be other valid measures of student-learning outcomes beyond what we currently use, but I don’t know what they might be.”

Fourteen percent of respondents reported that the full board receives no information about student-learning outcomes. By role, the responses varied significantly, with 22 percent of trustees saying the board receives no outcomes information compared to 11 percent of administrators. The difference may be a comment on how well the board members understand the information or the use to which they put it. A trustee of a private university observed that assessment information “was never shared because we never asked,” and 12 percent of respondents reported that monitoring student-learning outcomes is not considered a board responsibility.

When asked about the kinds of information board members would find valuable in monitoring student-learning outcomes, respondents suggested the following:

- An annual refresher on outcomes assessment—the rationale and methodologies.
- Information about what other boards and academic affairs committees receive and how they use it.
- An easily monitored dashboard of strategic indicators of student success.
- Longitudinal and comparative information on student-learning outcomes.
- Enough information to understand the significance of the data they receive.

Board use of information on student-learning outcomes. Less than one-quarter of respondents reported that the board uses information about student learning to inform budget decisions. By role, the responses varied considerably, with 31 percent of board members answering in the affirmative, compared to only 19 percent of administrators. These answers are disheartening and raise concerns about the disconnect between resource allocation and student learning, especially given the financial constraints faced by many colleges and universities. In his preface to a recent report on the connections between assessment and institutional resources, Peter Ewell emphasizes this finding: “Simply investing more money does not appear to produce more or better outcomes. Improved student learning will occur only if such investments are directed and intentional” (“Connecting the Dots between Learning and Resources,” Jane Wellman, 2010, p. 3). Further, the report indicates that institutions that outperformed peers in student engagement and retention did not spend more per student but they did spend *differently*, putting proportionately more money into academic and student support than their peers did (p. 11). Clearly, appropriate connections between fiscal and educational decision making can have positive effects on both “bottom lines.” Asked for examples of actions boards have taken after receiving assessment information, one board member reported “a significant reallocation of funds to support internships and study abroad as a result of our NSSE discussions.”

“Because rankings data are easily accessible and offer comparisons, boards may find them convenient substitutes for indicators of the quality of learning, and indeed this is often the way they are treated. However, retention and graduation rates and student/faculty ratios are as close as rankings come to descriptors of learning.”

“The hard work of assessment has value when it leads to an improvement in student learning and achievement and when it supports accountability. Boards have a stake in both and should be expected to engage in the process appropriately.”

Also worth noting among the survey results is that trustees are more likely than administrators to report that the board’s monitoring of student-learning outcomes has contributed to improvements in student learning (26.9 percent compared to 14.8 percent). A chief academic officer at a private institution remarked of his governing board, “Individuals have offered important insights, but for many, this is a subtle and difficult element in their overall responsibilities.” The hard work of assessment has value when it leads to an improvement in student learning and achievement and when it supports accountability. Boards have a stake in both and should be expected to engage in the process appropriately. A provost reported, “The board discusses student-learning outcomes regularly and as a result we are currently stepping up our focus on students’ ability to find employment and graduate study through employer and student surveys. We are using this information to analyze the effectiveness of our curricula to prepare students for their professions and lives.” A board member at a private institution reported that the academic affairs committee and the full board “reviewed student improvement in writing after three years of college training and compared our results with those of peer institutions. The basic curriculum was revised as a result, including more intensive writing early in the student’s experience.” An administrator said, “Since our board has established a range of accountability policies and practices that are centered on student-learning outcomes, it is much easier to engage faculty and administrators in meaningful and productive discussions.”

Other positive changes reported were a culture of assessment across the campus, course revisions, and greater attention to the assessment process overall by faculty and staff. These final comments point to what may be the greatest value of board engagement in assessment of student learning—heightened attention to the board’s fiduciary responsibility for educational quality, including greater understanding of student-learning assessment results, clearer institutional focus on accountability, and greater responsiveness to needed changes surfaced by assessment.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The results of this survey describe a governance environment in which the majority of boards receive some information about student-learning outcomes but are unsure of how to interpret or respond to it. The majority of board members, who frequently come to their service from business and industry, receive orientation to higher education finances, but orientation to educational assessment and quality is relatively rare. Too often, college rankings are used as a proxy for educational quality for the board. While boards are devoting more time to considerations of educational quality, most agree it is still not enough time. Board members and chief academic officers are not always on the same page as to the value boards can bring to the institutional effort to assess student learning, and few boards make a link between financial decisions and educational quality. As has long been the case for institutions, boards also find their engagement in assessment of student learning is situational, often driven by reaccreditation. And sometimes boards do not receive useful information from assessment because institutions still have not established reliable processes to assess student learning.

For colleges and universities to respond fully to the demands of the public and the needs of students, they must continue to address the question of what difference a college education makes, and boards must be their partners in this. Boards must be a part of the conversation about student learning, but they cannot do this alone. Institutional administrators should encourage their involvement and provide appropriate orientation and education. They must receive appropriate information on what the institution expects and what it finds in the process of assessment. And, they must hold the administration accountable for following up to address identified needs. While respecting the responsibility of faculty and academic administrators, boards can and should be the lever that institutions need to improve their assessment of student learning and to act on findings in a way that improves educational quality and delivers on the promise of higher education.

Suggestions for board members

1. Develop your understanding of your fiduciary responsibility for educational quality.
Recognize that education has two bottom lines: one for finances and one for educational quality.
Also, understand that discussions of both can be linked in meaningful ways.
2. Devote time in board meetings to educational opportunities and discussions of what the institution is doing to assess and improve student learning.
3. Expect to receive useful, high level information on student-learning outcomes, including actions taken to improve learning outcomes based on the findings, as well as the results of those actions.
Look for comparisons over time and to other institutions. Devote time to discussion in board meetings.
4. Use information from the assessment of student learning to inform appropriate financial decisions.
5. Recognize that faculty and academic administrators shape the approaches to assessing the outcomes of student learning, but the board is responsible for ensuring that assessment takes place and that results lead to action for improvement.

Suggestions for administrators

1. Include an introduction to the oversight of educational quality in board orientation.
Make sure it is included in the list of board responsibilities that is discussed with new board members.
2. Provide regular education to all board members on the institution's assessment process, key results, and actions.
3. Provide high-level reports to the board on findings of assessment, including a set of dashboard indicators, and engage board members in discussions of implications.
4. Be certain that meeting agendas of academic committees and the full board allow strategic and comprehensive discussions of assessment—the rationales, the processes, the findings, the implications, and any follow-up actions.
5. Include the board in the accreditation process in appropriate ways.

RESOURCES

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



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