

## The Governing Board's Role in Assessment

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Extracted from Chapter 6 of *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*,  
Jossey-Bass (2015)

Leadership is important in any endeavor undertaken by a college or university, but it is especially critical for effective and meaningful assessment of student learning outcomes. While it is often emphasized that faculty engagement and buy-in are the most crucial determinant of success in assessment, these conditions are rarely attained in the absence of visible and sincere support by the institution's leaders.

Members of institutional boards of trustees occupy a prominent, but carefully delimited place in the assessment of student learning outcomes. On the one hand, they hold ultimate responsibility for an institution's assets and activities. This means that they are obliged to examine academic quality and are the only authority, save that of the state in the case of public colleges and universities—that can compel the institution's president to pay attention to something. On the other hand, the powers that boards possess must be exercised with restraint. Too much intrusiveness—especially in academic matters—obstructs effective governance and can constitute a significant threat to the quality of teaching and learning. In practice, this delicate balance of authority and restraint means that boards will generally act indirectly in the realm of assessment policy by asking questions and ensuring that the basics of academic quality assurance are in place.

### Roles and Responsibilities with Respect to Assessment

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Put succinctly, the board has two basic responsibilities to the institution with respect to assessment. The first is a fiduciary responsibility for academic quality that is just as important as its better-known fiduciary responsibility for the financial affairs of the institution. The second responsibility that boards have with respect to assessment is consistent with the obligation that any governing authority has to the organization over which it presides: to ensure that the organization's leaders possess the tools needed for effective management. For colleges and universities, one of these tools is assessment, whether it is embodied in the direct assessment of student learning outcomes or indirect assessment through surveys or program review.

- Just as it is a violation of its fiduciary obligation for a board to allow an institution to fail financially, it is a failure of board responsibility to allow an institution to graduate students who do not meet accepted standards of quality with respect to what and how much they have learned. Boards clearly recognize the former when they authorize and receive the results of a financial audit—a process that certifies for a given period the credibility of the institution's financial statements. The academic counterpart of a financial audit is a periodic accreditation review—a process

that periodically certifies the soundness of the academic awards the institution confers with respect to content and quality. When members of the board “stand behind” a graduating class at a commencement ceremony each term, they symbolically bear witness to this fiduciary obligation.

- It is a central duty of the board to ensure that information-gathering processes are in place and, especially, that the results of these processes are used to dispassionately evaluate learning with an eye toward their continuous improvement. Relevant indicators should be part of regularly reviewed institutional dashboards, and boards should hear from faculty and staff regarding what an institution is doing to improve performance. Another part of this responsibility is the board’s role in selecting or periodically evaluating the performance of the institution’s president. A significant consideration here is the effectiveness with which the president champions assessment and its use as a management tool. To emphasize this matter, some institutions use a set of performance indicators that include assessment results as part of an annual presidential evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

These two board responsibilities thus encompass the dual role that assessment typically plays at any academic institution. The first is summative, and embodies the external accountability function, largely through regional or program accreditation, that assessment frequently plays. The second is formative, and embodies the role of information-based quality improvement that effective assessment should also engage. Boards must foster both.

### **Operational Activities in Assessment**

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The board’s principal operational activities in assessment are ensuring that basic assessment processes are in place and that the institution’s leadership is using their results to monitor and improve the teaching and learning process. This first requires basic knowledge of what these processes are and how they operate. One widely-cited source on this topic lists these in the form of a set of basic questions that can be asked about any “business” (Ewell, 2013):

- How good is our product (learning assessment)?
- How good are we at making our product (retention and student flow)?
- Are our customers satisfied (surveys of students and employers)?
- Do we have the right mix of products (program review)?
- Do we make the grade (institutional accreditation)?

Board members should ensure that information addressing each of these questions is periodically gathered and should review the results.

The same source also lists three principles that should guide board engagement in assessment.

- The first emphasizes a posture of indirect engagement by enjoining board members that “running the curriculum is the faculty’s responsibility; the board’s role is to remind them of that responsibility.”
- The second principle admonishes board members to keep discussions of assessment results focused on strategic issues like maintaining academic quality and new program directions, and to refrain from getting tied up in the details of academic management.
- The third asks board members to expect and demand a culture of evidence in which anecdotes are minimized and assertions backed with evidence-based argument.

The operational imperative of all three principles is that boards should ask academic leaders probing questions about the meaning and action implications of any assessment evidence that they present.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Truman State University in Missouri has followed this practice for more than two decades.

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They then should listen carefully to the answers these leaders provide to assure themselves that matters of academic quality are being properly attended.

Two final aspects of the board's operational engagement with assessment require brief mention. First, many of these activities will properly take place in the academic affairs committee of the board, which usually comprises a subset of board members, academic leaders, and faculty members. But even where this is the case, conclusions and key issues must be aired for the full board at the next available opportunity. To ensure that this is the case, board members should ask the institution's assessment coordinator (or equivalent) to supply a formal update of assessment activities and results at least annually. Second, many public institutions have multi-institutional governing boards as part of a state college or university system. Exercising proper oversight of academic quality through a system board can be a major challenge in large systems, because the opportunity for question and answer between board members and academic leaders is so limited. In such cases, board members need to remain especially focused on ensuring that crucial quality assurance and improvement processes like accreditation and program review are addressed, and where each institution in the system is in the rhythm of these processes.

Board members should cultivate the habit of asking good questions of the faculty and administration about student learning and how its quality is being maintained.

### **Principal Challenges and Responses**

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Board members frequently encounter two challenges when they consider the proper role of assessment in quality assurance. The first arises because the professional and career backgrounds of board members mean that they are typically more familiar with money and organizational strategy than they are with curriculum and pedagogy. This can lead to considerable reticence in dealing with topics like student learning outcomes assessment—topics with which many board members do not feel comfortable or competent even though they may have valuable things to contribute to the discussion. Several approaches can be effective in meeting this challenge. The most important is for all parties to avoid the use of the arcane language and terminology that unfortunately typifies much discussion about assessment and academic quality. Most of the real content in a discussion about findings and methods can be readily translated into more understandable terms, much as Ewell's "five basic questions" noted earlier represent a "business-like" reframing of basic academic quality practices. Another way to address this challenge is to ensure more frequent direct contact between board members and faculty members, particularly through the academic affairs committee. Greater familiarity through more frequent contact—particularly informal contact—will help diffuse the barriers that board members may have imposed on themselves when it comes to discussing matters with which they feel less comfortable. Finally, increased familiarity will be a byproduct of ensuring that discussions of academic quality are held regularly, as advised earlier.

The opposite challenge is encountered when board members choose to proactively intervene in the operational management of academic affairs. In assessment, this may take the form of immediately recommending direct action to fix a deficiency that assessment results appear to have uncovered without sufficient faculty discussion and respect for academic governance. Another is mandating a particular assessment approach (like a standardized test) without consulting academic leaders or the faculty. In their professional lives, board members are often accustomed to direct action and tend to be impatient with the much slower pace of academic decision making. More substantively, some board members may have deeply held positions on what and how particular subjects should be taught. Both of these conditions threaten to undermine the delicate balance of strategic oversight discussed above. Clarifying the limits of appropriate board concerns through board handbooks and the orientation of new board members can be helpful here.

In short, the role of the board, although indirect, is essential to sound assessment. Board members should be broadly informed about what the institution is doing in assessment and should regularly receive reports about assessment findings and what they mean. And they should hold academic leaders accountable for acting on the results of assessment by following up on promised actions

in subsequent meetings. Above all, however, board members should cultivate the habit of asking good questions of the faculty and administration about student learning and how its quality is being maintained.

## References

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Ewell, P. T. (2013). *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality*. Washington, DC: Associated Governing Boards (AGB).

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