SECOND EDITION

MAKING THE GRADE

HOW BOARDS CAN ENSURE ACADEMIC QUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

As board members, we are accustomed to looking after the financial health and fiscal integrity of our institutions. Virtually every board meeting we attend features reviews of budgets, revenue projections, capital needs, or the approval of specific expenditures. Many of us also sit on the foundation boards of our institutions, where examining specific investments and associated returns is the principal order of business. But at many institutions, the board only rarely gets to look directly at the heart of the academic enterprise: the quality of teaching and learning. This is confirmed by the results of AGB’s recent survey of board members and academic administrators, which indicates that almost two-thirds of respondents do not feel that enough time is spent examining student learning at board meetings.¹

For many reasons, this state of affairs has begun to change—and change it should. As in the far-more-visible world of elementary and secondary education, the products of our colleges and universities are experiencing intensive public scrutiny because of the overwhelming importance of developing the nation’s “educational capital” in a globally competitive world. At the same time, competition within higher education for more and better students means that attention to academic quality must be paramount if the institutions for which we are responsible are to prosper.

As in other realms of institutional operations, 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. Ensuring academic quality is a fiduciary responsibility; it is as much part of our role as board members as ensuring that the

institutions have sufficient resources and is spending them wisely.²

Most boards have academic affairs committees that are responsible for broad oversight of the institution's academic functions, including programs, curricula, teaching, research, and faculty affairs. These committees have a specific responsibility for ensuring that academic quality assurance and improvement mechanisms are in place. They can be expected, for example, to look carefully at the evidence about student learning or the results of academic-program review, then engage in interpretive dialogue with senior academic administrators and faculty committee chairs to determine potential implications and what improvements can be made. Occasionally, such dialogue will result in a recommendation to the full board about a potential strategic direction with respect to academic programming or a needed investment. For small boards that have no discrete academic affairs committee, the full board will have to judiciously assume these responsibilities.

My intent in this book is to review the substance of what board members should know about the various dimensions of academic quality, the mechanisms colleges and universities use to investigate and improve it, and the kinds of questions we should ask our presidents and chief academic officers about how the institution is doing. I briefly examine the various changes that have occurred in both the academy and its operating context that now compel attention in ensuring academic quality. I then go on to review four major elements of academic quality assurance and improvement that boards should know about:

1. the assessment of student learning,
2. student retention and graduation rates,
3. stakeholder satisfaction, and
4. academic-program review.

Each is briefly described in terms of how the process works and the kinds of questions board members should ask about results. For each, moreover, I list re-

² Consistent with Principle 1 of the "AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality" (AGB, 2011): See Appendix, page 106.
sponsibilities particularly appropriate to the academic affairs committee. A final chapter addresses institutional and program accreditation—the increasingly important process of external review that draws upon internal evidence and certifies quality for an institution's many stakeholders.

Defining the Territory

One way to organize the processes that make up academic quality assurance and explain how they fit together is to visualize the institution's teaching and learning functions as they would work in a typical business enterprise. Given this perspective, questions such as the following will be familiar to most boards of directors in other settings:

- **How good is our product?** For colleges and universities, the principal product is student learning, and the quality of learning outcomes should be a central concern. Just as in a manufacturing enterprise, quality needs to be examined from at least two perspectives: the ultimate quality of the product on completion (that is, what a student knows and can do upon graduation) and the "value added" by the "production process" of instruction (that is, how much more a student knows and can do upon graduation than he or she did upon entering the institution). Determining these is the business of assessment.

- **How good are we at producing our product?** Like every other "production process," college-level instruction entails a certain amount of "waste." Not all students who enter our institutions as freshmen will complete their programs, and many of those who do will "drop out" for some period of time or will otherwise finish late. Patterns of student flow into and through our institutions are important to monitor because they affect both costs and outcomes. As a result, every institution should know something about student retention and graduation.

- **Are our customers satisfied?** Like all businesses, colleges and universities have a range of stakeholders, and the perceptions they maintain about our in-
stitutions are important to monitor because they will strongly affect whether the stakeholders continue to relate to and invest in us. Among the key stakeholders from whom we must seek such information are students, their parents, potential students and their parents, employers, civic opinion leaders, and members of the public in the regions we serve. Periodically examining stakeholder perceptions and opinions can help tailor our product and anticipate emerging needs.

- **Do we have the right “mix” of products?** Like businesses that typically offer diverse “product mixes,” colleges and universities offer degrees in many fields and provide instruction at multiple levels. Thus, regardless of the levels of outcomes achieved and the efficiency of the production process, institutions should periodically take stock of their “product portfolios” to determine whether they are offering the right things at the right levels in the light of graduate quality and the marketplace. Stock-taking of this kind is typically a part of academic program review.

- **Do we make the grade?** Businesses that want to stay competitive must obtain external certifications or ratings of their quality. For products, that may take the form of a certification by Underwriters Laboratories (UL) or a Good Housekeeping Seal. Companies themselves can pursue international quality certifications such as ISO 9001 or seek the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. For colleges and universities, the basic quality certification is institutional accreditation, and it is critical for institutions if they are to remain in good standing.

Analogies between the academy and the world of business, of course, can be overdrawn. But characterizing some of the basic processes of academic management and quality assurance in business language emphasizes the fact that academic affairs should not be considered alien territory by members of the board who do not happen to be academics. Familiar principles of wise management and judicious oversight should inform these functions just as they do any other.
Defining the Board’s Role

The basic questions posed here are not only colloquial but are intentionally pitched at a level appropriate for board involvement. The role of the board in academic-quality assurance, as in any other area, needs to be defined in terms of explicit boundary conditions that guard against overstepping the line between exercising necessary fiduciary responsibility for the institution and directly managing its operations. While this is always a delicate balance, it is even more so in academic affairs, where issues tend to be more complex than in more “businesslike” areas of institutional functioning such as finance, personnel management, communications, and fundraising.

Why are academic-quality issues more complex? Partly because faculty from different disciplines often have different values with respect to what is most important in the curriculum and what constitutes high-quality performance. Thus there is much more ambiguity than in whether a fiscal bottom line is black or red. Lines of authority, too, are less clear-cut: Academic matters typically are managed by consensus, and individual faculty and departments are legitimately accorded a great deal of autonomy in defining what they do with respect to instruction and how they do it. These factors mean that coming to agreement and closure on academic matters may take a good deal of time.

This state of affairs means that boards need to display patience in allowing the process of academic deliberation to run its course. But it also means that board members should continue to press for answers and avoid the temptation to stop asking questions just because the process seems stalled.

One way to achieve clarity about the board’s proper role in these matters is to consider the following principles:

- **Running the curriculum is the faculty’s responsibility; the board’s role is to remind them of that responsibility.** Principles of shared governance at any institution mean that primary responsibility for an academic program is vested in its faculty. This means that faculty first must define the learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve in each academic program and
The Academic Affairs Committee

For boards that have an academic affairs committee, dialogues about academic quality should be deeper, but the need to maintain appropriate balance becomes even more important.

Academic affairs committees are expected to examine evidence of academic quality in greater detail than the full board, as well as discuss emerging implications with academic leaders and senior faculty members. Such discussions may well raise questions about curricular change, program inventory, the need for greater attention to faculty development, and potentially significant investments in instructional technology. Because of their unique position and ability to see the issues from the point of view of the institution as a whole, rather than from the perspective of a particular department or school, committee members may be able to shed a different interpretive light on some of this evidence and should not hesitate to do so. But like the full board, committee members should be mindful that their role is about strategic direction, not the details of how things should be done.

for the institution as a whole, then design and deliver a curriculum consistent with these objectives.

Although some variance in how each faculty member teaches toward established learning objectives is normal, it is both appropriate and important for the board to insist that all faculty members have such objectives, that instructors are conscious about designing learning activities consistent with those objectives, and that they are collecting evidence that those objectives are being attained. It is also important for the board to remind faculty members that such work is an integral part of their academic responsibility. But it is beyond the board's appropriate role to question or dictate the content of those intended outcomes, or the particular instructional designs and approaches used to achieve them.

- **Stay focused on strategic issues.** Strategic issues are “mission-critical”—that is, they are issues that, if left unattended, will threaten the institution's ability to fulfill its purposes. Balanced budgets, for example, are mission-critical, which is why boards pay so much attention to achieving them. But all of
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the business-oriented questions noted earlier are mission-critical, too. Student retention, for example, is mission-critical because it affects not only tuition revenue but also institutional reputation, which is essential for attracting new students. Program mix is mission-critical because it matters greatly to the student markets that an institution wants to tap, and because it largely characterizes institutional type and aspirations. And maintaining the quality of student-learning outcomes is mission-critical because those outcomes are used to validate the claims that an institution makes about its graduates—claims that, if unsubstantiated, will affect graduates’ employment and postgraduate opportunities and ultimately an institution’s ability to attract new students.

In this regard, strategic questions should reflect how well the institution is performing its fundamental job of graduating students who are competent and well prepared. They should not address the specific changes needed in response to negative assessment results. Similarly, strategic questions may reflect new opportunities for institutional markets or reveal the potential need for new programs during a program review. They are not about designing the content or dictating the instructional approaches of new programs.

- **Expect and demand a culture of evidence.** In the past, colleges and universities viewed academic quality as intangible, impossible to measure, and dependent on the eye of the beholder. That traditional view rested largely on institutional resources and reputation as a proxy for academic quality.

  The current premise of academic-quality assurance, however, takes an entirely opposite view, holding that it is possible to assemble meaningful and generalizable evidence of academic quality and to act on that data to improve teaching and learning. But because many of the processes in place to do so are new and unfamiliar, there remains a tendency at many institutions to make assertions about student learning or program quality based largely on anecdote.

  Boards should not let that happen. Conversations about academic quality
in any of its dimensions should be based on evidence. Boards should insist on it, and administrators and faculty members should come to expect it. Whenever claims about quality, effectiveness, or improvement are made, boards should always ask, "How do we know that?" If evidence-based answers are not offered, the follow-up question should be, "What would it take to find out?"

In many cases, adequate evidence may not be available for legitimate reasons: Methodologies for gathering appropriate evidence in some areas may be unavailable, inapplicable to the institution’s circumstances, or simply too expensive to pursue in a cost-effective way. But the board nevertheless has a responsibility to ask the right questions.

- Recognize that evidence about academic quality raises issues but rarely gives final answers. Much of the evidence generated by academic-quality reviews ends up being presented in numeric form and, as a result, has an air of precision that suggests finality. In truth, though, such data usually represents not the end but rather the beginning of a conversation. This will be the case particularly in the deliberations of the academic affairs committee, where evidence about academic quality should be regularly presented and thoroughly discussed. Such conversations are not exclusively confined to the academic affairs committee, however. Accordingly, when presented with such data, both board and committee members should not just take them at face value but should instead ask administrators what they think the data mean and what action implications grow out of the findings.

When reviewing academic-quality data, committee members should also be aware that such statistics mean little without an interpretive context. One way of providing context is to establish a point of comparison. So committee members might ask how a given statistic about academic performance compares with the same information from the previous year, or with similar figures nationally, or with comparable data from peer institutions. Another way to provide context is by breaking down the statistics further to examine what
they reveal about different campus populations or programs. So the committee might, for example, ask how men performed in comparison with women, how particular academic programs fared in comparison with one another, or how students receiving institutional aid performed.

Finally, because academic quality is complex and elusive, no single piece of evidence tells the whole story. Committee members instead should ask administrators to provide evidence drawn from multiple sources and to engage the campus in holistic conversation about the "big picture" that emerges from a presented body of evidence.

"No single piece of evidence tells the whole story."

- **Make reviewing evidence of academic quality and improvement a regular and expected board-level activity.** Considered in the context of pressing board business—such as approving budgets, looking at construction progress reports, and handling legal matters—it is easy to put off looking at academics. Yet teaching and learning constitutes every institution’s main business, and academic quality should be of paramount concern to the board. Because the faculty and administration bear most of this responsibility, the board’s overall level of engagement in this area need not be time-consuming, but it does need to be systematic.

Reviewing the results of all four sources of evidence of academic quality—the assessment of student learning, student retention and graduation rates, stakeholder satisfaction, and academic-program review—should be the explicit responsibility of the academic affairs committee, which should establish a regular schedule for doing so in collaboration with academic leadership.

Meanwhile, regular opportunities for academic-quality review should be built into the board’s annual work plan—whether by scheduling annual reviews of “dashboard” performance indicators containing data on academic quality, making discussions about quality an integral part of a strategic-planning exercise, or making assessment results a topic for a board retreat where more in-depth conversations can occur. Finally, the full board should be aware
of preparations for institutional accreditation—a process that today focuses more heavily on the assessment of student-learning outcomes—and should thoroughly discuss the resulting accreditation report with administrators to determine what should be done in response.

The bottom line is that knowledge about the academic condition of the enterprise is as critical for a board as knowledge about the institution's fiscal condition. As Derek Bok, a professor of law and president emeritus of Harvard University, wrote in a 2005 essay in the Chronicle of Higher Education: "The traditional roles of trustees are both to defend and promote the interests of their institutions and to represent the concerns and needs of the public that does much to subsidize and sustain higher education. Examining the methods used to enhance the quality of education is a natural way of discharging the second role."3

Yet it is important to keep the board's involvement strategic by (1) ensuring that the right kinds of academic quality-assurance processes are in place and (2) periodically asking questions about how the administration is using the information it collects about the academic effectiveness to improve teaching and learning.4

To reiterate, the board has a fiduciary responsibility to ensure that the institution is meeting its obligations. In this regard, a favorable accreditation outcome is as important to an institution as a clean financial audit. The board also must be assured that the administration is effectively managing the institution and is using tools and approaches consistent with known best practices in academic management—including learning assessment, monitoring student flow, soliciting feedback from students and stakeholders, and regularly reviewing the quality of academic programs.

The full board and/or its academic affairs committee ensures that these im-

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4 Consistent with Principle 2 of the "AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality" (AGB, 2011): See Appendix, page 110.
Important processes are in place and functioning effectively by requiring annual reports from the president and chief academic officer on the institution's results and any consequent issues of academic quality. It is as important for the board to know that the right mechanisms are in place and being utilized as it is for the board to know that the institution is following sound budgeting and accounting practices.

Finally, as in any corporation, the board has ultimate responsibility for the soundness of the institution's products and the integrity of its operations. Ultimately, that means that the board must be able to stand behind the competitiveness of its institution's graduates with respect to their knowledge and skills and to the academic integrity of the curriculum that prepared them. This is what we signify when we stand with our faculty and graduates at every commencement convocation. We need to act on this testimony in the boardroom as well.

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