STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN Academic Affairs

CLARIFYING THE BOARD’S RESPONSIBILITIES

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Strategic Leadership in Academic Affairs

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In monitoring, evaluating, and ensuring accountability, the board needs to understand the culture of academic professionals and be well informed about the institution's academic programs. The knowledge required is not that of experts but includes an understanding of the basic logic of programs as capacities of the institution. How does the program relate to mission? What are its strategic goals? How is it evaluated?

The board needs to grasp the educational dynamic of programs and how they interact to create various degree options for students. Familiarity with academic language is important so that the board can evaluate the effectiveness of existing or new programs in fulfilling the institution's strategic goals. By attending to wider educational trends in teaching, learning, and the curriculum, trustees will be able to situate the distinctive program choices of their own institutions. An institution's academic identity is found precisely in how its constellation of programs sets it apart from others.

Trustee knowledge is not passive but is put to use in a continual monitoring of academic programs and policies, all of which are works in progress. Programs are in constant motion as students and faculty members enter and depart, as new courses are added and others dropped, and as entire new pedagogical approaches and programs are proposed. The governing board actively monitors this changing scene by persistently posing strategic and fundamental questions, an array of which appear in previous chapters. In practice, the questions will take on the coloring of the specific circumstances of each institution, even as they boil down to such issues as consistency with mission, integration with other programs, efficiency in the use of resources, assessment of results, alignment with strategic goals, and distinctiveness and quality of programs.

Many times, trustees and others within and outside the academy disparage trustee monitoring of the academic program. It is portrayed as a passive formality or, worse, as a wasted effort in which trustees are expected to rubber stamp the administration's and faculty's proposals.

Effective monitoring as an active process of inquiry offers more
promising potential. When those in the chain of decision making realize that the institution's highest authority will pose fundamental and penetrating questions, the entire process is changed. Department leaders, deans, and provosts will create more rigorous and thoughtful proposals to fit the context of the anticipated questions they know will be coming. Both by the reality and the symbolism of the authority they hold, trustees who engage in this active monitoring process set in motion a continuing process of responsiveness and of responsibility. Thus, it becomes one of the ways the board participates in the collaborative leadership of the institution.

As the board monitors the academic program it also evaluates the institution's performance. To do so effectively, it operates on two levels. First, the board ensures that the faculty and administration have developed a self-conscious series of methods to gather and analyze information about the academic program. And second, because the requirements of accreditation or of state agencies mean that every institution will have addressed the assessment issue in some form, trustees should be aware of the broad outlines of the processes the institution uses and confident that self-evaluation has become internalized as a continuing aspect of the institution's life.

Although the board is not expected to create or operate the processes of evaluation, it sees the results. It regularly should receive summaries of annual assessment reports, significant surveys and studies, program reviews, and analyses of progress in reaching strategic goals. As the administration gathers and prepares information for the board, it typically will offer its own interpretation of the results and of perceived strengths and weaknesses. Although the board should give substantial weight to these analyses, it also should bring its own independent judgment to bear. The board not only should receive evaluations from others, but it also should critically review, integrate, and interpret the meaning of the data from its own vantage point. By seeing the institution whole and exercising final responsibility for it, board members can discern issues not visible to those enmeshed in the process.

Because the board evaluates performance, it is able to ensure accountability for fulfilling the institution's purposes and achieving its strategic goals. In healthy organizations, assessment leads naturally to actions designed to improve performance. Good data beg to be used to make the place better. The board needs to make certain that the tie is tightly drawn between knowing and doing, between gathering information and using it to improve quality.

Finally, the board has to oversee and evaluate the process of implementing the strategies to reach established goals. Effective operational and strategic planning gives the board a rich agenda for review. Has the institution taken the proposed actions? Are they working? Are goals being met? Are new or altered goals needed? If not, what new designs are being considered to solve the problem?

If significant commitments are not being met, then the board has cause to involve itself with the administration and faculty to mobilize initiatives and require new actions. Precisely how to do so requires careful reflection to ensure consistency with institutional
culture and practices. That topic will be considered later in this chapter through two case studies, as well as in a discussion of the work of the academic affairs committee in a subsequent chapter.

The Decision-Making Process

In addition to monitoring, evaluating, and ensuring accountability for academic programs, boards have to make decisions affecting them. At most institutions, board action is the final step in the creation or discontinuation of academic programs. Boards of large institutions make decisions about programs at virtually every meeting, while those of small colleges may make such decisions only a handful of times in a decade.

Boards rarely initiate program decisions. Rather, they receive proposals that have been through an elaborate process of review, deliberation, and recommendation by departments, schools, deans, chief academic officers, and the president. As they raise and answer the key questions related to new programs, faculty and administrators should be expected to address issues of financing, staffing, student demand, program quality, and strategic fit. If the proposed program represents an entirely new type of degree for the institution—the addition of a bachelor's of science program, for example—then it will be considered a "substantive change," and accreditation review will be part of the process.

Like the board's responsibility to monitor and evaluate existing programs, its decision-making role first involves trustees becoming confident that the process that has brought the proposal to the board is sound and thorough. Prior knowledge by faculty and administration of the board's standards, expectations, and active assessment of proposals will build a higher level of rigor and coherence into whatever program is brought forward.

Should the board's review of the proposal raise substantive questions on financial, strategic, or even on content grounds, the board has a variety of options. Typically, a board would ask the administration and faculty to answer questions addressing certain serious issues before reconsidering the proposal. As the case studies will explore, the specific tactics for handling the deferral, revision, or rejection of a program will vary by institution. The board will not want to embarrass those who have recommended the proposal to the board (typically the president or provost). In urging further consideration of a proposal, the board will be at pains to differentiate the issues so that its concerns or questions do not appear to be a repudiation of substantive academic judgment made at prior levels. If this occurs, the board will face a difficult burden of proof in substituting its judgment for that of academic experts. In the rare instances where a board might contemplate such an action, the board itself should seek professional opinions as a basis for its decision to reject a program.

When the board is asked to make a final decision to discontinue an existing program, its review may require special procedures. If the program to be eliminated involves the termination of faculty or staff appointments, particularly tenured positions, the decision becomes far more complex. Normally, institutions will have established procedures, usually involving direct board involvement, to ensure that all sides of the issue have been
explored, all parties heard, and all procedures scrupulously followed. Chapter 6 examines these questions in greater detail and suggests issues about which board members should be especially mindful.

Some critics of the prevailing patterns of academic decision making argue that boards should exercise their final authority over the curriculum much more fully and freely than normally is the case. Boards should be able to shape curricular content by initiating change and defining program requirements, they argue. Indeed, from time to time, boards do act directly to specify curricular requirements. Board intervention might be anticipated in institutions under the control of a religious denomination, for example. More controversially, however, the motive of some boards seems to be a desire to place greater curricular emphasis on Western civilization in an effort to balance its perceived neglect within contemporary higher education.¹

Because the board possesses the authority to do so, should it not impose curricular requirements when it conscientiously believes it has justifiable cause to act? As is often the case, pursuing the question in abstract terms of legal authority may lead in the wrong direction. Boards can do countless things legally that are stunningly unwise or prohibited on other grounds. They legally can hire presidents with no involvement whatsoever of any other constituency, but no board would do so if it wants the new president to enjoy support. Boards legally can employ faculty by acting alone, but not if they wish to abide by standards for accreditation. Individual board members legally can give money to impoverished student athletes, but not if they want their institution to be a member of the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

What these illustrations suggest is that the board exercises its academic responsibilities in a world of multiple expectations and authorities, prevailing understandings of good practice, and attendant regulatory and legal limitations. To contravene authoritative understandings of sound professional practice is to court recrimination and to invite redress.

On campus, the implications of imposing curricular decisions are cut in different directions. In a modern college or university, the board’s legal authority in everything from accounting standards to student disciplinary proceedings is filtered through multiple layers of defined practice and procedure. State and federal law create a thick net of requirements and duties. Board bylaws and faculty handbooks define policies and procedures through which the board has limited itself, including the way it exercises its own legal authority. The board has the authority to change the procedures, but until it does

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**DATA POINT**

34% of respondents said the board regularly plays a decision-making role in the general education curriculum, either by giving final approval to proposals or by providing advice and comment. 41% said curricular matters are presented to the board for information only. 23% said such matters do not come to the board at all. 87% said individual course approval is not a board issue.
so it is bound by them. In effect, the board's authority to act independently in the academic and other spheres may be less than some trustees expect.

Regardless of the board's actual legal authority, there is a steep price to pay for disrupting the normal expectations of the academic decision-making process. In the eyes of the faculty, whose view is supported by a large body of expert opinion and the weight of respected traditions, the curriculum is its realm of primary responsibility. If the board is perceived as invading this sphere, the problem becomes an ethical one. In interceding, the board communicates disrespect for the faculty's professional identity and integrity and violates the established norms of collaborative academic decision making. The result will be faculty distrust and resentment that will undercut cooperation long into the future.

Finally, in a modern university that operates with the full protections of academic freedom, a board that seeks to impose a curricular mandate might ask itself what it really hopes to achieve. Whatever program or requirement the board may impose, it is the faculty, the people "on the ground" who will deliver the lectures, lead the discussions, choose the readings, develop the assignments, grade the papers, and assess the students. The professor has to be free to challenge students and their ideas and to question critically every text. Much of what students learn will be a function of what the professor takes to be important. However significant the curriculum, more important are the faculty members who teach it. They are not subject to intellectual mandates.

So, the question about the board's possible intervention in the curriculum seems to answer itself. Under most scenarios, it is a bad idea. It may even be a dangerous idea if ideological or political influences press a board to interfere in the curriculum. The board's first responsibility is always to the well-being of the institution, and efforts from special interests to control the board's conduct, especially if motivated by ideology, can undermine academic integrity. If boards or other stakeholders are convinced that the curriculum is in ideological disarray, they have a variety of ways to respond. The answer, however, is not to install its own curriculum.

The primary issue is not the board's authority but the use it makes of that authority. When it uses its authority to ask powerful questions, to require effective methods of evaluation, and to expect the results of assessment to translate into continuing efforts at improving performance, the board can have a decisive and enduring impact on educational quality. When it holds the administration and faculty responsible for reaching strategic goals, it puts its authority to work as a crucial part of a process of collaborative decision making and institutional leadership. In that case, the board is making a critical difference as it exercises its academic responsibilities.

Abstract terms such as "authority" and "responsibility" become easier to understand if considered in light of two case studies. Both are hypothetical, but both combine elements of actual cases.

**Case 1: Crisis in General Education in a Liberal Arts College**

A private undergraduate liberal arts college of 1,800 students has established a strategic goal of developing a new general education program. The college offers several successful professional
programs in addition to 24 majors in the arts and sciences and has competitive but not selective admissions standards. The current "breadth" requirement consists mainly of introductory survey courses combining lectures with discussion sessions. Studies have shown that students are critical of the program because it repeats work done in high school. They complain that the courses are not interesting, that the discussions do not relate to the lectures, that choices to meet requirements are too limited, and that most of the tests and assignments require them simply to give back information.

Attrition after the freshman and sophomore years is notably higher than predicted by student test scores and high school grades, with exit interviews of departing students showing discontent with the courses in the first two years as the third most important reason students transfer. The data show that a high proportion of the most talented students transfer, often because they are disappointed with their experience.

The institution's finances are stable, but it is highly tuition dependent, and past financial problems have occurred because of enrollment declines. A reduction in attrition rates is a central aspect of the strategic plan's financial model to attain long-term financial equilibrium through modest enrollment growth.

After two years of labor, the college's curriculum committee has not produced a program the faculty supports. Conflicts within the committee between personalities and over educational philosophy, including skirmishes in the "culture wars," have stalled the work. The administration has cooperated with the committee but has not pressed for any given program, fearing that it then would become the "administration's proposal." One compromise plan is brought before the faculty for a straw vote, but responses in campus discussions and on the floor of the faculty senate show no widespread support. Faculty members complain that the proposed new requirements cannot be staffed with existing faculty and resources, and the administration cannot promise additional funds. Some department chairs privately complain that they see the proposal as a threat to future enrollments, and hence to staffing levels.

In a review of the goals of the strategic plan, the board's academic affairs committee learns of the problems with the general education proposal, and committee members review the issue at length with the president, the chief academic officer, and faculty leaders. Everyone knows the vital importance of the issue and is frustrated with the situation. They are open to new approaches, though they also are sensitive to the academic self-governance traditions of the faculty and its curriculum committee. The board always has believed that the curriculum should be left to the faculty.

After a long, private conversation with the president, and with his diffident concurrence, the committee chair proposes that it is time to develop a specific charge from the committee for the whole board to consider. Preceded by a pointed and probing discussion of the unusual step they are about to take, the board adopts a resolution addressed to the president but intended for the academic administration and the faculty as well. To foster this wider communication, the board circulates its resolution to the entire faculty.

The board frames its resolution in terms of the strategic goal previously endorsed by all parties to develop a new general education program and summarizes its deliberations in assessing the achievement of the goal. The information related to student attrition is placed in the context of the board's commitment to academic quality and to the institution's financial future—issues the board sees as strategically inseparable. The board explains that if the institution's long-term academic, strategic, and financial objectives are to be met, then enrollment levels must be enlarged, and attrition must be reduced. Respectful of the prior efforts by the faculty and the administration, the board calls for a new
effort to develop an approach to general education that responds to problems that have been discovered in various assessments. The board establishes a broad expectation for a forward-looking program using the best pedagogical practices, a balance of studies attending to classic texts from both the Western tradition and other cultures, and a clear and thoughtful rationale for course requirements. It charges the president, academic administrators, and faculty leaders to accomplish the task through existing or special committees, as they judge best.

The board sets a deadline of one academic year for a new program to be developed and approved, with new courses phased in over time, according to a schedule to be devised by the administration and faculty. The board asks for progress reports to be submitted prior to each board meeting and for the chair and other members of the committee developing the program to meet with the president and the board's academic affairs committee when the board convenes. The board requests the president to make general education a strategic funding priority.

The board's resolution electrifies the campus since it runs counter to their tradition of distancing themselves from curricular questions. Many of the faculty in professional fields approve of the board's action, because they have been critical of what they see as the endless bickering of their colleagues in the liberal arts. Most of the senior faculty in arts and sciences are deeply disturbed, and many are angered over what they believe is a violation of the traditions of academic decision making. Whatever the intent, the board has communicated loss of confidence in the faculty and administration and disrespect for the faculty role in governance. There is talk of faculty "boycotting" the whole process of general education reform. A number of faculty committee chairs request a meeting with the president, the board chair, and the chair of the academic affairs committee, which is granted.

The faculty leaders criticize the board's action, repeating the concerns that have been circulating on campus. They ask that the resolution be rescinded or amended to remove references, even in broad terms, to desired forms of pedagogy or expected course content. They further indicate that deadlines and interim reports do not fit the way a faculty develops a curriculum. They are offensive tactics of the corporate world that have no place in academe.

The air is tight with tension when the board chair speaks bluntly and with some emotion to open the meeting. He says that it appears that the faculty wants to be accountable to no one for anything, not even to themselves for commitments they have made. The board cannot build a little white picket fence around the campus to keep the faculty safe and secure from the real world. He emphasizes that keeping good students and funding the college are the central goals. The board has a final responsibility for the good of the whole college that it cannot delegate to anyone else.

Seeing several faces flush with anger, the chair of the academic affairs committee tries to reposition the discussion. She indicates that her committee was sensitive to all of the faculty's concerns and discussed them with the faculty on the committee, as well as with the president and the chief academic officer. The resolution that was adopted was criteria-referenced to the college's traditions of governance under these serious circumstances. She goes on to illustrate her claim. The reform of general education is on the college's strategic agenda by prior action of all the college's decision-making bodies, including the whole faculty. She emphasizes that before acting, the committee considered an array of information, including the curriculum committee's various proposals. She argues that the committee intended to craft a proposal that drew a wide circle around the issues without intending to prescribe or dictate curricular
content to the faculty. All the references in the resolution to pedagogies and content questions came from the curriculum committee's prior proposals and background papers.

By establishing broad expectations, she says, the board's committee is not legislating a program but simply trying to move the process forward. The faculty is still free to exercise its best judgment, even to interpret differently the resolution's "broad expectations," as long as it meets its responsibility to create an effective general education program. The chair ends her remarks by asking the faculty whether some of them might not be responding more to appearance than reality. She notes that if the faculty were carefully to define and differentiate roles and responsibilities in academic decision making, as might be done by scholars analyzing this situation, they would conclude that the board's action is an example of appropriate self-limitation in use of its authority.

A more cooperative tone begins to shape the conversation, as the president tries to sum up his feelings. He notes that he before anyone else should resent the board's resolution, and he did so initially. He says that he keeps racking his brain wondering what he could have done to avoid this impasse. He wonders aloud whether this would have happened if he had more political skills. Finally, though, he has concluded that those he carries responsibility for the academic program, he does not have the authority to fulfill that responsibility. Academic authority rests with the faculty. He also believes that had he struck the alarm bell without the board's involvement, his actions would have been stereotyped as administrative interference or worse.

Although he did not like the board's charging him to act under a deadline—nor did he appreciate the board communicating with everyone as it did—he has come to believe it represents both a wise and legitimate action by the board. He will not now be accused of putting words in the mouth of the board, as has happened in the past. Most important, he has learned that you cannot define a decision-making role for the board in academic affairs and then be unhappy if its members exercise it. We tell the academic affairs committee and the board to evaluate the academic program, the president says, and to make us answerable for the goals that we have set in the educational program. That is what the board did.

The case continues. After many meetings with the chief academic officer, representatives of the faculty governing council, and the chair of the curriculum committee, it is proposed to the president that a new committee be created to develop a proposal. The new committee examines a series of model programs and invites several national leaders on general education to consult with the committee. The new proposal fits the framework established by the board, though the committee's work evolves according to its own insights and rhythms. At the final meeting of the academic year, the new program is adopted by a majority of the faculty, with some abstaining in protest over the process. The academic affairs committee discusses and endorses the new program and reports to the full board on its contents. There is a discussion as to whether the full board needs to act officially, given that the degree program is not a new one. The decision is made to adopt a resolution of approval because it changes degree requirements for all students. The board unanimously adopts the resolution.

This case illustrates the way a board actively carries out its role in monitoring, evaluating, ensuring accountability of, and making decisions about academic programs. Readers are encouraged to consider their own responses to this situation. Does this case represent effective or ineffective work by trustees? Do they go too far or not far enough?
What specific factors about the institution are most relevant in the interpretation of the case? Do the board's actions meet the criterion of legitimacy? Were the senior faculty's initial criticisms valid or misplaced? How would you have responded to the board as president of the institution? As chair of the academic affairs committee, how would you have handled the situation?

Case 2: Academic Exigency

To illustrate another set of possibilities for board involvement, let us change the facts of the prior case to create extreme circumstances. Everything unfolds the same way, except that the faculty turns down the committee's proposal, and rejects it a second time when asked to reconsider it by the president and the board. It happens that the board's intervention and discord over the place of the Western tradition in a proposed humanities sequence were much more ideological and bitter than anticipated. Open hostility destroys the process.

At the board meeting where these developments are reviewed, the chair of the academic affairs committee advances a bold argument. She claims that the mission and strategic prospects of the institution are intimately tied to the effectiveness of the general education program. The board has demonstrated its convictions by its actions. The faculty's failure cannot be allowed to stand, lest the board forsake its fiduciary responsibilities. She goes on to argue that the failure is not the responsibility of the administration, because it does not have the authority that it would possess in a tightly coupled, hierarchical decision-making system. Rather, it is time to develop a new concept, a kind of "academic exigency" parallel to "financial exigency," but with nothing to do with tenure. Academic exigency means to her that after following stringent procedures to safeguard the normal processes of academic decision making, the board can take an academic program into "receivership." The chair argues that the burden of proof to do so should be high and demonstrably related to central issues of mission and institutional viability. Once valid information has been studied, the issues defined, external mediation sought and completed, all parties heard, and final efforts to resolve the problems attempted, the board can address academic program issues directly through its own powers and authority. It may declare exigency and then, as in this case, create a general education program through the authority it would delegate to the faculty and administration, outside experts, and members of its own board.

This extreme situation is not implausible, especially given recent developments on many campuses. In this case, though, the board has acted only after satisfying a rigorous set of procedures. How would the reader respond to a proposal to develop procedures for the equivalent of "academic bankruptcy?" If the board has the standing authority to take the action, to create a program anyway, why are new self-limiting procedures needed? Or to take a contrary view, does not the board's effective, if formal, authority stop at the classroom door? Do academic institutions have to live with whatever the academic professionals finally decide or refuse to decide, since their expertise and autonomy will control what and how anything is actually taught? What are the implications of the board's action? What should a president do in these circumstances?

Although this may be an unlikely scenario, it sharpens issues that recently have arisen
58% of respondents said it was appropriate for a board to override faculty in matters of curriculum in certain circumstances.

34% said this should not occur.

in higher education. Given the tumult of life and the play of forces around ideological issues and partisan politics, it is wise to ponder and test ideas of trustee authority under various scenarios.

These two cases illustrate the variety of evaluations, judgments, and decisions in the work of the board. Although more complicated than normal decisions, they highlight the underlying processes and issues that may figure in board deliberations. The board’s responsibilities to monitor, evaluate, and hold the administration and faculty accountable for results in the academic realm are consequential. These responsibilities represent a significant, often underappreciated opportunity for the board to contribute decisively, yet appropriately, to academic decision making.

Magnier, Denise K. "Battle Over Academic Control Pits Faculty Against Governing Board at George Mason U." Chronicle of Higher Education (June 18, 1999), page A14.