

# The Importance of Academic Oversight

By Mary Dana Hinton, PhD // Volume 27, Number 5 // September/October 2019

[Home](#) > [Trusteeship Article](#) > The Importance of Academic Oversight

*Ensuring a high-quality academic experience for all students depends on a board that understands its responsibilities with respect to the stewardship of an institution's academic mission.*

Boards of trustees are tasked with multiple, demanding areas of oversight: enrollment, athletics, risk management, financial stability, student learning outcomes, freedom of expression, strategic planning, and more. While none of these areas are new for governing boards, the demands of each area, the level of expectation and accountability, and the risks associated with improper management are significantly high, and missteps can result in very public and costly consequences. As governing board leaders, it is very easy to become so engrossed in the volume of items to be overseen that the most important element of our institutions—educating our students—can be overlooked.

Regardless of institution type—research university, small liberal arts college, comprehensive university, or community college—colleges and universities share a core enterprise and mission: academic learning. As stewards of the mission, trustees must actively engage with our institutions' academic outcomes. Without question, educational oversight is a central and essential part of trustees' work. All other demands are in service to, or in support of, student learning. Therefore, as trustees, it is critically important to find the appropriate level and type of oversight of an academic enterprise as we steward our academic mission.

Most trustees would concur that when students choose to attend our institutions, we promise them a high-quality education. In fact, as the governance leaders of educational institutions, this should be a fundamental part of our task. However, data show that many trustees acknowledge a lack of

clarity around how their institution defines high-quality education; limited, if any, governance oversight of academic quality; and, not acting on what we do know about our institutions' academic quality and outcomes.

AGB's 2018 report *Boards' Engagement with Educational Quality: An Overview of AGB Survey Results* found that even among boards that understand their responsibility for the educational quality of their institution and that recognize the fiduciary importance of that responsibility, not a great deal of time is expended on academic planning, engagement, and outcomes. The AGB report notes that: "In 2010, more than 20 percent of respondents indicated that monitoring student learning was not a board responsibility. Eight years later, virtually all respondents believe that the board has at least some role in monitoring educational quality. Yet, despite increased awareness, boards have not made corresponding adjustments in important areas of practice. For instance, in 2010, approximately 60 percent reported that not enough time was spent discussing student learning. Eight years later, boards and academic leaders still feel the same: 58.6 percent of all respondents believe that the board does not spend enough time discussing educational quality."

A few questions immediately arise from this finding: If boards neglect to discuss academic quality, and academic quality is our primary responsibility, how can we appropriately steward and govern our institutions? How do trustees balance their governance responsibility with the fact that the implementation of the academic program is primarily the purview of the faculty? And, how do boards hold themselves accountable for the academic enterprise when it is often beyond their areas of expertise?

While the board's role is not to create curricula, it is to oversee the academic program at the appropriate level of governance. Boards are rightfully charged with providing the insight, resources, support, and accountability needed to fuel a high-quality academic program. It would not behoove trustees to get into the details of academic planning and delivery. However, trustees can, and must, accept their fiduciary and strategic responsibility in a number of areas to ensure educational quality.

The first step for governing bodies to support the academic enterprise is to know the institutional mission. What does the mission call on the board to do academically? It is essential to ensure that the board understands how the

institutional mission is directly connected to the academic program, and invests board time and resources to become educated about, and able to speak to, that connection. Mission should be the primary driver of the academic programs and be foundational to all academic planning on campus. Additionally, since every budget is a statement of priorities, ensure you understand the institution's budget not only as a spreadsheet exercise, but as a statement of, and investment in, institutional mission and commitment to academic quality.

Second, it is the responsibility of the governing board to know the college or university's institutional student learning outcomes (SLOs) or institutional learning goals (ILGs). This is an ideal entry point for the board to have significant impact on the academic program in an appropriate governing manner. SLOs and ILGs reflect the promises we make to students regarding what they will know and be able to do as a result of attending our institution. Institutional goals and outcomes indicate the academic commitments being made to every student who attends a college or university, regardless of major. Board members should be readily able to find the SLOs or ILGs on the institution's website. If not, I encourage you to task the Academic Affairs Committee (or comparable committee) to spend time uncovering and sharing those learning goals with the board. (Not only is this an appropriate governance task, it will also be an essential part of any accreditation effort.)

At the College of Saint Benedict and our partner institution, Saint John's University, our ILGs are:

- **THINK DEEPLY:** Think critically, creatively, and with complexity when addressing significant questions;
- **EMBRACE DIFFERENCE:** Observe life from as many points of view as possible;
- **ENGAGE GLOBALLY:** Embark on a journey of discovery and take part in the world;
- **SERVE GRACIOUSLY:** Discover a meaningful life purpose through service and leadership; and
- **LIVE COURAGEOUSLY:** Embody the skills and attributes of personal and professional success.

These ILGs are a powerful reflection of our missions and visions and reflect the commitments we make to every student on our campuses.

Once developed, the ILGs should inform and shape the outcomes each institution seeks to achieve through coursework and other programs. Questions trustees should ask include: How do current and new (or proposed) academic programs align with our ILGs? As we consider the goals and outcomes for our students (be they employment, transfer, graduation, or other) how do our ILGs align with and support those goals?

ILGs also inform how the faculty engages in, and with, academic planning, pedagogical practice, and student learning. Therefore, trustees do not need to review syllabi or otherwise get into the weeds of the academic program or planning. Leave that to the faculty experts. Rather, choosing to engage at an appropriate level of governance with academic quality will elicit critical questions trustees have a responsibility to ask themselves about the academic program:

- What is, and how do we articulate, our approach to learning? Is this in alignment with our institutional learning commitments?
- Are we actively connecting, highlighting, and supporting a high-quality academic program in our strategic plan?
- How are we highlighting and supporting a high-quality academic program in our budget?
- How do trustees, as guardians of the institution, articulate our institution's value proposition based on our academic goals, programs, and subsequent learning outcomes?

Third, authentic, ongoing engagement with educational quality, outcomes, and goals also frames key governance questions for trustees, within and beyond the academic program. As part of their governing work, questions the board should regularly explore include:

- How will the board engage with student learning outcomes and institutional learning goals?
- How do these goals integrate with our mission, vision, and strategic vision, which guide the board's work?

- How do these goals inform board committee responsibilities, including, but not limited to, the academic affairs committee?
- How do our ILGs influence our budget process and resource allocation?

Fourth, trustees have a responsibility to hold academic leadership, the faculty, and the broader community accountable for the implementation and measurement of student learning and a high-quality academic program. Indeed, higher education has long spoken about assessment. Today, it is critically important for boards to ensure ongoing assessment is taking place, not only during decennial accreditation visits or for interim reports.

To be clear, a discussion of educational quality and student learning is a task of the trustees. However, the leadership and actual measurement of these areas is the work of academic affairs leadership and faculty. While trustees do not perform the measurement, they do need to ask critical questions about the findings. Those questions need to be generative, forward looking, and actionable for faculty, academic affairs leadership, and the board of trustees.

For example, I recommend that boards not get mired in whether an individual number on an assessment report went up or down. Rather, ask academic leadership and faculty what the data mean to, and for, them. A trustee's job is to question the data and think about the implications of that data as it relates to fiduciary and strategic responsibilities. Boards should explore the story the data are telling and what implications that story has for mission, sustainability, strategic planning, and the future of the institution.

Note that it is equally important to develop a regular schedule by which the assessment of educational quality is discussed at the board level. (Boards should also review their own self-assessment data to ensure that they are spending quality time on the fiduciary, strategic, and generative responsibilities of governance.)

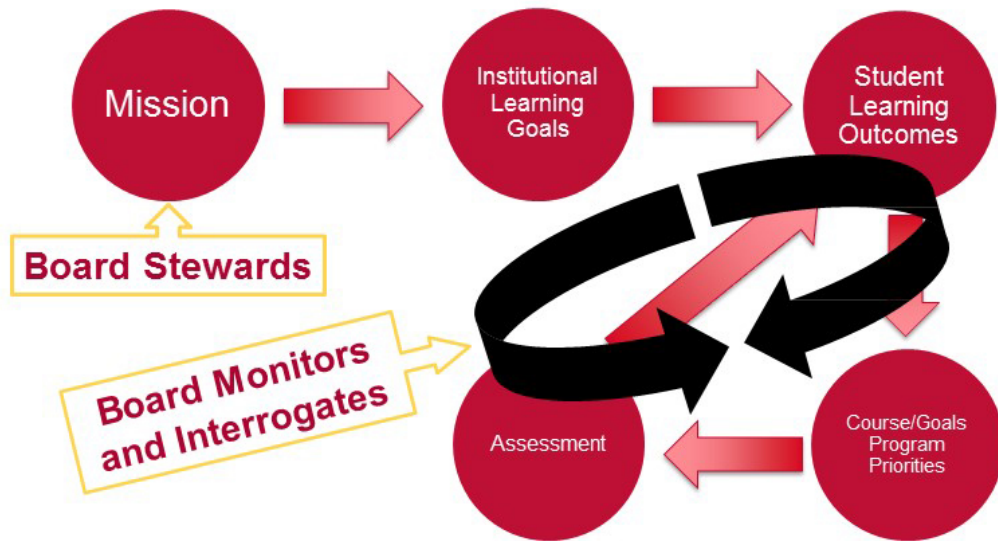
Fifth, and importantly, recognize that behind the outcomes, goals, and data lurk actual human beings. As such, there are key relationships you need to nurture as you engage and support the academic enterprise. With the support and blessing of the president and board chair, work to develop a solid relationship between your chief academic officer (CAO) and the chair of the

academic affairs (or comparable) committee. They should connect regularly, not with the goal of monitoring the CAO but with the goal of asking key questions and offering support. For example, the committee chair should regularly inquire as to what the board needs to do to support academic quality. And, board members, academic leaders, and faculty should attend such events as the AGB National Conference on Trusteeship.

The next critical relationship to demystify and enhance is that between the faculty, the trustees, and the administration. None of these groups are monoliths. The familiar tropes and stereotypes about each group inhibit our collective work and compromise how we serve our students. Boards should actively build bridges—at the appropriate level—to support these relationships. The ILGs or SLOs can anchor conversations between faculty, trustees, and administration within shared goals and complementary responsibilities.

In summary, the board's role in ensuring academic quality involves setting an institutional and academic vision that aligns with the mission and inviting faculty and academic leadership to use their expertise to flesh out and manifest that vision. The board's role is also to ensure that ongoing assessment is taking place and then examining the data in order understand the institutional story and its implications. Finally, the board's role is to make its decisions in light of the data, using this information and planning to support stewardship of the mission.

Taken holistically, the work of the board as it relates to high-quality academic programs can be represented graphically as follows:



Source: Mary Dana Hinton

Here are the academic quality questions you need to ask as governing board members:

1. What does our mission call upon us to do academically?
2. What are our institutional learning outcomes?
3. How are we achieving these outcomes in our academic program?
4. How are we using assessment data to inform and drive the board's fiduciary and strategic responsibilities?
5. How do we engage the faculty in this dialogue?

The heart of our institutions is the academic enterprise. Boards have an explicit and ongoing duty of care to support, protect, and further that enterprise. The way to most effectively carry out that charge is not by micromanaging the academic enterprise, but by applying solid governance practices and embracing the board's fiduciary, strategic, and generative responsibilities at the core of our work.