

# Boards' Engagement with Educational Quality

## An Overview of AGB Survey Results

During the past decade, the public's understanding of **accountability** in higher education has **shifted**. Stakeholders increasingly expect institutions not only to measure academic performance but also to use information about **educational quality** to improve **student outcomes**. Meeting this challenge is of **paramount importance** and takes on added significance when considering the need to **strengthen** public **confidence** in America's colleges and universities. Consideration of **risk and reward** now must include the ways that institutions address issues of **educational quality**. Accordingly, board leadership in this area has never been more **critical**.

Since 1921, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has had one mission: to strengthen and protect this country's unique form of institutional governance through its research, services, and advocacy. Serving more than 1,300 member boards, 1,900 institutions, and 40,000 individuals, AGB is the only national organization providing university and college presidents, board chairs, trustees, and board professionals of both public and private institutions and institutionally related foundations with resources that enhance their effectiveness.



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## Foreword

**D**uring the past decade, the public’s understanding of accountability in higher education has shifted. Stakeholders increasingly expect institutions not only to measure academic performance but also to use information about educational quality to improve student outcomes. Meeting this challenge is of paramount importance and takes on added significance when considering the need to strengthen public confidence in America’s colleges and universities. Consideration of risk and reward now must include the ways that institutions address issues of educational quality. Accordingly, board leadership in this area has never been more critical.

AGB members and other higher education stakeholders look to AGB’s continued leadership in this area. An initial 2010 AGB survey established how, and to what extent, boards engage with matters of educational quality. The main takeaways of that first survey were that trustees learn about their obligation to monitor educational quality primarily in the academic affairs committee and not in orientation sessions; oversight of educational quality is situational and most often linked with accreditation; and many boards use institutional rankings as a proxy for data on student learning. The 2010 survey report concluded that boards were not necessarily negligent, but they were “systematically unaware and unprepared for this important fiduciary responsibility.”

Qualitative responses from that first survey indicated that increased board engagement might correlate with numerous desirable outcomes, including growth in student learning, the development of a campus culture that values evidence-based decision making, and positive working relationships among trustees, administrators, and faculty. In response, AGB strengthened its programming in educational quality and shared governance. A consulting service and a toolkit devoted exclusively to educational quality are now available to AGB members. With support from the Teagle Foundation, an educational quality project developed eight institutional case studies and sample dashboards, metrics, and academic affairs committee charges and agendas. *Trusteeship* has increased its coverage of board responsibility for educational quality, and AGB published a revised edition of Peter Ewell’s landmark *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality*. Perhaps most significantly, AGB’s Board of Directors issued a statement on board responsibility for the oversight of educational quality, meant to affirm and clarify this core principle of board governance.

In late 2017, AGB launched a follow-up survey to assess the current state of board engagement with educational quality, and to see what, if any, changes had taken place as a result of the association’s efforts. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the 2010 survey report has considerably raised awareness about the importance of board monitoring of educational quality—and perhaps improved the effectiveness of that engagement. But AGB needed to gauge whether progress has been made and how changes in student demographics, public opinion, and the economy may have influenced findings.

Fortunately, the survey shows that trustees are more mindful of their fundamental responsibility to educational quality. However, the results indicate that boards have made important strides in some key areas but not in others. 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. This result is as worrisome now as it was then.

If boards do not prioritize and regularize their stewardship of educational quality, they not only neglect a basic fiduciary responsibility but also expose their institutions to real threats, notably accreditation challenges and reputational risk. Conversely, robust board engagement with educational quality issues can yield substantial personal and institutional rewards. Survey respondents report that meaningful participation in educational quality has amplified board members' commitment to the institution and improved the depth and breadth of trustee contributions to other strategic issues such as financial stability and relevance.

AGB's organizational commitment to advancing board engagement with educational quality is supported by numerous devoted individuals, including several who deserve recognition. Susan Whealler Johnston, former executive vice president and chief operating officer, led AGB efforts on educational quality over many years; Kristen Hodge-Clark, vice president for best practice and innovation, designed and administered the survey and provided preliminary analysis; and Kyle Long further analyzed the results and wrote the report.

AGB's sincere hope is that this survey report will stimulate board and administrative leaders either to initiate or renew their commitment to this bedrock value of higher education governance. The present situation of awareness without continuous action is an unacceptable half-measure. This report, then, should be read as a call for invigorated leadership: board members and senior administrators should work together to establish and sustain cultures that consistently promote accountability for educational quality; they should regularly ask informed questions about—and expect evidence for—educational quality; and they should strategically use information about educational quality to improve outcomes for all students.

Richard D. Legon

President

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

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## Executive Summary

**T**he results of a 2018 survey on boards and educational quality indicate that trustees and administrators clearly understand what educational quality means for their institutions and believe that boards should engage in strategic issues concerning educational quality. At the same time, boards discuss these issues infrequently and often without substance or pertinent information about student learning. The survey indicates that boards rarely take appropriate actions to ameliorate these deficiencies. In other words, boards recognize a fiduciary responsibility to monitor educational quality yet generally neglect to fulfill that responsibility. Board and administrative leaders should work together to meet this challenge to fulfill institutional missions and strengthen public confidence in higher education.

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## Introduction

When the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) first conducted a survey about boards and educational quality eight years ago, the public was increasingly concerned about institutional accountability for the rising costs of a college education. Stakeholders wanted transparent assurance that students and parents were getting a sufficient return on their investment. By that time, campuses already had begun devoting more resources to measure student outcomes. They created or strengthened their office of assessment and office of institutional research to collect an abundance of data measuring student learning and engagement. In addition to their homegrown assessments of skills, knowledge, and experiences, institutions today participate in a variety of external surveys and examinations, including the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency test (CAAP), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Previously, these assessment practices typically were “summative” and used primarily to provide accounts for what happened to undergraduate students while they were enrolled.

Since the initial AGB survey in 2010, concerns about student outcomes vis-à-vis the cost of a college education have only been heightened. The economic recession in 2008 caused deep and long-lasting negative effects on higher education, and soft job markets increased public criticism of the price and value of a college degree. The publication of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* in 2011 represented a particularly strong and high-profile challenge to long-held assumptions about the value of higher education.<sup>1</sup> Using student learning data for more than 2,300 undergraduates at 24 institutions, the authors asserted that nearly half of all students demonstrated no gains on a wide range of learning outcomes. The book contributed to a sense of urgency about not only measuring learning but also using the information gathered to improve student learning.

From a variety of measures, we know that students are not learning as much as many have hoped or claimed. We also know more—from sources such as the *Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education*<sup>2</sup> and NSSE—about which classroom practices and learning experiences contribute to desirable student learning outcomes. As a result, institutions are increasingly able to use assessment for “formative” purposes to improve student outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Ernest T. Pascarella and Charles Blaich, “Lessons from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 45:2 (2013), 6–15.



Not surprisingly, measuring learning has become an established area of public policy. Several states use student outcomes data for performance funding. Regional accreditors demand evidence that institutions systematically measure student outcomes. Think tanks such as the Center for American Progress push them to do so even more rigorously. University-based research centers such as the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) at the University of Illinois provide best practices and policy briefs about assessment. Major philanthropies such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation support research projects to create new knowledge for improving learning outcomes. The *Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education* and other rankings include consumer data.

Amid such escalated attention to educational quality assurance, board engagement remains undervalued. Common misperceptions of how shared governance works can produce a policy environment that considers educational quality the exclusive domain of the faculty and academic administration. Of course, the faculty is *sine qua non* in the academic enterprise. Yet boards have a clear and undeniable leadership role in this area. It is the singular responsibility of governing boards to ensure their institutions are setting and meeting standards for educational quality and making budget and policy decisions that are informed by the impact of these standards. Among the many outcomes of board commitment to this issue can be clarifying the institution's focus on accountability and improving its ability to respond to any challenges such attention may highlight.

*Among the many outcomes of board commitment to this issue can be clarifying the institution's focus on accountability and improving its ability to respond to any challenges such attention may highlight.*

Throughout the past decade, AGB has encouraged boards to take up this mantle of leadership in direct and related initiatives. This report continues that call for engagement and asserts that failure to adequately monitor educational quality is a failure to fulfill fiduciary responsibility. In the context of eroding public confidence in colleges and universities, however, this report also presents a new warning. The median lifetime earnings for individuals with bachelor's degrees are twice that of those with high school diplomas.<sup>3</sup> However, a 2017 poll shows that a majority of Americans no longer think a college degree is worth the cost of obtaining one (*Wall Street Journal/NBC News*<sup>4</sup>), and the student-loan debt crisis has exacerbated that perception. Moreover, just 55 percent

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<sup>3</sup> Brad Hershbein and Melissa Kearney, "Major Decisions: What Graduates Earn Over Their Lifetimes," The Hamilton Project, Brookings Institution, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Josh Mitchell and Douglas Belkin, "Fewer Americans Value a College Degree," *Wall Street Journal* (New York, NY), Sept. 8, 2017.

of Americans polled in 2017 believe that colleges and universities have a positive effect on the country.<sup>5</sup> Strong board leadership is essential to meet these challenges. And while the problems are multifaceted and vary by institutional circumstances, an important and universal first step is to ensure that students are receiving the highest quality education possible. Other institutional goals that boards may set and monitor—from increasing enrollment to improving retention rates to hastening time-to-degree—will lose significance if students do not attain the institution’s learning goals.

How well boards monitor educational quality at their own colleges and universities is therefore intrinsically connected to public trust in higher education. In this climate, it is imperative that boards not delegate responsibility for monitoring educational quality even if they initially lack the wherewithal to do so. AGB’s 2014 report *Overseeing Educational Quality* observes:

*Many board members may feel they do not have adequate expertise to oversee educational quality—and that may in fact be true. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon every board member to learn a basic framework and vocabulary for overseeing educational quality and for boards to develop a common understanding that can help them make informed decisions in this vital area.*

Chief executive and academic officers must not acquiesce to any such discomfort among board members. Instead, senior administrators can equip their boards to meet this responsibility, and appointing authorities can address this need in selecting new board members. This survey shows that board and administrative leadership have heard the call but have yet to heed it.

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<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, “Sharp Partisan Divisions in Views of National Institutions,” July 10, 2017.

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## About the Survey

**R**esults from AGB's educational quality study are based on a 27-question web survey conducted between Nov. 15, 2017, and Jan. 15, 2018. The survey was sent to a total of 1,235 chief academic officers (vice presidents and provosts) and chairs of governing board academic affairs committees from AGB member public and private institutions. In total, 279 respondents completed the survey (a 22.5 percent response rate), with 32 percent from chairs of academic affairs committees or other trustees and 62 percent from chief academic officers or other academic administrators. By sector, the largest response rate was from independent institutions at 84.2 percent, with the remaining 15.8 percent from public institutions. This distribution is similar to that of AGB's membership. Independents represent more than 72 percent of member institutions.

The survey asked a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions about three aspects of educational quality that are pertinent to board governance:

- 1. Board understanding of educational quality;**
- 2. The ways boards learn about educational quality; and**
- 3. The impediments to monitoring educational quality.**

The results are presented here along these general themes. While some differences in response to questions about educational quality are to be expected by role of respondent, the variance in understanding the board's role was at times significantly different. Such instances are discussed below in the context of the findings. Unless noted, there were no meaningful differences in response by institution sector.

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## Findings

### I. UNDERSTANDING OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Comprehending the meaning of educational quality is fundamental to exercising the fiduciary responsibility to guarantee it, but how well do boards understand educational quality?

Approximately 86 percent of the trustee respondents, many of whom are chairs of their institution's academic affairs committee, report that they understand very well what is meant by educational quality for their institutions. However, when asked to consider whether most other members of their board understand educational quality, only a quarter (27.4 percent) believe their board understands this issue very well. Most (69.8 percent) believe their board members only "somewhat" understand educational quality. When later asked how boards can improve their engagement in this area, a chief academic officer remarked, "I think we ... simply need to be explicit about our definition of educational quality and to make this a repeated refrain at every board meeting." Trustees and senior administrators can do more to ensure the entire board has a strong foundation and understanding of educational quality to fulfill their fiduciary roles in this regard.

*Which indicators of educational quality do trustees and administrators use?* When asked to choose the "top three indicators you associate with educational quality for your institution," trustees and academic administrators agree in large part, but show some striking differences. The survey results indicate the most common measure of an institution's educational quality is the quality of its faculty (50.5 percent of all respondents). This coupling of the perception of faculty and institutional excellence is neither surprising nor undesirable. Of course, faculty quality is often evaluated—in whole or in part—by research productivity, which offers little information about how much students learn. Participation in high-impact learning experiences (e.g., internships, study abroad, undergraduate research) and data from student learning assessments top the list for administrators, signaling their belief that these indicators can help boards improve their understanding of institutional effectiveness. However, only 23.5 percent of trustee respondents listed high-impact experiences.

**Table 1.** What are the top three indicators you associate with educational quality for your institution? (*trustee responses*)\*

<b>1</b>	Quality of faculty	<b>60.4%</b>
<b>2</b>	Post-graduate job placements	<b>42.5%</b>
<b>3</b>	Data from student learning assessments	<b>40.6%</b>

**Table 2.** What are the top three indicators you associate with educational quality for your institution? (*administrator responses*)\*

<b>1</b>	Student participation rates in high-impact educational experiences	<b>49.6%</b>
<b>2</b>	Data from student learning assessments	<b>45.7%</b>
<b>3</b>	Quality of faculty	<b>44.6%</b>

\*Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

More than 60 percent of respondents from the 2010 survey reported that their boards use national or international rankings in discussing academic quality. This finding prompted concern that boards were using rankings as a proxy for data about student learning. In 2018, however, only 6.4 percent of respondents identified national or international rankings among their institution’s top three indicators of educational quality. This is a significant and positive development. Still, boards should review more varied data concerning educational quality. The results indicate that boards and academic leaders can profitably engage in discussion about how broader review of data about student learning—especially data about student participation rates in internships, study abroad, undergraduate research, and other experiences that research has shown contribute to student learning—can be an essential practice for board members to fulfill their fiduciary responsibility for monitoring educational quality. Not only are these indicators of educational quality associated with gains in learning outcomes, but they also can be among an institution’s most distinctive features in an increasingly competitive recruitment market for students, faculty, and professional staff.

*A broader review of student learning data can be an essential practice to fulfill boards’ fiduciary responsibility for monitoring educational quality.*

## II. THE BOARD’S WORK IN MONITORING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

The other side of the coin to understanding educational quality is the board’s discernment of its precise role and responsibilities.

*What is the board’s role in monitoring educational quality?* The 2018 survey indicates that more than 90 percent of respondents (with no significant difference by role) believe that boards should engage in strategic issues about educational quality, an encouraging finding consistent with their fiduciary responsibilities and with board member aptitudes, especially in the area of finance. Boards can and should be valued assets for strategically aligning institutional resources with educational quality initiatives. However, the responses to a question about “understanding of the board’s role regarding educational quality” varied significantly.

**Table 3.** What is your understanding of the board’s role regarding educational quality?\*

	TRUSTEES	ADMINISTRATORS	OVERALL
To hold faculty accountable for establishing learning outcomes for each program	4.7%	5.7%	5.3%
To hold administrators accountable for improvements in educational quality over time	34.0%	53.7%	46.3%
To focus on strategic issues related to educational quality	44.3%	73.1%	62.3%
To expect and review evidence of educational quality	32.1%	42.3%	38.4%
To make reviewing evidence of educational quality a regular board activity	24.5%	32.0%	29.2%
To engage in discussions with administrators about the meaning and implications of data on educational quality	27.4%	57.1%	45.9%
All of the above	52.8%	18.3%	31.3%
None of the above	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other	2.8%	4.0%	3.6%

\*Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

Trustees cannot fulfill their fiduciary responsibility for assuring educational quality without considering evidence for it. Trustees and administrators should work together to determine appropriate board level metrics and ensure that boards regularly receive extensive data indicative of their institution’s educational quality.

It is important for board members to ascertain the boundaries of their responsibility for educational quality. While faculty quality is a vital component in the evaluation of overall educational quality at many institutions, it is not the board’s responsibility to make the faculty answerable to its concerns. As the survey results indicate, boards and administrators might further discuss how to meet Peter Ewell’s caution that “running the curriculum is the faculty’s responsibility; the board’s role is to remind them of that responsibility.”<sup>6</sup>

*How do boards learn about their responsibility for monitoring educational quality?*

Board members are most likely to learn of their fiduciary responsibility for educational quality during committee work. Two in three boards educate trustees about this responsibility during new member orientation. This is a significant jump from 2010 when more than a third (36.6 percent) of respondents reported that trustees learn about their responsibilities for educational quality during orientation. Less than half of respondents indicated reaccreditation, board retreats, and special sessions of board meetings as occasions for learning about educational quality.

**Table 4.** How does the board learn about its fiduciary responsibilities for educational quality?\*

OVERALL	
<b>76.5%</b>	Committee work
<b>69.0%</b>	New member orientation
<b>48.0%</b>	Reaccreditation
<b>47.7%</b>	Retreats
<b>27.4%</b>	Special sessions of board meetings
<b>6.5%</b>	Does not discuss educational quality

\*Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

<sup>6</sup> Peter T. Ewell, *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality*, 2nd ed. (AGB Press, 2012).

The reaccreditation process can be a useful prompt for boards to improve their stewardship of educational quality. Indeed, of the respondents who indicated their institution had gone through reaccreditation during their tenure, most (60.5 percent) indicated that their board reviewed their institution’s self-study. However, only one in three respondents reported that their board monitored compliance with educational quality. Equally as troubling, less than a quarter (21.2 percent) of trustees and even fewer administrators (7.2 percent) indicated that their institution had developed a plan for ongoing board involvement. Moreover, about one in five respondents (21 percent) had neither gone through reaccreditation nor participated in a mid-term accreditation progress report. Given the cyclical nature of board member turnover as well as periodic accreditation cycles, it is essential that a plan be in place to engage newer board members in the accreditation process. All board members should be familiar with how accreditation works at the institution as part of its commitment to ensuring educational quality.

**Table 5.** In which of the following ways have members of the governing board been engaged with the institutional accreditation process?\*

	TRUSTEES	ADMINISTRATORS	OVERALL
Met with visiting team	64.6%	64.7%	64.7%
Reviewed self-study	68.7%	55.7%	60.5%
Monitored compliance with report	47.5%	24.6%	33.1%
Developed plan for ongoing board involvement in accreditation review	21.2%	7.2%	12.4%
Used information from accreditation report in making budget decisions	28.3%	9.0%	16.2%

\*Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

Some survey respondents appreciated how the accreditation process facilitated a shift in board members’ understanding of educational quality. When asked what board members learned from the accreditation process, one provost stated, “[the] board is gradually learning that the college has evolved significantly in 20 years from the model most [members] have stuck in their head.” Similarly, another provost remarked that the accreditation process showed the board “more ways to discuss the complexities and comprehensiveness of the institution, especially the ways in which we are adapting to rapid change in higher education.” Indeed, many comments from chief academic officers cited how board engagement in the accreditation process enabled members to learn much more about their institution, including, in some cases, how much better the institution was performing than they had previously believed.



*Who monitors educational quality?* Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72.9 percent) indicated that a committee of the board receives information about educational quality. Approximately 60 percent of respondents report that the full board receives that information. Because it is a fiduciary responsibility, board engagement with educational quality should occur at regular intervals. Reaccreditation and special sessions can serve as useful reminders to monitor educational quality more consistently, but unless they are supplementing established oversight practices, these occasions are insufficient to exercise the full extent of the board’s obligation. And while robust engagement is more likely to occur when a single, high-performing committee takes the lead, all members of the board share responsibility for ensuring the institution’s educational quality. As such, all trustees—regardless of committee assignment—should expect to see information on educational quality on a routine basis.

**Table 6.** Does the full board or a committee of the board receive information and data on educational quality (e.g., student learning assessments, etc.)?

OVERALL

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<b>19.1%</b>	Full board
<b>33.2%</b>	Board committee
<b>39.7%</b>	Both full board and board committee
<b>7.9%</b>	Neither; board does not receive information on education quality

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*While robust engagement is more likely to occur when a single, high-performing committee takes the lead, all members of the board share responsibility for ensuring the institution’s educational quality.*

*What type of information on educational quality do boards receive?* More than half of respondents (57.1 percent) stated that their boards receive alumni surveys as part of efforts to monitor educational quality. This figure is roughly the same as in the 2010 survey (60 percent). Regarding other types of information boards receive, there were negligible differences by role. Discipline-based assessments, institutional tests of skills and knowledge, and representative student portfolios or capstone projects can be indicators of student engagement, yet respondents indicate this information is rarely shared.

**Table 7.** Does the board or board committee receive board-level reports on any of the following institutional assessment measures?\*

OVERALL

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<b>57.1%</b>	Alumni survey
<b>37.3%</b>	Discipline-based assessment
<b>36.6%</b>	Institutional tests of skills and knowledge
<b>29.2%</b>	Employer satisfaction surveys
<b>14.9%</b>	Capstone courses
<b>9.3%</b>	Student portfolios
<b>14.3%</b>	Other
<b>14.9%</b>	The board does not receive this information

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\*Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

The most common variable for board review of educational quality data is field or program of study (60.7 percent). Roughly half of respondents report that their board sees educational data disaggregated by race/ethnicity (50.4 percent) and gender (45.2 percent). Fewer respondents indicated that their boards review educational quality data by categories of student socio-economic status or Pell eligibility. It is encouraging that some boards are reviewing educational quality data at a more granular level. But they should be expected to do so in more meaningful ways given advancements in knowledge about disparate outcomes for students of color and those with less-advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

*Are boards satisfied with the quality of information they receive?* Nearly 80 percent of respondents report being satisfied (60.4 percent) or very satisfied (18.9 percent) with the information on educational quality the board receives. Notably, trustees (34.5 percent) were considerably more likely than administrators (9.9 percent) to report that the information presented to boards was very satisfactory.

*How do boards use information about educational quality?* Most boards use information about educational quality to set institutional goals (61.7 percent), an appropriate and desirable way for boards to engage. Unfortunately, according to the survey, too few boards are leveraging this basic opportunity to strengthen their institutions. For example, boards should use data on student engagement and indicators of educational quality to allocate resources and develop policies to also achieve institutional goals. However, the survey does not make clear that this happens regularly.

**Table 8.** Does the board or a board committee use the information it receives about educational quality for any of the following?\*

OVERALL	
<b>61.7%</b>	Institutional goal-setting
<b>44.4%</b>	Allocation of resources/budget decisions
<b>34.9%</b>	Presidential assessments
<b>13.8%</b>	Don't know
<b>8.0%</b>	Student aid decisions

\*Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

More than half of boards (53.9 percent) discuss educational quality in the context of institutional risks. Indeed, failure to ensure sufficient educational quality poses significant hazards to institutional health. Comments from respondents suggest that changes to reputation and accreditation status are among the potential dangers perceived by boards. Accordingly, educational quality should be an important factor in institutional risk assessments and a regular agenda item of board committees that discuss risk.

### III. IMPEDIMENTS TO MONITORING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

While the survey findings reveal encouraging signs that some boards are effectively overseeing educational quality, many obstacles remain.

*What are the impediments to monitoring educational quality?* Nearly 60 percent of respondents reported that the full board does not spend enough time discussing educational quality. The greatest impediments are lack of time (54.7 percent) and other priorities (49.6 percent). Trustees (26 percent) are more likely than administrators (16.7 percent) to say that the board receives inadequate measures of educational quality. Administrators are more likely than trustees to report that inadequate board leadership (16.1 percent vs. 4.1 percent) or lack of interest among board members (21.8 percent vs. 8.7 percent) impedes monitoring of educational quality. Notably, 16.5 percent of all respondents stated that there were no impediments. To fulfill this essential obligation to monitor educational quality, board members, as fiduciaries, must reassess their priorities.

**Table 9.** What are the impediments, if any, to your board’s understanding of educational quality at your institution(s)?\*

	TRUSTEES	ADMINISTRATORS	OVERALL
Not enough time to discuss at board meetings	51.9%	56.3%	54.7%
Other priorities or crises preempt board attention	34.6%	58.6%	49.6%
Inadequate measures of educational quality	26.0%	16.7%	20.1%
Lack of interest among board members	8.7%	21.8%	16.9%
Inadequate board leadership	4.8%	16.1%	11.9%
Inadequate presidential leadership	5.8%	11.8%	9.4%
Chief academic officer does not engage the board sufficiently in this area	10.6%	8.0%	9.0%
Non-supportive institutional culture	1.0%	3.4%	2.5%
Perception that this information is not appropriate for the board’s role	5.8%	10.9%	9.0%
None	21.2%	13.8%	16.5%

\*Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

Several chief academic officers expressed concern that boards can sometimes bring preconceptions and biases about the problems their institutions face. In a representative comment, one provost explained, “My sense is that the board doesn’t fully grasp the crisis in K–12 education or the skepticism in the public about the value of a quality baccalaureate education.” Another provost noted that trustees’ tendency to resort to comparisons of their own school experience has made it difficult for them to engage in productive discussions about educational quality, observing, “There is good will but a pretty broad gap between those educated and fully understanding of the challenges and opportunities vs. those who draw on their own experiences as students or look to national coverage of stories that may not be relevant to our campus.” Chief academic officers can encourage board members to view their institutions more critically by regularly informing them about best practices in board monitoring of educational quality.

*Chief academic officers can encourage board members to view their institutions more critically by regularly informing them about best practices in board monitoring of educational quality.*

Adequate engagement with educational quality also requires understanding of assessment practices. Several chief academic officers cited as an obstacle the complexity and wide variety of assessment instruments, which can sometimes intimidate board members. Another provost observed that such nuance leads some board members to restrict any interest to “the compliance aspects of assessment, ‘proving or providing evidence of learning’ rather than improving learning. Some are more interested in job placement than academic quality experiences as a metric; therefore, the complexity of educational quality over time is sometimes difficult to fully engage.” Provosts can help trustees to learn about the process and details of measuring student outcomes, and understand the usefulness of direct measures to change programs and influence student learning.

Recent AGB data on board composition (2016) show that college and university boards have relatively few members with higher education backgrounds. Trustee committees of independent institutions and appointing authorities of public boards should use a matrix of needed skills and select an adequate number of board members with knowledge of the higher education industry. The complexity of decisions today and the way in which financial and educational quality decisions are interwoven require board members who are savvy about the essential work of the institutions they serve.

Numerous board members blamed institutional culture for insufficient board monitoring of educational quality. In a representative comment, an academic affairs committee chair noted, “Board culture/practice is for members to focus on the issues specific to their committee assignments, so few outside the committee would prioritize such understanding.” Another trustee stated, “Historically, the institution has not developed traditions that bring faculty and trustees together to share information, discuss strategic direction, and otherwise develop a mutually informed and cohesive relationship.” It is imperative that boards take time to educate their members about higher education issues and develop cultures that support rigorous board engagement with educational quality.

Another potential impediment to the work of the board is a committee structure that is outdated. More than three-quarters of respondents (76.1 percent) reported that their institution has not restructured any of its board committees to better address educational quality. Notably, those that have restructured tend to either separate or combine the academic affairs committee and the student life or enrollment committees. An academic affairs committee chair suggested expanding the size of the committee to ensure that more board members can experience its work. Another promoted more “inter-committee” work. For example, if information on educational quality is typically sequestered in the academic affairs committee, its members should seek opportunities to integrate their insights with the finance committee to ensure better returns on resource allocations. Those who continue to look at educational quality exclusively through the lens of an academic affairs committee may not be leveraging new perspectives and opportunities to advance the institution.

Boards need to regularize their monitoring of educational quality. It cannot be done well on an ad hoc basis. Fortunately, trustees and administrators agree, as this was a common comment from both sets of survey respondents. Regarding what can be done to improve trustees’ understanding of educational quality and better prepare them for meaningful discussions, one board chair said, “Stabilize regulatory issues and establish compliance culture to reduce constant crises so we can ask relevant questions and think strategically.” This is good advice for all boards.

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## Closing Thoughts

A comparison of findings in the surveys of 2010 and 2018 suggests that boards are aware of the components of educational quality, recognize their fiduciary responsibility toward it, yet often neglect their responsibility. Board members may be hesitant to engage in matters of educational quality because they lack expertise in that area. When this occurs, boards tend to delegate their oversight responsibilities to the faculty and academic administration. Indeed, survey results indicate that boards discuss educational quality sparingly and situationally. Still, the survey shows that both trustees and administrators have high expectations that boards should exercise some strategic role vis-à-vis educational quality.

The findings suggest that the information boards receive is not conducive to robust governance and is often heavy on faculty and alumni achievements. Boards are satisfied with this information; chief academic officers are not. Academic administrators know there are richer indicators of educational quality, especially those that speak directly to the institution's mission, such as measures of student learning and engagement. As a result, the limited board engagement that exists in matters of educational quality is often faculty- and alumni-centric, not student-centered.

Each board member is ultimately responsible for his or her own governing capacity. But it is incumbent on board leaders and senior administrators to educate board members so they develop a productive curiosity about educational quality. Currently, many boards are not getting the right information, education, or space in the meeting schedule to facilitate this shift. Equipped with better data, instructed about its meaning, and given the time to deeply discuss it, boards can add value to academic affairs and better exercise other aspects of their fiduciary responsibilities. The future of our educational institutions might just depend on it.

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# Checklists for Best Practices in Assuring Educational Quality

## BOARD LEADERS

- Regularly state, in the presence of the whole board, the institution's defined understanding of educational quality.
- Designate one committee to take the lead in oversight but ensure that all board members regularly review evidence of educational quality by providing the full board with policy-level, strategic summaries of the assessment information it receives.
- Increase the amount of time spent discussing educational quality in committees and as a full board.
- Ensure that during orientation, new members are informed about the meaning of educational quality, the board's responsibility in overseeing it, and the indicators used to monitor it.
- Ensure the board includes members with knowledge of the higher education industry.
- Ensure a strong partnership between the chief academic officer and the chair of the academic affairs committee to:
  - Identify the indicators—student learning among them—that best represent the institution's definition of educational quality;
  - Establish an expectation to regularly receive evidence for institutional performance in those areas; and
  - Guarantee that the board has the right data, structure, and agendas to regularly discuss the most critical issues related to educational quality.
- Use information on educational quality to inform budget decisions.
- Benchmark the board's success in its oversight and regularly identify areas for improvement.
- Commit to a strategy to continuously educate board members about educational quality.



## CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

- Set high expectations for board engagement with educational quality issues, including more time spent discussing educational quality.
- Work with board leaders to set goals for the board's commitment to educational quality.
- Educate board members about higher education issues and their fiduciary responsibility to monitor educational quality and encourage them to ask related questions.
- Inform all board members about the ways in which they can use information on educational quality to strengthen the institution, including—but not limited to—resource allocation.
- Empower the chief academic officer to prepare board members to meet their responsibility for monitoring educational quality.
- Create opportunities for academic administrators, faculty, and students to interact with trustees in appropriate and meaningful ways.

## CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICERS

- Identify core principles of, and best practices in, board monitoring of educational quality.
- Invest time in educating all board members about academic issues, educational quality, and student learning goals.
- During orientation, provide new board members with a model for engaging with educational quality issues.
- Give confidence to those board members who at first may be intimidated or do not possess the requisite understanding to participate in discussions about educational quality issues.
- Explain to all board members how and why the institution conducts program reviews.
- Outline the particulars of high-impact educational practices and the research supporting them.
- Explain the purpose and process of reaccreditation early and often, and clarify how the self-study report provides a valuable tool for monitoring educational quality.
- Familiarize members of the academic affairs committee with the language and practice of assessing student learning outcomes—including the differences between summative and formative assessment, and direct and indirect measures—as well as the current issues surrounding the application of learning outcomes to educational purpose and institutional mission.

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## Resources

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