

SECOND EDITION

MAKING THE GRADE

HOW BOARDS CAN ENSURE
ACADEMIC QUALITY

By Peter T. Ewell



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FOREWORD

Traditionally, boards have treated the product of their institutions—education—as off-limits. Whether out of deference for the role of faculty or from a belief that they are ill-equipped to explore questions of educational quality, board members typically have operated on the assumption that their domain is oversight of all other areas of the institution or system—that is, the financial, physical, policy, and leadership environments for education—but not the education itself. As a result, board members have tended to know little more about the education provided by their institutions than what they hear from successful students and proud faculty and administrators.

Given the current climate for higher education, boards need to develop new habits related to academic quality. The competition among colleges and universities for students, faculty, leaders, and grant and philanthropic dollars requires that boards be part of the conversation about the quality of their institutions' education and graduates. Institutions cannot position themselves competitively without the ability to make (and support) claims of excellence, claims that require supporting details and data. Boards seeking to move their institutions to a higher level or striving to define a clearer niche in the educational marketplace can do so effectively only if they can have strategic discussions about academic quality, raising appropriate questions and responding to appropriate information.

There are other, larger reasons for boards to become more informed and involved in matters related to education. For higher education, the 21st century began with a demand for greater board accountability. The public, including policy makers, raised the bar for boards of colleges and universities: Not only did it expect boards to deliver on their fiduciary responsibilities, it also demanded that boards be responsive to institutions' various constituents as well as be responsible for and to institutions and the public trust. Since that time, the public's demands have become more specific and more pressing. Parents, students, donors,

and policy makers are now asking pointed questions about the value of higher education: Why does a college education cost so much? What's the return on the investment? How well prepared is a graduate for the world of work? Such questions demand that boards provide answers.

As a result of these pressures, board members can no longer demur when questions arise about the quality of the educational experience at their institution or in their system. According to AGB's 2010 survey on how boards oversee educational quality, there is both good news and bad on this front. First, the good news: Since the early 2000s, more than 50 percent of boards increased the amount of time they devoted to discussions of student learning. But the bad news is that nearly two-thirds of boards say they still do not spend enough time on the topic. Given the pressure to respond to public questions about quality and the need to compete in the marketplace, more board engagement is crucial. But many boards, as well as presidents and chief academic officers, struggle with questions of how to achieve this engagement: How can board members become appropriately informed about educational quality given their diverse professional backgrounds? How can boards use their time efficiently and effectively in reviewing information about educational quality? How can boards best use their authority to ensure quality without micromanaging the faculty and academic leaders?

Peter Ewell, a long-serving board member and an internationally respected expert on the assessment of student learning, provides answers to these and other important questions in *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality*. First published in 2006 and soon known broadly by boards, faculty, provosts, and assessment specialists as “the little yellow book,” *Making the Grade* is now in its second edition, complete with a new introduction and a new description of the backdrop against which higher education boards now work. New references to online and print resources add to the value of the book.

Written by a board member for board members, this very readable book makes a compelling case for greater board engagement in discussions of student learning and educational quality. As Ewell asserts, “Ensuring academic quality is a fiduciary responsibility; it is as much a part of our role as board members as

ensuring that the institution has sufficient resources and is spending them wisely.” In addition to bringing clarity to board responsibilities in overseeing quality, *Making the Grade* provides excellent guidance for academic affairs committees. The questions found at the end of each chapter can help shape fruitful discussion by boards and committees.

This second edition of *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality* continues the important conversation begun by the original publication in 2006, and it sharpens the focus on the need for higher education to make progress in assessing and improving student learning.

This book is part of a group of AGB publications that help boards undertake this critical part of their fiduciary responsibilities effectively. In addition to AGB’s 2010 report on “How Boards Oversee Educational Quality,” there is AGB’s Effective Committee Series which includes *The Academic Affairs Committee* and Richard Morrill’s groundbreaking book, *Strategic Leadership in Academic Affairs* (2002), which provides a big-picture look at boards and the educational enterprise.

AGB’s 2011 statement on “Board Responsibility for Overseeing Educational Quality” provides guiding principles for boards, provosts, and presidents. It is included in its entirety in the Appendix of this edition.

Finally, AGB is appreciative of the significant contributions Peter Ewell has made to the quality of higher education governance through his thoughtful, authoritative, and sensible writing on the essential topic of board oversight of academic quality.

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

As in other realms of institutional operations, it is up to the faculty and administration to uphold and improve academic quality. But it is up to the board to understand it and to see that it gets done. Ensuring academic quality is a fiduciary responsibility; it is as much part of our role as board members as ensuring that the

¹ “How Boards Oversee Educational Quality: A Report on a Survey on Boards and the Assessment of Student Learning” (AGB, 2010).

institution has sufficient resources and is spending them wisely.²

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

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

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

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

² Consistent with Principle 1 of the "AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality" (AGB, 2011): See Appendix, page 109.