

REPORT TO THE TEAGLE FOUNDATION

Listening on Presidential and Board Leadership in Student Learning

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The Teagle Foundation convened a listening on the topic of Presidential Leadership in Student Learning, which brought 36 participants to a daylong session in New York. They were drawn from college presidents, foundation officers, researchers on student learning, board members, and representatives of professional associations of board members. What follows is the author's synthesis of the main points of the proceedings.

Building on work Teagle has done in recent years to make the question of student learning more salient in the broader discussion on improving higher education, the listening asked participants to focus on the institutional context in which the questions around student learning will be supported, sustained, and operationalized. The recent publication of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift* served as a nodal point of interest and concern in the discussion.

Many have considered the present as an inflection point in the history of higher education. Time will tell the best way to characterize it, but this story will likely include that this was a moment when the basis on which leadership was required, by various audiences, to tell the institution's narrative is changing. What used to be driven by the collection of singular anecdotes – a Nobel Prize, a teaching award, a student's life-altering experience – is more and more becoming driven by an aggregation of systematically derived and collected data. This will change the way a president does his or her job, requiring different ways to make the case for the academic work we do, and it will shift the role of the board in governing the institution.

Assessment

Among the three pieces of an "iron triangle" that make up the great challenges for higher education -- contain costs, improve quality, and open access – the question of assessment welds them together. All too often today, assessment, or the systematic measuring of how the institution is performing, begins from questions of compliance. It meets the needs of outside groups, given a face by the accreditation boards. One can imagine a different scenario, in which assessment begins from internal problems, issues, concerns, and desires for improvement, rather than from compliance. It could be a means by which an institution can ask, How are we doing in our core mission? And just as important, How do we know that? Successful assessment will usually result in more questions than it answers. Getting engaged in it means being prepared for discouraging results. What do we do when the evidence we have does not tell a good story? The most common reaction, to the blame the instrument, is not necessarily a counterproductive one. As long as the process is iterative, and the audience that attempts to refine what we are trying to measure stays on board, assessment can spark a larger consideration of what we value.

State of Affairs Now

There is more data-driven assessment happening now than even just 2-3 years ago. NSSE and the CLA have been embraced more widely over that time, and a survey of websites suggests that there is more transparency, as more institutions publish references to their learning outcomes. Still, assessment seems to be undertaken more because of external pressures of compliance and accountability, centered on accreditation, rather than internal

forces of institutional improvement. In this situation, it is not surprising that process trumps substance, and the faculty either do not take too much notice, or when they do, a reaction of distrust or cynicism is not uncommon. If the main drivers of the process are compliance then use of the data for institutional improvement will continue to be a challenge. More fruitful is to begin with a challenge or worry. How might we better serve our students in the domain of X? This positions the question of assessing results into two areas that faculty already will be predisposed to embrace: to enquire, and to seek to know, rests at the core of the academic mission, and faculty want to do better by their students.

What Presidents Can Do

In this broader context, the responsibilities of the president and board are shifting. During this current stage of institutional evolution, the world outside will need to be brought along more deliberately than perhaps they have in the past with respect to what is happening at institutions of higher learning. They need to be on point with the faculty, but also need to work on turning the dial on public perception. In spurring changes the president's levers are to set the agenda, raise issues, and assign resources. The president can deliver the news, both the good and the bad, and set the institution's agenda more squarely on the question of what kind of education we want our students to have.

Several moves were suggested. As the president's role has become increasingly externally focused, the board has generally followed that allocation of attention outward. It is perhaps the right time to revisit that balance. Should the president embrace the accreditation process, rather than allow the responsibility to devolve down the ladder, the board, which is now largely removed from that, will likely follow. While doing so, the president has an opportunity to shift the rhetoric away from blaming the feds or accreditors, and toward institutional awareness and improvement. The most promising leadership will be able to shift the focus away from compliance and toward internal action and useful consequences. Putting this issue on the agenda transparently and openly is a necessary move. The president can instill and enact an evidence-based culture, where internal discussion will anticipate the question, How do you know? There will of course be initial reaction against this or that instrument of measure, but just having that conversation opens up the discussion to the goal of making a better one. The president could start with an inventory of what is already being done to measure institutional change. Measures currently exist, but in the sometimes siloed spaces of the student affairs' office vs. the chief academic officer's vs. the institutional research group. The next step is to begin to catalogue the ways in which these observational data have been put to use.

The faculty have not run to embrace assessment of learning and the meeting included attention to the dynamics of their views. Whatever else it will require of faculty, assessment produce a deeper engagement for them outside the discipline and, beyond this, outside the institution. Stronger connections with the larger world are inherently stimulating, and create greater responsiveness. The institution of the board is already set up as a mechanism of translating issues between the inside and outside of the academy, so more faculty involvement with them could be an effective way, not just to introduce them and their concerns and ways of thinking to the board, but the other way around too. In

furthering the development of the faculty, the president could highlight examples of when the use of evidence-based investigation resulted in an institutional initiative that improved learning, but also simultaneously cut costs. Faculty are already warmed up to the first question, and framing the issue of doing better by their students along with cutting costs will help to start a conversation about responsibility over their student's tuition dollars and their benefactors' largess. The CFO of the university could give a good overview presentation to the faculty to strengthen this sense of ownership over the issue available financial resources. The language of fiduciary responsibility and financial audit could be better linked to the process of academic review and academic integrity. Additionally, the president can work to cultivate internal experts on assessment among the faculty and administration, and even the students. Making prominent one or the other narrative of a faculty member who formerly resisted and now embraces the goal of better use of evidence could help improve the link with faculty. One participant observed that among faculty it is not unheard of that the strongest critics becomes the strongest supporters.

Messaging

A number of moments raised the issue of how we should be discussing the question of improving student learning. Changing the discussion of evaluation from questions of teaching to a language of learning also reorients the discussion from a question of how we do things, to one that centers on the results of what we do. Boards are likely to respond to improving "quality." One participant spoke of an Academic Affairs Committee refigured as a Quality Committee. Some discussion immediately emerged over whether quality was a rich enough term to capture what we had in mind. Is it too thin of a platform to build a public case on? Perhaps "learning" has more to recommend it. Another mode of discussion brought out ideas on civic learning or the formation of a democratic citizenry. The question of "what our students are bringing to the world," is another creative way to embrace the larger issues. It was also suggested that learning among students could be positioned as a fundamental part of social justice. Given the increasing complexity of the world, making basic decisions around for example health care, or retirement, or even what utility company a person uses, now require a deeper basis of both knowledge and judgment.

Current Boards' Characteristics and Responsibilities

Roughly 2/3 of the group currently serve, or have served, on boards in their careers. This gave them a rich basis of discussion. The responsibility to improve student learning rests with faculty, but with the president and board rests the responsibility to remind them of that. Trustees will be used to a language of quality and be ready to discuss and embrace it as a goal. Discussion about assessment based measurement of learning will not immediately jump out to them. A recent study by the Association of Governing Boards found that ¾ of board members they surveyed reported their institutions had mission statements of what students should learn, half of them did not recognize that assessment was required for accreditation, and most did not embrace it as a trustee-level responsibility. During the various programs of trustee orientation, 1/3 learned about assessment of learning, while 80% learned about finance and assessment of financial health. While as recently as 10 years ago, boards expected the wave of assessment to hit,

they also expected it to be a *fait accompli* by now. What happened instead was an increase in the importance of the rankings information, rather than learning assessment.

Several impediments stand in the way of board members embracing assessment. They may pride themselves on efficiency (even over effectiveness). The time allocated to meetings tends to be more conducive to working in execution mode, rather than opening up large issues about re-thinking the institution. The language of assessment still tends to be an insider's one, and just as much as faculty sometimes find it off-putting, so too do trustees; and there are not enough good models in the mainstream that show assessment as a way forward. Also, it is perhaps true that boards are characterized by a certain diffidence. The setting seems to work differently than many they are used to, and they tend to be reluctant to insert themselves in what they regard as faculty's business. Added to this they tend to come in with a sense that their institutions are good and improving, and so, overall, their goals on academic affairs seem to be better characterized around issues of compliance rather than advancement. Finally, the board is not unaware of the measures by which they were chosen for their positions. If the main criteria by which they are brought on is their wealth, rather than their particular wisdom with regard to how to run an academic enterprise, they will be reluctant to engage in questions outside of their purview.

How to Make Boards Better

When asked why they choose to serve, not surprisingly, board members tend not to bring up assessment, but they do talk about quality. They see their responsibilities as coming under the domains of strategy and financial strength. If direct links can be drawn between assessment and these areas, board members will become interested. If their discussion around the quality of the institution can be centered on students, there will be a more natural segue to improving student learning. One participant remembered a board member, who runs an orange grove, comment after a long board meeting that no one was talking about the oranges. There are those in the current discussion that are making the case that a college and university education over the next 50 years will get worse, not better. It is possible that their involvement could be framed as one of generational equity, as ensuring that the next generation of college students is as well educated as they were. There are also ways to improve the board's engagement by reaching out beyond individual institutions. Building coalitions of like-minded boards, as well as presidents, holds salutary promise, and the board's engagement with assessment could become part of the accrediting process itself.

Better orientation would surely be a part of the board's experience, as well as better mechanisms to follow up on how the board is doing, up to and including ways of publicizing various boards' results. To remediate the possibility that money talk crowds out talk about student learning, the academic affairs committee could be better integrated with the finance committee, and the board could make service on both required. Members of the faculty and academic experts are also a logical part of a board re-oriented toward a greater emphasis on student learning. Board members should be asked to take longer meetings for exploration and evaluative questions.

Seeing around the Corner

Imagining an institution where the board plays a more activist role in the evaluation of the core academic mission means in most cases a slightly different institution than the status quo. A few further thoughts on what to expect emerged from the group. When presented as a one-off experiment in measurement, the results of any particular attempt to assess will present challenges. If the data do not paint a good picture, in current circumstances, there is an incentive for the academic administration not to share it. If there is a way to fold assessment into the whole process of what it is to be a healthy, learning institution, then the results of any particular iterative experimental initiative are less important. Instead, the goal becomes bringing the board into an ongoing process of self-study. Failures, when embedded within this larger systematic approach, could be seen as evidence of experimentation. This would bring the board more closely into the process of how presidents think. It also has the potential to bring faculty into the process, who might start to see experimentation and innovation as the criteria that win institutional rewards, rather than whatever it is that faculty see as the most effective current levers to produce resources.

Once again, assessment can be expected to raise more questions than it solves. From questions about nuts and bolts pedagogical practices and best use of resources, to larger issues of what the institution truly values. When a different kind of evidence becomes needed for any institution to tell its story, the question what that institutions truly values will take place under a changing set of parameters. It is likely that those institutions will thrive that do the best job of preparing the widest number of stakeholders for this new narrative.