

**SUMMARY OF ITEM FOR ACTION,
INFORMATION OR DISCUSSION**

TOPIC: Role and Function of the BOR Education Policy Committee

COMMITTEE: Education Policy

DATE OF COMMITTEE MEETING: September 21, 2011

SUMMARY: The attached chapter from Richard Morrill's book, *Strategic Leadership in Academic Affairs – Clarifying the Board's Responsibilities*, provides a framework within which the Committee can understand better its role and function so that Committee members can work with staff to ensure that the agenda items and supporting materials provided to the Committee are as informative and useful as they can be. Dr. Florestano and Dr. Goldstein will lead a discussion among members of the Committee about the role and function of the Committee on Education Policy, with an eye toward understanding and refining the annual agenda for the coming academic year.

Morrill notes in his book that many board committees, e.g. finance, audit, and facilities, have "a partially scripted role." He continues, "As a large part of their work, [they] apply rules, standards, and expectations that follow a prescribed pattern. Clearly this is far from the case in academic affairs, where there are far fewer controlling expectations." Because of this greater flexibility, academic affairs (or education policy) committees can, says Morrill, "become important links in the chain of strategic decision making and evaluation that institutions use to design and implement their academic futures."

Among the elements discussed in the attached chapter from Morrill's book that might provoke comment from Committee members are:

- The "information calendar" – "One of the principal tasks of the committee is to decide what to report as information and what to recommend for action to the board. 'Reading' data strategically is not a passive task but one that leads to further inquiries, comparative analyses, and the pursuit of explanations for troubling or unexpected indicators."
- Program approval -- "Scrutiny of the process that has produced a recommendation for a new program is the committee's responsibility, as is the Final assessment of issues related to strategic fit, academic quality, student demand, and financing."
- Faculty personnel policies and decisions – "As the institution stakes its reputation on commitments to such values as fairness, equal opportunity, high standards, consistency, and academic freedom, these values must be translated into all faculty employment policies and practices. The academic affairs committee guarantees the accuracy of the translation."

Finally, Morrill notes, "The work of the academic affairs committee will be more effective if its members periodically attend campus events – lectures, concerts, programs – to experience the campus in action...members of the committee will want to experience campus life directly."

As a new academic year begins and as new Regents join the Board and its Committees, a clearer understanding of the purpose and the work of the Committee on Education Policy will ensure a positive and productive year.

ALTERNATIVE(S): This is an information item

FISCAL IMPACT: This is an information item.

CHANCELLOR'S RECOMMENDATION: This is an information item.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION: Received as information. DATE: September 21, 2011

BOARD ACTION:

DATE:

SUBMITTED BY: Irwin L. Goldstein (301) 445-1992

irv@usmd.edu


The Academic Affairs Committee


To carry out the wide and complex range of responsibilities concerning academic matters, governing boards normally rely on a committee on academic affairs. Known by many different titles, structured in varying ways, and charged with an array of duties in different institutions, the committee's primary responsibilities include academic and faculty matters.

A typical private-institution board of 20-40 members is too large to process extensive information about the educational program and to deliberate in depth about specific issues. To be effective, the board has to rely on the work conducted in committee. If the committee is well informed, sensitive to its special role, and has good leadership and an effective internal dynamic, it can make a substantial contribution to the board and to the effectiveness of the whole institution. In some cases, small boards may function as a committee of the whole for educational issues, but in doing so its members will need to be aware of their special decision-making role in the academic sphere. That may be a tall order, given the board's many other responsibilities.

Whatever its specific set of duties, the academic affairs committee can serve as a mechanism that unifies the total work of the board. Because it focuses on the defining purposes of the institution, the committee can integrate the board's role in collaborative strategic leadership. In the academic affairs committee, trustees, administrators, and faculty members together can discuss the educational values and academic programs that provide the animating center for all the administrative and financial issues that normally crowd the board's agenda.¹

DATA POINT

 **50%** of respondents said the work of their board's academic affairs committee includes academic and faculty issues only.

 **20%** said the committee's work also includes enrollment management and student services.

The Work of the Committee

If the committee is to provide the board with an integrative perspective, it will need to find effective and efficient ways to fulfill its duties. First, this means establishing a productive working relationship between the committee and an administrative counterpart, usually the chief academic officer. This person can be expected to enjoy the full confidence of the president, who periodically will work with the committee's administrative coordinator to build agendas around action items and broad strategic issues.

Working with the committee chair, the chief academic officer should develop an information calendar that defines the assessment data and statistical reports that will be presented at each meeting on a rotating basis. A fall meeting might be the time, say, for presenting the statistical faculty profile, and a spring meeting the time for sharing the results of program reviews. By rotating information at set meetings, committee members can anticipate and analyze information within a familiar framework. Over time, this helps them see trends, deepen their understanding, and sharpen their questions. Though all board members should receive summaries of important data, the committee should be given more detailed information and special studies.

One of the principal tasks of the committee is to decide what to report as information and what to recommend for action to the board. The impact of its reports will be greatest if the committee has thought carefully about the purposes of its own deliberations. If the committee consciously monitors and assesses the academic program in a strategic framework, it can bring to life issues that otherwise appear to be inconsequential. To achieve this aim, the committee's administrative coordinator will want to illuminate the information provided to the committee, indicating what can and cannot be learned from it. "Reading" data strategically is not a passive task but one that leads to further inquiries, comparative analyses, and the pursuit of explanations for troubling or unexpected indicators.

In turn, the committee will think hard about creative and effective ways to report its insights and findings to educate the board about issues that eventually may come forward for action. To do so, it may focus a brief report on a key issue at each full board meeting, providing a few charts to show trends in areas such as retention, tenure patterns, or admissions rates to graduate school.

The committee's effort to interpret information has the ultimate goal of discerning what plans and actions can be designed to improve performance. The committee should expect reports from the administration or faculty to suggest specific actions to meet goals related to raising educational quality. Where this orientation is lacking, the committee can communicate through its questions and comments that it expects the loop to be closed between knowing and doing, between evaluating and enacting. Trustee monitoring and evaluation can energize the academic decision-making process, fueling collaboration among the board, administration, and faculty while driving strategy toward implementation. Because the committee's work involves continuing face-to-face relationships, the board's monitoring and evaluating activities are likely to influence the agendas of administrators and faculty members. The committee thus holds one of the keys to ensuring the

institution meets its objectives.

What happens when problems and challenges come to the committee's attention? How does it translate its authority into effective action? After all, it is the administration and the faculty who have the primary responsibility to assess and improve programs, while the board simply reviews that process. It would be a fundamental mistake to shift the administrative dimensions of evaluation to the board, which would be ineffective in that role. Yet by demanding accountability and assessing performance, the board has a powerful mechanism to foster change.

To illustrate how an academic affairs committee might respond to problems through its monitoring of the academic program, the following hypothetical case study might be helpful. It illustrates how an academic affairs committee might do its work and examines how the committee and the board itself might address an academic problem through measured and collaborative action. The underlying question is whether the governing board, working through its academic affairs committee, can make a difference in the academic program without interfering with the professional prerogatives of the faculty or administration.

Case 3: Problems in Academic Advising at a Regional State University

A state university with a strong regional reputation and an enrollment of 10,000 full-time and 4,000 part-time students has approved a strategic plan based on a vision to be a student-centered university with a strong focus on applied research in fields where it can become a national leader. Consistent with the vision is a strong new emphasis on the academic advising of students through a reorganized and reenergized system focused on faculty involvement.

In reviewing summary data on a student satisfaction survey, a member of the academic affairs committee notes an apparent problem with student advising in one of the university's schools. At a committee meeting, he asks the provost to find out whether the problem is real. The provost indicates he is unaware of any special problems but will report back to the committee.

It turns out that the detailed information troubles the committee. It reveals that a large proportion of students in the school, more than 40 percent, believe it is "difficult" or "impossible" to make an appointment with their faculty adviser. Other aspects of advising in the survey also receive low ratings. The dean reports that the problem seems to be centered on three of the six departments. He claims the issue may be overblown because many students expect to make instant or same-day contact with an adviser and refuse to plan ahead. The provost notes, however, that no other schools or departments in the university have the same rate of negative responses on the item, so the difference is significant. He tells the committee he is concerned that the dean was not more forthcoming initially about the issue given its strategic importance, but that the dean has volunteered to discuss the problem with the chairs of the three departments.

Several members of the committee are uncomfortable with the situation. They suggest that the renewed emphasis on advising is a crucial aspect of the strategic plan, that the results are worrisome in themselves, and that they send a terrible message that academic administration is still "business as usual." They wonder whether the provost would find it appropriate to receive a resolution from the

committee requesting the dean to prepare a report on specific actions the school intends to take to meet the strategic goals of the advising plan. The provost understands the significance of the issue but is undecided whether this is a wise step, because it may be interpreted as a signal that the board lacks confidence in his leadership. Because the school in question has a high volume of funded research, faculty members may see this as the board meddling with the way they establish their priorities and set their schedules. He asks that the president discuss the issue with the committee.


After a full discussion, the president indicates that under these circumstances the committee's approach is appropriate. She tells the committee that she has no objection to the committee's officially requesting a follow-up report that would, in effect, charge the provost to communicate the committee's expectations to the dean. The committee's action does not require a formal resolution of the whole board but will be part of the chair's oral report as a matter that is under consideration.

In explaining her reasons for accepting the committee's idea, the president suggests that this type of action will not undercut the provost's responsibility. The board committee collaborated with the administration, acted through it, and examined the facts before making a decision. It did not prescribe or impose a solution. Because the board recently had endorsed the strategic plan that several committee members helped create, it would be dangerous to invite their participation, give them information, ask for their questions and concerns, and then deflect their request for a report. As the institution's final authority, the board can send a powerful symbolic message of accountability because the request is tied to a goal that everyone, including the faculty senate, has endorsed. The committee's action shows it intends to use its authority within a balanced process of shared leadership.

One can easily imagine other scenarios under different presidents. Some presidents would argue that a board committee that directs the provost to take a specific action sets a dangerous precedent and undermines the authority of both the president and the provost. In this interpretation, the board committee's action, although innocent in itself, turns committee members into academic executives and implies that the board can act directly without going through the president. Presidents of this mind might suggest that the board's concerns should be honored, but that it is up to the president to tell the provost to seek corrective action at the school and departmental level and to report to the president on it, and he in turn to the board.

Readers will want to consider questions of their own regarding this case. Does it matter how this kind of issue is handled? Is the academic affairs committee's active role appropriate? Has it become too involved in faculty matters? Which of the presidential responses

DATA POINT

 **76%** of respondents said it is important for the board to have a significant voice in the nature and shape of academic programs.

 **20%** said it was not important.

is persuasive? How should one come to a judgment about these matters?

The case raises several issues about the way academic affairs committees should function. The first has to do with local judgments of the legitimacy of the committee's action. Standing agreements, traditions, settled expectations, and the values of the campus culture will answer the question of legitimacy in different ways for each institution. It is vital that the board committee act within broad patterns of perceived legitimacy. Under the right circumstances, the limits of legitimacy can justifiably be stretched but not broken, unless for very good reasons.


The second issue concerns the committee's fundamental goal. The academic affairs committee can be flexible in its methods, but its aim is to be an active partner in a collaborative process of educational decision making. The committee's purpose is not to use its authority as an end in itself; rather, it is to create a zone of accountability within which those responsible must answer for reaching the educational goals they have set for themselves. For this reason, the committee raises questions, makes evaluations, and asks for demonstrable results. As it does so, it may indeed be signaling that the administration's or the faculty's responses have been passive or ineffective, but it must do so in a way that respects each participant's contribution to the decision-making process.

Program Approval

In approving new programs or discontinuing existing ones, it is again the work of the committee that determines the recommendation that will flow to the whole board. Scrutiny of the process that has produced a recommendation for a new program is the committee's responsibility, as is the final assessment of issues related to strategic fit, academic quality, student demand, and financing. The board relies on the verification provided through the committee that a new program passes the tests of procedure and of substance. When the committee recommends that programs be discontinued, again the committee must review the case in detail and ensure that all parties have been fully heard.

An area in which the approval of a new academic offering has become challenging for academic affairs committees concerns programs requested by donors and corporations. Faculty often fear that donors or corporations will try to control the curriculum, hold sway on personnel decisions, or short-circuit normal governance patterns. In such cases, the committee can play a crucial monitoring role, providing a forum for opposing views and drawing lines to protect institutional integrity. Even though academic affairs commit-

DATA POINT

 **58%** of respondents from public institutions said developing new academic programs in response to the needs of business and industry is very important.

 **32%** of respondents from private institutions agreed.

tees and boards have the authority to create new ventures without prior faculty approval, doing so would be wise only in unusual circumstances.

If a controversy arises over a proposed program, the academic affairs committee can make a valuable contribution by inviting, with the administration's approval, faculty leaders who oppose the program to present their views directly to the committee. In controversial cases surrounding major gifts or corporate support for new programs, the administration usually is seen as already committed to the venture and may no longer be perceived as neutral. The committee can place the issue in a new light by reviewing the issues evenhandedly and displaying concern for the strategic dimension of the problem and the integrity of the decision-making process. Enough institutions have experienced problems in these spheres to suggest that the active involvement of the board committee can be an appropriate safeguard. The committee ordinarily should be able to keep proposals on the normal track for full review and approval.

Faculty Personnel Policies and Decisions

Although legal counsel, the administration, and faculty committees will carry the heaviest weight in developing and recommending major faculty employment policies and procedures, only the board can finalize them. Drawing on valuable perspectives from other walks of life, the members of the academic affairs committee will want to study and critique these policies and procedures.

As the institution stakes its reputation on commitments to such values as fairness, equal opportunity, high standards, consistency, and academic freedom, these values must be translated into all faculty employment policies and practices. The academic affairs committee guarantees the accuracy of the translation.

There are substantial variations among institutions in the way trustees are involved in decisions about faculty appointments, promotion, and tenure. Along the spectrum from small to large institutions, the trustee role reduces to a formality or even disappears. In tenure decisions, the stakes are high, and trustee involvement can be momentous. The academic affairs committee should not be asked to provide a more authoritative judgment than a committee of faculty peers about a candidate's qualifications. The campus would suffer a crisis of confidence if a committee of lay trustees were to substitute its judgment for that of prior levels of review, including that of the administration, on the merits of a tenure case. Such a decision also might violate the spirit or the letter of the institution's policies. The committee's work normally does not extend to studying tenure portfolios; rather, it is limited to ensuring that the tenure policies and procedures of the institution are functioning as intended.

Ironically, to make an informed judgment about policy and procedure, the committee will need to observe the application of criteria in specific cases. A brief summary of the professional qualifications of candidates and of recommendations made in prior stages of the review process will contain important information for the committee. Based on this information, committee members will be able to make observations or ask questions about whether decisions are consistent with stated expectations, institutional mission, and strategic aspirations.

From the profiles of candidates and the statistical faculty profile it has received, the committee will be able to note trends in faculty achievements in teaching and scholarship, academic backgrounds, and ethnic representation. The nature and future of the institution, including its financial future, are largely being defined through these decisions, so the committee's review constitutes a prime example of the power of attentive and active questioning. What is the precise nature of the scholarship of the candidate being accepted for tenure, and how does it differ from those being rejected? How do the institution's claims about the role of teaching translate into tenure decisions? Are standards consistent at the various levels of review? What explains divergent decisions by the dean and the department? Have all procedures relating to fairness and equal opportunity been scrupulously applied?

Should the committee's review raise serious concerns, members have the option to examine information in greater detail, even to read a full tenure file. In doing so, the aim, again, is not to second-guess the professional judgment of others but to be assured that practices and procedures are fully in accord with policy. The committee's occasional study of the details of a case can contribute to a more rigorous and consistent process.

If arbitrary or unfair decisions emerge, the consequences will be turmoil that can become crippling, especially at the department level. If, on the other hand, the board is confident that procedures are being fairly and consistently applied and that high standards reflect the institution's identity and aspirations, the committee and the board will be able to provide steady support to those making tough decisions. Tenure decisions register only as yes or no, up or out. They are total and final, unlike promotion or salary decisions that can be calibrated or revisited. Moreover, because such decisions may diminish or even close future professional opportunities, they are fraught with emotion. Personal and public attacks may come, and in their wake may be lawsuits. Since little can be said publicly about personnel matters, it can be a lonely and difficult time for those who have made the key decisions. The board should understand these circumstances and support those who carry the largest burdens in the decision, typically department chairs, deans, vice presidents, and the president.

Another reason the academic affairs committee will want to review tenure decisions as to process and pattern is to be aware of problems and controversies that may emerge on campus, in the press, or in the courts. Board members, like anyone else, always handle bad news and controversy better when they are prepared.

Depending on the size and protocols of the institution, the academic affairs committee may submit a report to the full board on tenure for its information and, depending on the institution, for its action. Only after the board has acted can candidates be notified of the tenure decision.

Committee Membership

To fulfill the academic affairs committee's potential as a vital strategic-monitoring and decision-making body, the committee's membership will need to be carefully considered. The selection of a committee chair is especially important. This trustee will need to interact effectively in many relationships—with other board members, the pres-

ident and other top administrators, faculty members, and students. The chair should have the stature to inspire respect in all these individuals. He or she will need to demonstrate a clear commitment to the centrality of the academic program in institutional decisions and a deep interest in educational questions. Because committee deliberations often involve sensitive personnel questions, campus controversies, or disputes over governance authority, the chair typically is someone who is circumspect and knows institutional policies well. A requisite skill is knowing how to interpret the decision-making system to others.

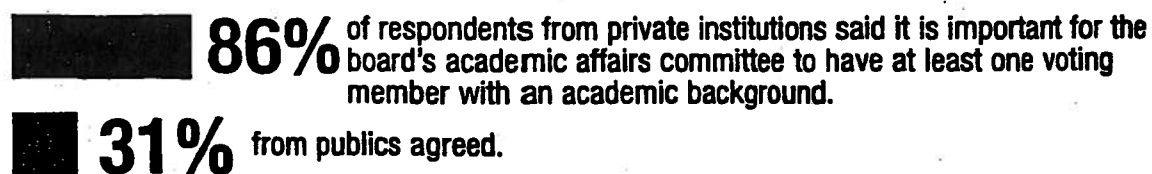
The chair also should be a key participant in other committees and task forces that are involved in strategic planning. Committee schedules may make overlapping memberships difficult, but careful planning will make it possible. The aim is to achieve linkage among committees reflecting the integrative nature of most of the institution's important decisions. In addition, the board might want a member or two of the academic affairs committee to serve on other key committees, especially finance. The committee's connection to financial matters is essential for reviewing the implementation of academic priorities.

Most boards have faculty members serving as members or observers on board committees, and this is especially helpful for academic affairs. To be sure, the faculty members must not speak for colleagues whose views they do not know, so the faculty participants need to exercise care in how and what they communicate to the committee. If the committee makes specific recommendations on personnel matters, such as individual tenure cases, faculty members should absent themselves to protect against any perceived or real conflicts of interest.

Many institutions seek to have at least one individual on the committee who is a professional in higher education—a president, dean, or distinguished faculty member of another institution. Such a person can make a substantial contribution. Deliberations on most issues begin with establishing context, and academicians can provide credible insights. Problem-solving skills and sensitivities honed in a similar environment elsewhere often are beneficial to the committee, especially in helping other board members understand the intricacies of the academic culture.

Because the effectiveness of the committee depends on its members being informed about broad educational issues, the institution might wish to provide subscriptions for committee members to higher education periodicals. *Change* and *Liberal Education* magazines focus on

DATA POINT



trends in teaching and learning, and AGB's *Trusteeship* addresses educational issues from the perspective of a board member. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* is a useful comprehensive weekly news source but demands more time than most board members have available. An efficient approach is for the committee's administrative liaison to circulate key articles and opinion pieces, especially on topics the committee is considering.

Some boards ask students to participate in committee meetings, sometimes as members. Many boards do not. The burden on students to participate can be considerable, so devoting time and energy to orient them to their assignments is essential. The personal experience of students in campus life and academic programs gives them the chance to offer a fresh and personal view that trustees may find valuable. Most students chosen for the task of committee service will be top performers, often enchanting trustees by their enthusiasm and achievements. There always are exceptions, but most students can be trusted to speak only for themselves and to avoid politicized issues. Again, as with faculty representatives, students should excuse themselves from deliberations or votes on specific tenure cases.

The work of the academic affairs committee will be more effective if its members periodically attend campus events—lectures, concerts, programs—to experience the campus in action. Although some presidents discourage informal contact between the board and the campus community, fearing back-channel communications, members of the academic affairs committee will want to experience campus life directly. Social events and dinners surrounding board and committee meetings represent a good opportunity for committee members to know one another personally, and brief presentations at committee meetings by faculty and staff help trustees better understand the institution.

Reflecting both the nature of the issues with which it deals and the expertise of committee members, many board committees have a partially scripted role. As a large part of their work, committees on finance, audit, facilities, and investment apply rules, standards, and expectations that follow a prescribed pattern. Clearly, this is far from the case in academic affairs, where there are far fewer controlling expectations. These circumstances present the academic affairs committee with an opportunity to contribute decisively to the effectiveness of the institution.

In various ways, academic affairs committees can become important links in the chain of strategic decision making and evaluation that institutions use to design and implement their academic futures. If the committee does not have a meaningful effect on this total process, then neither will the board itself. That is why the chief executive and board leaders should reflect carefully and creatively about the responsibilities, membership, and workings of the academic affairs committee.

¹ For ideas that parallel and supplement this chapter, see: Wood, Richard J. "Academic Affairs Committee." *AGB Board Basics Series*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1997.