Evaluating Board Performance

This information was adapted for Washington Association of College Trustees based on the publication, Assessing Board Effectiveness: Resources for Boards of Trustees Self-Evaluation, *by Cindra Smith and presented during the May 23, 2019, Spring Conference.*

Effective Leadership and Governance

Successful colleges require effective leadership and governance. Success is a result of highly qualified and skilled people serving in leadership positions. These people learn their roles, embrace their responsibilities, and continually improve their performance. Effective governing boards are comprised of trustees who are committed to excellence in performing their duties.

Students, communities, college staff, the public, media, government, and the accrediting commission have the right to expect and deserve a high degree of professionalism and performance from trustees of Washington's community and technical colleges.

How do governing boards assure they are effective? One way is through ongoing board and trustee education and development, to provide the skills necessary to govern well. Another is through regular board self-evaluation, to assess how the board is upholding commonly accepted standards of good governance. The board seeks and uses information on how it is performing on specific roles and responsibilities.

Assessing board performance involves looking at the board as a unit. While individual trustee behavior contributes to effective board functioning, a board self-evaluation looks at how individuals *collectively* work together to govern the district. It focuses on board policies and practices related to the role of the board in representing the community, setting policy direction, working with the CEO, and monitoring institutional effectiveness.

Board Tasks

Adopt a board self-evaluation policy and process
Regularly conduct a board self-evaluation
Discuss the results of the evaluation to identify strengths and areas for improvement
Use the results to enhance board effectiveness and set annual board goals

Relationship to CEO Evaluation

Given the unique nature of the relationship between the board and CEO, the evaluations of the board and the CEO are intertwined. When the board evaluates itself, it is evaluating in part how well the CEO supports the board; when it evaluates the CEO, it is evaluating the direction and support the board provides for that person. The CEO contributes to board evaluation and evaluates his or her support and leadership to the board. The board conducts the CEO evaluation and looks at its own behavior in fostering CEO effectiveness.

Some boards schedule their CEO evaluation and board self-evaluation discussions in conjunction with each other to capitalize on the link between them. Others do them at different times. One of the outcomes of both evaluations are priorities and tasks for the coming year, and no matter how the evaluation sessions are linked, the board and CEO priorities must be aligned.

Accreditation Standard

The importance of regular board self-evaluation is reflected in the Northwest Association of College and University Accrediting Commission Standards. Standard 2.A.8 states:

> *"The board regularly evaluates its performance to ensure its duties and responsibilities are fulfilled in an effective and efficient manner."*

The district's accreditation self-study will provide evidence that boards have conducted regular self-evaluations and used the results to improve how they are governing their district.

Purpose and Outcomes

The purposes of the board self-evaluation are to identify areas of board functioning that are working well and those that may need improvement. It is an opportunity for open and candid discussion about board and trustee responsibilities, as well as trustees' interests and desires. Board self-evaluations also model the value of reflecting on one's own performance and engage in ongoing improvement. They set an example for ongoing improvement throughout the institution.

Evaluation discussions foster communication and leads to more cohesive board teams. Reports from trustees on boards that regularly conduct self-evaluations include that they gain an increased appreciation for and understanding of their fellow trustees. Their board meetings run more smoothly and they receive better information. They have a set of priorities that guide board agendas and workshops. And, they increase the time they spend on college policy, goals and accomplishments.

The outcomes of a board self-evaluation include:

- a summary of what the board does well and its accomplishments for the prior year
- a better understanding of what is needed from each trustee and the CEO to be an effective board and board/CEO team
- an assessment of progress on the prior year's goals and identification of what needs to be completed
- goals and tasks for the coming year related to board performance and its leadership for district goals

In addition to the general outcomes, boards may have specific needs or desires from year to year, depending on circumstances. For instance, during an accreditation self-study, the board

may want to focus on the accreditation standards. Or, if the board has hired a new CEO in the past year, the evaluation may focus on the board/CEO relationship. If a board has not been functioning well, it may wish to focus on team dynamics, communication and the board's code of ethics. If the board has a significant number of new trustees, the evaluation may focus on the roles and responsibilities of the board and trustees.

Evaluation Process

Self-evaluation processes range from relatively informal discussions to formal, structured assessment surveys or even interviews. A board evaluation, whether formal or informal, should result in a report that describes the process, summarizes the results, and identifies actions that the board intends to take as a result of the evaluation.

Annual board self-evaluations are the most common. Each year, the board sets aside time to reflect on past accomplishments and performance against pre-determined criteria, and to identify priorities and expectations for the coming year.

Boards may choose specific areas to review more often. For instance, some boards will quickly assess the board meeting discussion and agenda content at the end of each meeting, which provides immediate feedback. Other examples are boards assessing how they oriented and integrated newly elected trustees, or the process of hiring a new CEO, after those events occurred.

Surveys

Surveys are by far the most common approach to gathering information about board performance. Responders rate board performance on various criteria, and the ratings are summarized and presented to the board for discussion. (College staff, a consultant, and/or a board member or committee may do the summary). The discussion of the summarized ratings and related comments is the board's self-evaluation.

Survey instruments ask responders to rate performance on the items in the survey, usually using a numeric scale. The ratings are provided as raw data and/or are summarized in some way (averages, charts, graphs, etc.)

Using the same rating scale from year to year allows average ratings to be compared to prior years for the same or similar criteria. Using the same rating scale for surveys of trustees and for college leadership allows for easy comparison between the two sets of results.

Surveys are designed to assess two areas of board functioning

- The progress was made on achieving board priorities and tasks set the previous year.
- Board performance on characteristics of effective board functioning.

Annual Board Priorities and Tasks: Survey instruments that assess achievement on board priorities are unique to each board. Annual priorities, related to the Board's governance role for

institutional goals, will vary from district to district (and from year to year within the same district). In addition, the board may identify specific areas related to board performance to address in the coming year.

Board Functioning. There are two primary types of instruments that assess board functioning. The first involves using a generic survey based on criteria that reflect commonly accepted standards of board effectiveness. The second involves developing a survey using criteria in local board policy and practice, related to ethics, board meetings, delegation to the CEO, monitoring policy implementation, and other board roles.

Interviews

Another evaluation strategy is for someone, usually a consultant, to interview all board members, the CEO and others (if any) identified by the board. The interviewer gathers information about board performance, summarizes the results of the interviews and presents a report to the board. It is a qualitative approach to evaluation. It may be used in addition to a survey.

An interview approach may be beneficial to use when the board has not had an evaluation for some time, or when there are significant and/or ongoing concerns about board functioning. Drawbacks include that it is a time-consuming, more expensive process.

Informal Discussion

Informal processes do not use surveys or structured interviews to gather information. Rather, the board allots time for a substantive discussion of board strengths, accomplishments, weaknesses and areas for improvement. It is recommended that such discussions be facilitated by an external person or consultant to allow the board chair ample opportunity to participate. A report of the discussion is prepared that summarizes the discussion and identifies further board action.

Boards with members who have been together a number of years, along with a long-term CEO, may use this approach. The drawback is that, unlike surveys, it does not provide numerical ratings that can be compared over time.

Designing the Evaluation Process

A Board Policy may be adopted that states the purpose and value of the board self-evaluation, either describes the process or states how it will be determined (by a committee of the board or other method), indicates when the evaluation will take place, may include if constituency feedback will be sought, and commits the board to using the results to enhance board performance.

Boards may have a standing or ad hoc committee to review the criteria and conduct the process. If a board hasn't had a process or wishes to significantly revamp the process and criteria, a subcommittee of the board is usually asked to develop a recommendation.

Alternatively, the Board may ask the CEO and his or her staff to research and recommend a self-evaluation process to the board.

Decisions for the board include: the specific purposes of the evaluation, whether or not the evaluation will include a survey and/or interviews, who will participate, which criteria will be used, consultant roles (if any), how the results will be shared and discussed, and who will write the report. Designing the process involves answering the following questions:

- Will the board evaluation be conducted through an evaluation discussion, survey, interviews, or a combination of approaches?

- Who will be asked to evaluate the board?

- Who will gather the information and compile the results?

- When will the results be discussed by the board?

Who participates in the board's self-evaluation?
All board members: The expectation is that the board evaluates itself. Each and every trustee should be involved in assessing board performance and in discussing the results of the evaluation. New trustees may think they don't have enough experience on the board to provide useful feedback; however, most new trustees have spent time observing the board prior to being appointed, and their input can be very valuable. Student trustees may be encouraged to contribute feedback and participate in the evaluation discussion.

CEO: The CEO is in a position to provide essential feedback to the board on its performance, and is key to ensuring that the board has the information and other resources to fulfill its responsibilities on many evaluation criteria. For instance, the CEO would provide feedback during a discussion of the results of a survey rather than completing a survey form.

College constituents: Boards may provide an opportunity for college employees to complete surveys on board performance. The most common approach is to invite the college leaders who are most familiar with the board to complete a brief survey and make comments. They are usually administrators who routinely attend board meetings as well as faculty, staff, and student constituency group leaders. Data from these surveys let the board know how it is perceived by those who most often see it in action.

Community members: A few boards occasionally seek information from selected community representatives (such as those on foundation boards or advisory committees). Surveys or interviews that gather feedback from community members should include those areas that community members may know about, such as the visibility and effectiveness of the board as ambassadors for the college. These surveys are often short – three to six questions, such as:

- The Governing Board for [Community College District] has a reputation for effective governance and positive leadership for the colleges.

- [Community College District] board members are effective ambassadors for the community colleges.

- The Governing Board for [Community College District] ensures that community interests and needs are reflected in decisions affecting the colleges.

If the board evaluation process includes feedback from college and/or community, the summary of the survey or feedback should be presented separately from the board's self-evaluation data, so that the board may compare trustee perceptions with those of others.

Evaluation Discussion
The actual board self-evaluation is the *discussion* about the survey or interview results. Interview summaries and survey ratings provide information for the board as a basis for discussion, but are not, in themselves, the self-evaluation.

Survey ratings identify areas where the board is doing well; high scores should be celebrated, and lower scores explored to see how the board might improve. Items where trustees had differing ratings should be addressed to explore the differing perceptions. The process of exploring what "excellence" and "efficiency" looks like contributes to board effectiveness.

The evaluation session is an open meeting of the board. Boards often schedule the evaluation session as a study session, workshop or retreat to allow for enough time to discuss the evaluation and identify priorities for the following year.

The schedule for evaluation, particularly if it results in identifying s annual priorities and identifying priorities, should be coordinated with the district's annual goal setting cycles.

The Report
The end results of the evaluation are a summary of the discussion and a set of goals or actions to be taken as a result of the evaluation. A written follow-up report helps ensure that the results will be used and that any issues will be addressed. It is evidence for the public and college community that the board is serious about assessing its performance and that trustees are committed to being an effective governing body. **The report is a public document, usually posted on the District's Web page for the Board of Trustees.** The goals, priorities, or action items for the coming year are usually reviewed at a subsequent board meeting and ratified or adopted.

Conducting the Survey
Most districts have research personnel who are skilled in survey development and using survey software to collect responses. The raw data of the results may be provided, but it is very helpful to summarize the data in some way (averages, charts, and/or graphs) to help the board make sense of the data.

Role of Consultants

Consultants and facilitators are often helpful to boards in developing and conducting an evaluation. They can provide an independent, non-biased influence to help keep board discussions focused and productive. They may help prepare the survey form, summarize data, and provide follow-up reports. They allow the board chair, who would normally chair the discussion, to participate fully.

Evaluation Criteria

Boards may use a variety of types of criteria to assess performance, as well as a combination of approaches. A good practice is to combine assessing progress on board priorities with criteria related to effective board practice.

1. Progress on annual board priorities, including board roles (tasks) in furthering the strategic goals of the district.
2. Commonly accepted standards for community college boards of trustees, including but not limited to ACCT, ACT and Accrediting Commission standards, and/or
3. Criteria gleaned from the board's own policies (e.g. the code of ethics, board responsibilities and duties, delegation to the CEO).

Annual Board Priorities and Tasks

Each year, boards should discuss progress on the district's goals and plans, identify the most important priorities for the coming year and the board's role (tasks) in governing and furthering those priorities. **Board priorities are developed in conjunction with the CEO and align with the CEO's annual goals and priorities.**

Annual priorities clarify where board and CEO resources and time should be spent in the coming year. They comprise steps toward strategic and long-range goals and clarify what the board should be doing. The priorities lead to tasks or roles for the board and answer the question, "What does the board need to do in order to accomplish the specific priorities?"

Common board roles or tasks related to the goals include "setting expectations," "monitoring progress," "reviewing and approving plans or policies," "advocating for the district," and the like. The priorities and tasks inform the development of board meeting agenda items and workshop topics.

The priorities and implementing board roles (or tasks) are criteria in the board's annual self-evaluation for the following year. Specific benchmarks or measures may be established to help the board define expectations for itself and the members.

Following are just a few examples of district goals, board priorities, and related tasks, and a possible benchmark. There are countless possibilities and they will vary from district to district and year to year. A caveat is not to have too many, perhaps six to ten areas to address.

Board goals may be lofty, such as "provide leadership to ensure educational quality through fostering innovation." This type of statement lets the college know the Board is vitally

interested in educational quality and will be expecting reports. It is helpful to identify specific tasks or roles for the board in providing such leadership, e.g. "review a comprehensive report of program reviews in the career-technical areas, and monitor implementation of plans to improve programs where indicated."

Example 1. District Strategic Goal: Improve Student Success

- Board Priority: Expect and monitor progress on establishing and assessing student success measures.
- Board Task: Participate in workshop that educate board members about the metrics and reports used by the district to monitor student achievement.

Example 2. District Strategic Goal: Maintain the Fiscal Stability of the District

- Board Priority: Ensure that all board members are knowledgeable about the district's fiscal condition.
    - Board Task: Hold board study sessions on state and other revenues, long-range budget projections. Support trustee education on understanding budgets, financial statements and audit reports.

- Board Priority: Maintain a 10% unrestricted general fund balance.
    - Board Task: Expect that the budget presented for review will include a 10% unrestricted general fund balance.

Example 3. District Strategic Goal: Promote a college culture that fosters innovation, excellence, and commitment to education.

- District Objective: Strengthen professional and leadership development opportunities for all staff.
    - Board Priority: Ensure there is a program for leadership development to address retirements and turnover in administration.
        - Board Task: Expect and review a report on leadership development within the administration.
        - Board Task: Expect that the budget will include resources for professional and leadership development.

These examples barely scratch the surface of possible criteria, as well as approaches to goal setting. Governing boards and CEOs will have their own approach and language to describe goals, objectives, priorities and/or tasks.

1. Board Priority: Strengthen the board's connections with and knowledge of K-12 trends and issues.
    - Board Task: Participate in a joint workshop with local K-12 boards of trustees.

2. Board Priority: Ensure that board meetings are positive and productive.
    - Board Task: Revise the board meeting agenda to include a consent agenda on routine items to allow more time to discuss issues.

- Board Task: Maintain respectful, inclusive and professional attitudes and language during board meetings.

3. Board Priority: Strengthen the board's policy role.
    - Board Task: Approve an updated board policy manual by the end of the academic year.
    - Board Task: Uphold the principle that delegation to the CEO is only through the board as a unit.

In addition to the priorities and tasks related to the District's strategic goals, the board may set professional development standards for itself. There may be special circumstances, such as hiring a new CEO, integrating new trustees, and/or respond to accreditation recommendations that will require board attention. The board may wish to focus on area that were not rated highly in a board self-evaluation. Examples include:

Example 1: Board Priority: Strengthen the board's connections with and knowledge of K-12 trends and issues:

- Board Task: Participate in a joint workshop with local K-12 boards of trustees.

Example 2: Board Priority: Hire and support and excellent CEO

- Board Task: Work with a search consultant to conduct a professional and effective search resulting in an outstanding CEO.
- Board Task: Develop and implement a plan to support and guide the new CEO during his or her first year.

Example 3 Board Priority: Strengthen the board's policy role.

- Board Task: Approve an updated board policy manual by the end of the academic year.
- Board Task: Uphold the principle that delegation to the CEO is only through the board as a unit.

To help trustees (and others) respond to these types of criteria, the survey instrument may describe what the board did to fulfill its role. For instance, the survey may list the board meetings or workshops where the board addressed certain topics, or activities the trustees engaged in to further their own development or represent the district.

Board Performance Standards

The most common approach to board self-evaluation is to use a survey based on commonly accepted criteria for effective boards. A sample survey form is included as an appendix. Criteria also may be derived from the following:

District Mission and Planning: Does the board understand the role and mission of community colleges? Does the board regularly review the mission? Does the board provide leadership for planning through setting broad policy direction and standards for planning processes?

Board Policy Role: Does the board understand and fulfill its policy role? Is the board policy manual up to date? Does the board clearly differentiate between its role and the role of the CEO? Is the board focused on the future direction of the district?

Board/CEO Relationship: Is there an open, respectful partnership and good communication between the board and the CEO? Does the board clearly delegate to and set clear expectations for the CEO? Is there an effective CEO evaluation process? Does the board create an environment that supports CEO success?

Board/Community Relationship: Does the board represent the community that it serves? Is the board knowledgeable about community trends and needs? Does the board help promote the image of the college in the community? Does the board effectively advocate on behalf of the college?

Educational Programs and Quality: Does the board understand the educational programs and services? Does the board monitor student success and educational quality? Does the board focus on the students of the future and their needs?

Fiduciary Responsibilities: Does the board ensure that the district is fiscally healthy? Does it approve a budget that supports educational and strategic goals? Does it effectively monitor fiscal management? Does it assure that district facilities meet student and employee needs?

Board/Staff Relations & Human Resources: Does board policy and direction foster respect and support for employee excellence? Does the board provide leadership and clear parameters for the collective bargaining process? Does the board refrain from micromanaging staff work? Does board policy and practice support faculty, staff, and student participation in decision-making?

Board Leadership and Behavior: Does the board understand and uphold its role and responsibilities? Does it have and adhere to a code of ethics and policies on conflicts of interest? Does the board deal effectively with perceived ethical violations? Do board members work together as a unit for the good of the district? Do board members respect each other's opinions? Do board members "do their homework" and contribute effectively to board discussions?

Board Meetings and Agendas: Do meeting agendas focus on key policy issues and board responsibilities? Does the board have the information it needs to make good decisions? Are meetings conducted in such a manner that the purposes are achieved effectively and efficiently? Do board members adhere to all aspects of open meetings laws?

Board Development: Does the board have its own goals and objectives for the year and evaluate itself on how it has achieved them? Do new board members, including the student trustee, receive an orientation to the roles and responsibilities and to the district's mission and policies? Are all board members encouraged to engage in ongoing education about college and state issues? Do board members receive and review information about important issues? Does the board continually explore how it be a cohesive team that engages in rich discussions that create an environment that fosters excellence?

Local Board Policy

In addition to commonly accepted criteria, a board may decide to use criteria derived from its local policies. The code of ethics and policies on board roles, meetings, delegation to the CEO, and how the board monitors policy implementation are all rich sources of criteria. A benefit of this approach is that the board reviews its policies during the course of the evaluation.

Using this approach requires a board committee and/or staff to develop a customized survey instrument. The following are examples of items found in various board policies:

1. Individual trustees have no legal authority outside the meetings of the board; they shall conduct their relationships with the community college staff, the local citizenry, and all media of the community on the basis of this fact. (From a board code of ethics policy)
2. The board delegates to the CEO the executive responsibility for administering the policies adopted by the board and executing all decisions of the Board requiring administrative action. (From a board policy on delegation to the CEO)

Individual Trustee Performance

As stated at the beginning, board self-evaluation focuses on how the board, as a unit, is functioning. The focus is on board roles, dynamics, and practices. However, effective board functioning depends on the contributions of individual trustees—boards benefit when their members are skilled and knowledgeable about their roles and the issues they face. Excellent communication skills, critical thinking, a focus on the future and the ability to consider broad policy goals and values are all important attributes.

Boards may wish to provide an opportunity for individuals to assess their knowledge and skills required to be an effective, contributing trustee. The responses to these individual self-assessments can be used to identify trustee development activities, including board study sessions, attendance at conferences, reading materials, and on-line seminars.

Summary

This resource guide is intended to help boards of trustees design a self-evaluation process that meets specific board needs and cultures. The information should help boards determine the approach they will use, which criteria will provide the best information for the board, who will be asked to evaluate the board, and how the results will be used.

Governing boards that engage in the self-evaluation process and thoughtfully consider and use the results to improve their performance provide excellent leadership for their communities and colleges. They are embracing their responsibilities and ensuring that board members have the skills and knowledge to lead and govern. High performing boards of trustees add value to their districts, thereby ensuring that their colleges make a difference in the lives of students and for the community.

Sample Board Self-Evaluation Survey

Board Performance Standards

The following set of criteria reflect key characteristics of effective governing boards. Results from this survey form may be used to provide a basis for discussion of overall board functioning. It may be used in conjunction with a survey on progress on board priorities and tasks. Boards may add or substitute items more pertinent to their specific needs.

Trustees are asked to rate their level of agreement using the following scale:

5 Strongly Agree
4 Agree
3 Neutral
2 Disagree
1 Strongly Disagree
N/A Unable to evaluate

CRITERIA	**RATING**
1. The Board understands its policy role and differentiates its role from those of the CEO and district/college employees.	
2. The board is committed to and regularly reviews the district's mission and goals and monitors progress toward achieving the mission and goals.	
3. The board assures that there are effective planning processes and that resource allocation support institutional plans.	
4. The board adheres to its policies; the board's policies are regularly reviewed and up-to-date	
5. The board delegates responsibility and authority to the CEO, and supports the CEO's leadership.	
6. The board maintains an excellent working relationship with the CEO; including honoring established protocols for communication.	

CRITERIA	RATING
7. The board sets clear expectations for and effectively evaluates the CEO.	
8. Board members represents the interests and needs of the communities served by the District.	
9. The board supports advocates District interests to local, state, and federal governments.	
10. Board members represent the District well at college events and in the community.	
11. The board reflects a commitment to student success in its deliberations and decisions.	
12. The board effectively monitors the quality and effectiveness of the educational program and services in fostering student success.	
13. Board members are sufficiently knowledgeable about the district's educational programs and services.	
14. The board assures the fiscal stability and health of the district.	
15. Board members understand the budget and provide effective oversight for fiscal operations.	
16. The board ensures that plans for facilities and maintenance are current and monitors their implementation.	
17. Board human resource policies and union contracts protect the district and effectively set standards for quality, fairness and equity.	
18. The board respects faculty, staff, and student participation in college decision-making.	
19. Board members refrain from attempting to manage or direct the work or activities of employees.	
20. Board members understand and fulfill their roles and responsibilities.	
21. The board expresses its authority only as a unit; members understand they have no individual authority.	
22. Board members maintain confidentiality of privileged information.	
23. The board regularly reviews and adheres to its code of ethics, and avoid conflicts of interest and the perception of such conflicts.	
24. Board meeting agendas reflect board responsibilities and include sufficient information for decision-making.	
25. Board meetings are conducted in an orderly, respectful manner; there is adequate time to explore and resolve key issues.	
26. The board understands and adheres to the Brown Act.	
27. Board members work together and with the CEO for the good of the District.	

CRITERIA	RATING
28. The new member orientation process effectively educates new members about board roles and the institution.	
29. Board members are committed to their own professional growth and participate in trustee development activities.	
30. The board evaluation process helps the board enhance its performance.	

Add any comments related to any of the above items:

Please respond to the following questions.

1. What are the board's greatest strengths?

2. What are the major accomplishments of the board in the past year?

3. What are areas in which the board could improve its performance?

4. I recommend that the board has the following goals for the coming year: