

# MINNESOTA STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES MEETING MINUTES

### CONVERSATION WITH DR. PETER EWELL

JUNE 20, 2007

WELLS FARGO PLACE

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

**Trustees Present:** Chair David Paskach, Caleb Anderson, Duane Benson, Michael Boulton, Cheryl Dickson, Ruth Grendahl, Dan McElroy, Thomas Renier, Scott Thiss, James Van Houten and Ann Curme Shaw

**Trustees Absent:** Clarence Hightower, David Olson, Christine Rice and Carol Wenner

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#### 1. Call to Order

Chair David Paskach convened the meeting at 1:35 p.m. He welcomed everyone and thanked them for coming for a conversation with Dr. Peter Ewell. The Ad Hoc Committee on System and Institutional Assessment will meet with him on June 21.

Chair Paskach continued that at the Board's retreat in February 2007, the Board identified accountability and outcomes assessment as topics to address this year. Subsequently, several trustees attended a session on the Board's role in accreditation at the Association of Governing Boards National Conference on Trusteeship in March. One of the presenters at that session was Dr. Peter Ewell, and he discussed his recent book for AGB, *Making the Grade, How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality*.

In April the Ad Hoc Committee on System and Institutional Assessment was created. Its charge was to study and make recommendations on several aspects of accountability and assessment. Chair Paskach indicated that as next steps were considered in the review process, it seemed appropriate to invite Dr. Ewell to join the board for a conversation on these topics.

Dr. Ewell is the Vice President of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems or NCHEMS. He is a national expert on institutional effectiveness and college outcomes and conducts research and consults with colleges, universities and state systems. Dr. Ewell has authored six books and numerous articles on improving undergraduate instruction through the assessment of student outcomes.

#### 2. A Conversation with Dr. Peter Ewell

Dr. Ewell thanked Chair Paskach. He commented that he would begin the presentation on basic principles of the Board's role in academic quality and accountability. He explained that he became interested in the subject of learning and wondered why so few educators were talking about it. His interest was reinforced by the publication of Derek Bok's book, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More*. Dr. Bok is president emeritus of Harvard University.

Following the general principles, Dr. Ewell will review substantive topics in his book 1) assessment of student learning, 2) retention and student flow and 3) accreditation. Acknowledging that this is a troubling time for accreditation, Dr. Ewell commented that he believes accreditation is the premier assurance of quality in this country.

Dr. Ewell provided a historical framework for the escalating demands for accountability. The performance of K-12; the assessment movement that started in the 1980s; concerns about return on investment; the Spellings Commission; state performance measures and funding all have placed accreditation in the hot seat.

The rationale for Board involvement focuses on fiduciary responsibility. Dr. Ewell compared it to the financial audit. Accreditation is analogous to, or the academic version of, the financial audit. The Board has a fiduciary responsibility for the quality of the product and ensuring that institutions are meeting their obligations. The ultimate responsibility for the soundness of the system's academic products and the integrity of its institutions' operations falls on the Board.

Dr. Ewell continued that business metaphors can work in education. Five guiding questions for Boards to consider are:

- How good are the products?
- How good are we at producing our product?
- Are our customers (students, business, general citizenry) satisfied?
- Do we have the right mix of products?
- Do we make the grade?

Dr. Ewell noted that the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system's strength is the variety of the products that it offers.

Five basic principles for defining the Board's role are:

- Running the curricula is the responsibility of the faculty and academic leaders at the system's institutions: the Board's role is to remind them of these responsibilities.
- Keep focused on strategic issues for the system.
- Expect and demand a culture of evidence.
- Recognize that most evidence raises issues but does not give answers.
- Make reviewing collective evidence of academic quality a regular and expected Board activity.

Dr. Ewell reviewed particular reminders for system Boards:

- Keep focused on policy, not the details of the behavior of individual institutions.
- The strongest systems are diverse; quality systems should recognize the distinctive and assigned responsibility of different kinds of institutions.
- Quality is as much about the collective benefit that the system provides to the state and its citizens as it is about the quality of the individual institutions.
- But, there may be some things the Board wants all institutions to do.

Dr. Ewell commented that it is because of accreditation that some institutions are getting better at assessing student learning outcomes. Assessment means gathering systematic information about what undergraduate students know and can do as a result of attending college. In most cases, the faculty will establish a set of formal statements of intended outcomes such as oral communications, quantitative reasoning or problem-solving. The data is usually collected in aggregate form about programs, not people.

In assessing student learning outcomes, Boards should expect answers to the following questions from its institutional leaders:

- Do institutions say what and how much students should learn? Where do they say it?
- What kinds of evidence do institutions collect about learning?
- Do institutions benchmark their performance?
- Is a structure of responsibility for assessment in place?
- How do institutions use assessment results?

Dr. Ewell continued that some reminders for Boards on assessing learning include:

- Accreditation certifies an institution's "bottom line."
- What institutions are learning from the assessment and what they are doing to improve learning are as important as having assessment in place.
- Institutions need to periodically "assess assessment" to ensure it is up-to-date and vital.

Dr. Ewell reviewed retention, graduation and student flow. Completion rates and student flow records are the single most common measurement across the states. Student flow records are based on a cohort method where students are tracked over time from a common starting point to a defined outcome. He noted that in a diverse system such as Minnesota State Colleges and Universities there will be very different rates. More selective institutions will have a higher graduation rate. Graduation rates are affected by:

- Student academic background and institutional selectivity.
- Student demographics.
- Full-time, continuous attendance.
- Financial aid and institutional support.
- Well-designed, targeted retention programs.
- Active presidential leadership and commitment.

While the first bullet accounts for most of the variation, the last bullet can really make a difference, it signals that student success is a priority for a particular campus.

Moving to accreditation, Dr. Ewell explained that it is a quality test where a favorable report provides a clear public signal that the institution has achieved a recognized level of performance that can be relied upon. Two trends are occurring to improve the process. One is to make it more transparent to the public and the other is to provide a summary of the findings as a result of the accreditation visit. Until recently, the Higher Learning Commission only publicly reported the outcome of the accreditation decision, but that is changing to make the process more transparent.

The other trend is a move away from ritualistic behavior to using the accreditation process to use data for improvement. Both trends provide more credibility to the accreditation process. Dr. Ewell noted that the trend is for accreditors to visit campuses more frequently and on a continuous basis, similar to the Academic Quality Improvement Program which was designed around Baldrige principles.

Accreditors are beginning to learn a lot from overseas programs of quality assurance. Dr. Ewell commented that in the United Kingdom, the audit techniques are similar to audits of publicly traded companies. The big development over the past four or five years is that the European community has begun moving toward a common European Higher Education standard format where credentials awarded in Spain will be accepted in Germany. The European community has recognized a need to compete globally as an economic unit.

**3. Adjournment**

Chair Paskach adjourned the meeting at 4:07 p.m.

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Ingeborg K. Chapin  
Secretary to the Board