

Boards are counted on to guide institutions through the long-term “transformational” change enveloping much of higher education. A new study offers insights on how.

Navigating THE Currents OF Change

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES are constantly undergoing change of some sort. Each new academic year brings computer software upgrades, fresh scheduling issues, new courses, and an influx of faculty and staff members.

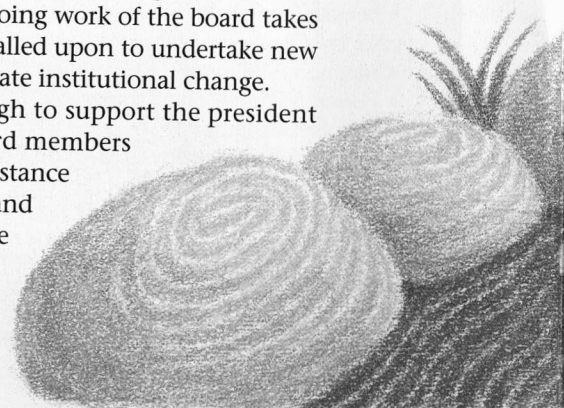
But some institutional change is more ambitious, penetrating into the fabric of the institution. Many call this change “transformational”—meaning that it affects culture, structures, policies, attitudes, and behaviors.

The pressures affecting higher education are similar to those faced by other not-for-profit organizations, for-profit corporations, and health-care providers. Technology, globalization, accelerating competition, the explosion of knowledge, and the increasingly diverse nature of our society are changing the way people in higher education think about their work. The need to respond creates new challenges and anxieties for faculty, administrators, and boards.

Governing boards must guide and oversee the difficult journey of change, balancing the needs for action and deliberation, working as partners with faculty and administrators, and accommodating the complexities of academic organization and culture. In the context of institutional change, the ongoing work of the board takes on new dimensions and urgency. Boards also may be called upon to undertake new tasks and develop fresh ways of working that will facilitate institutional change.

A governing board must be involved deeply enough to support the president and administration in effecting positive change. Board members should, of course, become knowledgeable about the substance of the change initiative—what is going to be changed and why. But trustees also should strive to understand the complexities of the change process in higher education

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and the ways in which it differs from that in other sectors. The board should ask, What will constitute success?

For five years, the American Council on Education (ACE) worked with a diverse group of 23 colleges and universities on a range of large-scale institutional change initiatives as part of the Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation, sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. From these institutions' experiences, we identified factors that helped or prevented progress. Highlights, particularly on the important role of governing boards, are set out below. (For more on change management, visit the bookstore of the ACE Web site at www.acenet.edu.)

Merely to mandate a change is not to make it happen. If the faculty and staff who must implement change do not play a central role in creating new approaches and do not feel ownership of them, the changes are likely to be superficial and short-lived. The board's responsibility is to set the direction, provide support, and monitor change. Micro-management by the board is as counterproductive in the change process as it is in general governance.

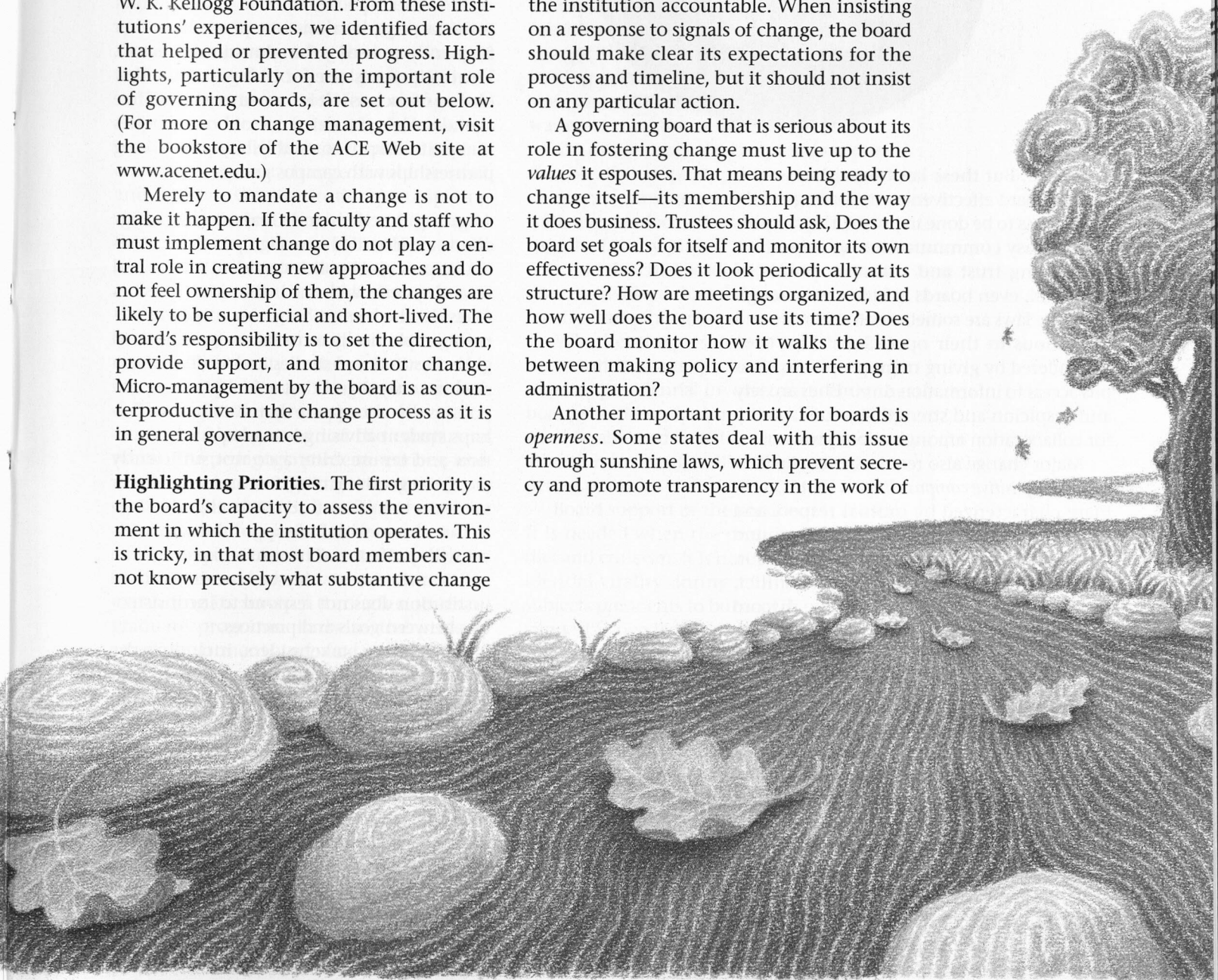
Highlighting Priorities. The first priority is the board's capacity to assess the environment in which the institution operates. This is tricky, in that most board members cannot know precisely what substantive change

is called for and how the change can be accomplished. Thus, the board should plant the seeds for change by bringing to the attention of the president and the campus those external pressures that suggest a need for it.

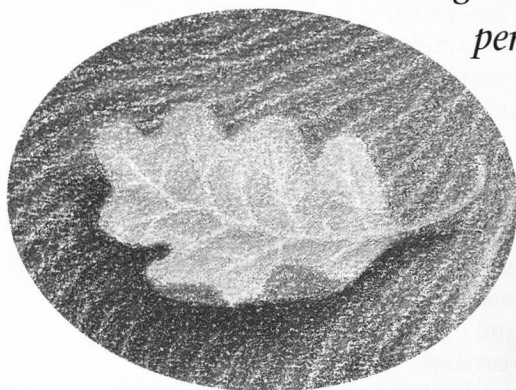
Boards have long been expected to monitor internal data trends and be alert to change signals on campus. Only after the board has done so is it in a position to hold the institution accountable. When insisting on a response to signals of change, the board should make clear its expectations for the process and timeline, but it should not insist on any particular action.

A governing board that is serious about its role in fostering change must live up to the *values* it espouses. That means being ready to change itself—its membership and the way it does business. Trustees should ask, Does the board set goals for itself and monitor its own effectiveness? Does it look periodically at its structure? How are meetings organized, and how well does the board use its time? Does the board monitor how it walks the line between making policy and interfering in administration?

Another important priority for boards is *openness*. Some states deal with this issue through sunshine laws, which prevent secrecy and promote transparency in the work of



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the board. But these laws sometimes work against board effectiveness by forcing nearly all business to be done in public, thus impeding the easy communication so important to building trust and common points of view. Still, even boards in states with tough sunshine laws are sometimes too remote and mysterious in their operations. The trust engendered by giving more people on campus access to information diminishes anxiety and suspicion and strengthens the capacity for collaboration among various groups.

Major change also requires energy generated by a *positive campus climate*, that is, a climate characterized by mutual respect and trust. The board should monitor climate and take responsibility for its own impact on it. If the campus is mired in internal conflict, the board should ask whether the discord is a reasonable response to a particular situation or an accumulated set of dysfunctional habits developed in a persistent atmosphere of distrust. Conflict absorbs energy, drawing it away from a change initiative.

Finally, the board must *set the tone* for the entire institution. If conflict has been an institutional norm, a board can encourage, by example and expectation, the sense that change in systems and practices is needed so that productive relations can develop.

Finger-pointing is unhelpful; an institution's problems are unlikely to have been caused by any one group (a common suspect

is the faculty), let alone one person (another frequently accused is the admissions director). The institution's case for change has the best chance of success if it is framed as a blame-free agenda. Also, the existence of board cliques makes it difficult to establish good working partnerships with campus groups.

Aligning Practices and Goals. Some change efforts are intended to realign practices in curricula, personnel policies, student affairs, and reward systems with the institution's mission. Consider the institution whose mission statement emphatically touts its student-centered goals. Institutional studies and feedback from students may reveal that actual practices and policies do not support that stated value. Perhaps student advising is inadequate; promotion and tenure criteria do not sufficiently recognize good teaching; first and second-year students too often find themselves in large lecture classes with little opportunity to interact with professors. The values expressed in a mission statement may be threatened if an institution does not respond to inconsistencies between goals and practices.

Only a few stakeholders, including the governing board, bring to the table enough of an institution-wide perspective to compare consistency of practice with stated values and to gauge coherence across the institution. The board has the responsibility to set the direction of the institution by articulating its mission. That means that the mission statement should be regularly revisited to see that it is up to date and is reflected in actual policies and practices.

When compared with the business world, colleges and universities appear to process

change slowly. While the deliberateness of faculty governance may contribute to the comparatively slow pace, other factors include the need for widespread discussion and consultation, and the challenges of aligning many related changes such as curriculum, faculty development, and tenure policies. Thus, the challenge for boards is to keep the pressure on institutional leaders and faculty to accelerate the pace of change and make the institution more agile, while at the same time recognizing the importance of deliberation and widespread participation.

The preparatory work for a change initiative can seem frustratingly slow to trustees, especially if their corporate experience suggests that change should be swift and decisive. One institution participating in the ACE project sought to undertake its first major curriculum overhaul in several decades. A faculty-led team began with an exhaustive, institution-wide discussion of the aims of undergraduate education and of teaching and learning, educating the campus community in the process of building support for change. Lengthy forums and debates laid the groundwork for major curricular change and led the campus to reexamine pedagogy, student services, and academic structures. Taking time at the front end brought about substantial change in areas beyond the curriculum later on.

Another institution chose to deal with an inadequate undergraduate enrollment by expanding its services through a series of graduate programs. Early in the project, select departments prepared curricula, and the admissions office created marketing plans and admission procedures. Buoyed by initial successes, other departments began to consider adding programs and personnel. Later, when the graduate student population reached a critical mass, their needs had to be taken into account in the student affairs office and in governance structures of the college, triggering a new set of related changes. This work is still in progress.

This last example illustrates why the process may seem endless. To head off frus-

tration, the board should ask for interim assessments of the change initiative. It is unrealistic to expect significant change at an institution in one or even two years.

Supporting the President. The ACE research revealed that the role of presidents in the change process varies from campus to campus, depending on the institution's size, traditions, and agenda. On some campuses the president used a hands-on approach to the change, working with the leadership team or writing strategic documents such as discussion papers. Direct presidential involvement was most common at small institutions.

On other campuses, the president played the role of champion, prodder, and provider of incentives and resources. When the change initiative was focused on teaching and learning, the faculty played the more important role, and the chief academic officer was more directly involved than the president with the faculty-leadership group.

Whether the presidential style is hands-on or indirect, a major institutional change requires presidential involvement. Thus, the board should understand that the president must be able to devote the requisite time and attention to change, all while juggling competing priorities.

Board support of the president is critical. It is needed when the president faces conflict and criticism. It is needed to ensure presidential vitality during a long process that subjects presidents to burnout. Finally, board support is needed to encourage responsible risk-taking, and boards should be tolerant of mistakes that are readily corrected.

Monitoring Results. Tracking institutional health and progress is a responsibility tailor-made for trustees. The board must ensure that goals are set, that processes are in place for the institution to monitor its progress, and that the president and key leaders are held accountable for results.

The specific evidence of change a board seeks will be tied to the substantive goals of the change initiative. For example, improv-

ing teaching and learning requires a different kind of evidence from an initiative concerned with creating an entrepreneurial institution. Only some forms of evidence sought by the board will be explicit and straightforward. Some illustrations:

- Changes in curriculum;
- Changes in pedagogical approaches;
- Changes in policies;
- Changes in budgets;
- New institutional structures;
- Changes in external relationships.

Other evidence for change, however, is less concrete than qualitative and cultural. Examples we have found relevant include:

- New patterns of interactions and conversations among key stakeholders;
- New language and self-concepts;
- New decision-making processes;
- A different “tone” on campus;
- A clearer sense of institutional self-image.

Institutions should be able to clearly demonstrate the effects of their decisions. But if a board is to be a partner in change, its monitoring should be both a formative process and a consistent demonstration of support. This will allow for making necessary mid-course corrections. A board that encourages innovation and experimentation will be more likely to elicit creativity than one that only plays the role of inspector and judge.

Habits of Mind. No precise mixture of strategies led particular institutions in the ACE project down the road to success. The 26 institutions were in different stages of the change process when they entered the project. Each institution had its ups and downs, its mistakes, and its unexpected victories. Some started with enormous energy and then faltered; others took a while to build momentum.

No matter how many fruitful strategies an institution employed or how well the strategies were executed, all the successes observed were at institutions where boards and other leaders displayed four habits of mind:

- They approached change as a collaborative “win-win” effort.
- They were intentional in their actions, so

FIVE TIPS FOR BOARDS SEEKING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

1. Develop the habit of holding inclusive conversations with administrators, faculty, and staff while respecting the authority of the president.
2. Freely share data and other information about the external environment and the institution.
3. Be willing to accept and act on reliable new data and information, regardless of the source.
4. Ask the campus to articulate how the solutions under consideration are related to the problems identified.
5. Encourage a blame-free climate in both formal policies and informal practices.

that change was an act to be managed, not a random occurrence to be endured.

- They were reflective about their change endeavors.
- They learned from their actions and adjusted earlier plans.

Overall, their change agendas were dynamic, suggesting that the strategies and behaviors learned could be re-used.

In the final analysis, change is about combining learning with action. The board can play a key role in encouraging the institution to be a learning organization with the capacity for continuous change through the climate it creates and sustains. By setting expectations and asking for responses that demonstrate progress and learning, board members can bequeath to their institutions a legacy of productive habits that will last beyond their tenure on the board. ♦

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