USC CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS

The Role of Boards in College Access Programs

Creating and Maintaining Quality

About Us

The Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA) brings a multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. Located within the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, the Center's director is William G. Tierney. Adrianna J. Kezar is the Associate Director. Conducting theoretically informed research with real-world applicability, the Center has a broad focus on three areas of higher education—improving urban postsecondary education, strengthening school-university partnerships, and understanding international education.

The goal of the Center is to provide analysis of significant issues to support efforts to improve postsecondary education. Such issues intersect many boundaries. The Center is currently engaged in research projects regarding effective postsecondary governance, emerging organizational forms such as for-profit institutions, financial aid and access for students of color, successful college outreach programs, the educational trajectories of community college students, and the retention of doctoral students of color.

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Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis
University of Southern California
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Executive Summary

MANY CHALLENGES FACE THOSE WHO WORK IN COLLEGE ACCESS programs. An essential component in addressing these challenges is through the utilization of a high performing advisory board. Based on an extensive review of the literature and interviews with 53 individuals who either work in college access programs or have served on their boards, the role and function of high performing boards can be summarized as follows:

Role of Boards

Define the organization's mission and develop a strategic plan.

Be an ambassador for the organization to external constituencies.

Develop streams of revenue sources and ensure fiduciary responsibility.

Participate in policy development.

Define quality.

Hire, support, and evaluate the chief executive.

Characteristics of High Performing Boards

A clear structure and delineation of roles.

A sense of engagement and participation.

An orientation and ongoing educational plan.

Interpersonal relationships.

A focus on board and programmatic outcomes.

The simplicity of the college access program goal and informal environment in which they operate should not impede selection of effective board members. Criteria for members are defined as follows:

Qualities of High Performance Board Members

A commitment to the mission of access to college.

Activism.

A complementary set of skills.

A willingness to learn.

The environment of the 21st century is one that is based on outcomes and a competitive culture. The top priorities of any executive director of college access programs should be the creation, development, and nurture of a high performing board to clarify the organization's goals and serve as ambassadors to external constituencies, generate income, and help define the parameters of quality. Given the vital importance of college preparation programs in helping to increase access to college, the role of the board can no longer be overlooked.

Introduction

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One of the least studied aspects of college access programs is the role of boards in determining organizational functions and operations. This is surprising given the role that boards can play in providing a sense of direction and strategic advocacy for college preparation programs. College access programs, however, struggle to utilize their boards to their fullest potential because of the difficult situations they face in their day-to-day work. How might the role of the board be considered when the basic organization is understaffed, finances are insecure, and a multitude of activities are required to serve different constituencies? In an environment in which multiple tasks must be accomplished in a timely manner, those actions that are not essential fall by the wayside and can be seen as relatively unimportant. Virtually all programs will have some sort of board for advice and guidance; eventually meeting invitations need to be sent out, agendas created, and meetings held. Inessential activities take time away from essential tasks, and some individuals see board meetings as a waste of time that consumes organizational resources and achieves nothing.

We work from a different perspective. We acknowledge the challenges that those who work in college preparation programs face—unstable finances, difficult working conditions, challenging academic hurdles, limited staff, and unclear determinants of effectiveness and quality. However, we argue that an essential component of solving such challenges is the board of a program, particularly if the board's definition, purpose, and membership has been considered and evaluated. While there are always reasons college access programs will struggle to find the time to work strategically with their boards, we believe that in the end the organization will be much better served if they spend the time. In fact, our interviews suggest that high performing college access programs tend to have strong and well-functioning boards. We note that, at a time when a great deal of literature points out the importance of boards in general, and when governing boards of colleges and universities have come under closer scrutiny for ways to be effective, college preparation programs are ill-advised in ignoring board effectiveness.

Access programs are facing increased scrutiny. Not all programs are equally effective. In an environment in which resources are short, funders increasingly require criteria that enable them to make informed decisions about program quality. As we elaborate below, one role of a high performance board is to help develop benchmarks of effectiveness. We base our analysis on an extensive review of the literature about the role of boards in non-profit organizations, and interviews with 53 individuals who either work in college access programs or have served on their boards.

Accordingly, this text has three parts. We first delineate the role of boards in college preparation programs and consider how high performing boards function. We then turn to a discussion of the qualities of effective board members. We conclude by suggesting that one of the top priorities of an executive director of a college access program should be creating and sustaining a positive relationship with the board. An effective board will not ensure an effective college preparation program; however, the lack of an effective board will make it that much harder to achieve a stable and worthwhile program.

The Role of Boards

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To be sure, not all boards are exactly alike. Just as a board of a private research university will have a different role and function from that of a public community college, so too will boards differ for college access programs. Some programs are inter-segmental and span different constituencies such as a university, a school district, or community-based organization. Additional programs operate as stand-alone entities and are responsible for generating a constant flow of income, whereas other programs receive a more or less steady amount of resources from a foundation, state agency, or the federal government.

The life cycle of a program also matters. Frequently, college access programs arise because of individual initiative. At other times, a foundation or governmental agency puts out a call for proposals, and new programs begin. Such programs differ dramatically from a small stand-alone organization or a state or federal program that has been in existence for a generation. Organizations have different needs. Their life cycles in large part determine what these needs are, what policies and procedures exist to resolve these needs, and who is empowered to deal with them.

Regardless of whether a college access program is large or small, well established or new, an effective board will help the program define and carry out essential tasks. What, then, might be the role of boards for college access programs? Even though there are multiple variations of college access programs with different foci and clientele, the basic functions of boards are quite similar. What varies is not the function, but how the board and organization define the function. The purposes of a board are six fold:

Define the Organization's Mission and Develop a Strategic Plan

The organization needs a common vision and shared understanding of organizational purpose. The mission needs to be more than generic statements, such as "We help students get into college," but not so specific as to bind the organization's leadership to specific tasks. A common purpose suggests that everyone agrees on the fundamental rationale of the organization. Organizational goals and priorities reflect the purpose. The board also plays a pivotal role in supporting and manifesting the mission. For example, as leadership turns over within the college access program, the board serves as a reminder of the mission and helps to interpret it for the new director. In addition, board members are responsible for describing the mission to external stakeholders and obtaining support and understanding for the purpose of the organization.

Goals are articulated through a strategic plan with specific benchmarks and aims for improvement. Too often, organizations with soft money and few resources approach long-range planning as a luxury; short range planning means by the end of

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the week. A board's role is to ensure that such thinking does not exist. Instead, the board encourages everyone to think about where the program should be in five years and what steps need to be taken to get there. In a dynamic social environment, organizations need to focus on continuous improvement and ways to change to meet new circumstances. A short, straightforward strategic plan offers a blueprint for an organization's leaders. The imprimatur of the board suggests that the text is not simply a public relations gambit to attract funding, but instead will be used as a way to assess the quality of the organization. The board needs to make sure that the strategic plan is real and lived by the organization and can do this by setting up accountability mechanisms by which the plan is evaluated each year.

Many individuals suggested that strategic planning should be more than goal setting and should focus on capacity building. Capacity building is broader than raising resources and includes a variety of efforts that ensure the success and ultimate growth of the program. This might include setting standards, developing more political support, increasing social capital, conducting evaluations, and creating partnerships. Often, one of the key responsibilities of the board related to capacity building is "saying no." College access programs often overextend themselves; part of capacity building is knowing when to constrain visions of the executive director and staff. Many of these roles and capacity building will be described in the following sections, but it is important to point out that capacity building is a key component of strategic planning for college access programs.

College access programs are frequently not self-reflective. Such programs are pressured to deliver a potpourri of services to various clientele in a timely manner. Turnover is often significant, both of staff and clientele. The "product" (learning) and the clientele (e.g. high school students) are changing dramatically. Because of technological advances, programs that were effective yesterday might be improved upon tomorrow. Programs may become ineffective due to changes in the interests of today's students. Regardless, organizational change ought not to be haphazard. A strategic plan affords the opportunity to develop learning strategies, reflect on effective activities, and consider short-range plans to facilitate improvement.

Be an Ambassador for the Organization to External Constituencies

Directors and staff of college access programs are, by definition, cheerleaders for their programs—they are advocates. Any potential funder or state agency expects a college preparation program's participants to say that, while the program is excellent, it needs additional resources. A program's staff also has a limited circle of contacts; individuals generally talk with other programs, funders, and individuals with whom they work, such as high school counselors. All of these groups are essential for the well-being of the program, but a board has the ability to interact with additional audiences on behalf of the organization. Board members also bring with

them a different perspective that may engender support in ways that staff cannot.

We will discuss below the qualities of board members, but in general, individuals are prominent in their communities and chosen because of the respect and significance of their positions and for the contacts that they have with important stakeholders that support the program. Generally, a board is not populated by staff from other college access programs or from other non-profit organizations. Accordingly, when a program's budget has been cut by the state, the board's members are able to lobby the state not only because they believe in the program, but also because of the positions they hold as community and civic leaders. Board members should be able to interact with civic and business leaders who may not be familiar with staff members.

Board members are often in unique positions to open doors for programs that would otherwise remain closed.

Board members can be effective ambassadors when they spread the word and appear as strong organizational advocates. Civic, business, and political leaders who serve on boards are potent symbols to external audiences about the import of a program. Given their institutional knowledge and personal stature, board members often can make the strongest case for a program to donors as well as civic and political leaders. As Scott Cowen has noted, "The multiplying effect of such advocacy can have a profound impact" (2005, p. 5). Such multiplication is imperative in an era in which there is not enough funding for the many existing ideas.

Too often college access programs operate in a vacuum in which only those who are served know about the program; frequently, even the students and their families can not name the program that has been of help. That is, rather than know that they are in a state-funded program (and that lobbying their state legislators for more program funding would be useful), students are frequently not even aware of the specific name of the organization. The result is that there is often very little political or civic capital being built by the program. The lack of such capital is always of concern, but is particularly important during difficult fiscal times. Board members who act as ambassadors have relationships with groups that staff members normally do not. As ambassadors, they participate in interactions on informal and formal levels. These interactions are able to aid the program in manifold ways. Board members are often in unique positions to open doors for programs that would otherwise remain closed.

Board members are also capable of interacting with schools and school systems in ways different from an access program's staff. Because board members are not involved in the day-to-day functioning of the program, they have a distance that may facilitate understanding of what the program is attempting to do. The result is that entrance to a school, or working with various offices in the school system, may be eased.

Develop Streams of Revenue Sources and Ensure Fiduciary Responsibility

College access programs frequently have a fiscal profile that is out of sync

with the changing times of the 21st century. Fifty years ago, for example, the vast majority of colleges and universities relied on state funding or tuition revenues. Very few institutions raised money from donors, and if they did, the income came primarily from alumni. The thought that a public university would undertake a capital campaign was unthinkable—indeed, some might even have claimed that it was inappropriate. That sort of thinking, for better or worse, is outmoded. States are no longer the sole source of an institution's funding, and in many cases, not even the primary funder. Tuition is but one of many revenue streams. For a college or university not to undertake a capital campaign today would be unthinkable. Institutions solicit funds not merely from alumni, but from multiple individuals and groups. The challenge of the institution is to convince potential funders of the quality of the services they provide.

A key role for board members is to be fiscal stewards for the program. They seek out alternative sources of funding, and suggest the names of wealthy individuals and groups who are not obvious potential contributors to the staff. It would be far-fetched to assume that low-income students and their families are capable of paying very much for a college access program's services, but we suggest it is equally absurd to assume that the sole source of a program's funds should be a foundation or state agency. In effect, board members need to be rainmakers. Some board members will be capable of providing personal contributions, while others will be able to solicit funds from individuals; a few board members will be capable and willing to do both. Those who are in prominent positions as ambassadors for the program send a meaningful signal by donating to the college access program. Their public donation is a marker that signifies to others that the ambassador walks his or her talk—not only do they say the program is important, they also fiscally support the undertaking. The development of alternative revenue streams, the generation of economic capital, and the support of long-term fiscal planning are among the most important activities that any college access board can undertake. Many board members may not be comfortable with fundraising and find it a difficult and unnatural process. Because this is a common problem, training for board members in fundraising might be appropriate. Further, there will always be some board members who feel less comfortable with such a role; in this situation strategies such as visiting foundations in pairs are important to develop.

In addition to raising funds, the board plays a particularly important role in providing fiduciary oversight. Many people with whom we spoke described how successful college access programs have ceased operations because of lack of oversight among boards has allowed the programs to deteriorate financially. College access programs often try to expand beyond their capacity. It is important for the board to bring fiscal reality to staff visions of expansion. Part of a board's fiduciary responsibility is fundraising, but another part of their responsibility is ensuring that funds garnered are used appropriately.

A board needs to ensure that the program monitors quality and has sufficient indicators to assess the overall quality of the program.

Participate in Policy Development

College access boards help develop the policies that guide the organization towards success. Some of the important policies that access boards might address include criteria for partnerships, evaluation, stipulations around funds, program expansion, and setting standards. Just as strategic planning is critical for the organization to know where it will go in the future and to provide specific goals and objectives to get there, organizational policies help guide day-to-day practices and ensure the organization thrives. Organizations that only focus on future strategies and goals and ignore day-to-day operations (as it relates to policy-setting) end up destabilizing the organization. A balance between strategic planning and policy setting is necessary, just as is a balance between fundraising and fiduciary responsibility. One of the important policies boards set is defining quality, the next role of the board.

Define Quality

As has been noted, evaluation is often the weak link of college access programs. All programs claim remarkable success; few can empirically prove those claims. More likely, a college access program's director makes the simple point that they did what they programmatically set out to do. For example, a program contracts with a foundation and says that it will offer a summer writing program for 50 college-bound students in July. The 50 students will receive four hours of instruction five days a week for one month. There will be four fieldtrips and a banquet. In the final report to the foundation, the program reports that they did indeed have 50 students in the program who received the services that had been listed. In effect, the claim of success is not that the program succeeded, but that the services were performed.

Such broad indicators of quality are no longer sufficient in a world marked by "bottom lines" and "benchmarks." Evaluation is no longer a luxury. A board needs to ensure that the program monitors quality and has sufficient indicators to assess the overall quality of the program as well as the internal effectiveness and efficiency of the organization. Board members are in the position of knowing the functions of the organization, but they are not so intensely involved that they are unable to step back and ask tough questions. Traditional assumptions and indicators of quality need to be challenged; the board is best suited to offer those challenges. A board can help a program director define metrics of excellence and base future decisions on outputs (how many students actually learned "x") rather than inputs (did 50 students actually participate in the program?). Measuring student outcomes and cost effectiveness are fast becoming the key measures of quality by state agencies and foundations. Board members need to be aware of these standards, and hold program staff to them. They also need to be prepared to challenge standards that may not make sense for their

program. High performing boards develop program guidelines and benchmarks that can be used to shape and strengthen the program and taken to various foundations and agencies to help in fundraising.

Hire, Support, and Evaluate the Chief Executive

Perhaps one of the most important ways that the board can ensure the success of the college access program is to make sure that it hires the right leadership. Well functioning boards take an active role in recruiting the chief executive; they do not wait for résumés to be sent in, but instead are actively connected to prospective leaders in the field.

The board is also instrumental in providing the chief executive with honest feedback that can help the individual improve. Many people we interviewed noted that "the chief executive often has a lonely job and needs support." Board members can help make chief executives successful by providing significant support, especially in their first year, as well as helping them to understand the history, mission, staff, and dynamics of the organization.

Boards are also consulted by the Executive Director for advice in developing their leadership team. College access programs are usually extremely small, and staff members are often overburdened. The more successful chief executives are in their position the better able they are to support the staff and to ensure the overall success of the programs.

Lastly, the board needs to think about succession planning for the executive director. Often college access programs have charismatic leaders who created the program, and when they leave the program suffers because the board has not thought about leadership succession.

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High Performance Boards

High Performance Boards

ONCE THE ROLES OF A BOARD ARE CLEAR, THEN THE NEXT STEP is to ensure that a board functions in a manner that assures high performance—for the board, and of consequence, the organization. One of the people we interviewed summed up the characteristics of high performing boards as the attributes for an effective team: a clear structure, a commitment to engagement and participation, orientation and ongoing education, strong interpersonal relationships, and a focus on evaluation and outcomes. We review these five characteristics next:

A Clear Structure and Delineation of Roles

Board structure pertains to the size of the board, the number and type of board committees, and the organization of the board's functions and responsibilities. A clear understanding of the work of the board (its roles and responsibilities) is necessary for board effectiveness. Ineffective boards often get caught up in one aspect of their functioning or, worse, simply have meetings and nothing else. An ineffective board has no written document that outlines roles and responsibilities; little communication occurs between meetings. When the board meets, there may be an agenda, but attendance is sparse. With ineffective boards, there is no follow-through, and no expectation that anyone is to do anything.

Conversely, an effective board has a text that delineates responsibilities of board members and terms of membership. A committee structure exists and the committees meet outside of the regular board meetings. Certain key committees are in place, such as a nominating committee to make sure that strong and well-connected board members are recruited, a standards and benchmarking committee to ensure that quality is defined and evaluated, and a fund raising committee that has specific targets to meet. Subcommittees need to be empowered to make decisions rather than have the overall board deliberate again. Meetings occur at set times, members make every effort to attend, and actions are taken between meetings. The board members are kept well-informed. Most college access programs are small and focused, so the size of the board generally does not need to be more than seven to nine members. Even with relatively small boards, there should be standing committees, and as needed, ad-hoc groups. Because there is never enough time at regular board meetings to do in-depth strategic planning, successful boards use retreats to allow boards the time they need to reflect and brainstorm with one another and staff.

Careful thought to the composition of the board is extremely important for it to be high performing. Typically, a mix of business and community leaders, academics, and educators helps create a balance of expertise.

A board needs a chair who is in regular contact with the executive director,

As members leave, the board chair and the nominating committee should assess the changing expertise of the board.

and a small executive board who participates in the development of the agenda, fiscal oversight, and activities on an as-needed basis by the chair and director. Two critical tasks of a board are self-renewal and evaluation of the director. Board members should have terms through which individuals rotate after a specific time limit. A nomination committee should maintain a roster of potential additions to the board. Careful attention to board turnover distinguishes high performing boards from others. As members leave, the board chair and the nominating committee should assess the changing expertise of the board. Further, although some college access programs will have a director who is evaluated by someone other than the board, the board should have some say in the evaluation and appointment of a director. The board has a particular view of the health of the organization, which is partly influenced by the work of the director. The board analysis should be communicated either to the director or the appropriate individuals.

One particularly vital aspect of a high performance board is the role of the board chair. The board chair provides leadership in several areas. He or she helps develop the agenda, keep the board on task, bring synthesis to discussions, maintain a civil tone, rein in delinquent members, and move discussions away from digressions and toward productive decisions. An effective board chair has a set term and is the primary contact for external constituencies. The program's director and board chair need to have an effective relationship such that the director will not hesitate to call upon the chair for advice and feedback.

A Sense of Engagement and Participation

Ineffective boards have low levels of participation; members see their appointment as simply honorific or symbolic, or, worse, board members think that the meetings are a waste of time or their input is not valued. A high performance board has tightly developed agendas that individuals will receive ahead of time. To be sure, not every recommendation that a board member makes needs to be followed. But if the advice of the board is routinely ignored, then members will question why they should take time out of their busy schedules to attend a meeting. Indeed, if attaining a quorum is a regular problem, then the director needs to question the vitality of the board.

In an age when voice mail, email, fax, and videoconferences are commonplace, a board should receive regular information and communication from the director. How can boards be expected to serve as ambassadors if they are not in contact with the program? When a director is in a city where a board member resides, an occasional lunch or coffee would be useful. If a board is unimportant, then a program's director will see such interactions as a waste of time.

College access programs almost always have celebratory events for the staff and students. A holiday gathering, an anniversary, or going-away parties are examples

of staff celebrations that boards members might be invited to attend. More importantly, celebrations for student graduation or program completion are logical venues for participation by board members. Again, if board members are expected to solicit funding or argue for the program, then they need not only to understand the structure of the program, but also need to believe in the worthwhile nature of the program. In this light, a high performance board is one in which members understand and support the goals of the program.

An Orientation and Ongoing Educational Plan

Although most board members are busy individuals, they need to learn about the program if they are to provide useful advice and guidance and be advocates for the program. Board members who do not have time to attend an orientation when they first come onto a board are likely not going to have time for additional activities down the road. An orientation does not need to be overly time-consuming; however, welcoming a new member to a board and providing no other communication is a sign of a low-performance board.

Written documents, strategic plans, agendas, and minutes from previous meetings are examples of the kind of information a new member should receive. Successful chief executives prepared detailed fact sheets and a list of frequently asked questions and answers for new board members. In addition to material about the program, the expectations of board members, including their roles and responsibilities, should also be described at the orientation. Prior to the meeting, the new member should have a separate meeting with the board chair and program director (or executive director). Optimally, new members should gain a participant view of the program from students. It is highly encouraged that board members visit the programs on site and interact with the staff, advisors, and students, perhaps sitting in on a session. A program, for example, that utilizes volunteers to help high school youth write college applications might have the new member participate. Again, if one indicator of a high performance board is a sense of engagement, then the most effective way for members to understand what the program is about is if they participate in the program. Most board members will agree to serve on a board because they support the program's mission, and for college access programs, board members are likely to enjoy seeing the students who benefit from their work. After orientation, board members should feel comfortable talking about the organization in other business and social settings and see themselves as a spokesperson or an advocate of the organization and its work. High performing boards have a follow-up orientation after a year asking members, "What do you wish you had known when you signed on as a board member?" and "What advice would you give to new members?" Information from the follow-up can be used to help redesign orientations.

Effective boards also recognize that education is an ongoing event.

The more interaction that happens among board members, the more they develop respect for one another.

Occasionally, board members might attend special events that help inform them about college access. National conferences, invited speakers, and articles and books are examples of ways to help board members update their knowledge about college access. Annual one-day retreats are useful ways to provide relevant information to board members. For example, if the board has been discussing the use of technology within the program, an invited speaker and background information about the topic might be extremely useful. National organizations such as the National College Access Network (NCAN) can be an effective way for a board member to see the breadth of college access. The point is not that all board members must attend all extra-curricular events. However, not having an educational plan for the board is to mistakenly assume that knowledge about the program is static. Also, providing education invigorates and builds board member commitment and activism.

Interpersonal Relationships

High performing boards do not just interact at board meetings; board members have relationships outside meetings and interact on an ongoing basis. The more interaction that happens among board members, the more they develop respect for one another and are better able to listen to each other and provide critical feedback to the college access program. Unless strong interpersonal relationships are developed, board members will not feel free to challenge each other's assumptions and try to move from opinions to facts. When strong interpersonal relationships exist, board members are less likely to take challenges to their opinions personally and there can be healthy disagreement on the board. As one board member noted, "We can disagree without feeling disagreeable. But this won't happen unless we trust each other, have mutual respect, and really are listening to each other."

Regular communication with board members is one way for a program director to foster relationships, but communication can also be enhanced through invitations to program events, educational seminars or programs, retreats, and other opportunities for interaction. Finally, board members who are negatively contributing to interpersonal dynamics or who lack engagement and commitment might well be asked to leave the board. Although some board members might be useful because of name recognition or because they have an important symbolic role, more often than not, a disengaged board member will not be useful to the program.

A Focus on Board and Programmatic Outcomes

Just as we have suggested that programs should be in a state of continuous improvement, so too should boards analyze ways in which to improve their functioning. An effective board should have a plan for annual evaluation. A simple "how are we doing" at the end of a meeting is not sufficient. Instead, a high performance

board will have as part of its criteria an evaluation process that occurs on an annual basis. The needs and concerns of members, for example, can be ascertained by self-assessment surveys. If a board finds itself weak in a particular area (fundraising, for example), then a future meeting or retreat can be held to discuss ways to increase board performance.

Further, if the board has established appropriate priorities and developed ambitious long-term and short-term strategic plans to realize these goals, then they need to be able to assess the program's performance. Again, an informal assessment from a program director—"things are just great"—is inadequate. Such a response does not give the board any data to assess the progress that is being made. The result is that hunches and best guesses are substituted for performance-based measures. A high performance board will ensure that they have the information necessary to enable them to assess progress and recommend changes when the program does not meet its goals—or exceeds them. A high performance organization is one that seeks to continually monitor, assess, and augment the program's goals and objectives.

Qualities of High Performance Boards

A clear structure and delineation of roles.

A sense of engagement and participation.

An orientation and ongoing educational plan.

Interpersonal relationships.

A focus on board and programmatic outcomes.

High Performance Board Members

High Performance Board Members

MOST COLLEGE ACCESS PROGRAMS ARE DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE. Their goal, unlike complex organizations such as a university or health-care center, is usually singular: to improve access to college for under-served populations. The programs are also commonly more informal than other non-profits and, certainly, the business world. Indeed, one example of this informality is that these programs generally lack boards and board policies. Budgets exist from year to year. Monitoring the budget is usually only part of one person's job; monitoring generally implies paying people for goods and services and nothing more.

Such informality and singularity of purpose may not appeal to every possible candidate for a board position. An individual will not be an ideal board member simply because he or she is wealthy. At the same time, if an individual has a narrow vision of what a college access program should be, then he or she may not be an ideal candidate either. What, then, are criteria for effective board members to college access programs?

A Commitment to the Mission of Access to College and Understanding of the Conditions of Low-income Populations

Prior to joining the board, prospective members should be able to demonstrate a history of commitment to public education and, more specifically, access to college. Evidence can be demonstrated in multiple ways, such as through charitable contributions, volunteer work, teaching, research, or outreach. A commitment to the mission of access is essential for individuals who will serve as ambassadors for a college preparation program. They do not need to know about the specifics of the program (orientation serves this purpose), but they should demonstrate that they have thought about access prior to being invited to serve on the board. If candidates are not committed to access and equity, or have done little more than give lip service to the issue, then they are most likely not going to be effective board members. In addition to having a commitment to college access, it also helps if they have an understanding of the conditions faced by low-income and first-generation students. It is these conditions that provide important contextual information that should be used to help guide decision-making around programs, policy, and strategic planning. If the board lacks an understanding of the social, economic, and political conditions of low-income populations they will be hampered.

Ironically, a dilemma faced by many college access boards is that they have members committed to the mission of college access and extremely passionate about this issue, so much so that it might become a conflict of interest and blind them to being able to provide objective direction and advice. In fact, boards need a sense of balance in perspective in which passion for the cause is tempered by healthy criticism

and skepticism. In addition, boards often have passionate advocates, but they may not have the necessary skills to provide advice and direction, including business savvy, legal skills, crisis management, relationship building, fundraising, and other perspectives and sets of skills.

What college access boards really need are movers, shakers, and activists who are willing to spend time and exert effort to bring innovative ideas to life.

Activism

Too often the board members are recruited by using the well-meaning fib that "this will not take much of your time" and "you won't have to do anything." But what college access boards really need are movers, shakers, and activists who are willing to spend time and exert effort to bring innovative ideas to life. Although we want well-connected individuals to serve on boards, we generally do not just want board members for their name's sake. This relates back to the notion of engagement and commitment discussed in the last section. At the individual level, this means choosing board members who have a reputation for being involved, not just rubber-stamping budgets and management plans, and who will spend time to develop a vision. A board member may need to spend additional time in the community as an ambassador for the program. Obviously not all individuals are able to make such a commitment. Prior to an individual's appointments he or she should understand the time commitments.

Individuals should be activists based on their strengths. For example, an academic might use his or her knowledge of the broader research picture to help inform what are often parochial understandings of access to college. A business leader might recommend and help implement cost-saving measures that would help build program capacity. A leader within the school system might provide entree into the schools and help to build relationships to expand the program. Too many boards have individuals who serve only a ceremonial function.

A Complementary Set of Skills and Outlooks

Just as a sports team does not need everyone with the same skill, a board should not have similar members. That is, a baseball team does not need every individual in the lineup to be a power hitter. Some individuals need to get on base; others will be valued for their fielding or pitching, and still others for their speed or leadership. Similarly, a board will benefit if its members are not exactly the same, but instead have composite skills that enable fruitful discussion and action to occur. Although we do not recommend a "Noah's Ark" approach for appointment, we acknowledge that a college access program will be well served when the board consists of individuals from diverse groups such as school districts, schools, academe, the community, and business and industry. The point, of course, is not simply to appoint someone to fill a slot, but to instead find individuals from diverse walks of life who

can help the board meet its multiple roles. The important skills noted include fundraising capacity, management experience, accounting skills, legal skills, connections with the community and stakeholder groups, and relationships that help the organization achieve its goals.

Individuals appointed to the board should also demonstrate a commitment to diversity that will enhance the board's performance. Diversity in this sense includes differences in ethnicity, gender, and profession. Too often, board members are more similar than different from one another. As a result, the perspectives, expertise, and knowledge of those who would potentially improve board activity are underutilized. Before a new board member is appointed, the nominations committee should determine the collective ethnic, gender, and professional make-up of the current board. New members should be considered in light of how their appointment will increase the diversity of the board and help the program achieve its goals.

A Willingness to Learn

Board members frequently need to learn another "language." An individual from the business world, for example, will think and speak differently from those who work with high school students. Wealthy board members may not be accustomed to eating lunch in a high school cafeteria, or even know very much about the trials and tribulations associated with working in and attending urban public high schools. Board members will be appointed for their social prominence, which may well outweigh that of the staff of a college access program.

However, those who carry out the work of the program also have specific knowledge and insight. Program staff may not know the world of business, but they likely understand the challenges poor youth face. High performance board members are those who are able to listen. The dispensing of advice is most useful if the dispenser has learned something about the organization and its members, and is able to create a collaborative climate. Even in high performance college access programs, "bottom lines" will be significantly more ephemeral and difficult to identify than profit and loss on balance sheets. Consequently, board members responsible for guiding an access program should know and respect college access programs and those who work in them. Ongoing educational programming helps create a culture of learning on the board, building on the individual willingness to learn.

Qualities of High Performance Board Members

A commitment to the mission of access to college.

Activism.

A complementary set of skills.

A willingness to learn.

Conclusion and Resources

Conclusion

WE HAVE SUGGESTED THAT COLLEGE ACCESS PROGRAMS NEED TO improve—and in some instances create—boards that will provide thoughtful guidance. The environment of the 21st century is one that is based on outcomes and a competitive culture. Too often, well-intended directors of access programs function in a way that may have been suitable a generation ago, but is no longer viable. Access to postsecondary education remains of central concern, but the organizations that seek to address these issues need to professionalize their structures and processes if they are to be effective in the new century.

Directors of college access programs usually look on a board as just one of the multiple tasks that needs to be addressed. Such a view of boards, we suggest, is no longer viable. The creation, development, and nurturing of the board should be one of the top priorities of any Executive Director. In particular, within the first few years of their appointment, Executive Directors need to focus attention on building the board so that it can be an asset in the following years. As we have argued, a high performing board will clarify the organization's goals and planning, serve as ambassadors to external constituencies, generate income, and help define the parameters of quality. Given the vital importance of college preparation programs in helping to increase access to college, the role of the board can no longer be overlooked.

Available Resources

Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities (AGB). Online: http://www.agb.org/

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