

Balancing All Sides **OF THE** Accountability TRIANGLE



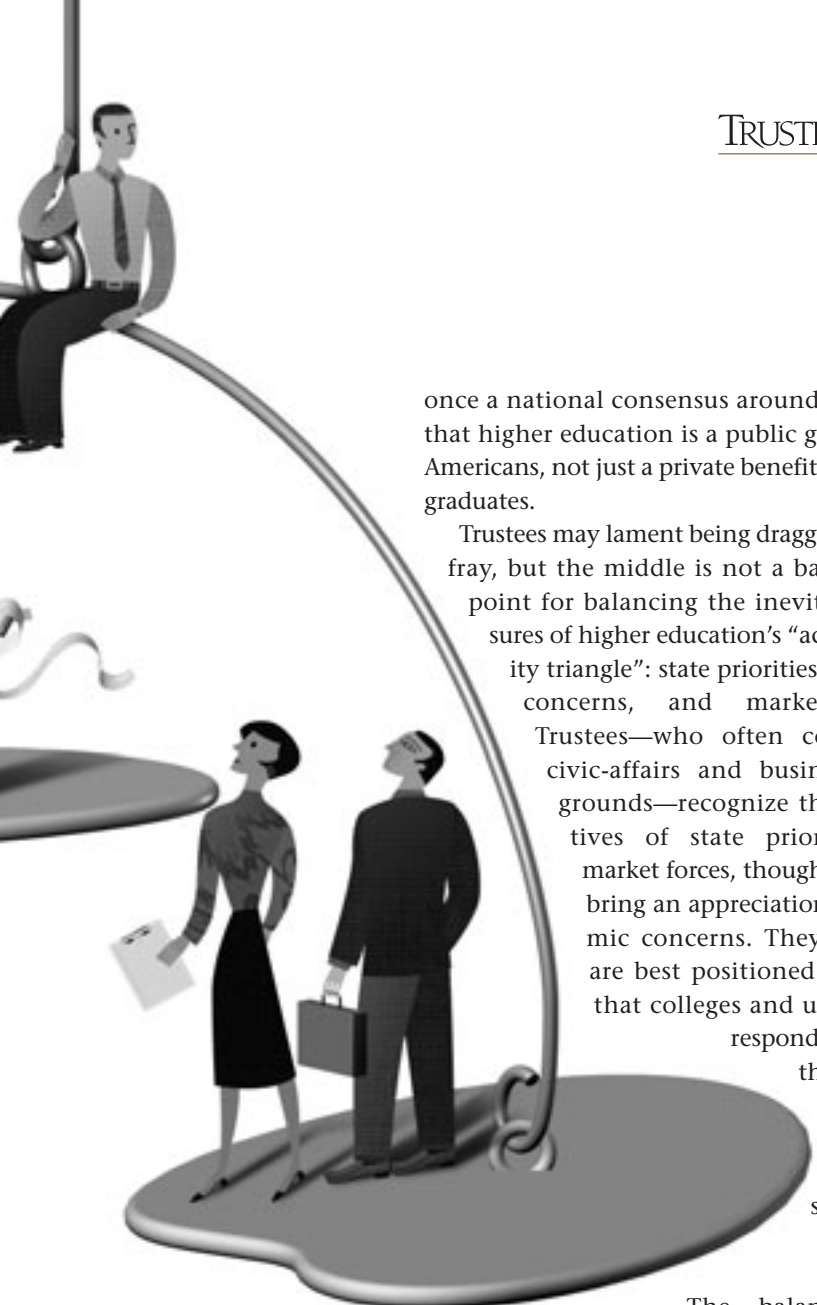
Trustees are best positioned to balance the civic, academic, and commercial forces pressuring higher education—each of which presents a different vision of accountability.

LIKE IT OR NOT, TRUSTEES FIND THEMSELVES IN THE MIDDLE of an ongoing battle over accountability and autonomy. They are bombarded from several directions, whether they serve on coordinating, system, or institutional boards.

Government officials accuse the academy of being more interested in autonomy than accountability—more interested in demanding financial support than in serving public priorities. Business leaders question the responsiveness of colleges and universities to market forces in a changing economy. Beleaguered presidents and chancellors accuse accountability advocates of being two-faced for demanding more services while supplying less support.

All sides in these battles look to trustees for backing. The stakes are high for the entire country, because the conflict is eroding what was

• BY JOSEPH C. BURKE •



once a national consensus around the belief that higher education is a public good for all Americans, not just a private benefit for college graduates.

Trustees may lament being dragged into the fray, but the middle is not a bad vantage point for balancing the inevitable pressures of higher education's "accountability triangle": state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces.

Trustees—who often come with civic-affairs and business backgrounds—recognize the imperatives of state priorities and market forces, though most also bring an appreciation of academic concerns. They certainly are best positioned to ensure that colleges and universities

respond to each of these imperatives without being subservient to any one of them.

The balancing act forced upon trustees has been vividly described by former University of California-Berkeley Chancellor Robert M. Berdahl, who noted, "Universities have generally had ambivalent relations with their surrounding societies: both involved and withdrawn, both serving and criticizing, both needing and being needed." That is why trustees must keep their institutions sufficiently safe from external pressures to safeguard their societal critique, yet sufficiently responsive to external needs to sustain society's support. In short, they must ensure that higher education as a whole and its colleges and universities simultaneously serve and scrutinize the society that supports them.

Accountability and Autonomy. Clashes between the civic, academic, and commercial

cultures in our society make serving without being subservient increasingly difficult for all in higher education. Each of these cultures presents its preferred version of accountability, with both positive and negative possibilities.

Civic culture pushes political accountability, insisting that colleges and universities must serve public purposes; unfortunately, this culture also periodically slides into doing the bidding of the party in power. Academic culture presses for professional accountability, or faculty participation, as essential to effective governance; occasionally, it produces gridlock in campus decision making and neglects societal needs. Finally, market-accountability advocates argue that colleges and universities must respond to client needs; sometimes, however, they divert higher education from fundamental purposes toward market fads.

To satisfy these diverse interests, University of Pennsylvania researcher Robert Zemsky, in a 1999 paper for the Knight Higher Education Collaborative, called for leaders—including trustees—to be "mission centered," "politically savvy," and "market smart." Zemsky's trinity suggests the conflicting requirements for producing accountability while preserving autonomy. Colleges and universities must *stick* to their missions, *serve* their states, and *sell* their services. But each demand in some ways fights with the others.

This certainly will disappoint academics, who believe the best institutions are those that offer the most programs and degrees. The campus that "sells" usually tells customers what they want to hear, while one that "serves" sometimes sends society an unwelcome message. The college or university that serves society best may well be the one that resists slavish reaction to market forces. A college or university that sticks to its mission may find it will miss the next market wave.

Trustees know that a single campus cannot do everything that markets demand. They know a college or university should do what it does best, which means sticking to its mission while

selling to clients who most need its services.

Finally, the politically savvy leaders in higher education are the ones who can distinguish public needs from partisan demands and persuade the general public and (one hopes) government officials to see the difference. These are tough tasks, but trustees with connections to the civic, collegiate, and commercial cultures are best equipped to balance these political, academic, and market pressures.

Six Tasks. Being accountable obligates trustees and higher education officials to explain and document the actions and results of their organization. Accountability imposes six primary

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obligations on college and university leaders. They must do the following:

1. demonstrate that they are using their powers properly and legally;
2. show that they are working to achieve their designated mission;
3. report how well they are performing to stakeholders and the public;
4. pursue effectiveness and efficiency by comparing the results achieved with the resources received;
5. ensure program quality; and
6. guarantee the institution is responsive to the public's needs.

Presidents, chancellors, and other administrators are duty-bound to meet these obligations and produce good results. Trustees have the task of assuring stakeholders and the public that their colleges or universities are actu-

ally fulfilling these obligations. Providing assurance, as opposed to taking action, is an amorphous responsibility. It requires a delicate balance of resolve and restraint for trustees that can—all too easily—lapse into extremes of dictatorship or indifference.

Several of these accountability obligations are natural for trustees to monitor, while others represent new or expanded roles. As the legal authority, the board is responsible for seeing that the institution and its officials act properly and legally. Setting and preserving institutional missions have always been the special tasks of trustees. Insisting on public reporting of institutional results represents a more recent recognition that public accountability is essential in a democratic society.

Trustees have long been interested in efficiency. Now they must move to a cost-benefit analysis relating results to resources. The faculty determines the quality of academic programs in instruction and research, but boards must ensure the use of a rigorous process for evaluating program performance. Finally, trustees of private and public institutions alike must insist that the college or university responds to the public's needs.

By assuring that each of these obligations is met, trustees can help ward off external intrusion into campus operations.

Coordinating Boards' Plight. The worst pounding in the accountability wars is inflicted on coordinating boards. State officials often view these entities as captives of campus interests, while campus leaders frequently see them as pawns of partisan politics. Given these divergent views, coordinating boards have difficulty formulating a comprehensive accountability system for higher education in their state that balances civic, academic, and market demands.

Coordinating boards also have the trying task of ensuring that higher education meets public needs. Lack of agreement on what constitutes those needs stirs the antagonism





between government, academic, and business leaders. Absent agreements on expectations, commitments remain open-ended, demands unrestrained, and stakeholders dissatisfied.

Few forums exist that bring academic, government, and business leaders together in ways that produce mutual understanding. These groups too often see each other at their worst rather than their best. Governors, legislators, and business leaders see presidents and professors mostly at budget times lobbying for more money, rather than at work designing and delivering programs that meet society's and students' needs. Academics complain of shortfalls in state funding, rather than recognizing the sizeable support that governments and businesses already supply.

Bridging the Gap. Distance between stakeholders and academics undermines the one characteristic that everyone sees as essential to balancing accountability and autonomy—*trust*. Contrary to the cliché, familiarity is more likely to bring appreciation than to breed contempt.

Currently, outsiders criticize the lack of accountability in higher education, but most

accept no responsibility for creating effective accountability systems. Harvard University's Robert Behn, in his book, *Rethinking Democratic Accountability*, talks about moving from "360-degree harassment" of government from all sides of society (for failing to satisfy their special interests) to "360-degree accountability," in which outside groups accept responsibility with government officials for setting priorities and ensuring their achievement.

Plagued by conflicting demands from state, campus, and commercial groups, coordinating boards alone cannot produce an acceptable accountability system. That's why AGB's Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance has developed a model for moving business, civic, government, and education leaders from "360-degree harassment" toward "360-degree accountability" in higher education.

In Mississippi, the center and the state Board of the Institutions of Higher Learning recently sponsored a process for generating a "public agenda" for that state. A steering committee of two-dozen members—composed of top government, business, civic, and education leaders—collectively developed a set of priorities of what Mississippi needed most from their

QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

- How do we ensure that our campus officers are using their powers properly? What do recent reviews say about our success in fulfilling this primary obligation?
- How does our college or university assess the extent to which our institution and each of its units are working to achieve our designated mission? Do we review and respond to the results of these assessments?
- Does our institution publicly report its performance of that mission? What do those reports suggest about its results?
- Do we regularly assess the efficiency and effectiveness of our institution by periodically comparing its costs and benefits? What do these comparisons signify?
- What processes does our college or university use in evaluating the quality of its programs and services? What do these recent evaluations suggest about trends?
- What public needs have we identified as our priorities? How well are we responding to those needs?

public and private colleges and universities in instruction, research, and service. Its report included indicators, benchmarks, and timetables for achievement.

A much larger summit meeting attended by representatives of the same groups endorsed this agenda. The process gives the civic, academic, and commercial cultures an equal interest in, and accountability for, the success of higher education. A large number of trustees from the coordinating board and from private and public institutions helped build consensus on the agenda, because they represented all three interests. Trustees from coordinating boards across the country could help their

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states move from conflict to commitment by adopting this model.

Coordinating boards (and, for that matter, other public higher education officials) should work to develop a state accountability system for higher education with the following characteristics:

- A “public agenda” prepared by top business, civic, government, and education leaders that identifies what your state needs most from higher education and includes prioritized goals, performance indicators, benchmark targets, and timetables;
- Participation in the development and implementation of the agenda by private and public colleges and universities as well as public schools;
- A focus on external results, not internal operations of colleges and universities, to pro-

duce external accountability while preserving institutional autonomy;

- A commitment to adequate and sustained funding from public and private sources commensurate with the public agenda, with lower targets but not less worthy ultimate goals when budgets must be cut;
- A balanced approach to public funding and tuition, coupled with financial aid that ensures access and affordability in private and public institutions;
- An appreciation of the contribution to the public agenda from all types of colleges and universities, based on mission performance not mission levels;
- An integrated plan that connects accountability programs and their implementation at the state, system, and institutional levels;
- Annual performance reports on progress toward the achieving the public agenda at the state, system, and institutional levels; and
- Five-year reviews of progress and revisions when necessary to meet new needs.

Huge Public Stakes. Higher education is too important to states and their citizens to leave accountability to long-distance duels between government officials and academic leaders, with trustees and regents in the middle of the muddle. The stakes are huge for our effort to rebuild the consensus that higher education is a public not a private good.

The key to success is active participation of trustees of coordinating, system, and institutional boards. Being in the middle, only you can balance the pressures of state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces—the three corners of the accountability triangle. ♦

Joseph C. Burke (burkejo@rockinst.org) is director of the Higher Education Program at the Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany, N.Y. He is editor of Achieving Accountability in Higher Education: Balancing Public, Academic, and Market Demands (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

