



BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Each year, the Kent State University Board of Trustees conducts an annual review of the University President's performance. In concurrence with the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), the Board sees presidential assessment as one of its fundamental responsibilities, providing the President with guidance and support, clarifying trustee expectations regarding institutional priorities, and enhancing leadership effectiveness. Although presidential evaluations are retrospective in nature, best practice in governance suggests that the process should also include a forward-looking orientation to what stakeholders see in the near future for an institution and how well its leadership is prepared to deal with these future issues.

Process

The Board of Trustees annually evaluates the performance of the President, and by extension that of the university as a whole, in meeting or progressing toward a set of mutually agreed-upon goals. This is consistent with the President's employment contract and with the Board's commitment to ongoing leadership development. The input of all trustees is actively sought, encouraged, and required and every two-three years, the Board seeks additional feedback from others including senior staff, student and faculty leaders, foundation board members, and community leaders in the review process.

At Kent State, the Board and the President have adopted many of the best practices cited by the AGB, including the annual establishment of mutually agreed-upon goals, preparation of a written self-assessment by the president, meaningful and regular communication between the board and the president regarding general results, and the inclusion of more comprehensive feedback from stakeholders on a regular basis, which for Kent State has occurred every two to three years.

In planning the 2011-12 performance evaluation, the Board and the President agreed that the timing was right for an outside assessment with a strong future orientation. This summer President Lefton will begin his seventh year in office, the university will celebrate the successful conclusion of a \$250-million capital campaign, bonds will be issued for a \$170-million campus improvement program, and critical phases of a \$100-million downtown Kent development will move toward completion. It is a momentous time in our history and the insights gathered from key stakeholders about major challenges and opportunities going forward will inform the conversation and planning by the Board and the President to optimize institutional performance.

In April President Lefton began the formal evaluation process by submitting to trustees a report detailing progress toward specific measurable goals that were agreed upon at the outset of the year. The Board then retained the Aldridge Group, a Westlake-based professional firm that specializes in executive assessment, to perform an outside assessment of Dr. Lefton's performance. Various constituencies were interviewed, including trustees, members of the president's cabinet, members of the Foundation board of directors, student leaders, faculty leaders, the Kent city manager, and a local business leader. A total of 30 people (including President Lefton) were interviewed in May 2012.

Summary Highlights

The Board's evaluation was very positive, finding that President Lefton met or exceeded every strategic goal for the review period. The Board is proud to support President Lefton's leadership and record of accomplishment for our students, the communities served by our eight campuses, and our state.

Kent State has an impressive strategic plan, which the Board approved, and which President Lefton is implementing with excellent results. He is a visionary leader who is appropriately setting the direction for Kent State. Under his leadership, Kent State is making major progress toward the six strategic goals that have guided the university since approval of the strategic plan in 2007. These goals are:

- Ensuring Student Success
- Enhancing Academic Excellence and Innovation
- Expanding Breakthrough Research and Creative Endeavors
- Engaging with the World Beyond Our Campuses
- Securing Our Financial Future
- Developing and Recognizing Our People

The outside consultant noted that President Lefton was viewed very favorably by all constituent groups interviewed as part of this process. He was described as demonstrating the competencies common to university presidents, with participants citing his top strengths as strategic thinking, leadership and persistence. Participants cited many institutional and individual achievements, which exemplify the President's leadership in a challenging economic environment. In the Board's view, the institutional highlights below are perhaps the most notable of the past year and over time will prove to be among the most impactful for Kent State.

- Through well-planned and executed strategies and investments, the university achieved record enrollment of 42,185 students system-wide and its largest-ever freshman class in fall 2011. By growing enrollment and expanding its "enrollment funnel," Kent State has managed its way through state budget reductions and is generating record numbers and quality of applications that will enable shaping of the class for the years to come. To date nearly 21,000 applications have been received for the fall 2012 class of 4,200.
- The Board and the President are fully aligned that the institution's first priority must be increasing student retention and graduation. The university has made a series of moves and investments to enhance student success, including most recently the engagement of

noted expert Dr. George Kuh as an adviser, expansion of student advising, increased student involvement in high-impact activities and learning communities, and implementation of the math emporium. As of this week, freshmen retention for fall 2012 is tracking about 1.8% ahead of last year.

- Kent State is moving forward with a major bond issue that will support a transformational \$170-million investment in academic facilities. The bond issue comes after three years of assessing needs, considering funding options, advocacy, reallocation, and program planning.
- Good leadership recognizes and seeks to leverage emerging opportunities, which was evidenced this past year by the exploration and near-completion of the merger of the Ohio College of Podiatric Medicine into Kent State University. This historic acquisition, which has strategic synergies for both organizations, required extensive due diligence, negotiation and joint planning among the administrations, faculties, and staff. The transfer is on track to take place on or near the beginning of the new fiscal year.
- President Lefton meets alumni and friends across the country, and he has helped energize donors and volunteer leadership to surpass the \$250-million campaign goal. Also pivotal to the future is planned expansion of the university's fundraising capacity to realize donor potential now being identified through comprehensive screening. University and foundation leadership together are building the pipeline to cultivate and ultimately produce the next generation of donors and ever-higher levels of attainment, which are essential to the university's future.
- President Lefton has continued to build a strong leadership team for Kent State, most recently appointing Dr. Todd Diacon as senior vice president for academic affairs and provost. The Board and the President have focused on leadership development and building bench strength as a strategic goal, as talent in the form of our faculty and staff is key to achieving desired high-impact results in education, research and service.

Future Challenges

As part of the executive assessment, key stakeholders were asked to share their perspectives on the challenges ahead for higher education in general and Kent State in particular, and how the board and administration can work together to meet these challenges. There was strong consensus around four primary challenges as well as the President's ability to meet them. Cited as top challenges for the future and areas of development for the President were: navigating a continually challenging financial future; the changing higher education marketplace and negative public perceptions regarding the value and costs of going to college; concern about the academic readiness of incoming students and student retention; and improving the relationship between the faculty and the administration. All constituent groups viewed the President's current skill set as well matched to these challenges. He was described as having the strategic thinking skills needed to identify ways in which the university can overcome funding issues and to help raise the public's confidence in higher education overall and Kent State University in particular as a driver of economic recovery and quality of life across the state, region and communities. Stakeholders interviewed described him as having the leadership and persistence required to continue to address college readiness as well as to forge a stronger relationship with the faculty. With continued and active support from the board and the senior staff, President Lefton will be

successful in leading the institution in the face of these difficult challenges, participants noted in the review process.

Conclusion

President Lefton is a University President who has accomplished a great deal in his six years at Kent State. Enrollment is up (far beyond other schools), the fiscal state of the university is in great shape (Moody's rating of Aa3), and fundraising is at an all-time high (recent Centennial Campaign generating \$270 million). Physical changes in the university and the city of Kent are transformational and have added a feeling of excitement and renaissance in a time when most of the country is still suffering the effects of the worst recession in more than 75 years. Only someone with strong leadership skills and vision could have made this happen, particularly given the roadblocks and challenges of our time.

The confidence of our Board of Trustees in President Lefton is pronounced, and we see him as the kind of leader Kent State needs for the foreseeable future. We expect him –and by extension the university community as a whole—to continue to realize our shared vision for Kent State. We are proud of our students, faculty, and staff who put excellence into action every day.

By all accounts, President Lefton has improved over the last six years and truly has grown into what is a very complex and demanding job. In addition, he has worked to develop himself further after each performance review, and has shown progress in how he deals with the people around him on a daily basis. We look forward to many more successes in the future.

Kent State University Board of Trustees

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June 6, 2012