Pearl Meyer

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Private Higher Education: Redefining Presidential Evaluation for Leadership Sustainability



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Preface: A Comprehensive View of Presidential Performance

Private higher education is navigating one of its most complex eras. Shrinking enrollments, financial strain, heightened scrutiny, and leadership turnover have converged to test not only institutional resilience but also the systems that guide, evaluate, and reward leadership itself.

This two-part series offers a unified framework for how boards can meet that challenge—by aligning how we compensate and how we evaluate presidential performance. In Part I, Sustaining Excellence and Building Stability in the Face of Uncertainty, we examined how well-designed incentive compensation can focus leadership attention, reinforce accountability, and sustain continuity. Incentives, when applied judiciously, serve as a governance tool to "pay smarter, not more."

Here in Part II we take the next step—moving from compensation design to performance assessment. Evaluation, we argue, must balance quantitative results with qualitative judgment to ensure that presidents are rewarded not just for what they achieve, but how they lead.

Together, these perspectives form a complete philosophy of comprehensive performance evaluation—one that links pay, performance, and leadership conduct under a single

principle: governance that is fair, strategic, and sustainable.

In part one of this series, we explored how incentive compensation can strengthen leadership continuity and align executive behavior with institutional priorities. That discussion focused on the mechanics of performance—how compensation can be designed to pay smarter, not more.

This article takes the next step by asking a deeper question: How do we know performance is being achieved in the right way?

Incentive design sets expectations. Evaluation confirms whether leadership actually fulfills them. Together, they form a complete picture of governance discipline—rewarding not just what presidents accomplish, but how they lead their institutions through complexity and change.

The Limits of Metrics

Metrics are indispensable. They quantify progress, establish accountability, and make performance visible. But numbers alone can't tell the full story of leadership.

- A balanced budget doesn't show the trust it took to get there.
- A record fundraising year doesn't reveal the commitment it took from the team to reach those levels.
- A successful campaign doesn't reflect the commitment to the mission among the staff who ran it.

High retention rates alone don't signify the work involved to create a high-commitment culture. Metrics capture *outcomes*. Evaluation reveals *leadership impact*. Without context, data becomes reductionist—encouraging transactional behavior where leadership requires judgment and nuance.

Why "How" Matters

Leadership conduct, culture, and decision-making style are not "soft" considerations; they are leading indicators of institutional health. Boards that measure *how* presidents lead—alongside what they achieve—protect both performance and reputation.

Examples of key leadership evaluation criteria include:

- Reputation: Credibility in higher education is currency. Evaluating communication, ethics, and governance judgment safeguards it.
- Retention: Faculty and staff engagement often reflect leadership quality more accurately than compensation structure. Measuring morale and trust helps prevent avoidable turnover.

- Sustainability: Short-term results achieved at the expense of culture or collaboration rarely endure. Evaluating behavior ensures that results are mission-consistent.
- Crisis Management: Volatility is the new normal. How a president navigates crises—transparently, calmly, and with foresight—reveals as much about leadership strength as any numerical goal.
- Organizational Health: A system where all decisions must bubble up to the President reflects disempowerment. Lack of accountability and unclear roles create massive inefficiencies and lead to both stagnation and lack of innovation. Presidents must create systems where decisions are made by the right people, and where good ideas flourish.

Evaluating the “how” brings fairness and foresight to governance. It ensures boards reward leadership that strengthens the institution’s foundation, not just its balance sheet.

A Framework for Comprehensive Evaluation

A complete evaluation framework mirrors the balanced incentive philosophy we outlined previously: it combines quantitative rigor with qualitative judgment.

Dimension	Focus	Purpose
What	Measurable outcomes—enrollment, finances, fundraising	Confirms accountability
How	Leadership behaviors—ethics, culture, collaboration, vision, inspiration and motivation	Ensures mission alignment
Where	Strategic trajectory—institutional readiness, succession planning, organizational health	Sustains continuity

Each dimension reinforces the others. The “what” delivers progress. The “how” safeguards values and culture. The “where” ensures the institution remains ready for what’s next.

Designing a Process that Builds Trust

Evaluation, like compensation, works best when it’s intentional and transparent. A credible process should be collaborative and developmental, not punitive.

- Joint Design: Boards, presidents, and facilitators agree up front on evaluation categories and weighting.
- Self-Assessment: Presidents provide written reflection on results, challenges, and priorities—anchoring dialogue in evidence, not assumption.
- Balanced Input: Use a mix of board feedback, institutional data, and selective stakeholder insight to balance breadth and depth, including direct reports.
- Cadence with Purpose: Annual reviews maintain rhythm; milestone evaluations (e.g., post-campaign, pre-renewal) add depth. Predictability normalizes accountability and builds confidence.

When boards and presidents co-own the process, evaluation becomes an act of stewardship—focused on leadership growth, not judgment.

Governance Discipline: Keeping Evaluation Strategic

An effective evaluation process doesn't blur the line between governance and management.

Boards must stay disciplined:

- Evaluate leadership capability as well as operational effectiveness
- Focus on themes supported by multiple data points, not anecdotes from a single source.
- Protect confidentiality, ensuring candor.
- Interpret results with context—economic, demographic, and institutional.
- Document outcomes and revisit them, reinforcing continuity from year to year.

A disciplined evaluation framework signals seriousness and maturity. It tells both presidents and stakeholders that performance assessment is about development, sustainability and integrity, not politics and bonus determination.

From Evaluation to Incentives: Completing the Loop

Incentive compensation and performance evaluation are two sides of one governance philosophy. Incentives reward measurable achievement; evaluation ensures that those achievements reflect mission, culture, and stewardship.

When done well, the two systems inform one another:

- Quantitative results drive incentive funding.
- Qualitative insights shape board discretion and future goal setting.

Boards that align evaluation with incentive design create a feedback loop of accountability and trust—rewarding leadership that not only delivers outcomes, but strengthens the institution's long-term credibility.

It's Time to "Open the Aperture" on President Evaluation

Higher education doesn't need more metrics. It needs a wider lens, including results *and* resilience, data *and* judgment, today's goals *and* tomorrow's readiness. When evaluations consider all aspects of performance—the what, how, and where—they are more reflective of what actually matters in the performance of the President. Opening the aperture wider on a camera lens reveals much more about the whole subject of the photographer's attention: in this case, the full impact of a President's leadership on an academic institution.

Incentive design establishes the framework for performance. Evaluation ensures that performance is delivered sustainably. Together, they reflect a governance model grounded in stewardship, fairness, and continuity.

Presidential leadership, after all, is not just about meeting targets; it's about sustaining the institutions that define our collective future. Paying smarter and judging wiser are, ultimately, two expressions of the same principle: governance done well.

About the Authors

Alexander brings 20+ years of experience advising tax-exempt boards on executive compensation and succession planning, with deep expertise in physician compensation governance for hospitals and integrated health systems.

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About Pearl Meyer

Pearl Meyer is the leading advisor to boards and senior management helping organizations build, develop, and reward great leadership teams that drive long-term success. Our strategy-driven compensation and leadership consulting services act as powerful catalysts for value creation and competitive advantage by addressing the critical links between people and outcomes. Our clients stand at the forefront of their industries and range from emerging high-growth, not-for-profit, and private organizations to the Fortune 500.