

Ohio Senate Advice and Consent

Trustee Appointment Questionnaire

Name: Mark S. Lerner

Institution Being Appointed to:

University of Akron

1. **Are you a graduate of or do any of your dependents attend the institution to which you are being appointed as trustee?**

I earned my MBA at the University of Akron, graduating in 1995. No dependents attend U of A.

2. **What is your position on the First Amendment rights of faculty, staff, and students, and how will you balance this with promoting diversity of thought on campus?**

First Amendment rights and academic freedom, while different, are essential to ensure that educators can teach, research, and publish without fear of censorship or retaliation and to foster critical thinking and intellectual diversity in classroom and campus environments.

However, First Amendment rights and academic freedom are not absolute. They are bound by existing laws and regulations. Those limits on speech and assembly prohibit inciting violence or discrimination or disrupting the educational process. Those limits impose consequences for their violation.

The Board of Trustees must ensure the Administration has policies and procedures that both protect and value First Amendment rights and academic freedom while ensuring a safe and supportive community that ensures no disruption of the educational process. The Board of Trustees is obligated to hold the Administration accountable for enforcing the University's policies and procedures. This is a complex topic which needs specialized legal input.

3. **In your opinion, what are three current significant issues affecting higher education?**

There are multiple trends that interact with each other that create significant issues affecting higher education. The keys to addressing these issues will be found in understanding the underlying root causes and developing courses of action. In my opinion, the following are three current significant issues:

- Maintaining financial viability in the wake of declining enrollment, excess physical capacity, rising costs, and heavy debt load.
- Higher education needs to reinvent itself to meet the evolving needs of the 21st century.
- Rapidly changing technology requires a shift from strictly a degree mentality to a lifelong learning approach to help keep workforce skills current.

4. **Do you feel comfortable presenting new or alternative solutions to issues presented to the Board of Trustees ("Board") by the president or other trustees of the institution to which you are being appointed?**

I do. I believe an important responsibility of a trustee is to engage early to help sense-making, problem-identifying, and issue framing. This requires asking difficult questions and presenting alternatives. This dialogue needs to occur before direction and goals are set. This approach is not a zero-sum contest for power but instead it is a collaborative process between the Board and the Administration which should lead to better solutions.

5. What are some ideas you plan to propose to reduce the overall cost of higher education?

First, I need to understand the University's cost structure and what programs they have in place to address cost effectiveness.

Lean and Six Sigma best practices from manufacturing, healthcare, and construction should be deployed throughout the University to improve efficiency and cost effectiveness.

Examine creative ways to monetize physical capacity to reduce both operating costs and debt burden.

In parallel with cost control, it is critical to reverse the declining enrollment trend to ensure the economic viability and vitality of the University of Akron.

6. What thoughts do you have on faculty tenure, post-tenure review, and annual faculty performance reviews?

I believe feedback is important. A performance evaluation offers an opportunity to discuss strengths and weaknesses, ensure performance standards are met, and opportunities for improvement and further development are identified. This is a best practice in industry and should apply to all employees of the University from the President on down including all faculty. The conflict arises at the crossroad of evaluating the quality of work and the job security provided by tenure.

7. What are your thoughts on ways to increase graduation rates at the institution to which you have been appointed?

First, I know very little about this topic. The little research I've done indicates that U of A has a graduation rate of 60-61% which places it in the top 45-50% of universities. That leaves plenty of room for improvement. There is a long list of reasons why people drop out. Learning which reasons the University can influence and what programs are in place to support students would be a first step.

8. Is higher education in Ohio addressing the current and future workforce needs of our state, and how can the institution you have been appointed to better address these workforce challenges?

I believe the University programs are generally designed to meet current needs. However, the demand for well-trained people is greater than the supply. This issue is being magnified by declining enrollment.

Future workforce needs may be a greater challenge. As stated above, higher education needs to reinvent itself to meet the evolving needs of the 21st century. Rapidly changing technology requires a shift from strictly a degree mentality to a lifelong learning approach. If the manufacturing onshoring trend continues there will be even greater demand for well-trained people.

In terms of how the University can better address these challenges, the first will be for me to understand what the University is currently doing. I believe the University needs to reach out to both the public and private sectors to understand what the economic development targets are and then evaluate how the University can best support those targets.

9. In your view, who are you ultimately responsible to serve as a trustee of the institution you have been appointed to: the president, Board chairperson, or taxpayers of Ohio?

The taxpayers of Ohio.