

Five Components of Building Strong President-Board Relationships



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Introduction

Higher education leadership is often framed by the college president. Though at times the college president serves as the face and spokesperson of their institution, institutional leadership is truly a team effort. The board of trustees is one of the key elements of that team.

While the board of trustees is most commonly—and publicly—known as the fiduciaries that hire and fire presidents, they also have a number of other responsibilities. Board members review policies, collaborate on institutional direction, review budgets, and serve as ambassadors for their institution.

Due to these wide-ranging responsibilities, one of the most crucial relationships any college president can have is with their board. The synergy, communication flow, trust, and approaches to decision-making processes can make or break the success of a presidential administration.

To promote good governance, here are components of building a strong president-board relationship.

Set Clear Priorities

Higher education has been through a number of transitions—such as expanding access to students other than White elite males by the admission of women and desegregation, Title IX, governmental defunding of higher education, the GI Bill, distance learning, and more—and so has the work of the board. Higher education institutions are not simply spaces for education and training, though those purposes remain core to the institutional mission and identity of many. Today's colleges and universities navigate a variety of activities and enterprises, which can include corporate partnerships, million-dollar revenue-generating athletics programs, research centers with cost-sharing agreements, development activities, legal challenges and liabilities, and much more.

Particularly because of this widening scope, it is critical that the board and president set clear priorities for the institution (and, subsequently, themselves) through a strategic plan or similarly scaled initiative. Linking either external or internal goals to a strategic priority provides the board and the president a rubric from which to evaluate their work; more importantly, it serves as a way to reference the accomplishments and initiatives of the institution. Agreeing on priorities allows both board members and the president to focus on what is most relevant in the moment, rather than be pulled in less-productive directions.

According to *American College President Study 2017*, 79 percent of presidents reported that they had a clear understanding of their board's expectations, as well as the expectations of their institution or system, during the hiring process (Gagliardi et al. 2017). But this understanding of goals needs to continue even after the president assumes their position.

Some institutional priorities and goals are public. Consider Colorado College's anti-racism commitment and associated dashboards of metrics.¹ In the commitment, the goals and associated initiatives are clearly articulated and the board of trustees is named as one of the accountable parties (Colorado College 2019). As such, the anti-racism commitment has become a foundational goal that requires investment and engagement from both institutional leadership and the board of trustees.

1 For more about Colorado College's [Antiracism Implementation Plan](#), read *Our Plan to Become an Antiracist Institution* and review its [diversity dashboards](#).



Other goals may be internal and not publicly shared. Key metrics, such as an enrollment increase of a certain percent or a specific amount of revenue from new programs, for example, are often not publicized because they are part of the institution's overall strategy, but they are nonetheless critical to define. These areas should be outlined in an institution's strategic plan, with clear measurements and timelines for assessment and evaluation to ensure the institution is on track with reaching its goals.

The board can also aid in setting a culture that encourages issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to be central to the development, execution, and evaluation of the overall institutional strategy. Towson University, for example, has even gone a step further by developing a strategic plan specifically for DEI goals.² Though board members may not be involved with the construction of the plan, they can use their positions and power to support, endorse, and avail resources to ensure such plans are able to be properly executed and integral to the operation of the institution.

Acknowledge Roles

Board members are often successful community members who are engaged in the life of the institution. However, the role of board members is to set policies—not implement them. The president, on the other hand, is responsible for implementing the policies and strategic direction set by the board.

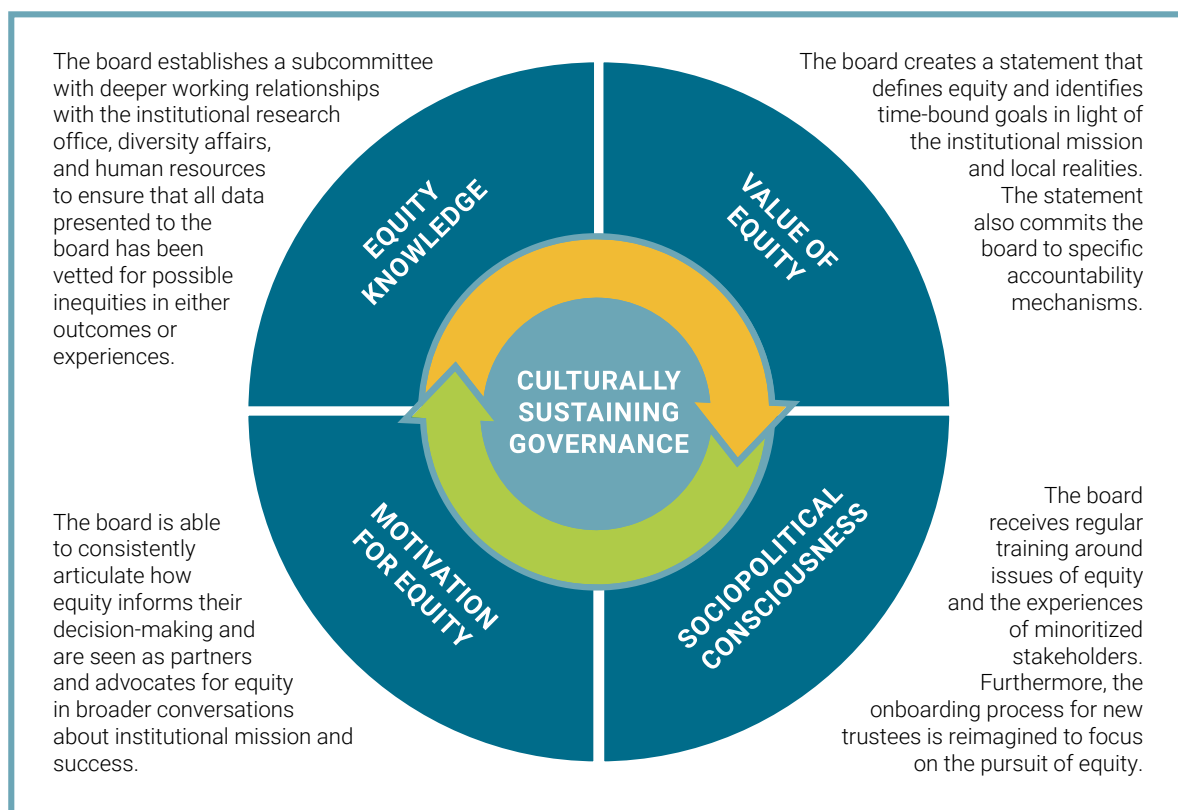
These two distinct roles are critical to understand, since board members shouldn't be balancing the books and the president shouldn't be administering policies in a vacuum. As the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges put it in *Principles of Trusteeship*, "Honor the academic norm of shared governance, which includes the board, president, administration, and faculty. The board has primary fiduciary responsibilities, and it delegates primary management responsibility to the president and primary responsibility for academic programs to the faculty" (AGB 2021).

² Access Towson University's diversity strategic plan, "[A More Inclusive TU: Advancing Equity and Diversity](#)" (pdf), to learn more.

Practically speaking, though, how can a board meaningfully set policies, particularly on key issues? One example is equity work. Boards can employ a framework that Rall, Morgan, and Commodore (2020) call culturally sustaining governance (CSG). The CSG framework (see figure 1) provides four main areas for boards to focus on to ensure they are approaching equity work in ways that do not overreach or overstep. The four domains central to CSG are equity knowledge, value of equity, motivation for equity, and sociopolitical consciousness. The CSG model provides examples of how boards can use these principles to advance equity work in partnership with the president and institutional stakeholders.

Consider the CSG model in action. A board can work with institutional offices to identify inequities on campus, such as the differences by race in persistence rates within a specific program. Next, the board can utilize institutional data to set clear goals that aim to decrease persistence gaps and increase racial equity in that program. Board members could also receive training related to issues of equity and learn about the experiences of historically minoritized students. In turn, the board should utilize what they learn along with the data they gather from the institution to inform their decision-making process to set institutional policy, which helps establish equity as an integral and intentional part of the board’s decision-making process.

Figure 1. Culturally Sustaining Governance Framework



Source: Figure adapted from Rall, Morgan, and Commodore 2020.

In addition to setting policies, the board also plays another important role—at many institutions, the president formally reports to the board. *American College President Study 2017* noted that the majority of presidents reported to the board (64 percent), with the exception being individual campus leaders who reported to a system head (nearly 32 percent) (Gagliardi et al. 2017). Additionally, 63 percent of presidents reported that either the board chair or the board were responsible for their performance evaluations. For this reason, it is vital that presidents are able to see their boards as part of a team and that boards work to avoid dysfunctional relationships and communication with the president, all while staying diligent to their fiduciary duty.



Establish Communication Channels

Often, the best space for a board member to raise a question, bring up a concern, or share expertise is within a committee. Similarly, the president and their staff often have the most meaningful exchanges with board members in the context of their committee work.

While the committee structure of a governing board can seem onerous at times, it is often within committees that the work of the board gets done. Rarely will the whole board do a deep dive on the financial statements or collectively assess the president, but that work does happen in committee meetings. Board members should join the appropriate committees relative to their expertise, and presidents should ensure those committees are staffed by the right senior person on campus.

The work of the committee then rises to the level of the whole board in the form of recommendations and motions. Ultimately, healthy committees make for good communication—and good governance.

When the president has an issue for the board, the board chair should be their first call. In that respect, the communication channels between the board chair and the president are crucial. As Stephen R. Lewis Jr., president emeritus of Carleton College, wrote, “The board chair has a central role to play in keeping any intra-board disagreements from encumbering the president” (Lewis 2009). In that same essay, he pointed out that boards require a similar flow of good information from the president through the board chair, otherwise they don’t have the right context for issues that arise.

As in any complex organization, communication at a postsecondary institution is multilayered and there is no singular path for all issues that arise. That said, committee work, governance structures, and the board chair-president relationship are all spaces where the most effective and efficient board-president communication can occur.

Prioritize the President-Board Chair Relationship

Of all the relationships within an institution, the one between the president and the board chair is one of the most important. As mentioned, progress and problems from the board funnel to the board chair, and the board chair is the president's first point of contact for campus concerns that rise to the board level.

Many presidents and board chairs have a standing time to meet, whether weekly or quarterly. One-third (33 percent) of presidents surveyed for *American College President Study 2017* cited governing board relations as occupying most of their time, putting it in the top four areas of which presidents reported primarily using their time (Gagliardi et al. 2017). While that time spent takes different forms at every institution, a reasonable assumption is that president-chair communication is a significant portion of that allotment.

In some cases, it can be difficult to establish a working relationship or define its parameters. For example, a board chair who is unfamiliar with higher education might struggle to identify the type of questions to ask the president, while a president may not want to overburden the chair with too many details. No matter the players, it can be a challenge to find the right cadence. Focusing on those aforementioned priorities can provide an easy agenda, however, and the key topic areas for any meeting have, in many ways, already been decided. Use them, and the relationship will form.

Support Each Other's Tough Decisions

The college president can become the face of an institution—through fundraising efforts and recruitment campaigns and in communicating a strategic vision to stakeholders. The president may also be the representative who receives the lion's share of the blame and critique when concerns or challenges arise.

However, institutional leadership is not embodied by one person or office. Rather, institutional leadership is a network of persons—president, board members, faculty, staff, and even students—who work together to guide the large entity that is a college or university. As part of this network, the board and the president must support each other's tough decisions. Indeed, according to the *American College President Study 2017*, 52 percent of presidents selected the board of regents as among the top external group that offered them the most support, followed by local community leaders (37 percent) and alumni (36 percent) (Gagliardi et al. 2017). While it is encouraging that the majority of presidents selected the board among the most supportive external constituent groups, that number will ideally increase as presidents and boards take on increasing scrutiny and public endeavors.

Consider COVID-19, which exposed the necessity for institutional leaders and groups to work cooperatively to ensure the continued operation of institutions while protecting students, staff, and faculty. Many presidents, in consultation with their cabinets, had to make crucial decisions whether to close their campuses in the middle of the spring 2020 semester. The decision to close campus would not only impact the school monetarily, but also impact everyone from staff to students. For institutions such as Benedict College in South Carolina, closing campus also meant having to figure out how to support underresourced students who may not have the means to suddenly leave campus. In this situation, Roslyn Clark Artis, president of Benedict College, worked in partnership with Benedict's board of trustees to help more than 100 domestic and international students get safely home (Mitchell 2020). President Artis informed her board of the situation; the board then took action to meet the challenges and support the president in ways that not only protected the institution but also supported its students.

This example from Benedict College also illustrates how a board can take issues of equity into account when making decisions. Closing was a tough decision. The board's trust in the president and actionable attempts to mitigate possible inequitable outcomes show how boards can support the president while holding up their fiduciary duty.

Using American College President Study Data

The 2022 American College President Survey included a subsection of questions on the relationship and experience of presidents with their governing boards, exploring how president-board relations can impact college presidential experiences.³ These questions provided a snapshot of the president's experience with their board. In turn, this can spur a conversation about what aspects of this relationship presidents believe deeply impact their presidential experiences and approach to the position, as well as their ability to optimally perform. Likewise, board members have an opportunity to gain insight regarding how presidents need support and look to work with their boards to successfully execute their shared vision.

To engage in truly transformative work as higher education moves into its next great era, presidents will need institutional buy-in as well as support from students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Ultimately, a strong relationship between the president and board is essential to ensure that transformative change occurs.

3 Findings from this survey are analyzed in *The American College President: 2023 Edition*.

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