

Building Public Governing Board Capacity Through State-Level Education Programs for College and University Board Members

Ingram Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance

The Governance Context

State policymakers and the public at large have a vested interest in the successful governance of their higher education system. The citizens who are appointed or elected to serve as trustees and regents of the state's colleges and universities oversee valuable public assets that they hold in trust for the state and current and future generations. All appointments to governing and coordinating boards need to be made with care, and, once selected, board members need the support and resources necessary to fulfill their institutional responsibilities while serving their states and communities.

Particularly, for those states with several free-standing independent governing boards for their two and four-year colleges and universities, a state-level education program can be an important strategy to build board capacity for higher education's quality and effectiveness.

It is common practice for institutions and systems to provide institution-focused in-service trustee orientation and education. But the existence and frequency of state-level programs for board members and the content of such programs varies greatly. At one end of this continuum, some states, by long-standing precedent or state law, conduct annual or biannual state-level trustee education programs. At the other end of the continuum are many states that provide no opportunities for trustees to gather for educational and informational purposes, particularly in a state-wide setting. Between these two extremes are more states whose trustee-education programs tend to be scheduled irregularly, lack a clear advocate or sponsor, are insufficiently funded, and are viewed with ambivalence.

About State Policy Briefs:

AGB periodically publishes informal papers on timely topics that reflect best policies and practices in state government's relationship with public and independent colleges and universities. The papers are intended for governors, state legislators, and their staffs as well as organizations concerned about effective public policy. State Policy Briefs are published under the auspices of AGB's Ingram Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance, which serves as an independent resource on the subject of this paper and others in the series. For more information about AGB and the center, visit www.agb.org.

Trustees and citizen board members play critical roles in higher education governance and policy making. The members of campus governing boards as well as system-level governing and state-wide coordinating boards exercise substantial fiduciary responsibility and agenda-setting roles that shape how their institutions operate and, ultimately, what they do, who they serve, and how they serve the people of the state and address the needs of the state.

Frequently, board members come to their positions with experience in dealing with financial and organizational decisions. Fewer board members come with the experience and know-how to help their institutions effectively address the diverse and changing needs of students and society. These broader, agenda-setting roles are becoming more prominent and critical as needs change and accountability demands grow. A well-governed college or university must respond effectively to the changing needs and opportunities in its environment, and an effective and well-coordinated state system is one in which the institutions work (both competitively and cooperatively) to identify and meet the needs of the public at large.

The changing economy demands graduates with the knowledge and skills to compete in the global marketplace. Budgetary constraints and demographic changes require institutions and programs that are as cost effective and educationally effective as possible. And our declining educational and research performance relative to other nations will not be turned around without exceptional effort and leadership. These needs represent well the emerging public agenda for higher education. It is time, and we have the know-how to help trustees and board members play more effective leadership and policy-shaping roles in addressing these public needs.

Fortunately more powerful information resources, analytic tools, and policy-setting strategies—through the Association of Governing Boards, the State Higher Education Executive Officers, the regional higher education compacts, the Midwest Higher Education Compact, the New England Board of Higher Education, the Southern Regional Education Board, and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education—are emerging to help trustees and board members become better attuned to public needs and to provide advocacy, leadership, and perspective.

Goals and Purposes for State Trustee Education Programs

State-level programs should serve to strengthen higher education citizen leadership. Three goals can help achieve that purpose.

1. Provide a forum to engage in discussion of best practices in the conduct of state-wide, public academic trusteeship.

State-wide education programs provide an opportunity to address topics that are not often addressed in institution-based programs. Pertinent trustee education topics include:

- exercising the appropriate degree of academic and financial affairs oversight to meet state-level needs and legal requirements
- developing board policies and practices in compliance with state open meeting and “sunshine” laws
- developing strong ethics and conflict-of-interest guidelines

- building and maintaining effective relationships among competing stakeholders
- ensuring clarity and consistency in institutional policies relative to areas such as credit transfer, student learning, and accountability

2. Connect trustees to the state's educational, social, and economic challenges that require higher education's leadership.

States that are developing a new state plan or “public agenda” for higher education (or a governance restructuring proposal) frequently find an annual or biannual statewide trustee conference to be a valuable forum for conversations about the plan. Likewise, states with an existing plan find the conference a logical place to discuss progress and next steps. A conference can provide opportunities to refocus board responsibilities and expectations and build cohesion and momentum for a new direction in state higher education policy. While each state will have its own agenda for higher education, common elements might include the need to maintain access and affordability in a time of decreased resources, increase the number of high school graduates enrolling in college, reduce escalating costs, increase the number of college graduates, balance contributions to a changing state economy, or develop more refined ways of measuring performance and demonstrating accountability.

Addressing such challenges effectively requires a collective and collaborative state-level response by higher education leaders and institutions. Engaging trustees for ideas, support, and state-level solutions can be pivotal. In states with single university-wide systems, trustees are more likely to engage in policy discussions with their senior administrators about system or state-level activities. But in states with multiple boards, the engagement of trustees often is piecemeal or overlooked altogether. Issues such as accountability, board responsibilities for monitoring and assuring institutional performance, student learning, and financial soundness require interaction among trustees and state policymakers. A statewide trustee meeting is an ideal place to commence important conversations.

A conference also provides an opportunity for state policymakers to interact with trustees and discuss with them any state plans or priorities for higher education, such as new or pending legislation or the projected overall higher education budget in light of current revenue projections.

3. Communicate broad roles and responsibilities and sense of broader purposes.

Trustees sit at the critical intersection of state needs and institutional aspirations—in challenging, frequently ambiguous roles. Governing boards and individual trustees need to reconcile their joint, sometimes conflicting responsibilities to the institution and the citizens of the state. The broader purposes of a statewide gathering cannot be easily replicated in other settings. If these broader purposes can be captured and sustained, it will be valuable to both higher education and the state. When states appoint or elect trustees by political party, a statewide conference can help to minimize political differences and create mutual understanding of the broader public good to be served.

Similarly, statewide conferences provide trustees with an understanding of issues at other institutions in the state. Trustees need to be effective advocates for their colleges and universities, but they should also understand how their institution (or system) fits with the missions of other institutions and into the larger picture of state higher education. Conversations among trustees across institutional lines help to ensure that common issues and opportunities for institutional and cross-sector collaboration are explored. An annual statewide conference should not be the only venue for such conversations, of course, but it can lay the groundwork for facilitating such collaboration.

Program and Planning Considerations

A successful program should attempt to strike a good balance between presentation and discussion. Many trustees are successful in their careers or professional endeavors. Giving them adequate time to be heard, ask questions, and interact in small groups is key to a successful program. Trustees expect to interact with peers and colleagues and do not want to feel as if they are being lectured to.

In those states with successful programs, the faculty usually consists of people who are knowledgeable about issues of substance and grounded in group-process skills. Their facilitation can be supplemented by experienced presidents, board members, state higher education executives, and association leaders. Another good practice is to draw upon seasoned trustees to help “teach” newer members.

Including state policymakers on the program is essential to a balanced program. This includes state legislators and, in particular, the governor. The attorney general’s office or board legal counsels should be considered to convey information, for example, about the state’s laws regarding open meetings, records, or conflicts of interest. State business leaders and nationally known keynote speakers can provide perspectives on particular issues and provoke conversations in new directions.

State-level trustee education programs provide unique learning opportunities for states, state policymakers, colleges and universities, and trustees. They can build support and trust around a common agenda, educate a wide audience on several issues, strengthen the performance of public boards, and strengthen the relationship between public higher education and state government.

Additional Planning Considerations

- A statewide program can be especially desirable where a “tiered” multi-campus system structure exists for the four-year universities and regional or community colleges. It is uncommon for various co-existing system boards to interact with one another. It is in these cases that state policymakers, especially the governor, can make a difference by lending their persuasion to the program’s creation.
- For states with a state higher education coordinating agency, an additional related purpose of a statewide conference is the opportunity for governing and coordinating board members to discuss and appreciate their separate and distinctive, yet complementary, responsibilities. Leaders of coordination and institutional governance can avoid potential divisiveness and come together around a common agenda to address the many challenges facing the state.

- For the several university systems that have institutional governing boards or statutorily created advisory boards with prescribed local authority, a system led board education program for both the system board and local campus boards is critically important. The program and planning considerations described in this paper hold for them as well.
- State-level trustee education programs need not be limited to just public institutions. Depending on the state and the circumstances, it may be desirable to include the state's independent institutions as well. They, too, make important contributions to meeting state education goals.
- States that have conducted successful statewide trustee conferences usually appoint an advisory or program planning committee consisting of college and university senior administrators, trustees, and staff from the governor's office. The advisory committee can devise the agenda, select topics, choose speakers, and, if desired, survey board members on issues to be discussed.
- The state capitol is usually the best place to hold the conference, but this may depend on whether the legislature is in session, whether the capitol is centrally located, or other considerations.
- Scheduling of social time is very important and can add immeasurably to a conference's success. This suggests scheduling an evening session at the middle or beginning of the program for participants to interact informally, such as at a lunch or reception and dinner.
- Some states have engaged state philanthropic or corporate foundations to support part of a program or certain functions, such as awards dinners. But it is reasonable for participants to pay a modest registration fee in addition to their travel expenses; colleges and universities can usually and appropriately reimburse trustees for most or all of such costs.
- Placing too many additional time requirements or mandating continuing education for public board members may have the effect of dissuading potential candidates from considering board service. But if qualified and screened individuals serve on public boards, they will be very likely to participate in well-designed and conducted programs. It is best if the governor or other appointing authority articulate the expectation at the time of appointment that trustees should regularly participate in such programs.
- Conversations and consultations with colleagues in other states will provide several helpful ideas and good practices.