June 23, 2016

For nearly 100 years, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has addressed the essential obligations of boards to navigate the myriad pressures of institutional governance and to support effective institutional leadership. The challenges our institutions face today—calls for greater accountability; decreased state funding; heightened standards of accreditation; polarized political environments; issues of access, cost, student completion, campus climate, and sexual assault—have grabbed the national spotlight and fueled public skepticism about higher education’s value.

Too much is at stake for boards to fail to get governance right, and high-performing boards have never been more essential. For these reasons, AGB remains steadfast in its commitment to help boards and board members succeed. We are doing so through a bold agenda that ranges from educational materials, technology, and boardroom work to public policy initiatives in the halls of state and federal governments. This is, indeed, a dynamic time for higher education.

As my term as AGB’s board chair draws to a close, I want to share some reflections on the state of our sector and to review briefly AGB’s recent accomplishments on your behalf. Just as important are our priorities going forward that will add value to and strengthen your institution’s governance as you make your board one that is truly meeting its strategic responsibilities.

Informing AGB’s strategic plan and our aggressive priorities is the report of the AGB National Commission on College and University Board Governance, *Consequential Boards: Adding Value Where It Matters Most*. From the good work of the men and women who served on the Commission, under the chairmanship of former governor of Tennessee Philip Bredesen, came renewed direction for our programs, research, and advocacy efforts.

The Commission’s seven specific recommendations provide a roadmap for boards to clarify their work, navigate change, and focus on those areas most directly the province of board responsibility. Through the Commission’s year-long efforts, it became clear that we need boards to help lead a restoration of public trust in higher education itself. Some of the report’s conclusions:

- Governing boards have a primary responsibility to add value to their institutions and to higher education.
- Our institutions need their boards to focus on issues of greatest consequence, especially strategic issues not addressed elsewhere.
- Boards and institution/system chief executives must develop shared expectations and respect and support each other’s responsibilities.
AGB is best able to support these important efforts by boards and institutional leadership by continuing to be in the place where we can make the most impact: the boardroom. Whether through AGB Consulting, which conducted more than 200 consulting engagements this fiscal year; AGB Search, which led 100-plus searches for chief executives and other senior leadership; AGB Institutional Strategies, our newest initiative, geared toward helping institutions evaluate and rethink their business models and priorities; our publications and AGB University videos, which educate and inform boardroom decisions; or our national and regional programs, which reach thousands of board members, AGB is moving the needle and helping you do the same.

Our work has true breadth, from our partnership with the National Association of System Heads (NASH) taking a fresh look at system board governance, led by Kevin Reilly, an AGB senior fellow and president emeritus/regent professor at the University of Wisconsin System, to our Standing Panel on Intercollegiate Athletics, led by John T. Casteen, president emeritus of the University of Virginia. Through the former, a specific outgrowth of Consequential Boards, AGB will prompt system leaders to rethink and clarify structures, improve the responsiveness of system boards, and support system chief executives.

Also, with the support of Lumina Foundation, AGB has focused research efforts on the impact boards could have on college completion rates, which is a national priority. The AGB Board of Directors this year approved a “Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of College Completion” underscoring the essential link between institutional mission, academic quality, and student success.

Few educational missions are as close to my heart as that of this country’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). As the former chair of the board of Spelman College, I am especially proud of AGB’s focus on effective governance at these institutions. Last year, AGB worked with HBCUs through a program designed to strengthen governance practices, capacity, and structures, as well as to enhance the working relationships between presidents and boards. More than 20 HBCUs participated, which was made possible through the generous support of the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and The Kresge Foundation. And, just recently, The Kresge Foundation approved a second grant of $1 million to strengthen the institutional business models of HBCUs in partnership with AGB Institutional Strategies.

No overview of AGB’s accomplishments these last two years would be complete without recalling our role in public policy, both on the national stage and within individual states. AGB’s Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance, with engagements in more than 20 states annually, has, through education, advocacy, and research, assisted stakeholders in improving the governance of our public colleges and universities and their foundations. The Center and its consultants have engaged and advised systems and state and federal policy leaders, always maintaining the primacy of our tradition of autonomous board governance. Their work has ranged from Oregon and Tennessee, which have undergone major statewide governance restructuring; to Missouri, which has been a bellwether for the call for greater diversity and inclusion on our campuses; to Texas, which even now is wrestling with questions of fiduciary authority and the privacy of student records. On the national stage, we continue to weigh in effectively on the congressional agendas on topics such as sexual assault on campus, accreditation, and endowment and tax reform. Our voice is both sought out and heard on these and other critical issues.
The trustees, regents, and board members who serve our member institutions and systems can be uniquely credible, strategically positioned spokespersons ready to convey the real value of higher education to our nation and its citizenry. AGB is taking the lead to inform and identify board members who are willing and able to tell the story of higher education to news media, policymakers, and the public. This priority, as well as our commitment to helping every board become a high-performing board, will continue to be paramount under the leadership of AGB's board and its incoming chair, my colleague David Miles, member of the board of Drake University and former president of the Iowa Board of Regents.

David, the AGB board and our staff, and I invite you to re-commit your energies and your institution to advancing higher education in partnership with us and with institutions across the nation. No matter the challenges you face, you are not alone. Your work is critical and challenging, its impact on your students and communities immeasurable. Herein lies our mission and our work together.

It bears repeating, so I will say it one last time: too much is at stake for boards to fail to get governance right!

Thank you,

Yvonne R. Jackson
Chair, Board of Directors, AGB