

Governing Board Oversight of College Completion

A Report by the Association of Governing
Boards of Universities and Colleges

Governing Board Oversight of College Completion

About AGB

Since 1921, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has had one mission: to strengthen and protect this country's unique form of institutional governance through its research, services, and advocacy. Serving more than 1,300 member boards, 1,900 institutions, and 40,000 individuals, AGB is the only national organization providing university and college presidents, board chairs, trustees, and board professionals of both public and private institutions and institutionally related foundations with resources that enhance their effectiveness.



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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The issue of college completion—students completing a college education and earning a degree or certificate—has become a hot-button topic for higher education and the public in recent years. While completion is not a new issue, several national and state-level efforts, including President Obama’s 2020 college-completion goal to increase the number of college graduates to 50 percent of the population, have brought increased attention to this issue. Labor market changes have also elevated the subject, as many more jobs now require some form of post-secondary education. Across all three sectors of higher education, the population of students attending college is growing and changing, particularly as many more non-traditional students pursue a college education.

However, while college enrollments continue to grow, the number of students who actually complete their college education remains disappointingly low, with only 59 percent of the 2007 cohort of college students who attended four-year, degree-granting institutions graduating in six years.¹ In fact, overall college graduation rates in the U.S. continue to trail significantly behind those of other developed countries: “According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United States now has the highest college dropout rate in

the industrialized world.”² When college students don’t complete their education, it creates a ripple effect that not only limits their prospects for future career options and thus their ability to pay back any student-loan debt they may carry; it also creates gaps in the workforce and ultimately impacts the economy.

Now more than ever it is imperative that higher education institutions work to improve college-completion rates by creating and implementing policies and programs that will promote the successful degree completion of their students. It is not enough to simply provide access to higher education; institutions must also ensure that appropriate tools, resources, and support are in place to keep students in college and help them progress to completion. Governing boards, as stewards of their colleges and universities, play a distinct and important role in helping to ensure that the students who enter their institutions graduate from them. They have a responsibility to ensure that the mission of the institution—to educate students—is being fulfilled and is operating efficiently and in concert with other facets of the institution.

As the fiduciary bodies overseeing colleges and universities, governing boards must ask the right questions, make certain that relevant policies are in place to maintain or improve completion rates, and hold the chief executive and other

¹ National Center for Education Statistics: *Postsecondary Graduation Rates-Fast Facts* (2015).

² Harvard Graduate School of Education: *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: 2011.

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administrators accountable for the success of the students who are enrolled. To do these things, boards need to be well-equipped with a clear understanding of what constitutes completion, including the metrics used to measure outcomes, as well as the institution's past, current, and projected performance in graduating students across all relevant sub-populations (e.g., race, gender, academic profile or college preparedness, transfer status, program/major, etc). Governing boards should also give ample time to the topic of completion in their meetings and discussions and have a firm understanding of how completion is associated with other critical initiatives and issues. Ensuring that students are persisting through graduation while consistently receiving a high-quality education that is preparing them to be productive citizens and to ultimately start their careers should be a key focus of all governing boards, but each board must evaluate how to best achieve that objective.

The Study

In the spring of 2015, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) launched an initiative, generously funded by Lumina Foundation, aimed at providing boards and administrators with information, tools, and resources related to their responsibilities for advancing completion at their institutions and systems. As part of this effort, a survey was conducted of nearly 1,100 college, university, and system board members to better understand what they know about completion, the importance of this issue among their boards,

the nature of the information they receive on completion, and how they use it to make policy decisions. For the purposes of this study, college completion was defined as total degrees and certificates awarded annually as well as four-year and six-year graduation rates for undergraduate students and two-year or three-year graduation rates for community college students.

Findings from the study are, for the most part, encouraging. Governing boards of independent and public institutions are aware and engaged in policy making concerning completion at their institutions. Not only do they receive data on degrees awarded and graduations rates, they also use that data to make various strategic decisions for their institutions or systems. Although most boards have made this issue one of their top priorities, for a number of other institutions, college completion is taking a backseat to other issues they find more pressing. Despite the fact that all boards are not prioritizing completion, most board members, even those whose boards are making it a priority, acknowledge that they may be falling short and could be doing more by devoting additional time and attention to this issue. In the report that follows, survey findings highlight board members' understanding of completion, the type of information and data boards receive, and their priorities and role in advancing completion efforts.

Ensuring that students are persisting through graduation while consistently receiving a high-quality education should be a key focus of all governing boards.

The Board's Understanding of Completion and the Type of Information Received

The vast majority of board members—over 90 percent at both independent institutions and public institutions and systems—say that they understand what is meant by the term “college completion” well or very well. (See Table 1.) That most board members understand the term is an indicator that they are paying attention

to completion as a major issue facing higher education. This could be due in part to the fact that most boards are receiving information and data related to student completion and are engaging in discussions about this issue at their institutions.

Table 1: Level of Understanding of College Completion

How well do you understand what is meant by the term “college completion”?	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
I understand the term college completion very well.	53.0%	60.1%	54.7%
I understand the term college completion well.	39.4%	33.0%	37.9%
I’m not sure I understand the term college completion well.	7.3%	6.6%	7.1%
I don’t understand the term college completion well at all.	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In fact, 41 percent of independent and public board members indicated that the full board receives data on college completion, and another 46 percent say that both the full board and a board committee receive those data.

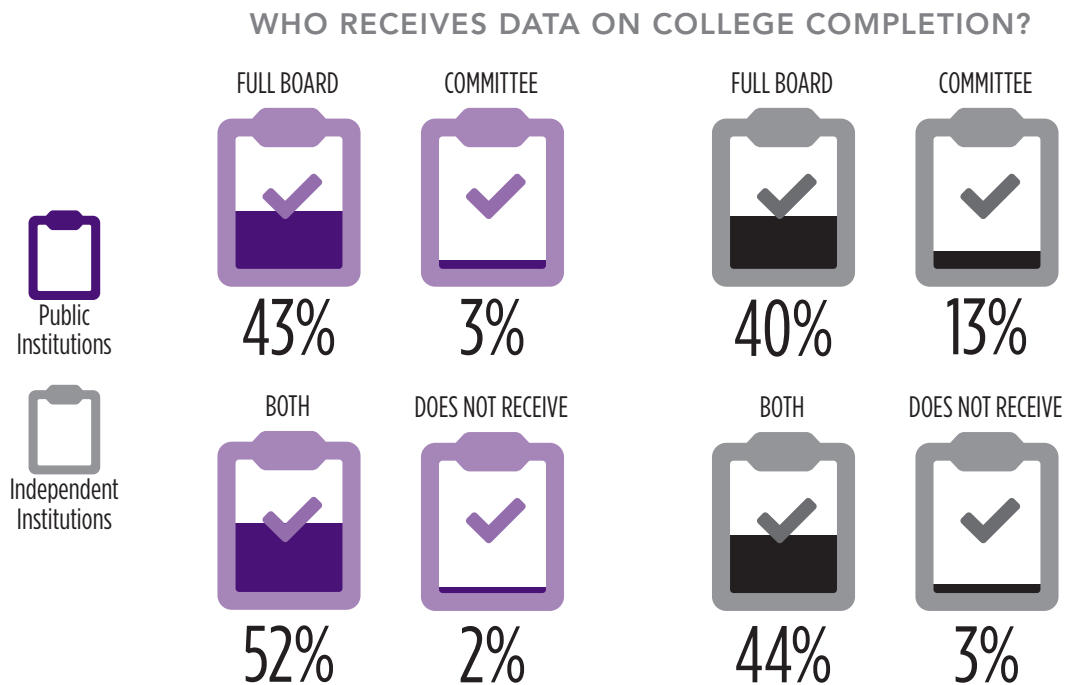
(See Table 2.) That means that 87 percent of the responding board members are discussing college completion in their full board meetings at some point during the academic year.

Table 2: Who Receives Data

Does the full board or a committee of the board receive data on college completion?	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
Full board	39.8%	43.2%	40.8%
A committee	12.7%	3.0%	10.1%
Both	44.1%	51.5%	46.1%
My board does not receive data.	3.3%	2.3%	3.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.*

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With regard to the type of data boards are receiving, most (nearly 64 percent of independent board members and 72 percent of public board members) report that they receive data on both total numbers of degrees/certificates awarded and graduation rates for the institution/system.

(See Table 3.) A smaller percentage reports that they receive data on either total degrees/certificates awarded or graduation rates and not both. Less than 1 percent report that they do not receive any data on college completion.

Table 3: Specific Data Received

Which specific data on college completion does the board or committee receive and review?	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
Only total number of degrees/certificates awarded	10.4%	7.6%	9.6%
Only graduation rates (e.g., 4-year/6-year rates OR 2-year/3-year rates)	20.2%	17.0%	19.3%
Both total degrees/certificates awarded and graduation rates	63.4%	71.6%	65.6%
Other	2.5%	2.1%	2.4%
Do not know	3.4%	1.7%	3.0%
My board does not receive any data on college completion (e.g., student graduation rates or total degrees/certificates awarded).	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Peer Benchmarking of College-Completion Rates

Not only are boards receiving various data on their institutions' college-completion metrics, just under two-thirds (64 percent) of all board members say that their institution or system also benchmarks its college-completion data against peers. However, over one-third (36 percent) of all board members say that their institution does not benchmark data or that they do not know whether it does so. (See Table 4.) For many colleges, universities, and systems, benchmarking is a strategic exercise that is used to assess and compare several components of the institution's performance with other institutions.³

As it pertains to college completion, peer benchmarking has become an important tool and indicator for most institutions to gauge whether their completion rates are competitive with those of other colleges or universities. For governing boards, this type of information—especially the reasons behind key differences—can be valuable because it provides additional context and in some cases better enables the board to make informed decisions about a range of issues, including future marketing and enrollment targets, financial aid, and many other facets of the institution's operations.

³ McLaughlin, G. and Josetta S. McLaughlin, *The Information Mosaic: Strategic Decision Making for Universities and Colleges*. AGB Press: 2007.

Table 4: Peer Benchmarking

Does your institution/system benchmark any of its college-completion data?	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
Yes	61.9%	68.2%	63.5%
No	13.1%	11.9%	12.8%
Do not know/Not sure	24.9%	19.9%	23.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As it pertains to college completion, peer benchmarking has become an important tool for institutions to gauge whether their completion rates are competitive with other colleges or universities.

*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

The Board's Priorities for Completion

In fulfilling their fiduciary duties for an institution or system, boards must attend to myriad issues, each with its own nuances and complexities. Respondents indicate that many of their boards regard college completion as a major priority or the most important priority their board is undertaking. Slightly more than half (51 percent) of independent board members and almost three-quarters (73 percent) of public board members say that oversight of college completion is currently either the most important priority or a major priority. (See Table 5.) While a significant

percentage of publics and independents are prioritizing this issue, the fact that more publics are doing so than independents is cause for concern. Although public institutions are generally more likely to be held accountable for advancing state workforce needs and demonstrating a return on investment of state appropriations than independent institutions, both sectors are accountable to their students, parents, and other prospective consumers to ensure academic quality and student success.

Table 5: Board Priorities

To what extent is oversight of college completion currently a priority?	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
It is the most important priority.	3.8%	9.0%	5.1%
A major priority	46.9%	64.4%	51.2%
Somewhat a priority—about the same level urgency as other policies and topics	35.7%	21.2%	32.1%
Not a high priority	9.3%	3.2%	7.8%
Not a priority at all	2.9%	1.4%	2.5%
Do not know/Not sure	1.4%	0.7%	1.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Respondents indicate that many of their boards regard college completion as a major priority or the most important priority their board is undertaking.

*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Other Factors Influencing Why College Completion Is Not a Top Priority

When respondents who indicated that oversight of college completion was not a priority were asked why that was the case, many from both public and independent institutions noted that other pressing and urgent issues are taking precedence in discussions at meetings or that they did not believe college completion fell under the purview of the board. Many specifically stated that it is the responsibility of administrators, and the board should be careful about interfering and/or micromanaging in such a matter. One illustration of these views came from a board member who stated that: “We have financial problems, including deficits, so we spend time on them...The board is also afraid to seem like it is

interfering with how the administration runs the school.” While the board’s role is not to manage the institution, it does have a role in overseeing the performance of the institution as it pertains to student completion.

Still other respondents thought that their graduation rates were already at a suitable level and therefore there was no need to prioritize completion in their meetings, making comments such as: “We are happy with our completion rate, so it doesn’t warrant much discussion.” Regardless of whether an institution’s completion rates are high or not, some discussion, even about how to consistently maintain those rates, could be valuable to ensure continued success.

IS COLLEGE COMPLETION THE MOST IMPORTANT
OR A MAJOR PRIORITY FOR YOUR BOARD?



Public
Institutions



Independent
Institutions



73%



51%

Percentage who responded yes.

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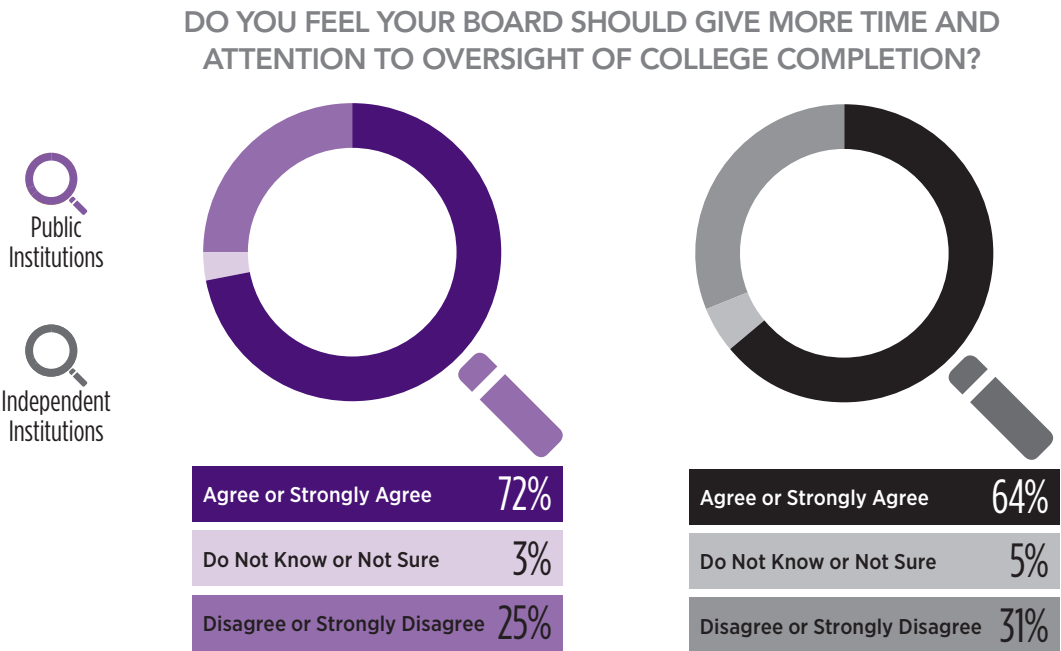
Time Devoted to Discussion of College Completion

Though the majority of respondents reported that their boards are prioritizing college completion, there is still a disconnect with how much time is devoted to this issue. Only 36 percent of public board members and 15 percent of independent

board members indicated that their board and/or a committee of the board spends slightly more or much more time discussing college completion as compared to other topics. (See Table 6.)

Table 6: How Much Time Is Devoted to Discussing Completion?

On average, how much time is devoted to discussion of college completion by a board committee?	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
Much more time than other topics	2.2%	10.7%	4.4%
Slightly more time than most other topics	13.0%	25.2%	16.1%
About the same amount of time as other topics	46.3%	41.1%	45.0%
Slightly less time than most other topics	18.2%	13.3%	17.0%
Much less time than most other topics	17.3%	8.9%	15.2%
No time is devoted to this topic	2.9%	0.7%	2.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Despite the disconnect between boards' prioritizing of completion and the actual amount of time devoted to discussing the topic over other issues, most board members recognize that they need to do more. In fact, 64 percent

of independent and 72 percent of public board members agreed or strongly agreed that their board should devote more time to the topic. (See Table 7.)

Table 7: Should the Board Give More Time to Discussing Completion?

My board should give more time and attention to oversight of college completion.	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
Strongly agree	17.2%	22.9%	18.7%
Agree	47.1%	49.2%	47.7%
Disagree	28.9%	24.4%	27.7%
Strongly disagree	1.6%	0.8%	1.4%
Do not know/Not sure	5.2%	2.7%	4.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The Board's Role in Advancing Completion Efforts

For boards to engage appropriately in the oversight of student completion at their respective institutions, receiving reports or data on student-completion rates is only the first step. They must take additional steps to use the data provided in order to engage in meaningful discussions, create mutually agreed-upon goals with senior

administrators, and make informed policy decisions to ensure success for all subsets of the student population. The last is especially important as student demographics continue to change in American higher education, and the need for new approaches or strategies to ensure success grows. Most independent (71 percent)

Sixty-four percent of independent and 72 percent of public board members agreed or strongly agreed that their board should devote more time to college completion.

**Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.*

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and public (86 percent) board members report that their institutions currently have a set of strategic goals in place to improve completion. (See Table 8.) While the majority do have a set of goals, over one-quarter (29 percent) of independent board members and 14 percent of public board members say their institution does

not have completion goals or they do not know if it has such goals. Clearly defined goals for student completion and success are an important barometer to measure progress and areas for improvement. Without a set of clear goals, boards cannot appropriately engage in this or any other issue that they oversee.

Table 8: Strategic Goals

Does your institution/system currently have a set of strategic goals in place to improve college completion?	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
Yes	70.6%	86.4%	75.0%
No	13.9%	4.4%	11.3%
Do not know/Not sure	15.5%	9.2%	13.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Although not every institution has a set of strategic goals in place, nearly all board members (90 percent) report that they receive information

on strategies being implemented to improve completion. (See Table 9.)

Table 9: Receiving Information on Completion Strategies

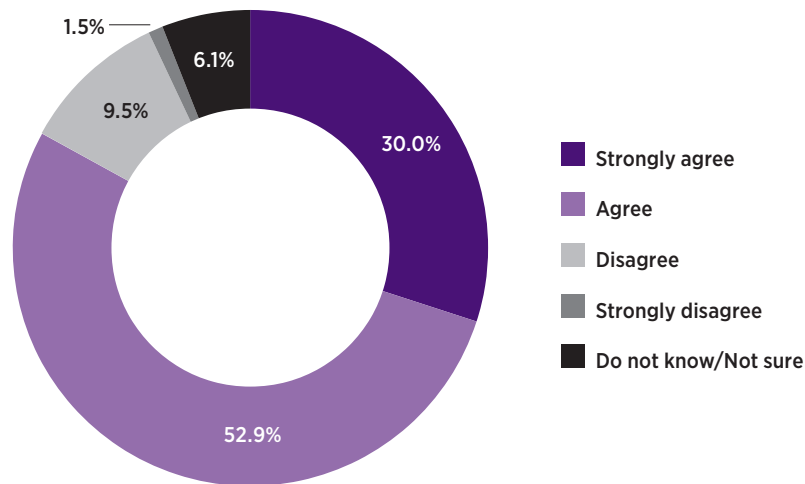
Does the board receive information about strategies being implemented at the institution to improve completion?	Independent Institutions	Public Institutions or Systems	Overall
Yes	88.6%	92.5%	89.7%
No	5.1%	3.7%	4.7%
Do not know/Not sure	6.4%	3.7%	5.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Some of the completion intervention strategies reported included instituting new academic advising programs, modified course offerings, increased financial aid, mentoring, and early alert systems to flag low-performing students.

The majority of all board members (83 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the interventions being implemented at their institutions were effective.

MY INSTITUTION/SYSTEM HAS EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES, PROGRAMS, AND EFFORTS TO IMPROVE STUDENT GRADUATION RATES AND/OR DEGREE/CERTIFICATE COMPLETION.



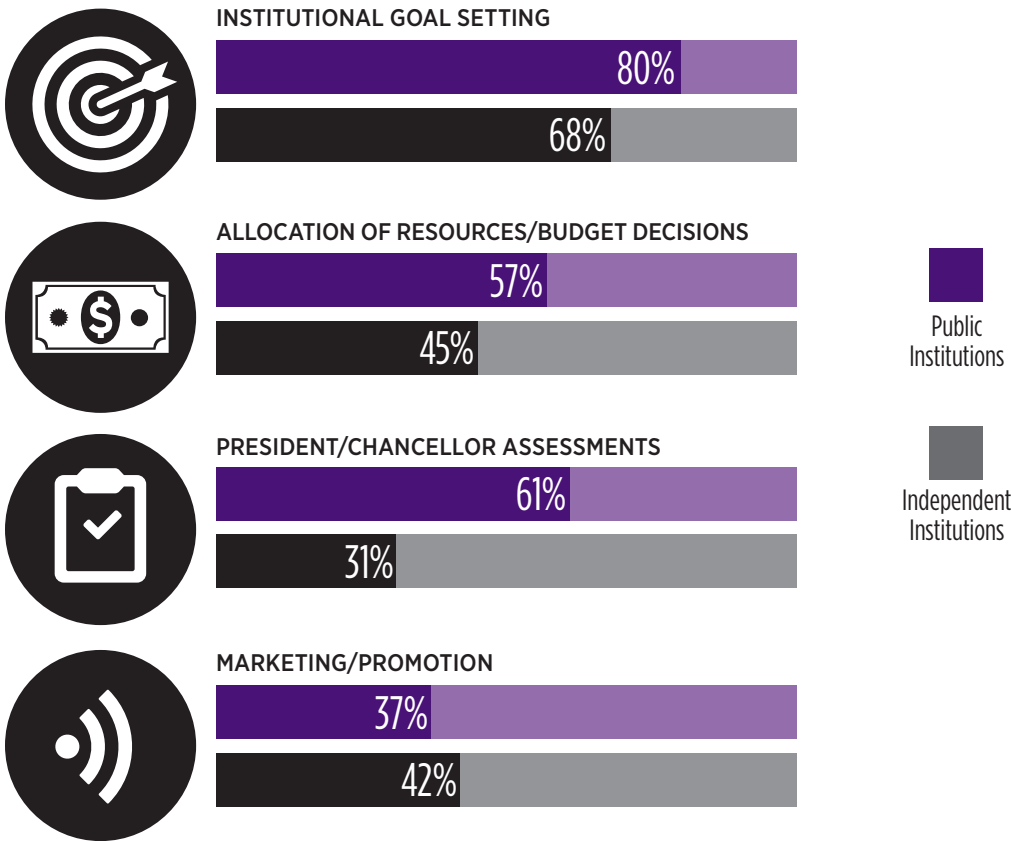
Most independent (71 percent) and public (86 percent) board members report that their institutions currently have a set of strategic goals in place to improve completion.

How Boards Are Using Information on College Completion to Make Decisions

While it is encouraging that most board members believe that their institutions are working effectively towards improving completion rates, the question of *how* boards are using the information they receive on completion is still an important one. Board members of independent institutions report that the top three ways in which they use information or data they receive on completion are: setting institutional goals for a host of strategic issues, allocating resources and making budget decisions, and driving marketing and promotion. A greater percentage

of board members from public institutions than independents report that they are also using the information they receive on completion to set institutional goals and allocate resources. Public boards are also more likely than those at independent institutions to use this information to assess the president or chancellor. As boards grapple with the appropriate ways in which they should engage in the issue of college completion, they must consider, with the chief executive, what types of policies and systems of accountability should be established for the board to oversee.

HOW DOES THE BOARD USE THE INFORMATION IT RECEIVES ABOUT COLLEGE COMPLETION?





Conclusion

There is an important role that all governing boards must play to ensure success for their most important asset, the students. The results from the survey indicate that governing boards are engaged in the issue of college completion. Board members report that they understand the issue well, and most receive some information or data about completion rates, goals, and interventions being implemented. While these are encouraging signs, there's still more to be done. For many more boards, the issue of completion is not rising to the top of their list of priorities because they may be contending with other, more immediate issues that need the board's attention. Even among

those boards for which it is a major priority, they may not be as engaged in meaningful discussions as is necessary. Improving college-completion rates will not happen overnight, but boards must consistently make improving or sustaining their institutions' completion rates a priority; in turn, chief executives and other administrators must appropriately engage their boards to ensure that they are able to make informed decisions for the future of their students.

The forthcoming AGB Board of Directors' statement on college completion outlines core principles for how boards should consistently and appropriately engage in this issue.

About the Survey

In April 2015, an electronic survey was emailed to just over 14,000 independent and public board members with valid email addresses from AGB member institutions and systems. Following the initial release, additional follow-up reminders were sent to non-respondents. The survey was closed in July 2015. In total, 1,058 complete

responses were received from board members, a 7.6 percent response rate. Sample sizes fluctuated per question. Of the total respondents, 27.6 percent represented public institutions or systems and 71.8 percent represented independent institutions.



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