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EFFECTIVE BOARD CHAIRS

*A Guide for University
and College Chairs*

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CHAPTER 1

The Board Chair in Today's Dynamic Environment

I am entirely certain that twenty years from now we will look back at education as it is practiced in most schools today and wonder that we could have tolerated anything so primitive.

— John W. Gardner

College and university board chairs today seldom preside over quiet, traditional institutions. Higher education is in transition, as change on many fronts—social, economic, political, demographic, and technological—brings both tensions and opportunities that test institutions' capacity for innovation, adaptive behavior, and even survival. As a result, boards have a higher profile. Some colleges and universities still call their boards *overseers*, while some call them *visitors*, as though they visited campus occasionally to make sure the silverware had not been stolen. But the terms *directors*, *trustees*, and *governors* more accurately capture the contemporary operations of the board and reflect the engaged, hands-on governance required today. Board members are asked to be active, visionary change agents and to work closely with the president and administration to secure an institution's place in the extremely competitive, dynamic higher education marketplace. In light of current reality, there is great value in taking a fresh look at what it takes to be a strategic, energetic board chair and how this role compares in public and independent institutions.

ATTRIBUTES OF EFFECTIVE BOARD CHAIRS

As in any endeavor, some people come to the job of board chair with skills and instincts that serve them well, while others need more support as they take on their responsibilities. But almost all incoming chairs have the potential to be effective and to leave a legacy of enhancing the university or college they serve. To do the job well, they need a dedicated focus on institutional mission and a sophisticated understanding of how to leverage the power of the board. The position also demands the right leadership skills and the capacity to anticipate change and generate solutions.

Dedication to Mission

Today's governing boards, particularly their chairs, must be galvanized to advance the institution's core mission and dedicated to meeting their responsibilities for the institution's success. They must genuinely believe and act as though the next generation's ability to compete in the global economy depends on the quality of the education their institution provides. An effective board leader will have a keen awareness of how societal change—especially evolving demographics and technology—influences higher education and will continue to do so. He or she must be grounded in the essential mission and strategic plan of the institution while comprehending the details of the existing financial model and whether or not it will be sustainable in the coming years.

Capacity to Leverage Power

Acknowledging the source of the board chair's power helps the chair create a roadmap to success. That power comes from the board. Board members elect the chair and entrust him or her with the power to lead them in meeting their fiduciary obligations on behalf of the institution they are charged with overseeing. The chair's success or failure hinges in large part on the capacity to leverage that power in pursuing the institution's mission and vision. But far too many chairs quickly forget this principle. If they do, relationships with and support from board members may atrophy, leaving the chair isolated and unable to marshal the support he or she needs to lead. (For more about leveraging power, see page 44.)

CHAPTER 2

Essential Responsibilities for Board Chairs

Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

— John F. Kennedy

Four broad themes capture the board chair's basic responsibilities and challenges. He or she must be dedicated to:

- Understanding the institution in all of its complexity;
- Guaranteeing the effectiveness of both the chair and the board;
- Being a strong external advocate for the board; and
- Acting as the board's conscience, disciplinarian, and consensus builder.

These themes are evident in the essential responsibilities of the position of board chair.

SIX ESSENTIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Make a commitment to the board and the institution.
2. Focus on the institution's vision.
3. Establish a mutually supportive relationship with the president.
4. Cultivate board relationships.
5. Build board effectiveness and consensus.
6. Be an advocate for the board and the institution.

1. MAKE A COMMITMENT TO THE BOARD AND THE INSTITUTION

Too often board members think they want to be chair, yet they have not sufficiently thought through the demands of the position, nor do they have the requisite experience or skills.

It is important to evaluate carefully what being board chair entails and to assess honestly the level of commitment and the qualities required, including the ability to:

- Devote a significant portion of one's time to being chair. The position is not honorary.
- Understand the gravity of the position. The chair's success or failure could deeply affect the institution.
- Set an example of leadership and engagement, from being present on campus to providing financial support.
- Gain the trust of other board members and the administration by being available to them and by keeping on top of the major issues affecting the institution.

2. FOCUS ON STRATEGIC DIRECTION

A roadmap for the institution is a critical tool because it defines a clear direction for the board chair. This means a strategic plan is essential, with well-defined objectives. There is nothing more essential to an institution's success than for its governing board and administration to be operating from an established and mutually agreed-upon strategic plan. For the board chair, this means:

- Being knowledgeable about the institution or system in all of its complexity, including its financial model.
- Understanding the mission, which should be spelled out in a strategic plan. If there is no strategic plan, then work with the president or chancellor to start the process of creating one as soon as possible.
- Knowing the institution's strengths and weaknesses.
- Staying informed about current issues in higher education.
- Keeping the board focused on strategic issues and governance matters rather than on the distractions that inevitably arise.