

ASSOCIATION
OF GOVERNING
BOARDS OF
UNIVERSITIES
AND COLLEGES

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Board
Essentials
Series

The Role of the Board Professional

By Charlene K. Reed





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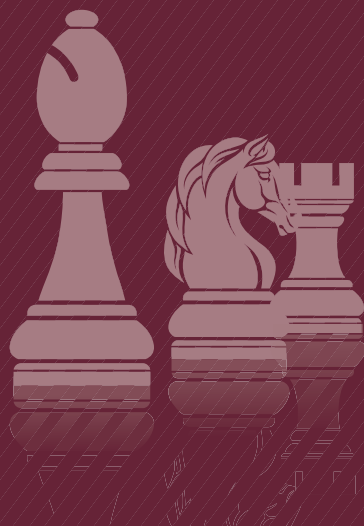
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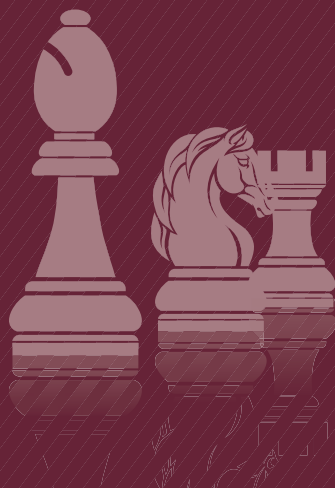
ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS
OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

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Introduction



In their 1996 classic, *Improving the Performance of Governing Boards*, Chait, Holland, and Taylor asserted that “effective governance by a board of trustees is a relatively rare and unnatural act.” That bold statement still rings true today as high-performing boards are not born but rather are made through intentional, well-conceived board structures and practices. But thanks in part to the good work of a highly motivated and well-prepared cadre of board professionals—working in partnership with their boards and presidents—effective boards are not such a rarity any longer.

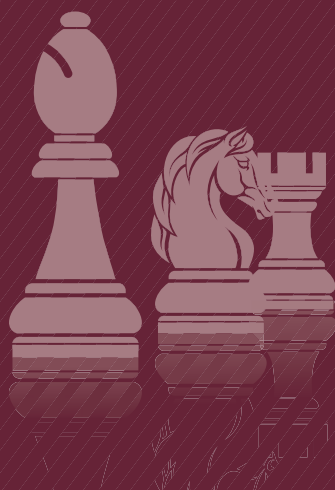
As the primary liaison, planner, adviser, and staffer of a governing board, the board professional plays a unique and critical role in higher education. This essential, yet often under-the-radar professional connects the board to the administration and the institution and focuses every day on the practice of governance and the care and feeding of trustees. Drawing on over two decades of experience as a board professional at two institutions, as well as my service as chair of AGB's Board Professionals Leadership Group in 2013, I would summarize the board professional's role as follows. Simply put, the board professional is:

- The glue that connects the board, the president, the institution, and key stakeholders;
- A trusted counselor and confidant;
- A prognosticator who is capable of “seeing around corners,” anticipating needs before they are felt and issues before they arise; and
- Ideally, a strategic partner and advisor to leadership who assists in furthering the institutional agenda and ensuring good governance.

Perhaps the most colorful—and insightful—description of the board professional's role comes from Dr. Artis Hampshire-Cowan, who exemplified the profession at its best in her 23 years of service to Howard University. In addressing a national audience of her peers in 2015, she likened the board professional to a *consigliere*. In the American mafia, the *consigliere* is the number two person in a crime family, the don's right-hand. The *consigliere* is a close, trusted friend and confidant of the don, the mob's version of an elder statesman—one who is devoid of personal ambition and offers disinterested advice. The parallels were clear to Hampshire-Cowan as she described the board professional—everyone's advisor, one who puts the institution's interests above all, one who knows and keeps secrets, and one who is viewed as a trusted figure whose word is his or her bond.

SECTION 1

Role and Responsibilities



Evolution of the Board Professional's Role

From the early days of nonprofit boards, there has been a need for someone to plan and keep track of meetings and assist board members in their stewardship. Often called the board secretary, this position originally was filled by a member of the board. As the responsibilities of governing boards grew in complexity and scope, the position evolved from volunteer to professional staff member, with the board professional sometimes part of the president's office and sometimes simultaneously serving in an additional senior-leadership role. The first meeting of higher education board professionals documented by AGB occurred more than four decades ago, with an agenda that focused on activities such as preparing board minutes and planning board meetings.

While these duties remain a part of the board professional's portfolio, the role has evolved from acting as a secretary into functioning as a true partner to presidents and board chairs in the practice of good governance. Today, the role of the board professional, at its best, is that of a strategic advisor who serves concurrently as institutional historian, contemporary analyst, prognosticator, and closer, notes Artis Hampshire-Cowan.

As will be explored in greater detail in Section 2, the board professional's role has grown and advanced to that of a senior university leader who often serves as a member of the president's cabinet and participates in or leads the development of institutional policy and strategic direction at the highest level of the institution. The board professional has a keen grasp of which considerations are most important to board members across a broad range of issues. Working in collaboration with colleagues, the board professional can give advice regarding how a draft recommendation would resonate with the board, the public, and college or university stakeholders. When empowered to do so, the board professional can be an effective in-house strategist for building board members' understanding of and support for an action, posing questions such as: What background information do board members need to consider this issue? Is this matter ready for the board's consideration at this time, or does it need more time to percolate?

Core Responsibilities of the Board Professional

While significant differences exist in the board professional's role across the broad expanse of institutional types, sizes, and traditions, there continues to be a core set of responsibilities that most board professionals perform and oversee.