

**AGB**

**Effective  
Committee  
Series**

# **The Student Affairs Committee**

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# *Effective Committees*

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This publication is part of an AGB series devoted to strengthening the role of key standing committees of governing boards. While there is no optimum committee system for institutions of higher education, certain principles, practices, and procedures prevail. The best practices outlined below support the objectives of board committees: focused effort, informed decision making, and self-management.

### **A. FOCUS THE WORK OF COMMITTEES**

The work of boards should be grounded in the work of its committees. Working in tandem, committees enhance the purpose and advance the productivity of the full board.

1. Committee charters should clearly declare the governance purpose of each committee.
2. Committee work should be aligned with the institution's strategic vision, goals, and priorities.
3. Committees should translate their charges into annual goals and work plans that align with the board's governance responsibilities and the institution's strategic plan.
4. Committees should focus on monitoring the institution's strategic progress and the committee's accomplishments.
5. Committee meeting agendas should be concise, developed in consultation

with the committee chair and designated staff member, clearly state desired meeting outcomes, and they should be distributed—with appropriate supporting documents—well in advance.

6. Committee members should strike an appropriate balance between “too much” and “too little” information. They must guard against requesting overly detailed information to avoid becoming embroiled in administration or overburdening staff. At the same time, they need sufficient supporting materials to make sound recommendations and ensure adequate oversight.

## **B. FACILITATE INFORMED AND PARTICIPATORY DECISION MAKING**

Committees are responsible for recommending decisions and actions to the full board. They should serve as models of good governance, where issues are debated and recommendations are framed openly, inclusively, and with full transparency.

1. Committees should deliberately include constituents whose voices have legitimate bearing on the topics under consideration.
2. Board members and constituents should have an active and reciprocal understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities within the institution’s governance structure.
3. Through committees, board members and the institution’s constituents should engage in a dialogue that demands facts and explores critical issues within the appropriate boundaries. Jointly and based on mutual trust, they should learn to ask the right questions that honor governance prerogatives and advance the institution’s strategic direction.
4. When making formal recommendations to the full board, committees should present conclusions that summarize relevant data and findings, including constituent voices and diverse perspectives.

## **C. ORGANIZE THE WORK OF COMMITTEES**

While board bylaws often define the committee structure, the needs of each committee vary depending on the committee’s purpose and the institution’s changing circumstances. Within the division of labor between committees and the board, committees have responsibility for managing their own policies and practices.

# *Introduction to the Student Affairs Committee*

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College and university boards are charged with governance responsibility to ensure that students receive a high-quality education from a well-managed institution that fulfills its mission and actively pursues its vision. The student affairs committee places current and future students squarely at the center of its work and must ensure that other committees, as well as the full board, remain primarily focused on students in order to meet expectations and the charge. Committee members achieve this by understanding, supporting, and collaborating with institutional administrators tasked with responsibilities related to student affairs on campus

This is an exciting and challenging time to work on student issues in higher education. Shaped by world events, economic upheaval, social and political shifts, and technological innovations, today's college students are more tech-savvy, globally minded, and demanding of attentive customer-service than ever. The recession, mobile technology, and increased international competition are influencing why and how today's students pursue a college education.

More than 20 million full-time and part-time students are currently enrolled in 3,400 institutions of higher education in the United States.<sup>1</sup> About 45 percent

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Studies. 2009.

are between 18 and 22 years of age, but today the median age is 29.<sup>2</sup> Women comprise more than 57 percent of college students.<sup>3</sup> Some students live on campus, some live in the community, some have families, many work full- or part-time, and nearly 2 million receive their degrees each year. These students come to higher education with particular needs and abilities, and all of them are investing time and money with a primary academic purpose in mind: They want an excellent education with accomplished professors who teach in compelling and informative ways. Even in this economic downturn, the vast majority expect employment opportunities and a better quality of life as a result of obtaining a degree.

Since it is not always obvious that the welfare of students should be the essence of a college or university and the work of its governing board, many worthy initiatives can compete for the board's attention. Those include research, faculty issues, fundraising, and investments, among others. Yet these all involve or impact students in some way. For example, research enhances the education provided, adding value to students' academic experience. A healthy endowment can result in student aid and scholarships. A student-centered governing board with a strong student affairs committee can see those connections and thereby significantly strengthen the institution and its service to students.

The student affairs committee should also be aware of the impact of issues brought before other board committees that deal with academic, research, and fiscal issues as they relate to students; members can use these opportunities for collaboration with other committees. Examples include approval of new majors to match emerging careers, monitoring undergraduate research, incurring bond indebtedness for residence halls, overseeing investment income on scholarship accounts, and consideration of tuition and fee increases. Terrence MacTaggart writes: "There are few changes only the board can accomplish....Setting strategic direction is another illustration of collaborative decision making that encourages contributions from many stakeholders while making it clear who makes the final call."<sup>4</sup> An awareness of the necessity of collaboration helps to inform committee work.

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2. Hersh, R.H. and J. Merrow, *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

3. National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education. 2007.

4. MacTaggart, Terrence, *Leading Change: How Boards and Presidents Build Exceptional Academic Institutions* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2011), page 59.

## THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

The title and work of the student affairs committee is often linked with academic affairs as well as other areas such as research, diversity, workforce development, athletics, technology, and campus safety. Regardless of committee name, the committee's work is to think of student interests with each issue discussed, fee approved, survey analyzed, capital project considered, curriculum reviewed, master plan presented, and policy set.

Placing a priority on students requires an understanding among student affairs committee members of the specific student needs and characteristics at a particular institution, along with its organization, actions, and responses to those students. A place to begin would be student demographics such as age, gender, race, geographic origin, family educational history, socioeconomic status, and academic preparation prior to entering college. It is useful to understand how these demographics have changed at the institution over the years. What are projec-

## STUDENT SURVEYS

Many institutions conduct regular surveys on student satisfaction, needs, and attitudes as well as surveys on student learning and engagement with the campus. These include the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE), the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshmen Survey.

The CSSE and NSSE are instruments through which data have been collected from more than 2 million undergraduates at more than 2,000 two-year and four-year colleges and universities since 2000. They are constructed around five benchmarks of effective educational practice:

1. Level of academic challenge;
2. Active and collaborative learning;
3. Student-faculty interaction;
4. Supportive campus environment; and
5. Enriching educational experiences (at four-year institutions) or student effort (at two-year institutions)