
Executive Summary

In a challenging environment in which the future vitality of higher education is in question, strategic thought partnerships between chief executives and governing boards are more important than ever before. Trustee talent and wisdom are often underutilized by presidents who lack the know-how to fully engage trustees as strategic thought partners. Author William E. Troutt offers presidents and board leaders practical guidance on how to optimize the talents of trustees and build more effective partnerships between the president and governing boards. This guide, grounded in theory and experience, provides thought-provoking engagement strategies as well as real-world examples of both of president-board relationship missteps and successes.

Chapter One: “Trustee Leadership Matters So Much”

Effective trustee leadership is essential to the future success of higher education. This chapter delves into the importance of trustee leadership for three institutional stakeholders: shared governance stakeholders, the individual trustees, and the presidents who collaborate with trustees to advance the institution’s mission.

Chapter Two: “Three Basic Questions Presidents Need to Ask”

This chapter poses three basic questions to presidents who are eager to develop more effective governing boards. The first question centers on evaluating one’s goal for the optimal level of board engagement. The second question encourages presidents to consider the amount of time that will be required to develop their boards. The final question deals with the importance of the candid, honest conversations necessary to achieve the highest level of board performance.

Chapter Three: “Trustee Recruitment and Retention”

Assembling the right people around the board table takes time and requires a strong partnership between the board and the president. This chapter focuses on the process of recruiting and retaining trustee talent and the importance of informing prospective trustees of both the institution’s aspirations and how much their trustee service matters.

Chapter Four: “Dealing with Difficult Trustees”

Despite careful trustee selection, presidents may find themselves managing “difficult trustees” who can disrupt the work of the board. This chapter offers readers concrete examples of disruptive trustee behavior patterns and stories of troublesome board behaviors. It also provides presidents and board chairs with the most effective strategies for addressing these issues.

Chapter Five: “Trustee Education and Leadership Development”

Colleges and universities must provide opportunities for trustee education if they wish for board members to acquire a mastery of governance responsibilities and intimate knowledge of the institution. This chapter describes the importance of trustee orientation in the ongoing process of trustee education and details opportunities for ongoing trustee leadership development, such as planning and executing board retreats and periodic board evaluations.

Chapter Six: “Governing Board Organization”

Presidents and governing boards who take the time to work out their optimal board organization will be rewarded with engaged trustees and robust thought partnerships. This chapter urges boards to regularly update their bylaws to ensure relevance and compliance, and to conduct an annual structural review of board committees and ad hoc board committees to ensure their functionality and productivity.

Chapter Seven: “Governing Board Culture”

Board culture is hard to define and difficult to measure, but it matters even more than having the optimal structure. This chapter encourages presidents and board chairs to foster a healthy board culture built on mutual respect, trust, candor, and a willingness to openly dissent. It is only when these foundational elements are secure that boards may become a community of care for one another.

Chapter Eight: “Trustee Meeting Design”

Well-designed board meetings can inspire a high level of board engagement and prevent meetings from devolving into a litany of staff reports encouraging board micromanagement of administration discussions. This chapter’s meeting design recommendations include using an agenda committee, executive sessions to bookend board meetings, plenary sessions to promote education and thought leadership, and standing committee meetings to encourage robust conversations.

Chapter Nine: “Trustees as Thought Partners”

Successfully navigating today’s higher education environment requires presidents to fully engage their governing boards as strategic thought partners. It takes deliberate effort to build these close relationships. This chapter urges presidents and board chairs to fully utilize trustee thought leaders to support good decision-making and fresh thinking about higher education governance.

Chapter Ten: “Building the Partnership”

A strong president-board partnership takes time to develop and requires a high level of candor, openness, and trust. This chapter highlights key actions boards and presidents can take to develop their relationship, such as developing administrative support for trustee thought leadership and creating a shared vision for the institution when it comes to decision-making. It concludes with the author’s top takeaways from 35 years of working with governing boards.