

Equitable student success is intrinsic to the mission and essential for the financial stability and reputation of the institution. The greater the number of students who succeed, the more efficiently the university operates. Demonstrating the value of higher education and return on investment is more important than ever. This includes increasing the number of students who succeed in college. If students earn a higher education credential, they are better prepared for work, more able to pay off debt, and remain favorably connected to the institution. There are associated costs for each student who does not succeed—for students, the institution, and society. Current levels of student success fall short, particularly for the most vulnerable populations whether they attend community colleges or the most selective Ivy League institutions. Boards are accountable for equitable student success through their fiduciary duties of loyalty, care, and obedience.

What does it take for boards to transform institutions for equitable student success? These leadership principles can guide the governing board in exercising consistent oversight, inspiring change, and sustaining this long-term effort.



Equitable student success is possible only with the intentional collaboration of key institutional stakeholders.

Everyone has a role to play in advancing equitable student success. Staff, faculty, administrators, students, communities, and boards must work together to make equity the priority. Effective boards are knowledgeable about what other stakeholders are doing with respect to equity efforts, are open to influence, and intentionally support those efforts through board action.

In colleges and universities, shared governance is a team endeavor. The board must work effectively with others and inspire their commitment to equitable student success. Boards operate at a unique policy and leadership level: they lead by example, establish policies, set institutional priorities, determine goals and metrics, and select the president. Boards are accountable for institutional performance and success.



Equitable student success is transformational. Transformation requires board engagement.

Boards are ultimately accountable for equitable student success in higher education and play a leading role in setting mission and policies, establishing the tuition, and hiring the chief executive. The roles and responsibilities of boards shape institutions for years to come. No other stakeholder has the power to inform long-term, systemic change in the same way.

The priorities of the board shape the direction of the institution. Committing the board and institution to achieving equitable student success means applying this expectation to the work of the board and its committees, institutional leadership, policies, budgets, strategic plan, communications, faculty, staff, and students. This leadership should be transformational. Equitable student success requires new approaches and sustained effort to eliminate barriers and achieve goals.



Equitable student success is mission critical and strategy centric.

Equity is not just a moral imperative; it is also a business imperative. Colleges and universities must be inclusive communities, enabling individuals to thrive intellectually, socially, ethically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, and physically. Boards must establish the value of and motivation for equity in order for this work to be sustainable.

Boards should assess indicators of current and future institutional performance, aligning equity goals with strategic plans and resources. Raising retention and completion rates, improving campus climate, ensuring basic student needs, preparing students for success in a global community, serving the changing student demographic population, upholding the relevance and value of credentials, serving our communities, and engaging in cutting edge research are all tied to winning strategies for equitable student success, long-term institutional vitality, and mission fulfillment.



Equitable student success requires the board's commitment to continuous learning.

Concepts of equity and strategies for achieving student success are continuously evolving. Equitable student success requires each board member to commit to continuing education to stay abreast of changes in higher education, demographics, terminology, challenges, and high-impact practices to advance equity and student success. This should be an ongoing focus in the work of the board and its committees. The board should leverage experts to stay up to date on effective practices. Board members' deepening knowledge and understanding of equitable student success fuels continued institutional growth.

Like other sectors that commit to systemic change and ambitious goals, higher education boards should expect to focus on issues of equitable student success on a regular basis. Any industry that seeks transformational change must commit to this work for the long term; reimagining success for all students will require such effort.



Equitable student success efforts must be data informed across the institution.

Disaggregated, longitudinal data are essential to knowing the equity status of the board and the institution in order to (re)set measurable goals and develop a plan. Boards need to leverage qualitative and quantitative data to identify challenges and assess progress. It is not enough to acknowledge gaps and set goals. Boards must track progress at least annually and readjust as needed depending upon institution-specific data for specific populations.

Determining what data are needed for strategic insights and oversight is an essential element of board work. Balancing the need to examine success for different groups and keep board engagement at a strategic level takes discipline and respect for the roles of the board, president, and administration. A unique contribution of boards is asking probing questions that frame issues in search of solutions. Boards that micromanage rather than macrogovern will get lost in the weeds.



Equitable student success must be uniquely overseen by the board to address the culture, climate, and aspirations of each institution.

A focus on equity pushes beyond cookie cutter approaches to access, retention, student experiences, and other factors. Boards must help stakeholders respond to the history, characteristics, and culture of the campus and reflect institutional mission. At its essence, equitable student success means demographic and socioeconomic factors are no longer predictors of student outcomes and experiences. What that means will vary from one institution to another—from open admissions colleges to research universities, from Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Each board and institution will need to envision and support equitable student success for their students through their policies and resource allocation. Boards hold their institutions in trust for future generations and determine the policies, resource priorities, and strategic plans to achieve this goal. It will take new approaches to protect the long-term stability and vitality of the institution and its mission.



Equitable student success requires the board to examine its policies and practices through an equity lens.

There are direct and indirect approaches to centering equity in the role of the board. Boards must examine the policies, practices, and procedures they have in place and assess their own norms, habits, and actions with equity in mind. To maximize outcomes for all students, transformation has to happen within the board as well as the campus. Changing the composition and structure of the board is important for a number of reasons. Having a diverse board brings distinct perspectives to the table, augments connections to community, and establishes new relationships. The board is also representative of the institution. Board orientation and training introduces new members to the culture and values of the institution and provides continuing board education for all members.

The way the board structures and organizes its work in committees focuses the attention of the board on what matters most. Boards may choose to create a student success or justice, diversity, and inclusion committee to elevate and accelerate this work, or reexamine the charges of existing committees to embed this essential work in each. As the board works more effectively and efficiently to achieve equitable student success, so will the institution.



Equitable student success leverages a process of continual improvement.

Achieving equitable student success is a journey, not a destination. The iterative process requires training for both the “sprint” and the “marathon” at the same time. It requires an unwavering focus on student success, attention to the board and other stakeholders, agility, responsiveness, and unwavering commitment. The board is responsible for managing and educating itself and allowing and enabling its administrative team to be a part of its continuing education.

The board should be proactive and take responsibility for assessing the board and its members. Incorporating the institution’s equity and inclusion goals and plans in these evaluative processes is necessary for holding the board accountable. Continual improvement means that the board will not simply stop at assessment; the board will act in response to evaluation findings, changing conditions, and new understandings to more closely align its work with evolving equity goals.

These leadership principles for boards can be used as one of many tools to engage the board in learning about and fulfilling its responsibilities for equitable student success. For more resources visit the [Knowledge Center at AGB.org](https://www.agb.org/knowledge-center).