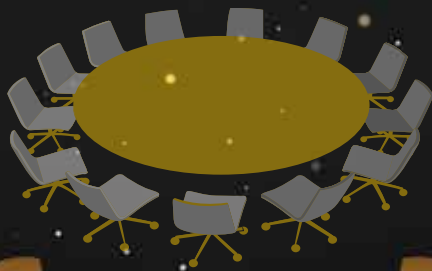


Tales of Boldness and Creativity

Recipients of
the 2023 Nason
Awards for Board
Leadership

BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL





THE PANDEMIC tested the mettle of college and university boards and foundations. On top of closures, building out capacity for remote instruction, and reopenings, they had to keep an eye on the future and figure out how to regain enrollment and build public support at a time when some question the relevance and value of a college degree.

In such turbulent times, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, in partnership with the nonprofit retirement provider TIAA, chose five higher education boards to receive the 2023 John W. Nason Award for Board Leadership for facing challenges and surmounting them.

They follow in the footsteps of boards that have been singled out as models every year since the first Nason Awards were bestowed in 1992. The award is named for the Swarthmore College president who chaired the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council during World War II and helped nearly 4,000 students move from internment camps to 600 campuses across the country.

The award-winning institutions mirror the breadth and diversity of the higher education landscape. They include a Colorado public college in the Rocky Mountains whose board found a creative way to address an acute shortage of housing for students; a private university in Texas that faced head-on the legacy of racism in its past; the foundation of Utah's second-largest university, which took on the mission of revitalizing and diversifying itself; a historically Black university in Louisiana that, rather than resting on its laurels, is building a medical school; and, a community college foundation in an impoverished Massachusetts city that has found ways to support its diverse student body that go beyond financial aid.

These are their inspiring stories.



Using a 'checkbook' and ingenuity to serve Rocky Mountain communities

Colorado Mountain College (CMC) is unique among the state's nearly three dozen colleges and universities, the only one with an official dual mission under state law to offer a mix of liberal arts and skills-focused training and award both bachelor's and associate degrees. It enrolls 15,000 students, including English as a Second Language and adult learners and those pursuing specialized certificates, at 11 locations strung across 12,000 square miles of snow country in the Central Rockies, including Aspen, Vail, and Steamboat Springs. As the largest independent special taxing district in the state, CMC relies primarily on local property taxes. It gets no state funding for new buildings and facilities.

That's where the Colorado Mountain College Board of Trustees has stepped up to the plate and helped find creative ways to bolster the college's finances, including a bold move into the debt markets to borrow \$40 million to build scarce, affordable new housing for students who include ski patrollers and others in the hospitality industry preparing to become the resort communities' future fire fighters, teachers, and nurses. The college's bond issue has leveraged \$20 million in other money raised locally, with more on the way.

Five percent of CMC's students are "Dreamers," born outside the United States but raised and educated locally. They are eligible for in-state tuition but not federal student aid. The college drew national attention for an innovative, philanthropically funded income-sharing program it created in 2018 that allowed Dreamers to tap funding in the CMC Foundation at low interest rates and pay the loans back from future earnings. (That program, Fund Sueños, was suspended like others nationally after the service provider closed due to a federal rule change that undercut income-sharing arrangements.)

The elected board was out front convincing local voters in 2018 to override a fiscal straitjacket in the state constitution and allow the college to "float" its mill levy to sustain its operations and services. That passed by an almost two-to-one margin and set the stage for voters statewide to remove that particular constitutional restriction



Carrie Besnette Hauser



Peg Portscheller

entirely in 2020. Two more rural communities petitioned to join the CMC tax district and a third is trying to get it now.

Carrie Besnette Hauser, PhD, the college's president since 2013, said of the creative steps the school has taken, "We can't do it without a board that starts with 'Yes' and figures out and helps us do the things that we're doing." In its support for the Dreamers, she added, "this is a board that's been really bold on these issues."

"We have said from our inception almost 60 years ago that we are an open door to everyone. That's why we were created," said Hauser, who has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and reached base

camp on Mount Everest. "There's not another institution within 60 miles of these communities, so if it wasn't us, it wouldn't be anyone."

Board President Peg Portscheller, an education consultant and former school superintendent, said, "The college is held in high regard by our taxpaying public, by our students, by community and political leaders, and that's a tribute to Carrie's leadership team as well as our faculty."

Moody's has upgraded the college's debt rating twice on Hauser's watch; only one public institution in the state has a higher rating. The board has ensured that the college can afford to make salary adjustments every year, from custodians to deans, while still keeping budget increases level with inflation.

It wasted no time borrowing \$40 million at low rates of interest to build housing in the four towns, some of it on land donated by



Colorado Mountain College

generous supporters. “To have good credit, you have to use your credit card,” said Hauser.

When a state legislator questioned whether the college should be in the business of building housing, she replied, “That’s our form of financial aid. We have to provide a place for our students to live in order for them to be part of these economic engines [in] these mountain resort communities so that they can become the EMT, ambulance driver, nurse, or firefighter, whatever. We’ve got to be part of that solution.”

The institution was designated by the U.S. Department of Education in 2021 as a Hispanic-Serving Institution after years of efforts to enroll more Latino students, making it eligible for increased aid. Now 28 percent of students are Hispanic, more than double the percentage in 2014.

To meet the shortage of health providers in these mountain communities, the board added a third nursing program and approved a major capital initiative to build state-of-the-art nursing simulation labs at each site. A dental hygiene program is in the works at a cost exceeding \$6 million. The board also approved connecting all the high schools in its region to the college’s high-tech instruction technologies.

With an infusion of pandemic relief dollars, the board waived tuition and fees for the summer 2020 term. Consequently, summer enrollments jumped to historic highs.

“It’s just been great to see the reputation of the college grow,” said Portscheller, who joined the board six years ago. “We now have a vibrant institution totally in tune with the needs of these very diverse communities up and down the spine of the Rocky Mountains.”

“We have a saying on the board that money is not going to prohibit any student from attending. If you have a desire, Colorado Mountain College will find a way to help you make that happen,” Portscheller said.

The past five years have been eventful and productive under a strategic plan titled “Reaching Greater Heights.” Next on the to-do list for the college and board: crafting a new strategy to propel this enterprising institution forward to 2030.



Unafraid to confront a Texas past tainted by racism

At a time of national torment over the legacy of slavery, racism, and race relations in America, **Texas Christian University** (TCU) has been unafraid to face squarely its own experiences with racism, slavery, and the Confederacy.



Victor J. Boschini, Jr.



Mark L. Johnson

The school, which celebrates its sesquicentennial this year, was founded by two brothers, both ministers and teachers, in 1873 with 13 students in a single building in tiny Thorp Spring, Texas, from where it moved first to Waco and finally in 1910 to the cattle-trading city of Fort Worth.

Addison and Randolph Clark affiliated Addran College with the Disciples of Christ church, and it was rechristened Texas Christian University in 1902. The brothers served in the Confederate army but never owned slaves.

Like many colleges across the South, TCU remained segregated into the 1960s, although there was some limited training for Black soldiers in World War II and teachers in the 1950s. The board of trustees voted to racially integrate the entire campus in 1964. Today about 5 percent of the student body is Black, 17 percent Hispanic, and 6 percent other racial and ethnic minorities.

Demands for racial justice echoed loudly at TCU even before the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020. Two police killings in the Dallas-Fort Worth area gained notoriety, including the shooting of Atatiana Jefferson in the back bedroom of her home on October 12, 2019, while she babysat a nephew. Black students in December 2016 demanded the hiring of more Black faculty, the creation of a multicultural center, and zero tolerance for racially insensitive and hateful speech.

TCU established that center and stepped up efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, including mandatory training and hiring more diverse faculty and staff, and the appointment of a chief diversity officer and senior adviser to the chancellor. Today, 32 percent of top administrators, tenured faculty, and staff are individuals of color. TCU received a Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award from *INSIGHT Into Diversity* magazine five years in a row.

But the murder of George Floyd convinced Chancellor Victor J. Boschini Jr., EdD, and Chairman of the Board Mark L. Johnson that TCU had to do more.

On July 15, 2020, with the unanimous support of the board of trustees, Boschini and Johnson announced the launch of the Race & Reconciliation Initiative, a scholarly exploration of the university’s past and present. They wrote in a joint letter to the TCU community:

“We are at a pivotal point in America today. Racism has been consistently present for far too long, and many recent incidents, including the deaths of George Floyd and many others, have awakened a passion for true equity and justice. It is imperative that we, as stewards of TCU, do everything we can to instill, and live, very real change.”

TCU is now in the third year of the five-year Race & Reconciliation Initiative, with the university having already accepted and put into action recommendations “for healing,” as the initiative’s chair, Frederick Gooding Jr., PhD, an associate professor of African American Studies in the John V. Roach Honors College, expressed it.

The board of trustees has increased its own diversity—16 percent now identify as individuals of color and more are from outside Texas—and established a subcommittee to advise the university on social justice issues. It is chaired by trustee LaDainian Tomlinson, ’00, a pro football Hall of Famer and devoted alumnus. Eight other trustees serve on that panel.

TCU joined the Universities Studying Slavery consortium, a network of dozens of institutions across the South and Northeast examining their connections to enslavement and enrichment from the trade.

Boschini, the chancellor since 2003, has heard no complaints from donors, alumni, or others. “We really haven’t had much pushback at all. Our students especially have really embraced it,” he said.

At a time when statues of Robert E. Lee and other Confederate generals and foot soldiers were being removed from parks and courthouses across the South, TCU has decided to leave the bronze statue of the Clark brothers in its place of prominence near the front entrance to campus, where it’s been since 1993. It shows the brothers in pioneer clothing, with Randolph’s hand on Addison’s back.

While some students had said they felt uncomfortable walking past the founders’ statue, the panel recommended that instead of removal, the university add extensive signage nearby to “memorialize a more complete story of TCU, commemorating the efforts of underrepresented or marginalized groups who contributed to TCU’s development and highlighting racist attitudes and behaviors from earlier years as an educational step toward creating an antiracist community.” That’s been done, including a mural with a quote from Violeta Chamorro, a former president of Nicaragua, that, *“Reconciliation is more beautiful than victory.”*

The university now holds annual reconciliation days. At the most recent, it reconnected with the descendants of a former slave, Charley Thorp, who had done construction work for the Clark brothers in the early days of Addran College.

The newest statue on campus sits outside the basketball arena and shows a former star player, James Cash, ’69, PhD, taking a shot. Cash, TCU’s first Black student-athlete and the first Black basketball player in the Southwest Conference, went on to become the first tenured Black professor at the Harvard Business School, where a building is named for him. He is now retired. His plaque reads: “TCU helped me accomplish more than others thought possible, by teaching me to care more than others thought wise, which empowered me to take more risk than others thought was safe.”



A board points the way toward a more diverse future for Utah

When **Utah State University (USU)** President Noelle E. Cockett, PhD, and the leadership of the **Utah State University Foundation** set out to reimagine the foundation’s role, they did not have to look far for expert advice. The new vice president for advancement and president of the foundation, Matthew White, PhD, was completing his doctorate on board governance. Steeped in knowledge about how the best boards carry out their missions, White helped Board Chair Marshall Crawford and President Cockett reinvent the board, changing its composition, increasing its fundraising prowess, and championing efforts to make Utah’s land grant university more diverse.



Noelle E. Cockett, PhD



Matthew White, PhD



Marshall Crawford

Cockett, a longtime faculty member who became president in 2017, said, “I did not see the full potential of the foundation board in the past. The only time the board was active at USU was during the last comprehensive campaign,” which ended in 2014 after achieving its \$500-million goal. “After that, it languished.”

The foundation board, currently chaired by Marshall Crawford ’80, itself recognized a need to step up, take on greater challenges, and diversify its own ranks by gender, race, profession, and age. Without term limits, some members had served more than two decades. Cockett remembers one telling her, “I’d really like a more meaningful, proactive role.”

The board got an infusion of new blood and underwent training to identify, confront, and eliminate personal biases, blind spots, and prejudices.

The bylaws were rewritten to align with university initiatives, establish term limits, and create new committees—an executive committee and committees on governance, development, finance and investment, and marketing.

While Utah State is predominantly White, its Hispanic community is quickly growing. Some 22,000 students attend Utah State’s main campus in Logan, and 6,000 more attend in 31 other locations.

Crawford, a former investment banker and now a U.S. Treasury Department senior advisor who helps manage infrastructure projects around the globe, said the need to increase diversity had long been on the radar but without any actionable plan.

The revamped board enthusiastically embraced this new direction, Crawford said. “We have benefited from the fact that we are seeing things from more diverse points of view. It’s improved the way that we plan for the future of this university.”

The board was influential in the hiring of the university’s first vice president of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It cosponsored with the Alumni Association commemorations of Juneteenth, the day that slavery finally ended in 1865.

Moreover, it helped forge a unique partnership with historically Black Fort Valley State University in Georgia that is paying dividends for students and researchers alike at both land-grant institutions. Their foundation boards have met jointly over Zoom, and the USU Foundation has funded opportunities for students, faculty, and staff at both institutions to participate in collaborative diversity workshops. Future plans include enrolling Fort Valley students in Utah State’s new College of Veterinary Medicine. Fort Valley State University President Paul A. Jones, PhD, and his wife, Sylvia, are Utah State alumni, and she serves on the foundation board.

As for the bottom line, the foundation helped raise a record \$110 million in 2022, more than four times the 2018 level, and the university’s advancement team has doubled in size to 60. The 2022 results included a \$41-million gift from a Utah family to establish the Bastian Agricultural Center.

Cockett and the foundation board now have set a goal of raising \$75 million or more annually going forward. “We have lofty goals around some very focused impact initiatives,” said White, including nurturing a research enterprise that already allowed Utah State to receive Carnegie R1 classification in 2021, placing it among the nation’s 150 most research-intensive campuses.

Another change is that there are now periodic meetings of the leaders of the foundation board, the governor-appointed board of trustees, the Alumni Association Advisory Board, the president, and her advancement staff.

This collaboration “really ties us together in a way that allows us to communicate effectively, create seamless coordination, and lets everybody understand their role in implementing the university’s strategic plan. We feel like it has made the foundation’s work so much more meaningful,” said Crawford, who will be succeeded as board chair this July by Jeannine Bennett, JD, a retired Salt Lake City attorney.

When the Nason Awards were presented to Utah State and four other schools at AGB’s annual Foundation Leadership Forum in January, several foundation board members came on their own to join the celebration. “It just shows how excited they are for where we are and where we’re going,” said Cockett, who is stepping down and returning to the veterinary science faculty later this year.



New leadership to move Xavier forward in New Orleans

It was a tough act to follow.

Norman Francis, JD, was among the longest-serving college and university presidents in U.S. history when he retired in 2015 after 47 years at the helm of **Xavier University of Louisiana** (XULA), a historically Black institution in New Orleans renowned for producing future doctors. Francis chaired the Louisiana Recovery Authority after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George W. Bush.

His successor, Reynold Verret, PhD, and the XULA Board of Trustees have proven up to the task.

Its financial stature was bolstered in 2018, when the federal government at long last forgave the \$335 million in hurricane relief loans that Xavier and two other historically Black institutions, Southern University at New Orleans and Dillard University, received after their campuses were destroyed by Katrina. Xavier’s \$165-million debt had been a millstone around its neck.

Since then, it won reaccreditation with flying colors, launched a centennial campaign to raise a half a billion dollars by its 100th anniversary in 2025, and announced plans to establish a joint college of medicine with Ochsner Health, the state’s largest academic health system.

Verret, an immunologist and biochemist, is only the second lay president in the history of the institution founded by Mother Katharine Drexel—now a saint—and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to educate Native Americans and African Americans.

Verret and his board quickly set to work crafting a new strategic plan that reaffirmed its commitment to helping create “a more just and humane society” by raising graduation and retention rates and sending even more students to medical and pharmacy schools and other graduate and professional programs.

“Our mission remains consistently the mission that we were given in 1925, which says that we must contribute to a just,



Reynold Verret, PhD



Justin Augustine III

humane society (and) be of service to the world that we live in. That's something that we test ourselves on: Are we keeping faithful to that mission?" said the Haitian-born president, who was educated at Columbia University and MIT.

Business executive and alumnus Justin Augustine III '80, who chairs the board of trustees, said he and the president are in constant contact, by phone and even text messages, bouncing ideas off one another and figuring out how best the board can help Xavier meet its ambitious goals.

"We have established a really wonderful relationship, a great partnership. I just love to see the way his mind operates," said Augustine, a senior vice president of Transdev Services, an international transportation company, and a former general manager of New Orleans's regional transit authority whose accounting major set him on a path to success in business and government work. "I'm kept really informed, which makes it easy for me to communicate to the board and, in turn, for us to make lives easier for the administration."

There had been no presidential search by the board in anyone's living memory when it set out to find Francis's successor. Verret, who'd been provost of Savannah State University, another historically Black institution, said Xavier was performing well, but the challenge for him and the board was to figure out "what we needed to change as we moved forward and what we needed to preserve. And that was a concept that the board was able to have."

The board recruited new trustees who brought fresh, outside perspectives to their work. Today only four of the 24 board members are alumni, which, as the Nason Award application phrased it, leads "to governance that focuses on the future, not on 'the way things always have been.'" The alumni association has posed no objection because they, too, "want the best class of professionals that we can utilize to ensure that the success of the university is paramount," said Augustine.

Each of the three chairs during Verret's presidency has made good governance a priority. Among the changes were that the Building & Grounds Committee and the Business Affairs Committee began to meet jointly to better coordinate facility needs with budgetary realities. An internal audit subcommittee was established (later upgraded to a full committee) and annual board assessments were conducted. All committee chairs and board officers now serve on the Executive Committee, and the bylaws have been clarified. The conflict-of-interest policy also was strengthened.

Since the 2016–2017 academic year, two-thirds of new faculty



Xavier University of Louisiana

hires have been faculty of color. Xavier also has improved the retention of students who were the first generation in their family to attend college and has expanded peer tutoring to help raise grades.

Two-thirds of Xavier students are science majors. The board has approved new health science programs and embarked with Ochsner Health to build and open what would be the 158th U.S. medical college, including two in New Orleans (Tulane and Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center).

"One of the key drivers of health disparity in the United States is the low representation of physicians and other practitioners of color," said Verret. Seven in ten of Xavier's 3,400 students are Black, and the university has long held the distinction of being the alma mater of the most Black graduates from medical schools. It prepares future pharmacists in great numbers as well.

A major project on the board's to-do list is getting a new residence hall built, as well as addressing deferred maintenance and other renovations in line with a campus master plan. The campaign has already raised \$65 million. Fully half of the \$500-million goal is for the purpose of increasing student financial aid. Already 94 percent of students apply for and receive some form of need-based assistance.

Verret sees that as the most important part of the campaign. "Our students are not wealthy, by and large," the president said, and to be faithful to its mission, Xavier needs to ensure that no qualified student is turned away because they cannot afford to enroll.



A foundation finds creative ways to help parents get to class—and feed their families

The leadership and planning skills that Corey Murphy acquired in 20 years as an officer in the Marines served **Holyoke Community College (HCC)** well when leaders recognized the need and urgency of revitalizing the **HCC Foundation** to help meet the needs of working students in a community with a 26 percent poverty rate, more than double the state and national averages.

Murphy, who owns an insurance business, first joined the foundation board 16 years ago. But it was in 2019 that he was called upon to step up and lead a new governance committee charged with undertaking a top-to-bottom review of the foundation's structure and how it could best support HCC's 9,000 students, 28 percent of them Hispanic. Later, Murphy would advance to vice chair and then chair of the board.

The foundation is the oldest of any serving the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's 15 community colleges.

Holyoke is a Connecticut River Valley town in Western Massachusetts once known as "the Paper City of the World" for its many paper mills. It is perched beneath a mountain ridge in an area that once belonged to the Algonquin Indians and other Native American tribes. Growing alongside the larger nearby industrial city of Springfield, Holyoke's population peaked at 60,000 in 1920 and now stands at 38,000. The board has itself become more diverse while stepping up fundraising and supporting innovative ways to help students, including starting a drop-in "child watch" service for parents rushing to classes and opening a fresh produce market and pantry on campus that accepts SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps).

Addressing those needs and improving diversity, equity, and inclusion were priorities for Christina Royal, PhD, when she arrived in 2016 as the college's fourth president. Within a year she had a strategic plan in place focusing on enhancing support services for its changing population of students. After Hispanic enrollment surpassed 25 percent in 2016, HCC was designated by the U.S. Department of Education as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, qualifying for additional grants and assistance.

When the new governance committee was established, its first order of business was a top-to-bottom review of the bylaws, led by Murphy, who holds an MBA from Babson College, one of the top business schools in the country.

"They asked if I would sit on the executive committee and be willing to help. It seemed a bit of a daunting task. It was just start from



Corey Murphy



Christina Royal, PhD

scratch and go," Murphy said. He and Amanda Sbriscia, hired in 2017 as the vice president of institutional advancement and the executive director of the foundation, drove the effort, which took a full year.

The bylaws revision became Murphy's entrée into a more invested leadership role with the HCC Foundation. It "very much played to Corey's strengths," said Sbriscia. "He brought to that process an ability to be both organized ... and forward thinking. It enabled us to ask questions like, where does the foundation want to go and who do we want to be."

It resulted in the creation of term limits, a director emeritus program, and the addition to the foundation's Executive Committee of representation from the governor-appointed board of trustees and the Alumni Association Council. As the Nason Award application noted, Murphy drew on a blueprint he'd read about in AGB resource materials. Murphy initiated quarterly meetings with the president and chair of the college board of trustees. A memorandum

of agreement was developed between the college and foundation, again using a template provided by AGB. A new onboarding and mentorship program was started and plans laid for the first comprehensive fundraising campaign, now underway with a \$15-million goal.

The board, which once had no minority members, is now 30 percent Black, Hispanic, or Latinx. It is also the first community college foundation in Massachusetts to fully fund staff positions in the advancement

office for revenue generation and donor engagement.

"From the college side, I describe it often as us moving from a mom-and-pop-type shop to a legitimate, medium-sized organization," said Royal, whose expertise on online education—the topic of her Ph.D dissertation—served the college well during the pandemic.

The college is already halfway to its \$15-million goal thanks to a pledge from the Elaine Marieb Charitable Foundation to renovate the Center for Life Sciences. The late philanthropist, anatomist, and textbook author graduated from HCC's nursing program in 1980 and later taught there. (The College of Nursing at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, which received a record \$21.5-million gift from the Marieb Foundation, is named for her.)

The HCC Foundation distributes half a million dollars in scholarships to students annually, including a new Bienvenidos Latinx Scholarship. "It's incredible to hear their stories and see the huge impact the college has on students and the community. The foundation plays a role in trying to make it accessible, but tuition is not the only aspect," said Murphy. "We try to be a little creative and figure out other ways that we can support them." ■

Christopher Connell is a longtime higher education journalist.