

# Engaging Foundation Board Members as Strategic Advocates



## Why do foundation board members make good advocates?

Foundation board members can be powerful advocates on behalf of public higher education writ large and for their host institutions. They are typically well-connected civic and business leaders with deep ties to the institution that the foundation serves and share a passion for its mission. These individuals are frequently experienced, politically savvy navigators who understand the policy landscape and often interact with local, state, and federal elected officials. Foundation board members are often among the most significant donors to their institutions, demonstrating their confidence and commitment to the purposes of public higher education with their philanthropic investments. These attributes make foundation board members potentially powerful champions for making the case for public higher education as a compelling public good and a strategic asset, which contributes to regional and national economic development; creates impact through cutting-edge research in health and medicine, science, and technology; and serves as an engine of social mobility and economic opportunity for the citizenry.

Foundation boards encompass a crosscut of political affiliations, including individuals who have supported policymakers on both sides of the aisle. Foundation boards can be a powerful complement to institutions' professional government relations teams and administrative staff, opening doors and bringing the credibility of personally disinterested leaders from sectors outside of higher education.

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## What kind of advocacy should board members engage in?

Foundation boards and institutions should recognize that advocacy can take various forms. Foundation board members should always be equipped to help make the case for the value of higher education—especially in a period when the purposes and value of higher education are being challenged. Such informal advocacy can take place in social settings, at civic or philanthropic events, in professional settings, and in structured one-on-one conversations.

Board members should be prepared to work closely with the institution and foundation government relations teams to be ambassadors on behalf of their institution, its mission, and its priorities. Helping the institution to advance specific legislative or policy positions requires thoughtful preparation and coordination. In such cases, government relations staff will typically work with a few carefully selected volunteers and include them in meetings with leaders where their relationships and their status as professional or philanthropic leaders can have the greatest impact.

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## How can board members and institutions work together effectively on advocacy?

Foundations can be powerful advocacy partners, but they should always work in close collaboration and strategic alignment with institution leaders. Institutions must educate foundation boards about the public policy landscape, strategic priorities, and advocacy strategy; equip them with talking points; and set clear parameters regarding when and how foundation board members can speak on behalf of the institution. Some foundations have dedicated advocacy committees to help integrate the advocacy function with the other work of the board and to more effectively engage the most interested and potentially influential board members.

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Institutions must create the conditions to set up board members' advocacy for success—starting open and honest conversations about prior advocacy experience and interest in doing this on behalf of the institution. These discussions with board members should also establish clear governance boundaries, shared expectations, mutual understanding of the effort required and scope of work, and a framework that aligns board efforts with the broader mission. This includes providing talking points—such as the sample talking points at the end of this guide—so board members can communicate with consistency, accuracy, and clarity. Staff might also canvass volunteers to learn about their interests and relationships and prepare board members to be part of visits with policymakers.

It can be helpful to pair those less familiar with educational advocacy with other board members or campus leaders who regularly do this work.

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## Elements of a Successful Advocacy Strategy

### A. Develop strategies and implementation plans.

- Identify board members who can represent key constituencies, help to forge coalitions, have existing relationships with legislators and other policymakers, and can speak with passion, authenticity, and authority in support of institutional priorities.
- Provide guidance so board members can confidently advocate on behalf of the institution, understand the institution's policy positions and priorities, are familiar with the institution's advocacy strategy, and have a clear understanding of their appropriate roles.
- Provide talking points and other advocacy tools to enable foundation board members to communicate with consistency, accuracy, and clarity, and in alignment with the institution. Talking points should address both individual institution priorities and points of pride as well as the value of public higher education more broadly.<sup>1</sup> Institutions should train foundation board members and equip them with social media toolkits and work with them on op-eds and other opportunities to amplify the institution's message.
- Schedule and coordinate opportunities for board members to convene together with campus leaders and elected officials to discuss institutional priorities and impact.
- Understand the public policy environment and the challenges and opportunities it presents for fulfilling the institution's mission. Institution and foundation leaders should develop a shared advocacy/public policy strategy and associated governance and management practices that might include the creation of a foundation board advocacy committee, regular briefings of the foundation board by government relations staff, and periodic advocacy education sessions for board members.

### B. Set the governance guardrails.

- Reaffirm board independence and alignment to mission. Advocacy must avoid undue external or ideological influence and proceed in concert with leadership. Emphasize that while we all fall somewhere on the political spectrum, the tone and content of educational advocacy meetings are always in support of the institution. Further, gathering individuals who represent varied points on the political spectrum but who align in support of education can leave a powerful impression on elected officials. have existing relationships with legislators and other policymakers, and can speak with passion, authenticity, and authority in support of institutional priorities.

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- Board orientation and ongoing guidance should underscore who is empowered to speak on behalf of the institution, the foundation, and the board, and provide guidance on how to address questions from stakeholders looking to them as representatives of the institution. Special attention should be given to social media guidelines for foundation board members regarding institution-related messaging on their personal and professional social media accounts.
- Board members should not pursue personal advocacy agendas or act independently of the chief executive and government relations lead. Board members should always act collectively and in the best interests of the institution, not as representatives of an appointing authority or a particular constituency.

## C. Clarify roles and coordination.

- Institutional leaders, in concert with government relations or external affairs staff, set the advocacy plan and coordinate timing/messaging for all institutional and affiliated boards.
- Foundation/alumni boards reinforce institutional talking points buttressed with insights from their perspectives as alumni, donors, and community and business leaders to strengthen policy asks.
- Institution and foundation staff should engage foundation board members when developing advocacy agendas and strategy—they can contribute valuable perspectives that compliment institutional interests and may have helpful perspectives on the factors influencing policymakers.
- Foundation boards and individual board members should never freelance or act incongruently with institutional priorities and strategy.

## D. Define your advocacy audiences and make a specific plan for each one.

- **Policy champion network:** Engage board members to champion specific issues aligned with their personal, professional, and philanthropic interests and to forge ties with policymakers with whom they have relationships or shared interests.
- **Civic/business outreach:** Leverage board members as third-party champions of the institution with chambers of commerce, industry groups, and local leaders.
- **Storytelling and media:** Position selected directors for op-eds, testimony, and events; provide messaging and one-page documents with key talking points, including relevant data.
- **Planning:** Refresh the annual advocacy plan during board retreats. Align board recruitment with advocacy/network needs.
- **Alignment:** Do all this work in conversation and alignment with the government relations and/or external affairs staff.

## Sample Talking Points for Strategic Advocacy Partners

Government affairs teams and institutional communications staff should develop talking points that foundation boards and other advocacy partners can use to demonstrate the value and impact of the institution and make the case for specific policy positions. These might reference general data about the value of public higher education as well as institution-specific metrics. Following are some examples of talking points about higher education.

### 1. Economic Mobility and Return on Investment

**Public institutions award the most college degrees:** Sixty-seven percent of all bachelor's degrees conferred in the United States are from public universities and colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 318.50, "**Number of degrees/certificates conferred by postsecondary institutions, by control of institution and level of degree/certificate: Academic years 1970–71 through 2022–23**"). Forty-seven percent of first-in-family students graduate from public four-year institutions (FirstGen Forward, "First-generation College Students' Achievement and Federal Student Loan Repayment, Fall 2024").

**College pays over a lifetime:** Median lifetime earnings are roughly \$1.5 million higher for men and \$1.1 million higher for women with a bachelor's degree versus a high school diploma ([Georgetown University, \*The College Payoff\*, 2021](#)).

**Opening doors to dream jobs:** Degrees are pathways to meaningful work, stability, and purpose. Ninety-one percent of bachelor's degree holders are confident they are learning skills that will help them attain the job they want. ([Gallup–Lumina Foundation \*State of Higher Education 2025\*](#))

**Reducing the educational debt burden:** At graduation, the average student debt among public institution graduates is \$27,100, compared with \$33,800 at private nonprofit institutions.

### 2. Workforce, Civic, and Community Impact

**Financial contributions to society:** Over a lifetime, bachelor's degree holders contribute \$273,000 more in taxes and use \$82,000 less in government services compared with high-school graduates. They are more than twice as likely to volunteer and give three times more to charity ([How Do College Graduates Benefit Society at Large?, 2024](#)).

**Higher education pays for itself and more at the state level:** The Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) found that every dollar the state spends on public higher education increases tax revenues by \$3 in Utah ([USHE, \*Return on Investment of USHE Graduates: Individual and State Benefits of Postsecondary Education\*, 2018](#)).

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**Education and research in general pay for themselves:** From 1965 to 1990, more than one-third of U.S. growth was due to increased education attainment, and 40 percent was due to worldwide research (**Charles I. Jones, Stanford University, Sources of U.S. Growth in a World of Ideas, 1998**). More recently, public health funding is a strong example: every research dollar invested by the National Institutes of Health in fiscal year 2024 created \$2.56 in economic value—as well as contributing to public health (**United for Medical Research: A Powerful Return on Investment: \$2.56 Generated for Every \$1 Invested in NIH Research, March 2024**).

**Higher education boosts regional and state economies:** The *Wall Street Journal* found that counties with land-grant universities have significantly lower unemployment on average. In addition, they raise the incomes of non-graduates in the region (**Bob Davis, There's an Antidote to America's Long Economic Malaise: College Towns, Wall Street Journal, December 12, 2016**). Institutional economic impact reports are a great source of statistics and case studies highlighting the multiplier effects of public investment in higher education and the impact on students' lives.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. The Unique Value of Public Institutions

**Public university research changes the world:** Public institutions' research has provided breakthroughs including touch screens, lithium-ion batteries, antibiotic discoveries, improved crops, and the CRISPR gene-editing system (**APLU, How does public university research and community engagement benefit society at large?, accessed August 20, 2025**).

**Creating new career pathways for first-in-family students:** In 2019–2020, 26 percent of all undergraduates were first-generation students. 32.7 percent of undergraduates enrolled in public two-year institutions were first-generation, speaking to the value of public institutions creating opportunity (**Postsecondary National Policy Institute, First Generation Students in Higher Education, April 2025**).

### 4. What Your Institution Delivers

**Convey data points specific to your institution regarding:**

- Graduation and employment rates in desired degrees/fields: How does education directly lead to meaningful employment in needed fields?
- Impact on the local community, state, region, nation, and world:
  - Employment: What are the employment rates in the institution's county, and how does the institution contribute to employment? How many graduates stay in the same state or district?
  - Economic contribution: How has the institution created jobs and boosted the local economy? Has the institution's research led to impactful start-ups, patents, or technology?
  - Community enrichment: How does the institution contribute culturally to the community?
  - Service projects and volunteerism: How do students, faculty, staff, and graduates give back? How many volunteer?

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- Teaching/learning quality: What are the rates of student retention and graduation? What are the results of student learning assessments?
- Work-based learning: How many students are getting relevant work skills and experience? What are the employment rates of graduates?
- Innovation and research: What are some impactful examples of research the institution has developed? How much funding does the institution attract for research?
- Student success initiatives: How common is the use of high-impact practices such as first-year seminars, internships, undergraduate research, and capstones?

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## Sample One-Minute Script

*Higher education delivers lasting value for students and the public good. Bachelor's degree holders earn upward of \$1 million more over a lifetime, enjoy stronger job security, and have higher rates of homeownership, volunteerism, and contributions to charitable causes. They contribute more in taxes, rely less on public services, and gain skills that support career mobility and personal growth. For every dollar spent, education and research pay for themselves multiple times over, enriching the national and regional economies, boosting tax revenues, and promoting public well-being. Public institutions especially create more opportunity for first-generation students and burden them with less debt. Investment in higher education is an economic engine and a strategic asset; it is a win-win for students, business, government, and the public good.*

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## Sample Institution-Specific Talking Points

### Economic Impact

- \$XX billion generated in economic impact (FYXX)
  - [Breakouts by direct/indirect/induced impact]
  - \$1 out of every \$XX in the statewide economy
  - X percent of the state economy
- \$X billion in visitor and student spending impact

### Jobs and Employment

- XXX,XXX jobs created and sustained/supported
  - 1 out of every XX jobs in state
  - Nth-largest employer in state
  - X percent of the state's civilian labor force
  - X percent of the state's public school teachers are graduates
  - X percent of the state's health care workforce are graduates
  - X percent of first-in-family college students graduated from the university/system
- X percent of graduates (or alumni) stay in state to pursue careers and raise their families, generating ...
- XXX,XXX alumni earn \$ X billion in income for state

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## State and Local Tax Revenue

- \$ million generated in state and local tax revenue

## Research Impact

- \$X dollars of sponsored research funding were attracted by the university/system, generating
  - # Jobs tied to research
  - \$ million in state and local taxes from research activities
- \$ billion in economic impact

## Return on Investment

- For every \$1 in state funding received, university/system generates \$XX in economic impact returned
- Every \$X,XXX in state funding supports 1 job in state

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1. Foundation Board members should have access to and become familiar with the institution's economic impact report (typically produced by the external affairs or governmental relations office). These reports often offer infographics that capture key summary statistics regarding the institution's or systems' economic impact on a state/regional economy, employment and workforce impact, the return on investment of state support, state and local tax receipts, academic and medical research impacts, and in-state alumni, among other factors.

2. The Association of American Universities (AAU) and Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) offer guidelines on economic engagement frameworks and economic impact guidelines, December 2014, <https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU%20Files/Key%20Issues/Research%20Administration%20%26%20Regulation/AAU-APLU-Economic-Impact-Guidelines.pdf>. Representative examples of these reports include: University of Washington, <https://uw-s3-cdn.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2024/10/29155253/PSG-UW-Economic-Impact-Report.pdf>; University of South Florida, <https://www.usf.edu/about-usf/economic-impact.aspx>; Oregon State University, <https://leadership.oregonstate.edu/economic-impact>; University of Minnesota: <https://government-relations.umn.edu/sites/government-relations.umn.edu/files/2025-04/UMN%20E%26C!%20Report.pdf>.

## Related Resources

### Getting Into the Advocacy Game

**Kristin Hanson**

Higher education faces stiffer headwinds in public perception and larger threats to public funding than it ever has before. As such, foundation boards are finding themselves charged with helping to strengthen their institutions' relationships with local, state, and federal government officials.

**2025 • *Trusteeship* magazine, May/June 2025**

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### The Role of Advocacy and Community Relations for Foundation Boards

**Robert J. Nava and Lou Monville**

Institutionally related foundation boards provide a variety of support functions for colleges and universities. In addition to their fiduciary responsibility to manage the endowment and stewardship of its donors, directors also serve as advocates and ambassadors of the university.

**2024 • *Trusteeship*, magazine, May/June 2024**

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### Board Advocacy

This guide helps boards and leaders appropriately leverage their networks, volunteer status, and passion to impact policies and understand how board members can play a role in advocacy efforts.

**2021 • FAQ**

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### The Guardians Initiative: Advocacy Resources and Examples

**AGB**

This survey report and those that preceded it are intended to spark dialogue about the future of higher education governance, including board capacity and functionality. The report offers a comprehensive picture of independent, public, and institutionally affiliated foundation governing boards.

**Blog post • June 4, 2019**

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