

Rising to the Challenge: Strengthening board governance for the sake of higher education and its future

*A Three-Year Strategic Plan for the
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges*

2025-2028

Introduction

American higher education has long thrived under a system of board governance built on integrity, expertise, and independence.

In the 1819 Supreme Court case, *Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward*, Daniel Webster argued that the New Hampshire legislature had violated the contracts clause of the U.S. constitution by changing the college's charter. Ruling 5-1 for the trustees, the Court held that the college's charter qualified as a contract with which the state could not interfere. In doing so, it affirmed the sanctity of such charters and of institutional independence for colleges and universities.

Advocating for institutional independence has been central to the work of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) for more than 100 years. As the trusted source on higher education governance, AGB serves the sector and society broadly by championing and empowering good governance, helping boards understand and uphold their duties of care, loyalty, and obedience to their institutions' missions.

Today, as our colleges and universities are navigating political crosswinds, social unrest, and increasing scrutiny, the integrity of board governance has never mattered more. Independent governing boards are not symbolic structures; they are foundational to higher education's ability to serve the public good, safeguard academic freedom, and maintain mission-centered leadership through both crisis and calm.

The challenges for higher education are significant—among them are a decline in public trust in higher education and concern over the cost and perceived value of a college degree, as well as increasing fiscal strains and threats to foundational principles such as academic freedom; freedom of speech; and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Across a landscape of institutions of all sizes and types, with differing levels of resources and risks and distinct needs of students and other stakeholders, the work of governing boards is, indeed, complex and consequential.

It is the corresponding and urgent work of AGB to help governing boards lead wisely and advocate boldly. The time is now for AGB to once more assert its role as the authority on board governance—for the sake of higher education, a thriving democracy, and a flourishing society.

With the strategic vision we now articulate, we will do just that. Over the next three years, we will focus with renewed commitment and clarity on fulfilling our mission and advancing our vision. We will enhance our role in service to governing boards and ensure that AGB membership is indispensable to boards, executives, and board professionals; we will lead as a convener and a partner across higher education, leveraging AGB's unique position to better serve members and expand our positive impact. And we will organize and deploy our resources more efficiently and effectively while seeking new resources, fueling our ambitions in service to higher education and society.

As we do so, we will remain faithful to our core values as an association of innovation, integrity, inclusion, service, collaboration, and respect.

It is our privilege and our responsibility as AGB to support the stewards of higher education in advancing the public value of colleges and universities. The challenges of our day activate us, and the potential of tomorrow inspires us. We hope our vision for AGB likewise activates and inspires current, former, and would-be members; fellow associations and organizations; and existing and potential supporting partners. We invite you to join in our collective effort to ensure that higher education remains a powerful engine of opportunity and progress and contributes to a vibrant future for all.

Mission and Vision

Mission

AGB advances higher education as a public good by preparing college, university, and foundation governing boards to fulfill their fiduciary duties and exemplify the highest ideals of trusteeship.

Vision

Achieve excellence in all board governance and responsible trusteeship to empower vibrant higher education, inclusive democracy, and a flourishing society.

Our Strategic Aims

PILLAR 1

Strengthen AGB's Position as the Preeminent Authority on Board Governance

AGB will assert and enhance its role and become even more widely known as the authority on higher education governance. Quite literally: Governing is AGB's middle name.

OBJECTIVES

- Broaden AGB's governance research agenda.
- Create and elevate AGB thought leadership by producing new, timely, influential content and resources that shape the future of higher education governance.
- Build awareness of governance standards for thriving institutions and foundations.
- Strengthen AGB's brand identity beyond membership channels.

PILLAR 2

Ensure AGB Membership is Indispensable to Boards, Executives, and Board Professionals

AGB membership and its offerings will become recognized as essential to the success of governing boards, executives, and board professionals across the sector.

OBJECTIVES

- Extend the value of AGB membership to broader institutional leaders (i.e., cabinet members), ensuring continuing relationships with member institutions and foundations.
- Engage nonmembers in new ways that extend the value of AGB and support membership growth.
- Develop a consistent proactive/consultative approach to membership engagement.
- Develop new and innovative programs and services that address emerging governance challenges.

PILLAR 3

Lead as a Convener and Partner Across Higher Education

AGB will leverage its unique position to expand its role as convener and partner throughout higher education, serving members and expanding AGB's impact.

OBJECTIVES

- Develop strategies for engaging in statewide programs and regional compacts and networks.
- Develop and lead new convenings and play prominent roles in other higher education convenings.
- Create a comprehensive partnership strategy for engaging with corporations, foundations, and higher education associations and organizations.
- Serve as an incubator of governance initiatives for and with partners and members.

PILLAR 4

Optimize AGB for Sustainability and Growth

AGB will organize and deploy existing resources efficiently and effectively while seeking new resources to achieve its mission.

OBJECTIVES

- Assess and advance AGB's organizational readiness for evolution in support of strategic priorities.
- Evaluate and strengthen existing revenue sources and structures and diversify revenue streams to ensure financial sustainability and resilience.
- Complete AGB's Digital Transformation initiative and leverage technology in organizational innovation and in service to members.
- Optimize synergies between AGB and AGB Search.