

Engaging Governing Board Members as Strategic Advocates



Why do governing board members make good advocates?

Governing board members can be powerful advocates on behalf of their institutions or university systems and for higher education writ large. Board members are typically well-connected civic and business leaders who have a passion for the system's or institution's mission and deep ties to external stakeholders. These individuals are frequently experienced, politically savvy navigators who understand the policy landscape, and often interact with local, state, and federal elected officials. Trustees at independent colleges and universities are also among the most significant donors to their institutions, demonstrating their confidence and commitment to the purposes of higher education with their philanthropic investments. These attributes make system and institution board members potentially powerful champions for making the case for higher education as a compelling public good and a strategic asset—one that 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.

Governing board members may encompass a crosscut of political affiliations, including individuals who have supported policymakers on both sides of the aisle. They can be a powerful complement to the system's or institution's professional government relations teams and administrative staff, opening doors and bringing the credibility of leaders from economic and professional sectors outside of higher education.

What kind of advocacy should board members engage in?

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

Board members should be prepared to work closely with the system's or institution's chief executive and government relations team to be ambassadors on behalf of their system/institution(s), its mission(s), and its priorities. Helping the system or 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 may include them in meetings with policymakers where their relationships and their status as professional or philanthropic leaders can have the greatest impact.

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

Trustees can be powerful advocacy partners, but they should always work in close collaboration and strategic alignment with system or institution leaders. These leaders must educate board members about the public policy landscape, strategic priorities, and advocacy strategy; equip them with talking points; and set clear parameters regarding when and how board members can speak on behalf of the institution or system. Some institutions and systems 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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Systems and 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 work on behalf of the system or 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.

Elements of a Successful Advocacy Strategy

The chief executive and government relations staff should prepare board members for successful advocacy efforts by developing and operationalizing the following elements of a successful advocacy strategy.

A. Develop strategies and implementation plans.

- Identify board members who 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 advocacy strategy, and have a clear understanding of their appropriate roles.
- Provide talking points and other advocacy tools to enable 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 higher education more broadly.¹ The priorities and points of pride should include data on:
 - Student access and demographics;
 - Affordability and financial support;
 - Student success and outcomes;
 - Economic and workforce impact;
 - Institutional efficiency and value;
 - Community and civic impact;
 - Research and innovation outcomes; and
 - Institutional distinctiveness.

Institutions should orient 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.

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- Schedule and coordinate opportunities for board members to convene together with campus leaders and elected officials to discuss priorities and impact. Congressional recesses allow opportunities to bring members of Congress to campus for such conversations. Depending on the timing and seriousness of an issue, consider meeting members of Congress when in session in Washington, DC. Conversations with state legislators and members of the governor's staff (if not the governor) should occur not only when the higher education budget and appropriations are being determined but when opportunities present themselves throughout the calendar year.
- Understand the public policy environment and the challenges and opportunities it presents for achieving the institution's funding or policy priorities and fulfilling the institution's mission. For example, the policy environment may include the state's fiscal condition, the priorities of the legislative leadership, and the governor's state of the state address.
- Public institutions and systems should consider ways to engage foundation board members or other "grasstops" volunteers in advocacy efforts and develop a shared advocacy/public policy strategy. See AGB's [Engaging Foundation Board Members as Strategic Advocates](#).

B. Set the governance guardrails to clarify and coordinate advocacy efforts.

- All board member advocacy must proceed in concert with institutional leadership. It must avoid compromising board independence and institutional autonomy and avoid inviting undue external or ideological influence into university affairs. Emphasize that while we all fall somewhere on the political spectrum, the tone and content of educational advocacy meetings are always in support of higher education and the institution. Further, gathering individuals who represent varied points on the political spectrum but who align in support of higher education can leave a powerful impression on elected officials.
- Board orientation and ongoing guidance should underscore who is empowered to speak on behalf of the institution and for the board and provide guidance on how to address questions from stakeholders looking to them as representatives of the institution. Unless otherwise designated, the president speaks for the institution and the board chair speaks for the board. Special attention should be given to social media guidelines for board members regarding institution-related or system-related messaging on their personal and professional social media accounts.
- Institutional leaders, in concert with government relations or external affairs staff, set the advocacy plan and coordinate timing and messaging for all institutional and affiliated boards, including foundation and alumni boards.
- Institution staff should engage governing board members when developing advocacy agendas and strategy—they can contribute valuable perspectives that complement institutional or system interests and may have helpful perspectives on the factors influencing policymakers.
- Individual board members should never freelance or act incongruently with institutional priorities and strategy. Nor should board members pursue personal advocacy agendas or act independently of the chief executive and government relations staff lead. Board members should always act collectively and in the best interests of the institution/system, not as representatives of an appointing authority or a particular constituency internal or external to the institution. This includes any favoring of an academic department or the wishes of students, faculty or staff that run counter to university policy or the advocacy priorities that have been determined.

C. Define your advocacy audiences and make a specific plan for each.

- **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 or system with chambers of commerce, industry groups, and local leaders.
- **Storytelling and media:** Position selected trustees 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.

Special Considerations for University System Advocacy

The above principles and strategies also apply to system governing boards with a few differences and exceptions.

System governing boards oversee multiple institutions, and this responsibility can present special challenges when formulating a system advocacy plan. Systems vary in the degree of centralization, that is, the extent of central authority the system executive and system board exert over their constituent institutions. In addition, differentiated missions of research, regional, and even two-year institutions can complicate a system's advocacy efforts. Institutions with major athletic programs or with several members in the state legislature who are graduates may appear to have an edge in legislative debates.

System governing boards are simultaneously the board for the system writ large and the board for each individual institution in the system. This maxim is less true for those systems that have a two-tiered governance structure: a local institutional board with prescribed authority that co-exists with the "parent" system board. In any case, the advocacy of system board members, however deployed, must be fully in concert with the system executive and the system government relations officer. This is most critical when internally negotiating and approving a consolidated budget/appropriations request to be presented to elected leaders on behalf of all constituent institutions.

- During the budget process, all system trustees should voice support for the consolidated budget/appropriations request. It is a good practice for the system board chair (or designated board colleague) to be strategically involved, whether delivering testimony at a budget hearing or having pre- or post-hearing conversations.
- System board members with a member college or university located in their region or local community, or who may be a graduate of the flagship university, should feel comfortable speaking about the contributions and strengths of the institution and the value it brings to the community and the state. However, they must resist the temptation to think of themselves as constituent board members representing one institution over all others. These board members must refrain from showing any favoritism during conversations with elected leaders, especially during budget time. Their advocacy for the systemwide consolidated budget and other system priorities should extend to their local legislative delegation.

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- Any advocacy by an institution for a special appropriation request that benefits a single institution (which can admittedly result from a legislator's outreach) must not be made at the expense of another institution or the system's consolidated request.
- The capital budget for campus facilities is separate from the operating budget and may require state approvals beyond that of the system governing board. Institutions are known to make separate requests for buildings and renovations. The leadership of several systems will often tolerate separate requests for facilities if such requests result in an add-on to the capital funding request and are not at the expense of a consolidated request.
- Regarding state appropriations, for the several systems that have a local governing board within the overall system governing structure, it is incumbent upon the local board members, institution presidents, and institution government relations officers to advocate for the system's consolidated budget. Any institutional advocacy for special budget requests must not be made at the expense of other institutions or the consolidated request.
- Local governing boards within a system have a responsibility to champion their own institutions with local civic and business leaders and speak about the broad benefits of higher education that their institutions provide. They, along with college presidents, should also court local legislators, helping to build legislative support for systemwide advocacy goals that benefit all institutions—including their own—for operating funds and capital appropriations.
- In terms of Congress and support from the congressional delegation, the degree of leeway available to institution presidents and/or local governing boards with members of Congress may depend on the system's advocacy strategy. The system leadership should be informed ahead of time about advocacy efforts by single institutions in making requests of a member of Congress, but mature systems should recognize the need for a flexible policy. Administrators and key faculty of system research universities, for example, and their local institutional board members or local system board members residing in the same community should not feel constrained about going to Capitol Hill to advocate for a special funding request or for an agency's research budget.
- All board members affiliated with a college and university system should take every opportunity to advocate for increased federal funding for research, for categorial grant programs from the U.S. Department of Education, and for student financial assistance.
- Institution presidents and local system trustees or local board members must never surprise the system executive and system board regarding special requests of the governor, state legislators, or members of Congress without first informing the system president and system board chair. The saying "it's better to ask for forgiveness than ask for permission does not apply here.

Sample Talking Points for Strategic Advocacy Partners

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

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Higher Education Remains a Powerful Public Good

Higher education provides an individual benefit to all who pursue a degree. But equally, if not more importantly, higher education is a societal benefit that is driven by a shared investment by government and taxpayers on the one hand, and students and families on the other. This shared investment drives opportunity, prosperity, and progress that continues to serve as an engine of economic mobility, civic vitality, and societal advancement.

- Despite rising costs and skepticism, data consistently show that college remains one of the best investments for individuals and for society.
- College graduates earn higher lifetime wages, experience lower unemployment, and contribute more in taxes, civic engagement, and innovation.
- A more educated population supports economic growth, stronger communities, and greater social mobility, key outcomes aligned with higher education's mission.

Key Points—Higher Education as a Public Good

1. Economic Impact

- A college degree continues to yield strong returns—median annual earnings for bachelor's degree holders are roughly \$36,000 higher than those with only a high school diploma.
- In 2025, full-time workers age 25+ with a bachelor's degree earned \$1,754 per week, compared with \$953 per week for those with only a high school diploma ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025](#)).
- The unemployment rate for adults with at least a bachelor's degree remains around 3.3 percent, consistently lower than the national unemployment rate ([Federal Reserve Economic Data, 2025](#)).
- Between 2012 and 2022, for 25 to 34-year-olds working full-time, median annual earnings for bachelor's degree holders increased from \$60,300 to \$66,600 in 2022 dollars ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2023](#)).
- Median lifetime earnings are approximately \$1.5 million higher for men and \$1.1 million higher for women with a bachelor's degree than for those with only a high school diploma. ([Georgetown University, The College Payoff, 2021](#)).

2. Social and Civic Value

Institutions of higher education are engines of research, cultural development, and public service, addressing challenges in medicine and public health, climate, technology, and democracy.

- College graduates are more likely to vote, volunteer, and engage in community service, contributing to civic health and democratic vitality.

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- Over a lifetime, college graduates contribute \$273,000 more in taxes and use \$82,000 less in government services than those with only a high school diploma. ([Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2025](#)).
- Roughly 70 percent of college graduates participate in community groups, compared with about 48 percent of high-school-only graduates ([Pew Research Center, 2019](#)).
- The student voting rate in the 2020 general election was 66 percent, up 14 points from 2016, signaling growing civic engagement among college and university students ([Civic Nation, 2022](#)).

3. Equity and Mobility

Colleges and universities help narrow opportunity gaps and expand access to economic participation through targeted student success initiatives, advising, and affordability programs.

- Higher education remains a key pathway to upward social mobility, particularly for first-generation and low-income students.
- Ninety-one percent of bachelor's degree holders say their education equips them with skills that help them get the job they want ([Gallup–Lumina Foundation, *The State of Higher Education 2025*](#)).
- While employment among recent bachelor's degree recipients (ages 20–29) was around 69.6 percent in October 2024, long-term career and income outcomes remain consistently strong for degree holders ([Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025](#)).

4. Regional and National Competitiveness

A strong higher education sector ensures that the United States remains a global leader in science, technology, and democratic governance. Local and regional economies depend on robust higher education systems to attract employers, talent, and innovation hubs.

- University research drives discovery, from touch screens and lithium-ion batteries to antibiotics and CRISPR gene-editing technology ([Association of Public Land-grant Universities, 2025](#)).
- Every \$1 invested in National Institutes of Health (NIH) research generates \$2.56 in economic value and improved public health outcomes ([NIH—Direct Economic Contributions](#)).

5. 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?

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- Impact on the local community, state, region, nation, and world:
 - Employment and economic contribution: 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? How has the institution created jobs and boosted the local economy?
 - Innovation, research, and entrepreneurship: Has the institution's research led to impactful start-ups, patents, or technology? What are some impactful examples of research the institution has developed? How much government and private funding does the institution attract for research?
 - 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?
- Teaching/learning quality: What are the rates of student retention and graduation? What are the results of student learning assessments?
- Work-based learning and student success: How many students are getting relevant work skills and experience? What are the employment rates of graduates? How common is the use of high-impact practices such as first-year seminars, internships, undergraduate research, and capstones?

Sample One-Minute Script

Higher education delivers lasting value for students and the public good. Bachelor's degree holders earn upward of \$1 million to \$2 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. Colleges and universities create more opportunity for first-generation students and, through targeted financial aid, may reduce their debt burden. 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.

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

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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

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

1. Governing 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 system's 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.

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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

Engaging Foundation Board Members as Strategic 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.

2025 • Tool

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

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
