

Engaging Foundation Board Members as Strategic Advocates

Why do foundation board members make good advocates?

Foundation board members are frequently:

- Well connected civic and business leaders with deep ties to the institution which the foundation serves.
- Experienced, politically savvy navigators who understand the policy landscape, and often interact with local, state, and federal elected officials.
- Among the most significant donors to their institutions, demonstrating their confidence and commitment to higher education.

What kind of advocacy should board members engage in?

- Make the case for the value of higher education through informal advocacy in social or professional settings.
- Work closely with the institution and foundation government relations teams to be ambassadors on behalf of their institution, its mission, and priorities.

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

- Foundations should always work in close collaboration and strategic alignment with institution leaders.
- Institutions should brief foundation boards on public policy, strategic priorities, and advocacy goals; provide talking points; and clarify when and how members may speak on the institution's behalf.
- Dedicated advocacy committees can help integrate the advocacy function with the other work of the board.

Sample One Minute Script

Higher education delivers lasting value for students and the public good.

Bachelor's degree holders earn upward of a million dollars more over a lifetime, enjoy stronger job security, and have higher rates of home ownership, 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.

AGB

ADVANCING BOARD EXCELLENCE

DOWNLOAD THE FULL GUIDE

to access tips for building an advocacy strategy, guidelines for creating institution-specific talking points, and more.

Explore more resources at AGB.org/Advocacy



Sample Talking Points for Strategic Advocacy Partners

Economic Mobility & Return on Investment

- Public institutions award the most college degrees.
 - 67% of all bachelor’s degrees conferred in the United States were from public universities and colleges.¹
 - 47% of first-in-family students graduated from public four-year institutions.²
- Median lifetime earnings are roughly \$1.5M higher for men and \$1.1M higher for women with a bachelor’s degree vs. a high school diploma.³
- 91% of bachelor’s degree holders are confident they are learning skills that will help them attain the job they want.⁴
- At graduation, the average student debt among public institution graduates is \$27,100, compared to \$33,800 at private nonprofit institutions.

Workforce, Civic, and Community Impact

- Over a lifetime, bachelor’s degree holders contribute \$273k more in taxes and use \$82k less in government services compared to high-school graduates. They are more than twice as likely to volunteer and give 3.5x more to charity.⁵
- The Utah System of Higher Education found that every dollar the state spends on public higher education increases tax revenues by \$3 in Utah.⁶
- From 1965-1990, more than one-third of U.S. growth was due to increased education attainment, and 40% was due to worldwide research.⁷
- Every research dollar invested by the National Institutes of Health in FY2024 created \$2.56 in economic value—as well as contributing to public health.⁸
- Counties with land-grant universities have significantly lower unemployment on average. In addition, they raise the incomes of non-graduates in the region.⁹

The Unique Value of Public Institutions

- Public institutions’ research has provided breakthroughs including touch screens, lithium-ion batteries, antibiotic discoveries, improved crops, and the CRISPR gene-editing system.¹⁰
- In 2019–2020, 26% of all undergraduates were first-generation students. 32.7% of undergraduates enrolled in public two-year institutions were first-generation, speaking to the value of public institutions creating opportunity.¹¹

¹National 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”

²FirstGen Forward, “First-generation College Students’ Achievement and Federal Student Loan Repayment (Fall 2024)”

³Georgetown University, The College Payoff, 2021

⁴Gallup—Lumina Foundation State of Higher Education 2025

⁵APLU, How Do College Graduates Benefit Society at Large? 2024

⁶USHE, Return on Investment of USHE Graduates: Individual and State benefits of Postsecondary Education, 2018

⁷Charles I. Jones, Stanford University, Sources of U.S. Growth in a World of Ideas, 1998

⁸United for Medical Research: A Powerful Return on Investment: \$2.56 Generated for Every \$1 Invested in NIH Research, March 2024

⁹Bob Davis, There’s an Antidote to America’s Long Economic Malaise: College Towns, Wall Street Journal, December 12, 2016

¹⁰APLU, How does public university research and community engagement benefit society at large?, accessed August 20, 2025

¹¹Postsecondary National Policy Institute, First Generation Students in Higher Education, April 2025

DOWNLOAD THE FULL GUIDE
to access tips for building an advocacy
strategy, guidelines for creating
institution-specific talking
points, and more.

Explore more resources at AGB.org/Advocacy

