

Engaging Governing Board Members as Strategic Advocates

Why do board members make good advocates?

Governing board members are frequently:

- Well-connected civic and business leaders who have a passion for the system's or institution's mission and deep ties to external stakeholders.
- 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 (particularly trustees at independent colleges and universities), 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 system's or institution's chief executive and government relations team to be ambassadors on behalf of their institution or system, its mission, and priorities.

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

- Trustees should always work in close collaboration and strategic alignment with system or institution leaders.
- These leaders should brief trustees on public policy, strategic priorities, and advocacy goals; provide talking points; and clarify when and how board members may speak on the institution's or system'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 \$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 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.

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

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Sample Talking Points for Strategic Advocacy Partners

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.¹
- The unemployment rate for adults with at least a bachelor’s degree remains around 3.3 percent, consistently lower than the national unemployment rate.²
- 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.³
- 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.⁴

Social and Civic Value

- College graduates are more likely to vote, volunteer, and engage in community service, contributing to civic health and democratic vitality.
- 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.⁵
- Roughly 70 percent of college graduates participate in community groups, compared with about 48 percent of high-school-only graduates.⁶
- 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.⁷

Equity and Mobility

- 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.⁸
- 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.⁹

Regional and National Competitiveness

- University research drives discovery, from touch screens and lithium-ion batteries to antibiotics and CRISPR gene-editing technology.¹⁰
- Every \$1 invested in National Institutes of Health (NIH) research generates \$2.56 in economic value and improved public health outcomes.¹¹

¹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025

²Federal Reserve Economic Data, 2025

³National Center for Education Statistics, 2023

⁴Georgetown University, The College Payoff, 2021

⁵Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2025

⁶Pew Research Center, 2019

⁷Civic Nation, 2022

⁸Gallup—Lumina Foundation, The State of Higher Education 2025

⁹Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025

¹⁰Association of Public Land-grant Universities, 2025

¹¹NIH—Direct Economic Contributions

