

A DIFFICULT BALANCE

A project by
Public Agenda with
support from The
Kresge Foundation

DECEMBER 2015

Trustees Speak About the Challenges Facing Comprehensive Universities



**A Difficult Balance: Trustees Speak
About the Challenges Facing
Comprehensive Universities**

A report from Public Agenda by
David Schleifer, Carolin Hagelskamp
and Chloe Rinehart

Sponsored by The Kresge Foundation

Available online at:
[http://publicagenda.org/pages/
a-difficult-balance](http://publicagenda.org/pages/a-difficult-balance)

Copyediting: Lisa Ferraro Parmelee
Kathryn Masterson and John Immerwahr
assisted with the writing of this report.

Copyright © 2015 Public Agenda

This work is licensed under the Creative
Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-
ShareAlike 3.0 Unported license.
To view a copy of this license, visit
[http://creativecommons.org/licenses/
by-nc-sa/3.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) or send a letter to Creative
Commons at 171 Second Street, Suite
300, San Francisco, CA 94105, USA.

A DIFFICULT BALANCE

Trustees Speak About the Challenges Facing Comprehensive Universities

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	7
Finding 1: Finances	11
Finding 2: Student Success	21
Finding 3: Political Advocacy	29
Finding 4: Workforce	35
Finding 5: Presidents' Perspectives on Trustees	43
Implications	50
Methodology	53
Bibliography	56
Related Publications from Public Agenda	58
Acknowledgments	61
About Public Agenda Back cover
About The Kresge Foundation Back cover

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- What do trustees of comprehensive universities see as the biggest challenges facing their institutions?
- How are boards of trustees helping comprehensive universities address their financial challenges and meet goals for student success?
- What do trustees say about their boards' capacity to advocate with policymakers and connect comprehensive universities to regional employers?
- Where do trustees feel they add most value, and what would help them serve comprehensive universities better?
- How do the presidents of comprehensive universities view trustees' capacity to serve their institutions without micromanaging?

This research addresses these questions by examining the perspectives, experiences and needs of trustees of comprehensive universities, as well as the views held by the presidents of these institutions about their trustees.

Comprehensive universities—public institutions that offer four-year degrees to students drawn mostly from their regions—are the backbone of the American higher education system. In the fall of 2011, they enrolled 69 percent of all undergraduate students attending four-year public universities.¹

President Barack Obama has set a goal of making the United States once again the country with the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, meaning that eight million more young adults will need to earn associate's and bachelor's degrees by that date.² Comprehensive universities are crucial to meeting this ambitious goal. But they are trying to increase graduation rates among a changing student population at a time of historic declines in public funding and pressure to limit tuition increases.

Trustees of comprehensive universities are in a tough spot. They have governing authority over individual universities and, in many cases, over entire statewide systems of universities. They hire and fire university and system presidents, interact with state lawmakers and local business leaders and are charged with securing their institutions' futures. But

¹ Mark Schneider and K. C. Deane, eds., *The University Next Door: What Is a Comprehensive University, Who Does It Educate, and Can It Survive?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

² U.S. Department of Education, "Meeting the Nation's 2020 Goal: State Targets for Increasing the Number and Percentage of College Graduates with Degrees" (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

although some are elected, they are more typically volunteers appointed by governors. With limited expertise in higher education, they are supposed to help their institutions address challenges related to finances, student success and regional economic development without getting involved in day-to-day management.

To find out how trustees of comprehensive universities view their own capacity to serve their institutions, Public Agenda, with support from The Kresge Foundation, conducted confidential in-depth interviews with 42 trustees representing 29 boards responsible for governing a total of 143 four-year public comprehensive universities. Public Agenda also conducted confidential in-depth interviews with 45 presidents of comprehensive universities. More details on the methodology and sample characteristics can be found at the end of this report on page 53. The following, in brief, are our findings.

Finding 1: Finances

Trustees said finances are their top priority. But many trustees said they do not understand higher education finances well enough to help their institutions address budgetary challenges.

Nearly all the trustees we interviewed said their comprehensive universities are struggling with rising costs and declining state funding. Many said raising tuition is politically difficult and would contravene their institutions' missions by making them less accessible. But they also worried a lack of revenue is putting the quality of education at their institutions at risk. Many trustees wanted their institutions to operate more efficiently but said they do not understand higher education finances well enough to help accomplish that. They often felt overwhelmed by the volume of complex information given to them by administration and staff. Furthermore, some trustees worried they rely too much on administrators and staff to set agendas, frame problems, provide data and propose solutions. Some felt open meeting rules inhibit discussions about cost cutting. While many comprehensive universities are trying to fundraise, trustees said they need skills and training to help their institutions do so effectively.

Finding 2: Student Success

Trustees said they want their institutions to improve retention and graduation rates. But few trustees prioritized understanding the details of innovations that can support student success.

The trustees we interviewed were nearly unanimous in their view that comprehensive universities must focus on student success by helping students stay in college and earn their degrees. In practical terms, trustees typically saw their role as setting goals for improved retention and graduation, while leaving the details of how to achieve those goals to administrators, faculty and staff. They were not especially familiar with recent pedagogical innovations, such as competency-based education, that may require resource reallocation, new financial models and different roles for faculty and staff. Trustees of systems recognized that improving transfer for students between and across institutions is important and something they should be positioned to facilitate. But some expressed frustration with their limited ability to foster improved transfer and other forms of collaboration across institutions.

Finding 3: Political Advocacy

Trustees emphasized the importance of advocating with elected officials and other policymakers on behalf of their institutions. But many wanted help advocating more effectively and many criticized governors' appointments to boards.

Although the trustees we interviewed saw advocating for their institutions with elected officials and other policymakers as important parts of their role, nearly all stressed the difficulty of securing more funding in an era of overall lower budgets across state functions. Moreover, many trustees said they lack the skills and connections necessary to engage elected officials and policymakers effectively. Many maintained that governors and legislators do not choose wisely when appointing trustees and exert too much influence over those they do appoint.

Finding 4: Workforce

Trustees said comprehensive universities should be engines of regional economic development. But few trustees said they are actively helping their institutions connect to regional employers.

Preparing students for careers and meeting regional workforce needs are core aspects of comprehensive universities' missions, according to the trustees we interviewed. Most, however, seemed to let presidents and administrators take the lead on building workforce connections. Trustees of standalone institutions appeared more ready to facilitate connections between their institutions and regional employers than trustees of larger systems. Some trustees questioned whether their institutions are too focused on getting students jobs in the near term instead of considering the bigger picture of regional workforce planning. Several pointed out that comprehensive universities are themselves vital employers for their regions, making mergers or closures politically unfeasible.

Finding 5: Presidents' Perspectives On Trustees

Presidents of comprehensive universities said they contend with both disengagement and micromanagement by trustees. Some presidents said trustees do not fully understand their institutions' missions and therefore struggle to add value.

Presidents of standalone comprehensive universities seemed more able to find value in their boards and spoke about ways their boards have helped their institutions achieve goals, although at the risk of micromanagement. Presidents of comprehensive universities within systems talked about struggling to get their boards' attention and said trustees do not understand their institutions' missions well enough. Generally, presidents felt trustees need a better understanding of financial information, and administrators and staff can do a better job of presenting that information to trustees.

Implications in Brief

The following implications include what trustees told us could help them work more effectively and some of the key challenges they identified. More details on these implications can be found on page 50 of this report:

- **Address gaps in trust as well as gaps in information.**
Our research found trustees do not always trust the information they get from administrators and staff. Creating regular opportunities for trustees to engage in collaborative dialogue with institutional leadership and carefully framing and facilitating that dialogue can help build trust.
- **Provide trustees with orientations and peer-learning opportunities to help them understand and ask good questions about finances and other issues.**
Trustees told us they often feel overwhelmed by complex information and uncomfortable asking for help. Providing trustees with targeted information and creating time and space for them to ask questions could help them understand and serve their institutions better.
- **Empower trustees to engage in student success issues without overstepping.**
Presidents and senior administrators can do more to educate trustees about innovations in teaching and learning. Associations of trustees and of higher education institutions can do more to help trustees understand pedagogical innovations so they can be in a better position to guide comprehensive universities through conversations with internal and external stakeholders about student success.
- **Support trustees in advocating for their institutions with elected officials and policymakers.**
Trustees need to be able to advocate for their institutions with respect to transfer, financial aid and funding. This means they must be sufficiently informed about those policy priorities to discuss them with elected officials and policymakers.
- **Guide governors and legislators in appointing strong and capable trustees.**
Trustees and presidents told us that if boards develop mechanisms to identify gaps in their own skills and connections, they can be better positioned to advocate for new appointees who meet their institutions' needs.
- **Clarify for trustees how to help their institutions serve as engines of regional economic development.**
Trustees, who sometimes have significant business connections, could be positioned to help their institutions understand and meet regional workforce needs. But their roles should be specified and formalized as part of a broader institutional workforce strategy.
- **Grapple with the implications of discussing controversial issues in public.**
Having thoughtful, honest conversations about tough issues while ensuring the transparency of public institutions represents a challenge for higher education governance. Public universities, and the policymakers who determine how they will be governed, need to grapple with the implications of discussing controversial issues in public.



INTRODUCTION

The workhorse of American higher education. The undistinguished middle child. The university next door. These are all labels that have been given to four-year public comprehensive universities, which comprise one of the least understood sectors of higher education.

These institutions occupy a middle ground between two-year community colleges and the better-known flagship research universities. Comprehensive universities draw most of their students from their surrounding regions, offering four-year degrees that tend to be more affordable than those from private institutions and preparing students for professional careers in their states.

Comprehensive universities educate the majority of students attending America's four-year public universities—69 percent of all undergraduates in fall 2011. They enroll an even larger proportion of the nation's African-American and Hispanic students.³

President Barack Obama has set a goal of making the United States once again the country with the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, meaning that eight million more young adults will need to earn associate's and bachelor's degrees by that date.⁴ But the average graduation rate at comprehensive universities is 43 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education.⁵

Meanwhile, all sectors of American higher education, including comprehensive universities, face daunting financial challenges. Due to rising enrollment and limited increases in funding, higher education appropriations

per full-time equivalent student at public institutions were down 13 percent between 2009 and 2014 and down 24 percent between 1989 and 2014 when adjusted for inflation.⁶

Student populations are changing, too. From 1997 to 2011, enrollment of students ages 25 to 34 in all postsecondary degree-granting institutions increased 51 percent. Enrollment of students 35 and older increased 26 percent.⁷ In 2012, 27 percent of all undergraduates were employed full time, and another 39 percent were employed part time.⁸ In addition, Public Agenda's 2013 survey found that about 1 in 5 American adults without college degrees are thinking about going back to school to earn a credential.⁹

What roles can trustees of comprehensive universities play in this time of significant change and challenge?

Trustees of comprehensive universities are in a tough spot. They have governing authority over individual universities and, in many cases, over entire statewide systems of universities. They hire and fire university and system presidents, interact with state lawmakers and local business leaders and are charged with securing their institutions' futures. But although some are elected, they are more typically volunteers appointed by governors and approved by state legislatures. With limited expertise in higher education, they must help their institutions address challenges related to finances, student success

³ Schneider and Deane, *The University Next Door*.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, "Meeting the Nation's 2020 Goal."

⁵ Michelle Lu Yin, "Rethinking Student Outcomes: Constructing Predicted and Adjusted Graduation and Retention Rates for Comprehensive Universities," in Schneider and Deane, *The University Next Door*, 121–48.

⁶ State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, "State Higher Education Finance" (Boulder, CO: SHEEO, 2014).

⁷ William J. Hussar and Tabitha M. Bailey, "Projections of Education Statistics to 2022" (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

⁸ Center for Law and Social Policy, "Yesterday's Nontraditional Student Is Today's Traditional Student" (Washington D.C.: CLASP, 2015).

⁹ Carolin Hagelskamp, David Schleifer and Christopher DiStasi, "Is College Worth It for Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going (Back) to School" (New York: Public Agenda, 2013).

and regional economic development, without getting involved in day-to-day management. Finding the right ways to support their institutions without overstepping requires a difficult balancing act.

In 2011, Public Agenda’s qualitative research about trustees of both public and private institutions found most were focused on short-term challenges rather than the broader changes taking place in higher education.¹⁰ Since then, a lively debate has been

underway about the appropriate role of trustees. In 2014, the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) released reports calling for changes in how boards of trustees serve higher education institutions. Both organizations felt boards can do more to help institutions address critical challenges. But they had differing visions of what exactly constitutes the right role for boards.¹¹

THIS RESEARCH

To gain a perspective on how trustees themselves see their role and on the challenges public comprehensive universities face, Public Agenda, with support from The Kresge Foundation, conducted confidential in-depth interviews with 42 trustees representing 29 boards responsible for a total of 143 public comprehensive universities. We also conducted interviews with 45 presidents of comprehensive universities. The goal for our interviews was to elicit rich narratives and examples from trustees and presidents about their respective experiences with boards and the roles and responsibilities of boards in helping these universities address vital higher education challenges.

Interview participants were invited through a process that combined random selection from a comprehensive list of all trustees serving public comprehensive universities in 2014 (see the box below for how we defined “comprehensive university”) with selective targeting of specific governing boards and schools to ensure a group of research participants diverse

in age, gender, political ideology and race/ethnicity and representing a wide range of experiences, backgrounds, geographical locations and types of boards. We assured all interviewees of full confidentiality and arranged the conversations at times most convenient to them. Interviews were conducted by phone, recorded and transcribed. They were thematically analyzed by Public Agenda’s research team.

The qualitative nature of this research does not allow us to say exactly how common the issues discussed in this report are across trustees and presidents of all comprehensive universities. But the diversity of the samples, the confidentiality and depth of our conversations and the regularity with which issues came up across the interviews make us confident that this research captures some of the key challenges and concerns of these higher education leaders.

More details on the methodology and study sampling can be found at the end of this report on page 53.

¹⁰ John Immerwahr, Jean Johnson, Jon Rochkind, Samantha DuPont and Jeremiah Hess, “Still on the Sidelines: What Role Will Trustees Play in Higher Education Reform?” (New York: Public Agenda, 2011).

¹¹ Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, “Consequential Boards: Adding Value Where It Matters Most” (Washington D.C.: AGB, 2014); Benno C. Schmidt, “Governance for a New Era” (Washington D.C.: American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2014).

WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITY?

Comprehensive universities are not easy to define, and the distinctions between them and other types of institutions can be hazy.¹² For this reason, they are not easy for researchers to study or for elected officials or other policymakers to address. Some comprehensive universities are very large, serving 40,000 students, while others serve as few as 1,000 students. Some focus exclusively on undergraduate education, while others offer master's degrees or even a few doctorates. Some are historically black colleges and universities or other minority serving institutions. They are found in big cities, rural areas and suburbs.

For this research, Public Agenda relied on the Carnegie Classifications—the tiered system used to classify higher education institutions in the United States—to identify 374 four-year public comprehensive universities. We generated this list by first compiling the names of all public four-year universities that fall under the Carnegie Classification categories of “Master’s Colleges and Universities” (smaller, medium and larger), “Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences” and “Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields.” We then adjusted that list to exclude schools not considered comprehensive universities by the experts we consulted. Fryar used the same process for distinguishing comprehensive universities from research flagships, yielding a list of 384 comprehensive universities.¹³ Similarly, Schneider and Dean counted roughly 400 comprehensive universities based on the member institutions of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, which define themselves as public colleges, universities and systems that “share a learning-and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to underserved student populations and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions’ economic progress and cultural development.”¹⁴

As of fall 2014, the 374 comprehensive universities we identified were governed by 178 boards. We grouped these boards into four categories:

- A “standalone” comprehensive university is governed by one board that oversees only that one institution. We identified 104 boards that govern just one school, representing 28 percent of all comprehensive universities.
- A “flagship-satellite system” consists of one or more flagship research universities, as well as one or more comprehensive universities, and is governed by a single board. We identified 32 boards that govern flagship-satellite systems, representing 27 percent of all comprehensive universities.
- An “equal footing system” consists of multiple comprehensive universities without a flagship research university and is governed by a single board. We identified 10 boards that govern equal footing systems, representing 11 percent of all comprehensive universities.
- A “mixed system” consists of comprehensive universities, as well as varying combinations of other institutions, such as community colleges and one or more flagship research institutions, and is governed by a single board. We identified 32 boards that govern mixed systems, representing 34 percent of all comprehensive universities.

For more information about our process for selecting institutions to include in our sample, see the methodology section of this report on page 53.

¹² Nate Johnson and Gordon Davies, “Can Comprehensive Public Universities Implement Large-Scale Affordability Reforms?” (Washington D.C.: HCM Strategists, 2014).

¹³ Alisa Hicklin Fryar, “The Comprehensive University: How It Came to Be and What It Is Now,” in Schneider and Deane, *The University Next Door*, 19–42.

¹⁴ Schneider and Deane, *The University Next Door*, 131.



MAIN FINDINGS



FINANCES

Trustees said finances are their top priority. But many trustees said they do not understand higher education finances well enough to help their institutions address budgetary challenges.

Nearly all the trustees we interviewed said their comprehensive universities are struggling with rising costs and declining state funding. Many said raising tuition is politically difficult and would contravene their institutions' missions by making them less accessible. But they also worried a lack of revenue is putting the quality of education at their institutions at risk. Many trustees wanted their institutions to operate more efficiently but said they do not understand higher education finances well enough to help accomplish that. They often felt overwhelmed by the volume of complex information given to them by administration and staff. Furthermore, some trustees worried they rely too much on administrators and staff to set agendas, frame problems, provide data and propose solutions. Some felt open meeting rules inhibit discussions about cost cutting. While many comprehensive universities are trying to fundraise, trustees said they need skills and training to help their institutions do so effectively.

Finances are trustees' top priority.

The trustees we interviewed were nearly unanimous in identifying finances as their top priority and as the biggest challenge comprehensive universities face. Many expressed frustration with ongoing declines in state support and how they affect the quality of the programs comprehensive universities offer. One trustee said,

Finances is the first and foremost issue because to provide a quality education you have to have the resources in place. We've had a steady decline in support from the state for a number of years, and that continues to go in the wrong direction. When that's reduced, where do you pick it up? That's the primary challenge.¹⁵

– *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*



¹⁵ Quotations have been minimally edited for clarity.



Student Loan Application Form

Trustees said declining funding has also affected institutions' ability to maintain the physical structures of their campuses. One explained,

We're dealing with the incredible liability of old buildings throughout the system. In the past we've had the governor and the legislature pick up the tab for maintenance of these old buildings. The governor wants to stop that. What he wants is for trustees or the system to budget for maintenance within the regular allocation. That's huge, huge, huge. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

In the past, several trustees explained, comprehensive universities and other public institutions could balance shortfalls in state revenue by increasing tuition and fees. But many told us their legislatures and governors now have no appetite for tuition increases, with some imposing tuition freezes:

Raising tuition is something that the legislature and the governor do not look favorably on. The majority of our current trustees do not want to raise tuition. Therefore, what we're trying to do is see how we can use other income mechanisms to be able to literally subsidize the cost of educating the students that we are committed to, funding the best education possible. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

Furthermore, many trustees felt strongly that increasing tuition would make comprehensive universities less accessible to the students they should be serving. As one explained,

The regionals need to remain accessible and affordable. They need to demonstrate with metrics that they are responsive to the needs of their geographic area. It all comes down to money. We have to give a quality education with low tuition to a local population. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Several trustees felt quality would soon suffer at their universities, which they believed would have a negative impact on public perception of their institutions and threaten enrollment. One trustee asked,

At what point do you start a downward spiral, where the sense is that this isn't a thriving place, not a place you want to be? Schools can go up and down very quickly in the public mind if they don't sense that there's a good future for the school.

– *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Another felt that without more funding from the state or from tuition, institutions in the system he governs will be at risk of closure:

We have a legislature that has been cutting public funding for everything—prisons, universities, whatever—and at the same time, the politicians say we can't raise tuition. If you don't raise tuition and you don't have funding from the legislature, you start closing schools. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Trustees want their institutions to operate more efficiently.

The trustees we interviewed typically felt their comprehensive universities and higher education institutions in general must operate more efficiently to fulfill their missions of serving their regions and their students. This means they cannot do everything. As one put it,

Higher education has really got to get serious about prioritizing. They should focus on cutting costs from the things they don't do well. Education has never been in this position of having to think like a business. We don't like it but we have to do it.

– *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Some trustees praised the systems and institutions they govern for the hard work of tackling inefficiencies:

The institutions have done a good job of finding efficiencies and making these cuts work. Maybe in some ways we were bloated, had some programs that were not financially viable. Chancellors have done exceptional work in finding efficiencies.

– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

But many trustees criticized their institutions and higher education in general for being too resistant to cutting programs, courses and administrative services that do not serve students well. According to one,

I keep asking, why are we funding this right here? We need to feed the needs of the things that have potential. The things that are dying on the vine, prune them. But people in higher education say, "Oh, no, you can't take my baby."

– *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Trustees often expressed frustration with the slow pace of change and the politics that influence those decisions at their institutions, particularly given the challenges comprehensive universities currently face. One trustee said,

People embrace the slow speed of higher education, which doesn't make sense in a market that is under attack with rising costs and the burden of student debt.
– *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Despite their frustrations, none of our interviewees rejected the concept of shared governance with faculty. Many trustees were careful to point out that shared governance helps guarantee quality. But they were acutely aware of how it can slow the pace of change. One told us,

One of the most difficult issues for new board members to grasp is the complexity of shared governance, that faculty definitely should be listened to, and that it takes longer to make decisions because of that. It's slower than what you might find in the corporate world. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

From the perspective of some trustees, unions and university politics can also be sources of frustration:

I come out of business environments where one acts with speed, with clarity, with purpose, with precision. I find that in the university environment, because of union relationships or political relationships, change is very difficult to effect. From a board point of view, it is frustrating. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*



Trustees face steep learning curves in understanding higher education finances.

Many of the comprehensive university trustees we interviewed have careers in business, banking and law. They often told us they understand financial models well enough in their own fields but do not understand higher education finances as well. One trustee explained,

Board members need financial acumen. Even in the corporate world, we rely on our financial or audit committee to understand the financials of the organization. But it is incumbent for every board member to understand the financials of the organization, and I mean truly understand the financials of the organization.

– *Trustee of a standalone institution*

In our interviews, many trustees emphasized the size and complexity of the institutions and systems they govern, some of which include not only multiple comprehensive universities but also hospitals, flagship research universities and community colleges. Many systems and institutions negotiate labor contracts with multiple unions. Getting a full understanding of all the parts of the budget and costs, therefore, is difficult. A typical trustee said,

I don't feel like we have a good handle on the entire budget or the actual spending related to revenues and expenses. I'd like to see an in-depth financial review of the university system. That's one of my top priorities. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Trustees feel administrators and staff give them too much and too complex information.

Many trustees praised administrators and staff as highly capable professionals who are insulated from the political pressures they themselves can face. But many also said presidents, administrators and staff present financial information in ways that are difficult for them to understand and too voluminous:

We get a lot of stuff the staff generates, but so much of it is so technical. As a volunteer board, and most of us are very busy people, we do not—excuse me—I do not read every page of these 20- and 30-page things we get from the staff.

– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

In a recent AGB survey, nearly 65 percent of board professionals at private, public and for-profit higher education institutions reported an increase in requests for information from their boards.¹⁶ But the trustees of comprehensive universities whom we interviewed said they want information to be presented differently. One said,

We are not doing a very good job, training administrators and the staff to understand what is the right information that boards need. There is a tendency to just dump a ton of information. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

¹⁶ Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, "Survey of Board Professionals" (Washington, D.C.: AGB, 2015).

Yet many trustees acknowledged they depend on administrators and staff for information. One trustee said,

We're extremely dependent on the administration and campuses for information. The board oversees a monstrous entity. If it were a private company it would compare to the largest corporations in the world. Almost all board members have full time jobs. We're not experts in the areas where we make decisions.

– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Many trustees expressed concerns that the information they get from staff and administrators does not always give them the full picture of what they're discussing, however. Several wished they could get information and analysis independent of their institutions. One said,

There's inevitably a certain amount of spin or strategy. It's very, very hard for the board to get accurate information about the decisions we have to make. It's the biggest shortcoming of the board that we don't have a professional staff capable of analysis that works just for us. We have only the staff of the system, which is the same entity that is asking us to make the decision about them.

– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Another pointed out that this lack of trust is common among trustees at other higher education institutions. He recalled attending a national conference where his fellow trustees largely agreed that,

The staff likes to treat you like mushrooms: keep you in the dark and shovel you with manure. They just want to tell you here's a stack of papers and you don't need to read it all, just look, here's what we think you ought to do. If the trustees don't read it all—and these are busy people – a lot of times they're saying okay, I'll go with the staff recommendation. Sometimes some of us read and get into it. Then the staff says "uh-oh" and gets all worked up, because it becomes much more difficult and they don't run the show. The inmates shouldn't run the prison.

– *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Trustees did not only fault administrators and staff, however. Several said they and their fellow board members are often unwilling to admit they do not understand financial information, particularly in open public meetings. One trustee explained,

It's up to management to present the financials differently and in ways that are understandable to the board members. And the board members have to step up and say they need it explained in a different way or to admit that they do not understand. That's hard when there are reporters in the room, cameras running, and it's a public meeting. They should be saying, "I don't understand."

– *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Trustees feel administrators and staff exert too much control over boards' agendas, and open meetings make discussions of cost cutting difficult.

Trustees were concerned not only about the volume and complexity of the information they get from administrators and staff, but about perceived limitations on what they can discuss in meetings. Several felt administrators and staffs exert too much control over boards' agendas, limiting their capacity to govern. One described agenda setting by administrators and staff as "manipulation." As a result, another explained, boards often cannot have discussions about the most important and most difficult issues or those that could bring significant changes to their institutions:

A lot of times boards are left with making small choices, it's all small ball because of the bigger issues, the control is retained by the institutions because of the hoops and hurdles that have been woven around discussion of those issues ever taking place.

– *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

Many trustees also felt requiring board meetings to be public and open stifles discussions about difficult topics. Several said they too often end up talking about raising tuition and revenue instead of cutting costs, which, they suspected, is too threatening to administrators and staff. Others said it is difficult to consider thorny issues such as personnel, faculty workload and tenure fully because they are too sensitive to discuss and deliberate over in public meetings. One trustee explained,

The board seems to operate under a lot of restraints, some of which have been created by the challenge of deliberating in a public setting, others by the need of the staff and the administration not to lose too much control over many of the sensitive matters which we are dealing with. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*





Trustees pointed out that discussing cost effectiveness is particularly difficult in open meetings attended by journalists:

One of the things that presidents don't want to talk about at open meetings is cost effectiveness. As soon as you start talking about it, the press treats it as though you've already made those decisions. Then you get people all stirred up and the legislature all stirred up and you haven't even done anything yet. And then presidents respond by doing things behind closed doors instead. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Several described what it feels like to be on their side of the table during these types of open meetings:

It's difficult for board members to handle conflict. If you're in a room at the university and you have 400 people there that are all paid by the university system, that all are supporting everything that's being presented, it's pretty difficult to speak out against that. You feel like you're the odd man out. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Trustees worry about rubber stamping.

Given their difficulties in understanding higher education finances and their dependence on administrators and staff, many of our interviewees felt they too often rubber stamp administrators' proposals without really understanding them or adding much value. One trustee said,

We pretty much rubber stamp 95 percent of what the staff brings. Every once in a while some board member will raise a question, but then the staff pretty much justifies what their recommendation is. That's the bottom line.
– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Another said,

I worry that we're just too much of a rubber stamp, that we're not informed enough and we're not active enough. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board.*

Several trustees admitted they and their fellow board members do not take enough time to be more active, creating the appearance of oversight without actually governing:

People don't want to invest the time to review a lot of materials. They would rather get a Cliffs Notes summary presented to them at the meeting and then rubber stamp it after a couple comments and minor tweaks. It provides the appearance of oversight, but is not actually oversight. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Fundraising poses a challenge for comprehensive universities.

In a recent AGB survey, fundraising was the area in which the largest proportion of trustees of public colleges and universities (not exclusively comprehensive universities) reported that their boards are under-engaged. However, the proportion of public institution trustees who reported that their boards are under-engaged in fundraising was 57 percent in 2014, compared to 71 percent in 2011.¹⁷ Many of our interviewees said fundraising is a new and challenging area for the boards of comprehensive universities, which have less experience soliciting gifts and fewer wealthy alumni than research universities or private institutions:

When it comes to fundraising, we don't have the resources to have a lot of folk who are out there raising money for us. That requires a lot of planning. That's one area that we need training in. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Some of the comprehensive universities where we interviewed trustees also have foundation boards separate from governing boards that are dedicated solely to fundraising. But, generally speaking, trustees tended to see fundraising as primarily the responsibility of presidents, chancellors and their staffs. One explained,

Board members open the door to fundraising opportunities, but it is the staff who make it happen. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*





STUDENT SUCCESS

Trustees said they want their institutions to improve retention and graduation rates. But few trustees prioritized understanding the details of innovations that can support student success.

The trustees we interviewed were nearly unanimous in their view that comprehensive universities must focus on student success by helping students stay in college and earn their degrees. In practical terms, trustees typically saw their role as setting goals for improved retention and graduation, while leaving the details of how to achieve those goals to administrators, faculty and staff. They were not especially familiar with recent pedagogical innovations, such as competency-based education, that may require resource reallocation, new financial models and different roles for faculty and staff. Trustees of systems recognized that improving transfer for students between and across institutions is important and something they should be positioned to facilitate. But some expressed frustration with their limited ability to foster improved transfer and other forms of collaboration across institutions.

Trustees see student success as central to comprehensive universities' missions.

The trustees we interviewed were nearly unanimous in emphasizing the importance of student success, which they saw as central to the missions of their institutions and the work of their boards. One told us,

Everything we do needs to focus on the students' experience, the product and the affordability. – Trustee of a mixed system board

Several said focusing on retention and graduation had only recently replaced a focus on enrollment. One said,

The focus is on completion and success, whereas in the past we were compensated by the number of people that typically enroll, whether they completed or not. – Trustee of a mixed system board





Several trustees reported they were shocked to learn when they were first appointed how low their institutions' graduation rates were. Many acknowledged going through a learning curve as they realized their own experiences as "traditional" 18- to 22-year-old college students were different from those of many students who attend comprehensive universities. Many of the students attending the institutions they govern have jobs, children and family responsibilities that can make it difficult for them to graduate in four years. One trustee explained,

Trustees may have good intentions but they probably didn't get their degrees in our system. Trustees draw on their own college experiences and don't understand that these students are different, often working, still discovering themselves, can't necessarily finish in four years, need time to figure out what they want to do. They need to have it explained to them that our system is different, the students are different, and the universities are not research-one institutions.

– *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

As of 2013, at least 27 states had experimented with some form of performance funding, which ties institutional funding to outcomes such as student retention and graduation rates¹⁸ and can create challenges for engaging campus stakeholders.¹⁹ But many trustees expressed frustration that federal authorities do not count students who transfer or take more than six years to graduate toward an institution's graduation rate. A trustee who described her institution's student population as "very nontraditional" said politicians and the public see low graduation rates at her institution but do not understand the challenges facing those students:

They see a six-year graduation rate from people who have children, have other obligations, so they're not able to finish in four or five years, where six years might be the standard. It might take a little longer to finish. That hurts us as an institution.

– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

¹⁸ Kevin J. Dougherty and Vikash Reddy, "Performance Funding for Higher Education: What Are the Mechanisms, What Are the Impacts?" *ASHE Higher Education Report* 39, no. 2 (2013).

¹⁹ Alison Kadlec and Susan Shelton, "Outcomes-Based Funding and Stakeholder Engagement" (Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation, 2015).

Even so, she and other trustees said they want to increase the number of nontraditional students at their institutions and to meet those students' needs better. They cited more flexible course options and online education, improved customer service, advising and counseling as ways to serve not only nontraditional students but all students better.

Trustees set goals for student success but leave the details to administrators, staff and faculty.

Trustees typically said their role in improving retention and graduation rates is not hands on but involves setting goals and hiring presidents who can achieve them. Nearly all of those we interviewed spoke about the importance of not micromanaging academics. According to one trustee,

The board does not manage the day-to-day operation of the university. The board's role is in identifying what the priorities are and in holding the administration accountable for achieving those priorities. The board has made it a priority of the chancellor to understand how many of our kids are completing and in what time frame and what are the obstacles to that and coming up with solutions. We're not implementing the day-to-day strategies. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Another board member expressed a similar sentiment:

We tell presidents what to do. We don't tell them how to do it. Our job is to set them all up, and their job is to implement it. We direct the chancellor to come to us with metrics for each institution so that the presidents will understand what they're required to do and will have the yardstick that's necessary to measure their success or failure. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Several trustees said they do not set specific targets for increased retention or graduation, but instead ask presidents what their current graduation rates are and direct the presidents to increase them. One said,

There is no set goal to reach, but just to increase it. The board's role is to encourage management, but the last thing I want to do is get involved in directing how retention should be facilitated. The management are the professionals, and we should be encouraging them and letting them do their jobs. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Many trustees said their most important task was hiring student-centered presidents. According to one,

We as a board have to make it very clear to whomever we chose as president that student success is high on our radar, and we're going to hold them accountable for increased retention, implementing programs to not only recruit but to retain students. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Trustees of systems said they try to improve transfer.

When students cannot transfer credits between institutions, their time and money and taxpayers' money are wasted. Easing transfer can, therefore, reduce students' frustration and help them complete their degrees.²⁰ Strengthening transfer pathways from community colleges to comprehensive universities has the potential to help low-income students earn degrees, expand enrollment in comprehensive universities and minimize costs to students and taxpayers.²¹ Trustees of systems described pushing for improved transfer from two-year institutions and among four-year institutions. Several expressed frustration that it had taken so long to make such improvements. One said,

We've struggled with course transfer, and I don't say this with a great deal of pride. But we're making a lot of progress from where we started.
– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Some trustees said they have been able to improve their systems' transfer function after considerable effort. One said the system his board governs has managed to make progress on transfer only because of pressure from elected officials:

The legislature is watching us. They have passed legislation asking for this kind of accountability as well in respect to transfers, for example, for community colleges to our system. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

Several trustees expressed the belief that faculty members view community colleges as not rigorous enough and therefore resist transferring credits from them to comprehensive universities. Observers have noted that while community colleges prize open access and transfer, four-year universities tend to value selective admissions.²² A trustee in a system that includes both comprehensive universities and community colleges said,

After a long time, we developed a protocol with a community college system where people can transfer more easily. Putting people in the community college system is not a dead end. If they learn and come over back into the university system, they can get that four-year degree. It's much less expensive, and they get more attention at the community college level to bring themselves up to where they need to be.
– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Trustees said transfer must be a system-wide priority, despite differences among institutions within systems. According to one,

Regionals and community colleges have distinct missions that should be preserved. But there is a system-wide mission to graduate more students for the individual benefit of the students and the benefit of the state. And to make it possible for students to move smoothly from community colleges to the regionals. The goal of developing and preparing an educated workforce cuts across the whole system.
– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

²⁰ Alison Kadlec and Mario Martinez, "Putting It All Together: Strengthening Pathways Between Comprehensive Universities and Community Colleges," in Schneider and Deane, *The University Next Door*, 69–92.

²¹ Davis Jenkins, Alison Kadlec, and James Votruba, "The Business Case for Regional Public Universities to Strengthen Community College Transfer Pathways (with Guidance on Leading the Process)" (Washington DC: HCM Strategists, 2014).

²² Stephen J. Handel and Ronald A Williams, "The Promise of the Transfer Pathway" (New York: The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2012).

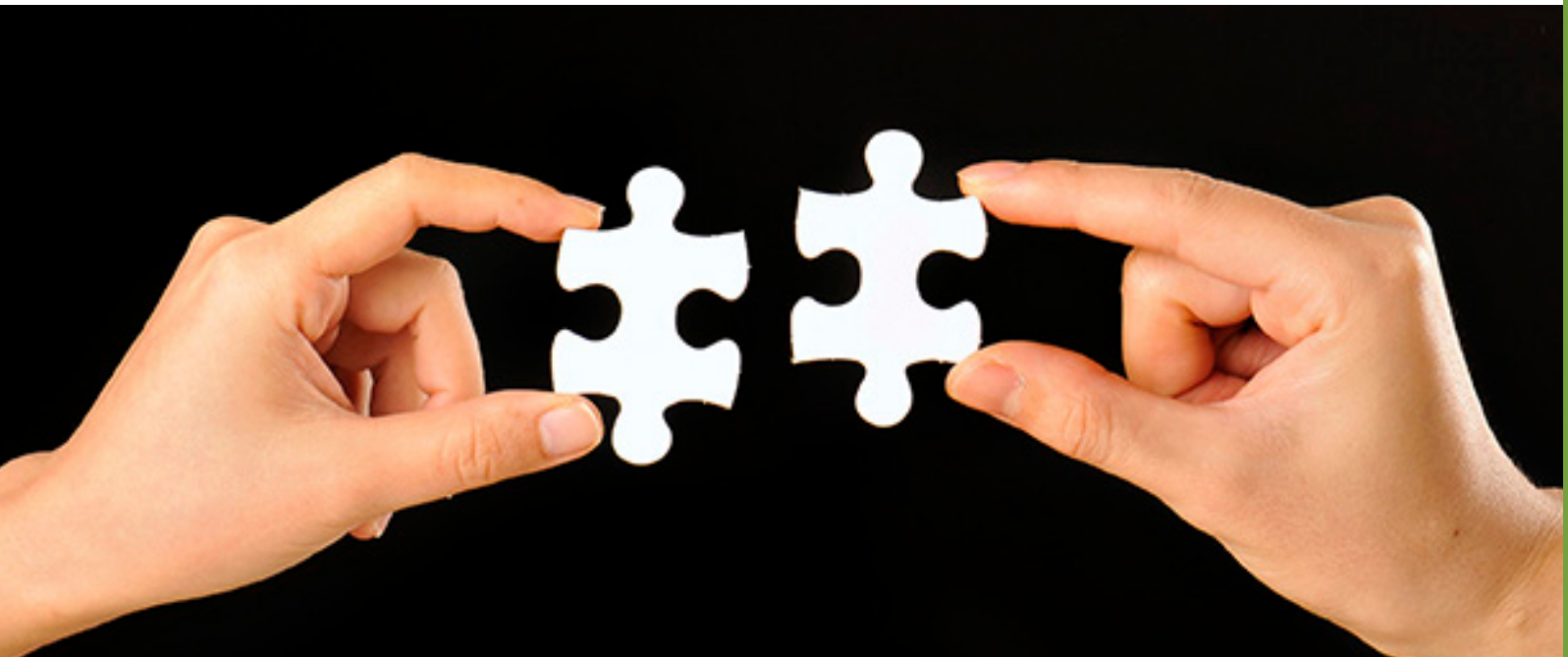
Improving transfer is difficult because collaboration in general is difficult.

For trustees of systems, the challenges of improving transfer are part of a larger problem of fostering system-wide collaboration and strategy. A trustee of a statewide system described the challenge of pushing for collaboration while avoiding micromanagement:

We expect cooperation between campuses, and they don't always do it. They sometimes have tunnel vision about what they're doing, and they have a sister institution that can help. All you can do is suggest. You can't make them do anything, but we sometimes see things that they might not. We would encourage them while not managing their lives. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Several trustees said part of their role should be to set expectations for collaboration across systems, not just on transfer but also on decisions such as which institutions should offer which programs and on sharing business functions and information technologies. Several saw that type of collaboration as a way to offset declining state funding. For example, said one,

The fact that we have several regional comprehensives has the advantage that they can learn from each other, in terms of management and other issues. The board can support that. The state appropriations for these campuses are woefully inadequate. So they have to be strategic and we at the home office provide a bunch of resources and smart people to help them be strategic. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*



But many of the trustees we interviewed expressed frustration with a lack of system-wide thinking and with ongoing competition among institutions. A typical complaint was:

Schools are all competing with each other, and no one has oversight. There is no plan in the state. There are too many schools vying for too few students. There is no set agenda. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Several trustees explained that fostering collaboration on transfer and other issues can be difficult because comprehensive universities in systems see themselves as separate institutions competing for students, funding and attention rather than as partners working toward one goal:

Part of our problem is that for years, the colleges' main competition was each other. And we've really tried to move away from that in the past ten to fifteen years so that each college is somewhat unique and is not just trying to compete with the other schools, by forging a culture and identity at each college.
– *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

Some trustees felt institutions resist collaboration because they are worried they will lose their identities and ultimately be merged with other universities. One said,

I think there's a fear between some regional schools. If they collaborate too much, they may lose their identity or may be up for consideration for a merger of the schools at some point. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Trustees spoke positively about institutions playing up their strengths in specific fields, such as tourism or agriculture, but they recognized differentiation can make it more difficult to cut or reduce programs. According to one,

Looking at programs is important to make sure that each school is offering programs that make sense to offer. The question of whether or not every school needs to offer every program needs consideration. But closing or merging campuses is politically and practically unrealistic. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Some trustees said they sometimes have to remind their peers on their boards that they represent the entire system, not one particular school. Some said this type of system-wide thinking can be particularly difficult for trustees with ties to specific parts of their state, such as trustees who are also state legislators representing districts where a comprehensive university is located.

Trustees know little about competency-based education.

When we asked trustees about the specifics of academic innovations or other student success initiatives at their institutions, many said they and their fellow trustees are not actively part of conversations about academics. When we asked about competency-based education, for example—a flexible way for students to get credit for what they know and by learning more at their own pace—one trustee told us,

Our board is, in my opinion, fairly weak in terms of academic oversight. We understand what this is about and understand the importance of it, and where the risks and opportunities are, but I have not seen that discussed at the board level. Our administrators are handling that, and they tell us about it, but they don't so much bring us into the conversation. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Another trustee framed competency-based education as an issue mostly for students who transfer from other institutions' competency-based programs. He said this has required his institution to convince faculty to accept competency-based credits as part of transfer agreements:

A lot of what we get with those students coming from two-year institutions is competency-based. It's not based on hours in the classroom, and that's one of the things that we've had to convince staff that's as valuable as what might have taken place those first two years, we can still build on that. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Trustees value online education, but several said it cannot substitute for classroom learning.

Online learning or blended online and classroom learning were not new to the trustees we interviewed. They tended to see online education as a normal part of what a comprehensive university should be providing. One told us,

Online should absolutely be a strength of a regional comprehensive. If you can deliver course work in a more convenient and accessible fashion, you are filling a higher education need in our regional market. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Trustees understood that many students who attend comprehensive universities have lives and responsibilities besides college, so many saw value in creating more online courses and programs for them. One said,

We are getting more nontraditional students, people who are going back to school as a career change, mothers who are now coming back to finish their education. I think for people like that, who have a working life, online education is going to be a real savior. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Several trustees, however, felt online learning cannot substitute for interactive, in-person classroom learning:

We learned that online education has not had quite the impact on four-year institutions that we thought it would have. Students want to be on campus and touch and feel where they learn. That does not mean that online education is not part of the future, and it is, but a much larger group want to be on campus. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*





POLITICAL ADVOCACY

Trustees emphasized the importance of advocating with elected officials and other policymakers on behalf of their institutions. But many wanted help advocating more effectively and many criticized governors' appointments to boards.

Although the trustees we interviewed saw advocating for their institutions with elected officials and other policymakers as important parts of their role, nearly all stressed the difficulty of securing more funding in an era of overall lower budgets across state functions. Moreover, many trustees said they lack the skills and connections necessary to engage elected officials and policymakers effectively. Many maintained that governors and legislators do not choose wisely when appointing trustees and exert too much influence over those they do appoint.

Trustees try to advocate for more state funding.

Preserving remaining levels of state funding or trying to make the case for increased funding were top priorities for our interviewees. Nearly all said states have cut funding or left it flat at comprehensive universities as operating costs continue to rise. The few interviewees in states that have increased investments in higher education were worried about future cuts. One put it plainly:

States have to come back to the table and meet their moral responsibility. Education is a constitutional requirement and the states are not living up to this requirement.

– *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Many trustees said they find it difficult to secure funding in an era of lower budgets for all state functions, not just higher education. One told us bluntly,

The turkey gets cut pretty thin. We get their attention but we don't get their votes.

– *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Many saw the loss of funding as a threat to their institutions' quality and accessibility. Some saw it as a threat to their institutions' very existence. They acknowledged comprehensive universities can no longer take their funding for granted and must now prove they deserve public money. One said,

If we're going to continue to exist as a state university, as state-funded universities, we're going to have to continue to sell our product to those who control the funding.

– *Trustee of a standalone institution*





Trustees varied in how much advocacy they engage in and how they rate their advocacy skills.

Trustees differed in how much advocacy they reported doing and in how connected they reported feeling to public officials. Some described playing fairly active roles with elected officials. According to one,

A lot goes through the state commissioner of higher education. But we are the highest profile body in the state. We are on the front line, testifying for the budget, and having conversations with policymakers. It's not daily contact and tracking bills or lobbying, but we are part of the public face of this activity. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Some trustees explained that any advocacy they undertake occurs in collaboration with other stakeholders within the university system. They described their institutions as building coalitions among students, faculty and staff and with other institutions to seek state funding and advocate on other policy issues. But many interviewees reported system chancellors, university presidents, administrators and staff take the lead on coalition building and on advocacy with elected officials and other policymakers. Some said they are not involved at all in advocating for the institution with elected officials. One trustee said,

If the government relations person needed help and would ask the board, we would help, but we have not been asked. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

This struck some trustees as a missed opportunity. As one explained, delegating advocacy to their institutions' government relations offices makes sense, but relationship building by the trustees themselves is also important:

Individual trustees or individual committees on the board could have conversations with our legislators and our governor. That has really been delegated to our government liaison person. That's fine to an extent, but it doesn't replace real relationships between the people at the university who are in that top leadership position—the board—and people in the legislature. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Trustees also described feeling unsure of how to reach out to legislators. They said they do not know how to build those relationships or how to engage in the advocacy required of them:

There is an idea that board members will advocate for the system in the legislature, but they don't know how to do that. It's just "go talk to your legislator" but you don't know how they do it or what they actually say to their legislators. How should they approach legislators? – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Trustees encounter elected officials who are skeptical of higher education institutions.

Trustees often criticized their institutions for what they perceive as inefficiency and waste. But many reported hearing similar criticisms from elected officials and policymakers, who see higher education systems as bloated. One trustee said,

A big part of our job is to try to convince legislators that we do run an efficient system. Our job is to try to establish a trust and convince them that you have elected this board to operate the university system and you need to trust us and let us do our job.
– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Some trustees told us that neither they nor their institutions have provided good answers to elected officials' questions about student outcomes or how money is spent. This makes it harder for them to ask for more money or otherwise advocate for the institutions' needs. One said,

I think there are some people in the legislature that are asking questions that we're not answering well about cost, value, the escalating costs of higher education. The answers haven't been as good as I would like to see them. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

One trustee told us elected officials are fed up with institutions' low graduation rates:

What has happened is that many of them have lost patience with the institution. So the politicians push the board and the board pushes back. They're looking at outcomes and graduates and they say that they are putting in lots of money and not seeing the results that they are looking to see. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Another complained that officials in state government don't recognize how hard the university system has worked to make cuts and find efficiencies, saying,

Many people think our institutions don't cut enough programs, but actually they do cut a lot. But the perception has become reality in some people's minds, no matter how much data we produce about the number of programs institutions have cut. And then the legislature might ask for something crazy, like a 10 percent across the board cut in the number of programs. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Several trustees claimed elected officials do not understand how much higher education benefits their states economically by meeting workforce needs, attracting employers and creating jobs. One complained about lack of understanding as part of an overall adversarial relationship between her institution and her state's political leaders:

We've had a governor who really has not wanted to put public support into our land-grant institutions. That creates an adversarial relationship. You need to protect those resources, but that is not the same as having a collaborative relationship where it is well understood that the university is a major economic driver. For every dollar of state money that goes into the university, that is returned five or tenfold in very real economic value within the state. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Many trustees framed their advocacy work as a matter of educating elected officials about the benefits of investing in higher education in general. A trustee who is also an elected official described trying to explain to his fellow elected officials the difference between his state's research university and its comprehensive universities. He explained,

We're great schools, we do a great service, but it's just a different niche that we have. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

A particular area in which trustees said elected officials need educating is in understanding that students at comprehensive universities may take more than four years to graduate:

Politicians don't understand that, for many good reasons, it can take a lot of students more than six years to graduate. This is an issue that we have to educate the legislators about. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

Trustees feel government constrains institutions' abilities to change.

Several trustees said having legislatures and policymakers watching their institutions can help keep them on track to meet retention and graduation goals. But many also said elected officials and policymakers are asking comprehensive universities to improve their graduation rates without adequately funding the steps necessary to effect those changes. One trustee told us,

We find ourselves as a board mediating the necessity to try to bring about change with the political reality of a government that is asking us to change but is setting up a variety of constraints on our ability to change. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Some trustees complained about underfunded K–12 systems that do not adequately prepare students for college and about changes to standardized testing policies that help determine college readiness, making it difficult for comprehensive universities to place students appropriately. One trustee explained,

We used to be able to mandate developmental courses. Since the legislature did away with that, now we have students who should be taking developmental courses going right into the college courses and failing. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Several trustees expressed frustration at what they saw as increased demands for reporting to government entities without any obvious payoffs. According to a trustee with experience serving on many higher education boards, institutional staff must produce many more reports for the governor's office and the legislature than were required when he served on the board of a community college system:

There is a much greater amount of intrusiveness by the legislature as well as the governor's office. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Appointments are too often motivated by politics rather than skills, trustees said.

Many trustees told us the most important factor in a board's effectiveness is whom the governor or legislator appoints to the serve on it. Many complained that governors and legislators too often appoint trustees for political reasons—such as to reward campaign donors or political allies—rather than because they are qualified to oversee a complex higher education institution or system of institutions. A typical interviewee said,

The board is full of political appointees. I'm very frustrated that currently the board seems to cater to the legislature. Most of the people that are appointed to this board have no background in public higher education. Until these boards are not political appointees, very little is going to change. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Several trustees said not only that governors appoint trustees without considering their skills, but that boards do not identify the skills they need and advocate for better appointees. One explained,

The board has no mechanism to identify its own needs. It's up to the governor to appoint members, and experiences or skills are not taken into account. He has made private suggestions to the governor about what is needed, but there is no formal mechanism for that by the board. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

Several trustees faulted their colleagues for not understanding the work and vision required of a university trustee. One said,

I'm not sure that everyone who agrees to serve fully appreciates the enormity of what is expected of them. You need to get people to fully understand that it is not just an honor but a serious responsibility. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

Many trustees said overt political conflicts are rare, particularly once trustees are farther into their tenures on their boards. But a few noted that trustees appointed by Democratic governors might conflict with Republican appointees and vice versa. And several said board members who are newly appointed are particularly beholden to elected officials. One described new appointees as,

Spouting the political agenda of whatever party is currently in power. There have been board members who were not reappointed because they fell into political disfavor. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

One trustee of a system, however, told us it is a governor's right to pursue his or her political agenda by operating through trustees. According to her,

I would not perceive pressure from the governor as political pressure. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

She described trustees' receiving directives from the governor as "normal government relations."





WORKFORCE

Trustees said comprehensive universities should be engines of regional economic development. But few trustees said they are actively helping their institutions connect to regional employers.

Preparing students for careers and meeting regional workforce needs are core aspects of comprehensive universities' missions, according to the trustees we interviewed. Most, however, seemed to let presidents and administrators take the lead on building workforce connections. Trustees of standalone institutions appeared more ready to facilitate connections between their institutions and regional employers than trustees of larger systems. Some trustees questioned whether their institutions are too focused on getting students jobs in the near term instead of considering the bigger picture of regional workforce planning. Several pointed out that comprehensive universities are themselves vital employers for their regions, making mergers or closures politically unfeasible.

Comprehensive universities' missions are to serve students and regions.

Trustees were nearly unanimous in emphasizing that students' careers and regional economic development are core aspects of comprehensive universities' missions. Several explained that career preparation has historically been part of their institutions' missions:

One of the early foundational missions of the land-grant schools was the democratization of education so that the children of working class people could have an education. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

A trustee of a historically black university told us his institution's mission had long been to serve minority students by preparing them for careers. He said,

The mission has not changed over the years: taking in young African-American and other minorities, teaching them how and preparing them for the transition to the world of work. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Similarly, said another trustee,

We owe the residents [of this state] an opportunity to receive higher education at a low cost so that they can have employment that is not dead-end. There are very few jobs in this region that don't require a baccalaureate degree. It is our obligation to bring students, young people, old people, the opportunity to get that basic education so that we open doors. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*



Trustees typically framed serving their regions' students as a way of also serving their states' or regions' economies, because these students will fill local employers' needs for educators, nurses and other professionals. A trustee described his institution as,

A place for state residents to be educated close to home if they choose to and receive a good education so they can contribute to the economy.

– Trustee of an equal footing system board

Many trustees said that when communicating with elected officials, they emphasize their institutions' positive economic impacts on their states and regions. According to one,

We try to make sure that our legislature and their constituents, and the governor, know that we work to provide our students with a high level of education and training so that they are well qualified for jobs. It is seen in the legislature as a great way to attract business to the state, to have a higher education institution that is focused on providing skills and training that meet contemporary job needs. Our mission coincides nicely with what the state is trying to accomplish. – Trustee of a standalone institution

Many interviewees explained that an educated workforce not only can meet existing economic needs, but can also create new jobs and industries for a region. A trustee told us,

When people talk about workforce, they typically talk about some sort of a trade school idea. What I am talking about is how the university system fits into the state's economy. I am talking about job creators, innovations, places where the universities are exceptionally good at developing intellectual properties that can then create industry.

– Trustee of a mixed system board



Trustees do not lead efforts to connect comprehensive universities to the regional workforce.

Trustees told us about many things their institutions do to connect students to jobs and employers, including setting up internships, conducting coop programs, inviting employers to campus and sending faculty to train with employers off campus. But, for the most part, the trustees themselves are not active in making these connections. Rather, they described these efforts as being led by their institutions' presidents, administrations, staffs and faculties.

Some trustees did, however, describe using their professional connections to find out what local employers need—a function some called being the ears of their institutions—and then communicating those needs to the rest of their boards and to their institutions' presidents. Local chamber of commerce meetings, business roundtables and Rotary Clubs are among the places where trustees said they interact with local business leaders. Some trustees are on local school boards and use that to help understand local needs for K–12 educators. Several specifically mentioned learning about demand for health care and other STEM professionals and communicating those needs to their institutions' leaders. For example, one trustee explained,

A big chemical company in the region needs some very specific skills in their employees, and they wouldn't get those if you just left that to chance. This message gets communicated through things like chambers of commerce and local workforce development boards. It's not rocket science but a matter of connecting all the dots rather than leaving things to chance. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

According to another,

The biggest pro at the college is how quickly we can adapt to a current need, whether that comes from the business community or elsewhere. A couple of years ago, we had a couple medical device companies moving into the area, and they were having problems finding the staff. We were agile and quick, and within six months, we had a program at the college so we could support them. Since then, we've had other similar companies come in the area. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

A trustee in a state capital told us she wished her institution could do better at responding to the needs of government and related employers, thereby improving their impression of the comprehensive university she governs. She said,

Instead of trying to look like the elites and the public flagships, a niche that we could fill could be for those folks that really want to work in government and in nonprofits. We could build internships in those environments for our students. I think those are some of the things that we could do that could help improve the perception of the university. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Trustees also talked about the struggle to meet employers' expectations for trained and work-ready graduates when faced with budgetary constraints and a large proportion of students who have been underprepared by the K-12 system. One told us,

Our priority is unquestionably training and retraining and our role in the economy. That's what the politicians talk about. That's what everybody talks about. That raises questions: If we're doing this for employers, who's paying for it? Should it be the employers? Is that a function of the state? How good of a job can the higher education system do if the feeder systems, the high schools, are not doing their job?

– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Many trustees said they have no data on how many students get jobs or what kinds of jobs they get. One said,

We have metrics in place to track recruitment, retention and graduation. We don't have adequate metrics to track students who have jobs when they leave, no.

– *Trustee of a mixed system board*

A few trustees said their institutions collect data to understand regional workforce needs and potential roles for regional universities and use this information to attract more students and enhance their reputations. For example, a trustee from a standalone institution explained that once the administration and board learned a significant share of their region's nurses and teachers were graduates of their institution, they were able to use that information in their marketing strategy.

Trustees of standalone institutions may be better positioned than trustees at systems to make workforce connections.

While we cannot draw quantitative conclusions from our qualitative data, examples of trustees forging connections between comprehensive universities and employers often came from our interviewees at standalone institutions. A trustee of a historically black standalone institution said,

We have a very focused effort around staying connected to business leaders, banks, and other institutions. They are represented on the board, on various institutional committees, on legislative committees. These are somewhat formalized and structured committees, with agendas and facilitators. And we do a lot of informal stuff.

– *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Trustees of standalone institutions might be better positioned to forge these connections than their peers at systems because they are closer geographically to the schools they govern and to local employers. Another trustee at a standalone institution gave an example of how she made workforce connections at a regional economic development summit:

Sitting at the table I saw a manufacturer I had read in the newspaper was expanding. I introduced myself and asked, “How many people will you be hiring? What certificates do they need?” I was able to grab the gentleman at our school who does workforce and put the two together and within two weeks we had a lab and training center ready to go. Maybe I overstepped my bounds, but as far as I am concerned, we just got 80 people in our community a job. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*

She also described pushing her institution’s staff to do a better job of finding out what skills a local employer needed:

We already had people in place. It was a matter of turning up the heat. We had people out there liaising with industry, but they weren’t asking the right questions. Do you have jobs that are unfilled? What kind of skills do people need to fill those jobs? It was our board that said, turn off the noise, focus on our goals, what certificates do they need? The board was active in putting the players together. Staff is doing implementation. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*

By contrast, several trustees of systems were willing to admit regional campuses get short shrift compared to flagship research universities. One such trustee told us,

Honestly, we pay very little attention to the satellite campuses, and that is probably not a good thing. A good board can bring attention, policy help and development work to a campus. But these campuses are basically left on their own to do much of that. The board has its hand full with the flagship campus. The satellite campuses are of secondary importance. I am just being honest. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

One system trustee told us his fellow board members tend to forget each campus has distinct needs:

Reaching out to industry and community is a problem. There are some board members who understand that there are different industry and community needs but not all board members understand that. But while there is a lot of centralized control in the system, there is a lot of local campus autonomy. A lot of times board members have to remind the system that each campus and community has its own needs. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

Others said regional campuses could be more responsive to regional workforce needs if they had better leadership and better strategic thinking at the institutional level:

I think these schools have unique abilities at that smaller scale to try some things and build some models that will be effective for the state. They can be particularly responsive to their regional needs and we can learn from that. But those things haven’t been as strategic as they could be, partly because of the turnover of leadership at the campus. My hope is the board will identify some strategic areas of investment that will help the regional economic prospects of the area the school serves. – *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

Trustees said institutions need to consider the bigger picture of regional workforce planning.

Several trustees expressed concern that their institutions focus too much on the immediate goals of getting students jobs after graduation. They found it challenging to move their institutions, fellow trustees and regional employers toward thinking more broadly about their regions' economic development and students' long-term career pathways. One trustee said of his colleagues,

Board members think more in terms of specific workers and saving them from dead-end positions, not in terms of the larger economic development of the region or in terms of the next job after the entry-level position. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

Another explained that when he talks to employers and regional stakeholders, he has to explain why his institution is not training students specifically to meet their immediate employment needs:

You have to know that they are representing their own interests and you have to respond: I'm not preparing students to work specifically in your business but for a variety of jobs. I'm not preparing students to work in your high school but to work in all high schools. – *Trustee of a standalone institution*

Several said job preparation can be short sighted because it is difficult to know exactly which skills will be needed in the future. Ideally, comprehensive universities should be projecting to meet future needs as well as current ones. A trustee said,

You don't really want to go completely from the position of what does the market want, because sometimes you want to provide things that will be helpful that the market doesn't yet know that it wants, or might not realize what's important. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

A few trustees raised questions about whether focusing on employment means sacrificing a focus on the quality of education. One said,

Creating a workforce is important, but talking so much about workforce we lose sight of the intrinsic value of a quality public education to students. There is great value in that, particularly when there is participation from the public sector in providing that to the citizen. That conversation gets lost when we are so focused on creating good workers. – *Trustee of a mixed system board*

This interviewee said if he were speaking to the legislature or the local newspaper, he would not downplay the importance of workforce readiness because doing so would threaten his institution's goals of securing more funding.

Comprehensive universities are also regional employers.

Finally, several trustees discussed the importance of comprehensive universities as employers, particularly in smaller cities and rural areas. As one put it,

The towns that they're in have pretty much gotten their livelihoods from the colleges. They're tremendously important to the communities that they're in.
– *Trustee of an equal footing system board*

One trustee framed this as a benefit to the regions in which comprehensive universities are located:

Often those campuses are the major employer in the county where they reside. Some of them are in very sparsely populated or rural areas, and there is a lot of jobs that are provided there. There's also some very nice support that happens back and forth between communities and their campuses. The faculty and the students tend to very interested in local challenges and issues. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*

But several trustees pointed out that because comprehensive universities are employers, shrinking or consolidating them is politically impossible, regardless of whether they serve students and the region well. Cuts and mergers mean cutting jobs. As one trustee said of his system's comprehensive universities,

They're more economic machines and economic engines for the communities than they are higher education. Everybody wants to protect them in the legislature because they have so many jobs. As far as their sustainability and how they compete nationally, they're mediocre. – *Trustee of a flagship-satellite system board*







PRESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON TRUSTEES

Presidents of comprehensive universities said they contend with both disengagement and micromanagement by trustees. Some presidents said trustees do not fully understand their institutions' missions and therefore struggle to add value.

Presidents of standalone comprehensive universities seemed more able to find value in their boards and spoke about ways their boards have helped their institutions achieve goals, although at the risk of micromanagement. Presidents of comprehensive universities within systems talked about struggling to get their boards' attention and said trustees do not understand their institutions' missions well enough. Generally, presidents felt trustees need a better understanding of financial information, and administrators and staff can do a better job of presenting that information to trustees.

Presidents contend with both disengagement and micromanagement by trustees.

Presidents of comprehensive universities described a perennial set of problems in working with their boards related to fighting disengagement while guarding against micromanagement. Presidents of comprehensive universities that are parts of systems tended to say their trustees are positioned to focus on the big picture but at the risk of disengagement and neglect:

They're very interested and ask good questions, but the system is too big for them to get into the weeds. – President of a comprehensive university within an equal footing system

Several presidents explained that, ideally, a system-wide board develops and articulates policies across the entire system, keeping institutions on track toward common goals and advocating for the entire system with elected officials and policymakers. But they also said system-wide boards can easily overlook comprehensive universities. Several complained about the extreme difficulty of getting trustees' attention. A president of a comprehensive university in a system compared board meetings to "speed dating":

You go from one trustee to the next, make sure they see you, try to make them interested in what you're doing, and then you move on to the next one. You try to see as many trustees as you can so they will put a name to a face and will support your proposals because they like you. It is just absurd.

– President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system



Several presidents of institutions that are parts of systems complained that their boards—and their systems' central administrations—make decisions that do not address their institutions' unique situations and do not give them enough leeway to pilot innovations. For example, an interviewee who is currently president of a standalone comprehensive university but was previously a president of a comprehensive university in a system explained that system-wide boards too often set policies that are not appropriate for all institutions in the system:

Boards can just arbitrarily throw out a number and say you've got to achieve this without really understanding your population and how realistic it is to be attainable. They can just say arbitrarily you're going to have an 80 percent graduation rate. Well, not unless you're a flagship with rich, highly successful students. You can get trapped with the board picking a number out of thin air and then you can spend a fair amount of time getting out from under that to a more realistic goal.

– *President of a standalone comprehensive university*

But presidents of comprehensive universities that are parts of systems saw both advantages and disadvantages to being what one called "almost ungoverned." On the one hand, some complained of being left without adequate guidance. One president said,

They just gave me this sort of vague mandate, "We'd like to be a little bigger and more impactful in our region," and kind of left it up to me. They don't show a lot of interest in understanding what we're doing.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*



Another president of a comprehensive university in a system described extremely disengaged trustees and board meetings that are “very scripted”:

Generally speaking, there’s no substantive debate in the board meetings. In the years I’ve been president, I don’t think I can recall a single time when the board actually got into the substance of a program.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

On the other hand, he also said trustees’ disengagement gives his institution room to maneuver:

They don’t engage. I suppose it gives me greater freedom of action, because I don’t have to go and ask, “Mother, may I?”

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

Presidents of comprehensive universities within systems said trustees do not necessarily understand their institutions’ missions.

Several presidents described their trustees as well-intentioned but lacking a true understanding of their institutions’ missions to serve their students and their regions:

They’re committed citizens. They care. I haven’t found one of them that isn’t committed to the mission, but they don’t really understand it.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

Presidents said that with a better, deeper understanding of their institutions’ missions, trustees could be better advocates with policymakers, elected officials, community members and regional employers. According to one,

Boards are cognizant of the roles of comprehensives, but not particularly articulate about it. – *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

As a result, presidents said, advocacy with external stakeholders often falls to them, to system chancellors and to other administrators. Said one president,

The board should be doing policy and political action. That’s their job. And creating a positive feeling about the institutions around the state and beyond. If they can do that, they’ve done really good work.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

A president gave the example of trustees who did not understand why his institution wanted to create an undergraduate engineering program. He said they did not understand that students who get engineering master’s and doctoral degrees at the system’s flagship tend to leave the state, whereas those who get bachelor’s degrees at the comprehensive tend to stay in the region and meet workforce needs, even without advanced degrees.

Presidents of standalone institutions said they can find value in trustees' critical questions but must also contend with overly engaged trustees.

Meanwhile, the presidents of standalone comprehensive universities whom we interviewed tended to say their trustees are engaged but can slip into micromanagement. A president of a standalone institution who had previously been a president of an institution in a system said his current board is much more focused on his institution than his former one was:

The real advantage is that I have nine members who are focused on making sure that my institution succeeds. – *President of a standalone comprehensive university*

Another president of a standalone comprehensive university praised her board for providing both support and critique:

I rely on upon them for input. So I think that they have been extremely supportive of the direction—not carte blanche, but certainly raising the kinds of questions that need to be asked, asking us to go back and reconsider points, and come back, and we do. – *President of a standalone comprehensive university*

But many presidents of standalone institutions acknowledged that having their own boards means trustees can easily find themselves “in the weeds” on issues including admissions, academics, personnel and the university’s relationships with community members. One such president told us,

The trap for these people is that they’re very successful and used to managing stuff and knowing the details. But we need them to think big, not details. – *President of a standalone comprehensive university*

Presidents of standalone institutions said they can too easily get sucked into what one called “the daily care and feeding” of trustees. Ideally, they said, they prefer to work only with their boards as a whole or largely with the board chairs rather than with each trustee individually. To that end, one president told us,

Getting the board to consensus is critical. You get pulled in too many directions if you try to deal with each member individually. – *President of a standalone comprehensive university*

A few presidents told us candidly they have questioned whether boards add any value to their institutions at all. One said,

The problem that most presidents won’t say is that they find it to be an inconvenient annoyance that they have a board. The president is a CEO and they don’t need a board. But they’ve got one and have to figure out what to do with it. – *President of a standalone comprehensive university*

But a number of presidents said they can find value in the capacity of boards to ask good questions, offer critical perspectives and provide input into institutions' strategies. One asked,

Could I run a college without a board? Heck, yes, I could. Every president feels that way. But I think that our secret to success is the board's willingness to ask legitimate, board-level questions. – *President of a standalone comprehensive university.*

Several presidents of standalone comprehensive universities said a good board asks good questions, particularly about finances and the wider political context in which their institutions operate. A typical president said that trustees provide

Not just affirmation, but questions and direction setting. With some financial considerations, they've helped us really think through unintended consequences of some strategies. They've been excellent in that.
– *President of a standalone comprehensive university*

Presidents suggested trustees should make more effort to understand information, and administrators and staff should improve their presentation of information to trustees.

Presidents suggested a number of ways trustees can better serve comprehensive universities and a number of ways they themselves can better serve trustees. Improving the presentation of information by administrators and staff to trustees and improving trustees' understanding of that information were high on many presidents' lists of priorities. Several presidents singled out financial information as an area in which trustees need better presentations of information and to work harder to understand the information they are given. One president expressed deep frustration that his institution's trustees do not understand higher education finance basics, such as the fact that an extra dollar from a donor does not necessarily translate into an extra dollar in the annual budget. He said,

What's frustrating is that all these are business people or they came out of government, and they continue to be chagrined at longstanding fundamental differences between the way public universities handle money and the way business handles money. It's not rocket science. I know they don't like the difference, but this idea that they would continue to be surprised by it is annoying.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

In addition to financial information, presidents mentioned the need for trustees to have a better understanding of information about enrollment, graduation and retention and regional demographics. But many said helping trustees better serve their institutions goes beyond simply giving them more and better information. Some said trustees get too much detail and not enough context. One president explained,

They are overwhelmed by detail and we can do a better job of context setting. Sometimes you can be so transparent with detail but it means they don't comprehensively understand what is going on.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a flagship-satellite system*

Poorly presented or insufficient information can be an invitation to micromanagement, according to one president:

I believe strongly that a board is only as good as the information you give them. When they're in the dark, they tend to micromanage. And that can be avoided.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

Ideally, presidents said trustees can help comprehensive universities think bigger.

When we asked presidents what can be done to help trustees serve their institutions more effectively, several said the untapped potential of trustees is not necessarily in how well they understand higher education, but in how well they can help higher education institutions think differently. One president insisted that,

Instead of asking how do we train the board and what can we teach them, it should be a question about, what do boards teach us and bring to us? That's business acumen and surviving under diversity. It's an interesting time to have this dialogue. It's all about really sharing best practices, no matter where they come from.

– *President of a standalone comprehensive university*

Several presidents shared this sentiment that the profound challenges and opportunities facing comprehensive universities require bolder thinking from outside of higher education. One president told us,

Board members need to be willing and able to participate in conversations about hard topics in an informed way. Not just to get rid of tenure but how to preserve some of its benefits and give up some of the costs. We still are lacking in terms of having enough of those hard conversations that are really informed on difficult topics. We can't go far in progress on any of these issues without the board.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*



Another emphasized that trustees can bring a valuable, bigger perspective to higher education institutions, but the most important issues are often too sensitive for boards to discuss:

The challenges are so large and critical in higher education that boards need to help us step outside the box a little more and consider and discuss and debate some things that were maybe taboo in prior years. Do we need to revisit some conventions of our enterprise like accreditation, tenure, academic freedom and shared governance? What is the value and usefulness of these things? At the board level in many cases those conversations are avoided because of all the sensitivities.

– *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

Yet another president maintained that boards have the potential to help develop innovative solutions to the challenges facing comprehensive universities:

Boards will be asked to sit at the table with us and understand these really tough decisions. It's about discovering something that we've never had before. It's beyond new sources of revenue, new donors or new populations of students. If funding is stable, how do you deal with the fact that higher education is continually more expensive with salaries and maintenance? – *President of a comprehensive university within a mixed system*

Across types of institutions and systems, many of the presidents we interviewed felt trustees have the potential to do more to secure the future of comprehensive universities.



IMPLICATIONS

Trustees, board chairs, university and system presidents, senior administrators, policymakers, associations of trustees and associations of higher education institutions all have roles to play in strengthening trustees' capacities to serve comprehensive universities. The following implications include what trustees told us could help them work more effectively and some of the key challenges they identified. They can be used to start discussions among the many stakeholders who seek to ensure the future of America's comprehensive universities:

- **Address gaps in trust as well as gaps in information.**

Effectively supporting trustees of comprehensive universities is about more than providing them with information to fill knowledge gaps. Our research found trustees do not always trust the information they get from administrators and staff. Creating regular opportunities for trustees to engage in collaborative dialogue with institutional leadership and carefully framing and facilitating that dialogue can help to build trust. Many trustees emphasized the value of one-on-one communication with chancellors, presidents and senior administrators, but they recommended such communication be purposeful and coordinated by board chairs, not ad hoc.

- **Provide trustees with orientations and peer-learning opportunities to help them understand and ask good questions about finances and other issues.**

Trustees are typically busy professionals volunteering to serve large, complex organizations. Their backgrounds do not necessarily prepare them to understand higher education finances. The ones we interviewed told us they often feel overwhelmed by complex information and uncomfortable asking for help. Providing trustees with targeted information and creating time and space for them to ask questions could help them understand and serve their institutions better. Many said learning from peers on their boards is the best way to learn about substantive issues. Several said more interaction with trustees from other institutions—at conferences, through campus visits and via peer-to-peer exchanges—would help them share best practices and understand that their institutions' problems are unique.

- **Empower trustees to engage in student success issues without overstepping.**

Trustees care about student success but know they should not micromanage academics. Presidents and senior administrators can do more, however, to educate trustees about innovations in teaching and learning so they can better understand why new models of academic delivery may require resource reallocation, new financial models and different roles for faculty and staff. Moreover, associations of trustees and of higher education institutions can do more to help trustees understand pedagogical innovations, placing them in a better position to guide comprehensive universities through conversations with internal and external stakeholders about student success.

- **Support trustees in advocating for their institutions with elected officials and policymakers.**

Whether or not they are able to secure more funding, trustees need to be able to advocate for their institutions with respect to transfer, financial aid and funding. This means they must be sufficiently informed about those policy priorities to discuss them with elected officials and policymakers. Trustees can build relationships with elected officials and policymakers in ways that make the most of their role as the public face and the “ears” of their institutions, listening for potential opportunities and challenges. Several trustees emphasized the value of bringing state legislators to campuses to forge connections, demonstrate needs and share successes. Those who said they received advocacy training from their institutions valued it.

- **Guide governors and legislators in appointing strong and capable trustees.**

Both trustees and presidents told us that choosing the right trustees is one of the most important ways policymakers can ensure comprehensive universities fulfill their missions. They said if boards develop mechanisms to identify gaps in their own skills and connections, they can be better positioned to advocate for new appointees who meet their institutions’ needs.

- **Clarify for trustees how to help their institutions serve as engines of regional economic development.**

Trustees, who sometimes have significant business connections, could be positioned to help their institutions understand and meet regional workforce needs. But their roles should be specified and formalized as part of a broader institutional workforce strategy. Trustees at all types of institutions would benefit greatly from having more opportunities to learn about promising practices in fostering regional economic development. For boards governing systems of institutions, attending to regional needs pertaining to workforce and other issues can be particularly challenging. While trustees in some systems are assigned responsibility for specific institutions, in others this is considered favoritism and inimical to governing the entire system.

- **Grapple with the implications of discussing controversial issues in public.**

Having thoughtful, honest conversations about tough issues while ensuring the transparency of public institutions represents a challenge for higher education governance. Many trustees described the difficulties of discussing tough issues in front of media, faculty and students in open meetings. Yet open meeting rules serve a vital role in ensuring the transparency of public higher education governance. Public universities, and the policymakers who determine how they will be governed, need to assess the effectiveness of current approaches to board deliberation and grapple with the implications of discussing controversial issues in public.

METHODOLOGY

This report synthesizes findings from one-on-one phone interviews conducted by Public Agenda with 42 trustees, who represent 29 boards that govern a total of 143 public comprehensive universities. The interviews were conducted between August 2014 and January 2015. All were confidential and ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes.

Public Agenda also interviewed 45 presidents of public comprehensive universities, focusing largely on their relationships with their boards, between September 2014 and January 2015. All were confidential and ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes.

As part of our background research, we also conducted 10 expert interviews with former board members, institution and system staff and higher education researchers.

Funding for this research was generously provided by The Kresge Foundation.

Selection and recruitment of interview participants

Interview participants were invited through a process that combined random selection with selective targeting of governing boards and schools. First, to create a full list of public comprehensive universities, we selected all public universities falling under the Carnegie classifications, “Master’s Colleges and Universities” (smaller, medium and larger), “Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences” and “Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields” from

the National Center for Education Statistics’ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). We removed from that list overly specialized institutions and institutions our expert interviewees felt should not be considered comprehensive universities. For a copy of the list of 374 institutions from which we sampled interview participants, email research@publicagenda.org.

Second, we assigned two random numbers to each institution on our list, effectively generating duplicate lists: one to recruit trustees and the other to recruit presidents. Using the random numbers, we sorted each list into numerical order and selected the first 50 institutions on each to invite their presidents and trustees, respectively, to participate in this research. When two or more of the institutions on the trustees list belonged to the same system governed by the same board of trustees, we added new randomly selected institutions so the total boards on the final list equaled 50.

Third, to ensure a demographically and geographically diverse sample of interviewees for this research, and to learn especially about the experiences of institutions that serve large urban populations, we expanded our two lists for trustee and president recruitment by adding all historically black colleges and universities and all other institutions designated as minority-serving, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics, as well as all institutions with campus settings designated by IPEDS as urban (“city—large” or “city—medium”).²³ Moreover, we added all institutions in three states of special interest to The Kresge Foundation: California, Michigan and Texas.

²³ Xiaojie Li and Dennis C. Carroll, “Characteristics of Minority-Serving Institutions and Minority Undergraduates Enrolled in These Institutions: Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Report” (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

Finally, through internet searches, we collected the names and contact information of every individual listed in 2014 as a member of one of the selected governing boards as well as names and contact information of each of the presidents of selected institutions. We added to this list a few individual trustees and presidents who were recommended by our expert interviewees. Through this selection procedure, we invited a total of 1,153 trustees

and 182 presidents to participate in interviews. Starting in August 2014, we sent letters by email (when available) and regular mail inviting trustees and presidents to participate in interviews. In December 2014, we again contacted all potential interviewees who had not responded to our invitation. Table 1 summarizes key descriptors of the 42 trustees and 45 presidents who agreed to be interviewed.

Table 1: Characteristics of interviewees and their institutions

	Trustees	Presidents
Total number of interviewees	42	45
Women interviewees	21%	33%
Interviewees who had served three years or less	21%	29%
Interviewees who were current or former board chairs	24%	-
Interviewees by type of institution ¹		
Standalone	21%	42%
Flagship-satellite systems	17%	16%
Equal footing systems	14%	16%
Mixed systems	48%	27%
Interviewees from minority-serving institutions	43%	31%
Interviewees from urban institutions	67%	36%
Number of states represented	23	26

¹ To compare, of the 374 comprehensive universities from which we drew our sample, 28 percent were standalone schools, 27 percent were part of flagship-satellite systems, 11 percent were part of equal footing systems and 34 percent were part of a mixed system.

Interview procedure and interview guide

Interviews were scheduled at times most convenient to participants and conducted by telephone. Participants were assured of their confidentiality.

Trustee interview guides were semi-structured and covered the following topics:

- Top priorities and challenges facing the comprehensive university or the comprehensive universities in the system
- The board's strategic vision and planning
- The board's main areas of work and responsibility
- Relations between the board and the administration
- The meaning of student success and the role of the board in fostering student success
- Strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the board
- Learning, training and board development
- The board's relations to external partners, including the legislature and workforce

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Public Agenda's research team analyzed the interview data thematically with the aid of the qualitative analysis software, Dedoose. All quotes used in the publication and other presentations of the research were carefully reviewed to avoid including identifying information about research participants.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. "Consequential Boards: Adding Value Where It Matters Most." Washington D.C.: AGB, 2014.

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. "Survey of Board Professionals." Washington, D.C.: AGB, 2015.

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. "The 2014 AGB Survey of Higher Education Governance." Washington, D.C.: AGB, 2014.

Center for Law and Social Policy. "Yesterday's Nontraditional Student Is Today's Traditional Student." Washington D.C.: CLASP, 2015.

Dougherty, Kevin J., and Vikash Reddy. "Performance Funding for Higher Education: What Are the Mechanisms, What Are the Impacts?" *ASHE Higher Education Report 39*, no. 2 (2013).

Fryar, Alisa Hicklin. "The Comprehensive University: How It Came to Be and What It Is Now." In *The University Next Door: What Is a Comprehensive University, Who Does It Educate, and Can It Survive?* ed. Mark Schneider and K. C. Deane, 19–42. New York: Teachers College Press, 2015.

Hagelskamp, Carolin, David Schleifer and Christopher DiStasi. "Is College Worth It for Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going (Back) to School." New York: Public Agenda, 2013.

Handel, Stephen J., and Ronald A. Williams. "The Promise of the Transfer Pathway." New York: The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2012.

Hussar, William J., and Tabitha M. Bailey. "Projections of Education Statistics to 2022." Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014.

Immerwahr, John, Jean Johnson, Jon Rochkind, Samantha DuPont and Jeremiah Hess. "Still on the Sidelines: What Role Will Trustees Play in Higher Education Reform?" New York: Public Agenda, 2011.

Jenkins, Davis, Alison Kadlec and James Votruba. "The Business Case for Regional Public Universities to Strengthen Community College Transfer Pathways (with Guidance on Leading the Process)." Washington D.C.: HCM Strategists, 2014.

Johnson, Nate, and Gordon Davies. "Can Comprehensive Public Universities Implement Large-Scale Affordability Reforms?" Washington D.C.: HCM Strategists, 2014.

Kadlec, Alison, and Mario Martinez. "Putting It All Together: Strengthening Pathways Between Comprehensive Universities and Community Colleges." In *The University Next Door: What Is a Comprehensive University, Who Does It Educate, and Can It Survive?* ed. Mark Schneider and K. C. Deane, 69–92. New York: Teachers College Press, 2015.

Kadlec, Alison, and Susan Shelton. "Outcomes-Based Funding and Stakeholder Engagement." Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation, 2015.

Li, Xiaojie, and Dennis C. Carroll. "Characteristics of Minority-Serving Institutions and Minority Undergraduates Enrolled in These Institutions: Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Report." Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007.

Schmidt, Benno C. "Governance for a New Era." Washington D.C.: American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2014.

Schneider, Mark, and K. C. Deane, eds. *The University Next Door: What Is a Comprehensive University, Who Does It Educate, and Can It Survive?* New York: Teachers College Press, 2015.

State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. "State Higher Education Finance." Boulder, CO: SHEEO, 2014.

U.S. Department of Education. "Meeting the Nation's 2020 Goal: State Targets for Increasing the Number and Percentage of College Graduates with Degrees." Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2011.

Yin, Michelle Lu. "Rethinking Student Outcomes: Constructing Predicted and Adjusted Graduation and Retention Rates for Comprehensive Universities." In *The University Next Door: What Is a Comprehensive University, Who Does It Educate, and Can It Survive?* ed. Mark Schneider and K. C. Deane, 121–48. New York: Teachers College Press, 2015.

RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS

Putting It All Together: Strengthening Pathways Between Comprehensive Universities and Community Colleges (2015)

Alison Kadlec and Mario Martinez

While barriers to effective collaboration between regional four-year institutions and community colleges seem to proliferate in every direction, a number of institutions, systems and states are stepping up to the challenge. Based on interviews with institutional leaders, senior administrators and faculty, this chapter presents case studies of partnerships between regional four-year colleges and community colleges.

In *The University Next Door: What Is a Comprehensive University, Who Does It Educate, and Can It Survive?* edited by Mark Schneider and K. C. Deane, 69–92. New York: Teachers College Press, 2015.

Outcomes-Based Funding and Stakeholder Engagement (2015)

Alison Kadlec and Susan Shelton

This paper examines the key aspects of stakeholder engagement that can strengthen the design, implementation and sustainability of outcomes-based funding policies. It seeks to help policymakers understand the prevailing starting-point attitudes of institutional stakeholders, primarily college and university administrators, faculty and staff, and the importance of engaging them throughout the policy process. It recommends specific strategies for effectively engaging these stakeholders.

<https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/kadlec-shelton-ofb-full.pdf>

The Business Case for Regional Public Universities to Strengthen Community College Transfer Pathways (with Guidance on Leading the Process) (2014)

Davis Jenkins, Alison Kadlec and James Votruba

This strategic case investigation presents evidence that a strategy of strengthening transfer pathways between community colleges and regional comprehensive universities has great potential to increase postsecondary attainment by large numbers of low-income students while minimizing the cost to students and taxpayers.

http://www.hcmstrategists.com/maximizingresources/images/Transfer_Pathways_Paper.pdf

Is College Worth It for Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going (Back) to School (2013)

Carolin Hagelskamp, David Schleifer and Christopher DiStasi

Through a nationally representative survey and focus groups, this study examines the expectations, attitudes and needs of adults who are thinking about earning postsecondary credentials after having spent some or, in most cases, many years in the workforce. It shines a light on the motivations, expectations and concerns of the growing numbers of adult prospective students across the country.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/media/is-college-worth-it-for-me-pdf>

Profiting Higher Education: What Students, Alumni and Employers Think About For-Profit Colleges (2013)

Carolin Hagelskamp, David Schleifer and Christopher DiStasi

This report summarizes survey and focus group research with prospective and current students at for-profit colleges, alumni of for-profit colleges and employers. It explores what the students and alumni think about the value of their degrees and what motivates prospective students to enroll in for-profit colleges. It also investigates whether employers believe for-profit colleges do a good job preparing students for the workforce.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/media/profitting-higher-education-pdf>

Not Yet Sold: What Employers and Community College Students Think About Online Education (2013)

Public Agenda

This research brief discusses findings from surveys with human resources professionals and community college students. It suggests that both groups remain somewhat skeptical about the value of online learning compared to in-classroom instruction.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/not-yet-sold>

Guided Pathways to Student Success: Perspectives from Indiana College Students and Advisors (2013)

Alison Kadlec, John Immerwahr and Jyoti Gupta

In the context of past studies on student enrollment and completion, this report investigates barriers to student success in Indiana's higher education system.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/guided-pathways-to-student-success>

Student Voices on the Higher Education Pathway: Preliminary Insights & Stakeholder Engagement Considerations (2012)

Public Agenda

In community college students' own words, this report examines the pathways, barriers and opportunities to college success across the country, with a focus on goal-setting behaviors and expectations.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/student-voices-higher-education-pathway>

Still on the Sidelines: What Role Will Trustees Play in Higher Education Reform? (2011)

John Immerwahr, Jean Johnson and Jon Rochkind

In-depth interviews with trustees from a range of public and private higher education institutions found that most were focused on short-term challenges and had not yet fully engaged with broader issues of higher education reform.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/still-on-the-sidelines>

Squeeze Play: Continued Public Anxiety on Cost, Harsher Judgments on How Colleges Are Run (2010)

John Immerwahr and Jean Johnson with Amber Ott and Jonathan Rochkind

This report reviews data from a series of national surveys tracking public attitudes on higher education. It suggests many Americans are skeptical about whether colleges and universities are doing all they can to control costs and keep tuition affordable.

<http://publicagenda.org/pages/squeeze-play-2010>

The Iron Triangle: College Presidents Talk About Costs, Access and Quality (2008)

John Immerwahr, Jean Johnson and Paul Gasbarra.

This research examines the views of presidents of two- and four-year universities, both public and private and finds they believe it unreasonable and unrealistic to expect higher education to maintain quality and improve access without significant reinvestments of public funding.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/the-iron-triangle>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors of “A Difficult Balance” would like to thank the following people for their support and contributions to the preparation of this report:

The trustees and presidents we interviewed for taking the time to share their views and experiences with us;

Our funders and partners at The Kresge Foundation, especially Chera Reid and William Moses, for allowing us the opportunity to conduct this research and the freedom to explore the issues without constraint or bias;

Alison Kadlec, Senior Vice President, Director of Higher Education & Workforce Programs at Public Agenda, and Erin Knepler, Associate Director of Higher Education & Workforce Programs at Public Agenda, for their feedback on earlier drafts of this report and for their higher education expertise;

Allison Rizzolo, Megan Donovan, Michael Rojas and Sung Hee Cho, Public Agenda’s communications team, for bringing our work to the attention of a broad audience;

Mattie Bennett Caswell at Public Agenda for her assistance in preparing the manuscript of this report;

Nate Johnson, Robert Smith, Steve Glazer and the anonymous presidents and trustees for their astute feedback on earlier drafts of this report;

Public Agenda’s Senior Fellow Jean Johnson, for her assistance and insight;

And Will Friedman, president of Public Agenda, for his vision, insight and guidance throughout this project.

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on higher education affordability, achievement gaps, community college completion, use of technology and innovation, and other higher education issues.

Find Public Agenda online at PublicAgenda.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/PublicAgenda and on Twitter at [@PublicAgenda](https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda).

About The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation is a \$3.5 billion private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development in Detroit. In 2014, the Board of Trustees approved 408 awards totaling \$242.5 million. That included a \$100 million award to the Foundation for Detroit's Future, a fund created to soften the impact of the city's bankruptcy on pensioners and safeguard cultural assets at the Detroit Institute of Arts. A total of \$138.1 million was paid out to grantees over the course of the year. In addition, our Social Investment Practice made commitments totaling \$20.4 million in 2014.

For more information, visit kresge.org.



For more information about this study, visit:
<http://publicagenda.org/pages/a-difficult-balance>

Or contact: Carolin Hagelskamp at chagelskamp@publicagenda.org, tel: 212.686.6610.