

SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT OF TRUSTEES TO PUBLIC COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY BOARDS

The vast majority of research that examines public boards of trustees concerns the role and responsibility boards are given after they have been formed. However, a key step that is regularly overlooked in predicting or evaluating the performance of a board is the appointment of its trustees. To begin to address this fundamental “first step” we focus here on criteria to be used in the selection of members for public boards of trustees. These findings have been based on 132 interviews with leaders in higher education.

Two sets of criteria are essential: one for individual nominees, which will be discussed first; and the second for the board as a whole. Just as nominees to the Supreme Court are judged by the American Bar Association according to specific criteria, so too, should nominees to public boards be evaluated in terms of established standards. Accordingly, the guidelines that follow are intended to serve as minimum requirements for the appointment of new board members to either single or multiple institutions.

The seven criteria that we discuss arose during interviews with governors, board members, college and university presidents, policy analysts, and faculty leaders. It is recommended that the qualities reflected in the criteria are present in candidates at the outset of an appointment, rather than developed once a trusteeship begins. Orientations for board members conducted by individual institutions/board committees should serve to enhance these qualities rather than impart them.

I. Commitment to Public Education

Prior to selection or appointment, individual board members should be able to demonstrate a history of commitment to education and a positive record in educational improvement. Contributions to education and educational improvement can be achieved in multiple ways, such as through charitable donations, volunteering, teaching, research or scholarship.

A commitment to the role and mission of public higher education is essential for board members who are to be given the collective “trust” of colleges and universities. Board members must be ambassadors for the institutions they serve. A trustee advances a broad agenda on behalf of the entire institution or system rather than for a narrow personal or political interest. Such commitment requires a firm understanding of the role and function of higher education in society.

Unlike in business where board members are typically individuals with extensive experience in the affairs of the company, the majority of trustees of public postsecondary institutions in the United States do not have professional backgrounds in education. Nevertheless, they are entrusted with organizations wherein education is the central enterprise. While it may not be necessary for board members to have professional backgrounds in education to be effective, candidates should be committed to the improvement of educational quality and to the unique mission of public colleges and universities to promote access and advance the returns on the public’s investment.

II. Record of Public or Community Service

A commitment to education is important, but perhaps even more essential is a broader commitment to public service. Such work requires social consciousness, a consideration for others, and an understanding of the complex public policy issues that confront the state and community. Individuals must be aware of, and able to articulate, the responsibilities of public institutions in regard to the social and educational issues that currently face the state, region, and communities in which they reside. Board members represent more than just a particular institution’s interests; they serve the needs and goals of the state and its constituents. Public service requires sensitivity to the people and problems that are critical to the core issues of education, such as access, quality, and affordability. A record of public service allows one to view these major educational concerns with a more balanced and broader perspective. Politics is seen as a virtue and not simply a path to resource acquisition. The candidate therefore should demonstrate a history of public service, such as through volunteer work or participation in other non-profit boards.

III. Knowledge of Complex Organizations and Academic Institutions

Knowledge of complex organizations is a second criterion for valuable appointees, as is a proven ability to function productively within them. The most important areas of competency are strategic planning, fiscal matters, legal affairs, development, and leadership. An understanding of the critical difference between policy-formation and management is also essential.

Even as colleges and universities become more productive and revenue-centered, institutions of higher education remain distinct from other business organizations. The focus of an academic institution centers on knowledge dissemination and production rather than revenue generation. "Bottom lines" are significantly more ephemeral and difficult to identify than profit and loss on balance sheets. Consequently, if they are to adequately measure effectiveness and productivity, board members responsible for guiding institutions of higher education should know and respect how colleges and universities are organized and how they function. They should recognize the differences between public and private institutions and distinctions across various institutional sectors. To provide the board with a complement of talent, a candidate's expertise in financial, legal, and policy matters should also be considered.

IV. Demonstrated Collaborative Leadership

Two of the most important tasks of a public board are to reach the best policy decisions and to provide leadership for the institution. The qualities listed previously focused on the prior accomplishments and degree of commitment of trustees; however board members also need specific competencies related to leadership and teamwork. The ability to articulate, understand, and help develop a consensus about institutional priorities and direction is essential. The board must provide broad support and authority to the president to act in the best interest of the institution. It must also have the courage to face up to and identify unpleasant realities and to act upon its decisions. Board members should have a demonstrated record of leadership, whether in their profession, public service, or volunteer work. Effective leadership is a particularly important quality for the board chair and should be given prominence in the selection of this particular board member. In addition, candidates should have a record of having worked in and with teams where building consensus was important.

V. Willingness and Availability for Constructive Engagement

One expectation of trustees should be that they are available for, and responsive to, the work of the board. Board members must be able to give a significant amount of their time for what is essentially a volunteer activity. A competent board member not only attends meetings but also participates in learning activities related to the institution, and makes connections with the campus community without being intrusive. In addition, a board member acts as an ambassador to the external community on behalf of the institution. A college or university will be perceived very differently depending on one's point of view. Having multiple and diverse viewpoints discussed and debated are essential for a board's collective wisdom. Engagement beyond minimal duties expands the knowledge base upon which trustees make decisions about the future of the institution.

VI. Commitment to Open-minded, Non-partisan Decision-making

Although board appointments are often made or confirmed by politicians or public entities such as state legislatures, the individuals nominated for the positions should have a demonstrated record of openness to various perspectives and an ability to make non-partisan decisions. Put another way, irrespective of their leanings in political or other matters, the chief allegiance of board members should be to higher education and to the institution they serve. Educational institutions do not represent political interests. Colleges and universities are "disinterested organizations" that require leadership from individuals who respect this mission. The primary responsibilities of a board of trustees include the appointment and evaluation of the president, policy development, advancement of a strategic plan, and policy and fiduciary oversight. A candidate's record and experience with decision-making therefore should be a central consideration.

VII. Record of Integrity and Civic Virtue

Integrity and civic virtue should also be expected of a candidate, as these qualities reflect a record of honesty, careful and fair judgment, and disassociation with scandal or wrongdoing. Related indicators include the courage to speak against injustice and to promote educational and social equality. A candidate's integrity should be measured against the institution's values and beliefs (i.e., commitment to diversity, liberal education, or democracy).

Before an appointment to the board is made, the candidate's background should be scrutinized carefully. It should reflect high civic virtue and should be absent of any activities that might jeopardize the integrity of the institution.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE SCREENING COMMITTEE, NOMINATING/EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, AND GOVERNOR

While the trustee candidates' qualifications are important factors in creating an effective board, just as important are the appointment and selection processes. Many boards do not have a formal screening committee, an active nominating committee, or an on-going search process for able candidates. No one model is ideal and states' distinct histories preclude a "one size fits all" method of appointment to a public board. However, the lack of any formalized process for screening and appointments of candidates is unacceptable for high performing organizations in the twenty-first century. The National Governors Association lists the creation of an advisory committee to recruit, screen, and recommend board candidates as one of the five best practices for boards. They note "the best advisory committees are guided by detailed, written qualifications that are tailored to each board." Clear, practical, useful practices and processes are essential. The Association of Governing Boards also argues that a rigorous selection process "sends the message to the public and to those being considered for trusteeships that the work of citizen boards matters and is consequential—to the public's welfare, the quality of life in the state, and to economic development."

In addition to the criteria for individual nominees noted above, the nominating/screening committee and/or governor should consider the following three qualities required for the trustees collectively.

I. Diversity

The board should—by composition and qualities—demonstrate to the institution a commitment to diversity that will enhance their performance. Diversity in this sense includes differences in ethnicity, gender, and profession among board members. The majority of boards are more similar than different from one another; as a result, the perspectives, expertise, and knowledge of those who would potentially improve board activity is underutilized.

Before members are considered there should be an assessment to determine the collective ethnic, gender, and professional make-up of current board members. New members should be considered in light of how their appointment will increase the diversity of the board and help it achieve its goals.

II. Unique Skills or Competencies

Every institution engages in a distinct mission and faces particular challenges. In the selection of board members, these unique goals should be taken into account. A university that has a hospital, for example, may benefit from the participation of a board member who is a physician or health professional. A technical college might consider the appointment of a well-known engineer or the president of a corporation that represents technical trades.

III. Complementary Skills and Perspectives

Much criticism of boards focuses on the way particular members represent interest groups such as unions, businesses, regions, faculty, or racial and ethnic groups, rather than the general public good. Some institutions, however, may find that a specific stakeholder or constituent with specialized knowledge of the institution and its history should be appointed to the board to ensure that such concerns are represented. Although we do not recommend a "Noah's ark" approach for appointment, we acknowledge that some institutions have had success appointing or selecting individuals who have special knowledge of the institution, including its mission and context, and who are able to represent the interests of the entire institution or system.

In a democracy as complex and diverse as now exists in the early twenty-first century, it is extremely difficult to determine how to serve the public good. Accordingly, multiple criteria need to be taken into account to ensure that the selection process does not devolve into political patronage. Throughout the twentieth century public colleges and universities acted as social and economic engines for progress; to maintain that progress a more tough-minded appointment process needs to be implemented that will ensure high performance among trustees.

Available resources:

Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities (AGB). Online: <http://www.agb.org/>

Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities (1992). Policies for improving trustee selection in the private sector. Occasional Paper Series, No.13. Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities (2003). Merit screening of citizens for gubernatorial appointment to public college and university trusteeship. State Policy Brief No. 1. Washington, DC: Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance, Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

Callan, P. & Honetschlager, D. (1992). Policies for improving trustee selection in the public sector. Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA), Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California. Online: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/chepa/>

Hearn, J.C., McLendon, M.K., & Gilchrist, L.Z. (2004). Governing in the sunshine: Open meetings, open records, and effective governance in public higher education. A full version is available online: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/chepa/>; for an abbreviated version, go to: http://www.agb.org/_content/fexplore9.cfm

Ingram, R. (1995). Effective trusteeship: A guide for board members of public colleges and universities. Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

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The Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis (CHEPA) is an interdisciplinary research unit directed by Dr. William G. Tierney. The Center was established to engage the postsecondary-education community actively, and to serve as an important intellectual center within the Rossier School of Education; it draws significant support and commitment from the administration. The Center's mission is to improve urban higher education, strengthen school-university relationships, and to focus on international higher education, emphasizing Latin America and the Pacific Rim. Working on fulfilling that mission are the Center's faculty, research assistants, and staff.

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