

**Excellence at Scale:
What is required of public leadership and governance in
higher education?**

Paul Lingenfelter
President
State Higher Education Executive Officers

Richard Novak
Vice President and Executive Director,
Ingram Center for Public Trustees & Governance
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

Richard Legon
President
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

July, 2008

SHEEO and AGB wish to acknowledge the generous support of
the Ford Foundation, whose assistance aided in the development of
this paper

Excellence at scale in higher education has become an urgent national priority. Its urgency is driven by substantial educational progress in other countries, the accelerating mobility of jobs and capital around the globe, the high standard of living and cost of labor in the United States, and growing environmental, political, and social challenges. These factors collectively have made postsecondary education and lifelong learning essential for adults seeking stable employment and productive citizenship.

While educators and policymakers still debate causes, solutions, and even the seriousness of the challenge, most agree about the core issue and ultimate goal: Now more than ever before, the future of the United States depends on the knowledge and skill of our people. To maintain our standard of living and cope with an increasingly complex world, the people of the United States must be second to no other nation in educational attainment and in discovery and innovation.

Clearly, the bar defining excellence in higher education has been raised. The great achievements of American higher education in the past century lay a strong foundation for future achievement, but do not allow us to rest on our laurels. One study of growing educational attainment in other countries estimates that the United States must produce one million more degrees and certificates every year for it to lead the world in educational attainment by 2025. Our universities still lead the world in discovery and innovation, but other nations are catching up by building research infrastructure and developing scientific talent. We cannot sustain leadership in postsecondary education without reaching higher levels of performance.

During the past five years, a series of national commissions and study panels have addressed the issues facing higher education. The sponsors—the Association of Governing Boards, the Business-Higher

Education Forum, the National Academies, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Governors Association, the Secretary of Education, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers—indicate the breadth and depth of the concern.

Federal and state policymakers and educators at every level must help achieve higher quality and more widespread educational attainment, without diminishing higher education's essential contributions in advancing knowledge and fostering free inquiry and debate. While this challenge has implications for everyone involved in the educational system, the roles of state policymakers and the trustees of public colleges and universities are the focus of this paper.

The division of labor—government, trustees, and educators

The roles of government, trustees, and educators in higher education range from those of elected governmental leaders to those of faculty. The responsibility of elected governmental leaders is to determine public purposes, and then to enact laws as well as raise and allocate public funds to achieve those public purposes. In that role, governors and legislators determine how many public institutions exist, where they are located, how much public support they receive, and how that support is allocated. At the other end of the continuum, the faculty is responsible for determining the content of instruction and research, standards for certificate/degree attainment, and policies and practices in classrooms and labs.

In between these roles lie many crucial operational responsibilities: who is employed and under what terms; what programs of study are offered; what criteria are used to evaluate performance; etc. Many challenging questions of higher education

governance exist in this “middle ground” between government and faculty responsibilities—the territory occupied by trustees and institutional leaders. These domains of responsibility are distinctively different and interdependent.

In a highly effective system of higher education, government, trustees, institutional leaders, and faculty will work for common purposes, focus on their primary responsibilities, and honor the others’ roles and the boundaries between them. New challenges, such as those now facing the United States, require everyone involved to reconsider their roles, their fundamental goals, and how they seek to advance the broad public purposes of higher education.

The central issue of public higher education governance

Although the details get very complicated, the fundamental question faced by political leaders in higher education policy is straightforward: How can the state properly achieve two overarching goals: 1) excellence in instruction, research, and public service; and 2) responsiveness to public priorities and needs?

The American system of higher education, as well as every other national system that competes effectively with it, provides a substantial amount of autonomy and flexibility to institutions. In advanced nations the public generally has relied on professional expertise for making both large and small decisions about what should be taught and studied, who gets into college, and what it takes to earn a degree. All over the world, colleges and universities have been given significant autonomy and freedom for only one reason—it is necessary for excellence.

At the same time, the states and the national government collectively spend about \$175 billion annually to support higher education in order to meet public priorities—the education of our people and research and services to address important human problems. The public is deeply concerned with both the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of higher education. Higher education’s responsiveness to public priorities is a serious matter. States and the federal government seek to balance “autonomy for excellence” with “accountability for results” through various mechanisms, including:

1. Regulatory laws, some of which affect all institutions, public or private, and some of which affect just public institutions,
2. The allocation of public funds for specific or broad institutional purposes,
3. The use of citizen governing boards established by state charter, statute, or constitution, rather than direct governmental oversight of colleges and universities,
4. The direct election or appointment and/or confirmation of board members for public institutions by governors and legislators, typically to staggered terms of office,
5. Statewide governing boards and public university systems to govern groups of individual institutions, and
6. Statewide coordinating boards given responsibility for promoting public priorities by advising the governor and legislature and coordinating separately governed institutions through certain regulatory powers.

In essence, these mechanisms are designed to assure public accountability while stopping short of making higher education a

governmental function like law enforcement, transportation, or public welfare. Higher education in the United States has become a relatively autonomous “social institution,” publicly and privately supported, rather than a direct governmental service. For both philosophical and practical reasons, the states have invented various checks and balances to insulate higher education from partisan politics while assuring public accountability. But all social institutions, including higher education, need to adapt to changing conditions such as those now facing the United States. It is time to review the mechanisms we employ to set and pursue priorities in American higher education.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches?

Several key ingredients must be present for system effectiveness, regardless of the specific formal structure used. These include: strategic vision, shared responsibility, leadership, professional capacity, trust, focus on priorities, the availability of solid information, and consensus-building ability. Governance structure may help or hinder educational progress, but if these other ingredients are not present, changing the structure will not accomplish much. That said, it is useful to review various structural approaches and their strengths and limitations.

With the exception of Michigan, all states have a statewide governing board, a statewide coordinating board, or in a few cases, both types of boards performing different functions. Most of these boards, whether coordinating or governing, are designed to connect business and civic leaders to the higher education public policy dialogue, and to provide a permanent forum for higher education policy that is partially insulated from the partisan political process.

Statewide governing boards

In twenty states, the formal structure of statewide governing boards provides a single, authoritative “chain of command” from the board to the chief executive of every university in the state system—and in a dozen of these twenty states, the two-year colleges as well. This formal power is its strength from the public accountability perspective; the ability to hire and fire can be an asset when seeking to make broad scale improvements.

Some statewide governing boards have strong executive leaders, frequently with the title Chancellor or President, who play significant roles in developing system strategy, allocating resources, and evaluating the performance of institutional chief executives. Others have used an Executive Director or Executive Secretary, with institutional presidents reporting directly to the board. Where there is no strong executive, statewide governing boards have tended to focus on institutional issues more than on a statewide agenda.

The fiduciary responsibilities of statewide governing boards require them to deal with a broad range of personnel and contractual issues in addition to broad statewide questions of policy and resource allocation. While some boards have been quite effective in dealing with both a public policy agenda and the ever-present demands of institutional governance, the broader public agenda may get short shrift if it is not a conscious priority.

Institutional leaders in statewide or large systems may complain privately (or publicly) about system constraints. Most presidents seem to prefer having his or her *own* board and the perceived or actual autonomy that it may provide.

Statewide coordinating boards

Statewide coordination of higher education was developed in the United States—and in the United Kingdom in a slightly different format—to advise governors and legislators on higher education policy, to recommend the allocation of resources to achieve state priorities and equity among institutions, to perform certain regulatory functions including academic program review and approval, and in some cases to administer state grant programs to students or institutions. These boards provide policy capacity for government without statewide governing authority.

The strength of the statewide coordination model is in its ability to focus on broad public policy issues and to provide the information required to advise the elected leaders responsible for making policy and allocating public resources. Many statewide coordinating boards were created to guide the expansion of higher education in the 1960s and to give legislatures and governors professional advice and a means of limiting the number of academic, fiscal, and planning issues requiring resolution in the political arena.

The weakness of statewide coordinating boards lies in their limited formal authority. For them to work well, coordinating boards must be supported both by formal statutes and informal relationships that give them the leverage required for effective coordination. To be effective, coordinating boards and their staffs must be able to work in the center of a triangle consisting of three key constituencies—the governor, the legislature, and the higher education community.

An effective coordinating board must be an honest broker among these three constituencies, two of whom have formal responsibility and

authority for deciding public policy; the third, higher education, has a modestly constrained, but meaningful degree of autonomy by virtue of professional standing, expertise, and social value. All three constituencies have a stake in and influence over the effectiveness of the broker, whose effectiveness can be diminished if its role is disregarded, its capacity eroded, or if it is perceived as no longer serving one of the constituencies fairly.

It is especially crucial for the governor and legislature, while reserving their right to make final decisions on fundamental questions, to use the advice of a coordinating board. Otherwise, such boards are too weak to make significant contributions. If the quality of a coordinating board's work does not command the respect of political decision-makers, the board should either be strengthened or eliminated in favor of another approach.

The coordinating board also needs credibility within the institutional community. The board must be deeply and obviously committed to the public interest in higher education, which includes advocacy as well as accountability. The proper balance usually means both government and higher education will be challenged by the coordinating board to contribute and perform at higher levels.

Gubernatorial and legislative leadership—its importance, and its limits

Governors have unmatched power to set an agenda for higher education and to mobilize other political and civic leaders in pursuit of that agenda. In most states, governors are the most powerful influence for allocating state funds and shaping tax policy, even

though they must accommodate legislative agendas and win legislative support for their programs.

Legislatures tend to “dispose” more than “propose,” but they do more than react to gubernatorial leadership. They shape public policy for higher education in many ways, including creating a demand for improvement, setting the terms of accountability, and allocating public funds.

While their powers are great, governors and legislatures are constrained by constitutions, by the opposition of their political opponents, by the economic and fiscal conditions in their state, by the continuous need to garner support and achieve re-election, by limits to the length of their tenure, and by the deliberative and contentious aspects of the political process. In addition to these limitations, governors and legislators have many other responsibilities. No governor or legislature can sustain deep involvement in any single area, and it is very difficult for them to concentrate their powers on a single issue.

If anything, these constraints are greater in higher education public policy. The governor is unable to direct change in higher education by executive order. The powers for governing institutions typically are vested in separately appointed or elected boards. The tradition of shared governance among trustees, administrators, and faculty imposes process requirements, even if not legal constraints, for decision-making at the institutional level. And the constituency for higher education is not as broad or universal as that of other public priorities, such as transportation or K-12 education.

These factors combined can make policy leadership and expanded support of higher education a high-risk, low-reward proposition for a governor or legislative leader. Higher education may

not deliver if political leaders make it a priority, and they cannot count on widespread support if they *do* make higher education a priority. These are formidable challenges for political leaders who wish to improve higher education.

Gubernatorial involvement in statewide governance or coordination

Governors, who are key actors in every state, vary in the amount of influence and formal authority they have over the appointments of state level higher education leaders. Most governors have the authority to appoint statewide board members, and a few hold *ex officio* memberships on state boards. In the United States, all statewide governing board chief executives report to the board, not the governor, but in seven states the governor has a direct role, sometimes complete authority, to appoint the chief executive of the state coordinating board.

Are gubernatorial appointment powers critical to a governor's influence over higher education policy? They can help, but the governor's *other* powers—to influence, sign, or veto legislation; to set an agenda; and to influence the budget—are fundamentally more significant. All governors, including the 43 with a limited or indirect role over higher education governance and coordination, rely on these tools. These powers—and the *limits* of these powers—are instrumental in shaping what governors can accomplish.

A state higher education executive appointed by the governor obviously enjoys the weight of the governor's authority in any undertaking, and the governor has great leverage over the state's higher education agency. The legal powers of the agency and the

amount of energy and attention the governor gives to higher education shape the dynamics in these situations. In a few states the agency controlled by the governor has powers more limited than those of the typical coordinating board. But when an agency controlled by the governor has substantial powers (such as in Colorado and Ohio), the governor has considerably more leverage over higher education policy, if he or she chooses to use it.

In the context of higher education's current challenges, active gubernatorial engagement can be a powerful tool for advancing necessary change. Not surprisingly, the practice of vesting more direct powers over higher education in the state's executive branch is growing in popularity. But the expansion and concentration of policy power in the executive branch has some potential drawbacks:

- If the governor is distracted by other priorities or has little interest in higher education, he or she may not appoint a person of stature to agency leadership, or neglect sustaining the technical expertise required for making sound policy decisions;
 - The chief executive of the state agency is term-limited along with the governor, and as a result the agency may lose momentum near the end of term, when the outcome of the next election is in doubt, or during the months-long transition between governors;
 - The governor's staff may not have the stature and independence required to give unbiased or challenging feedback;
 - Partisan electoral politics may play an inappropriate role in policy decision-making;

- Any initiative or success achieved by the governor is more at risk after his or her term ends due to the personal element in the political process; and
- The governor, for legitimate political reasons, may not wish to bear complete responsibility for difficult decisions (it can be useful to share power).

In the majority of states, it is still the coordinating or statewide governing board that appoints the state higher education executive without direct (although sometimes indirect) gubernatorial influence. Finding leaders for these challenging jobs with the necessary experience and talent in both higher education and public policy, however, seems to be increasingly difficult. Both political and higher education leaders have a stake in developing talented professionals who can be successful in these positions and structuring these jobs so they are attractive career opportunities.

The advantages and disadvantages of expanding the role of the executive branch warrant consideration as legislators and governors consider the mechanisms most likely to help their state improve the quality and scope of higher education. The 2005 report, *State Capacity for Higher Education Policy*, written by the National Center for Higher Education and Public Policy with the help of an outside working group, argues that strong, analytical, credible, broad-based public entities are needed to advance a statewide policy leadership agenda. Such an entity would have budgetary authority, the stature to engage the state's top leaders, and the analytical capacity to judge statewide and institutional performance. This entity would leave institutional governance to institutional and system governing boards, allowing

freedom for individual judgment and creativity at the campus level within the context of the statewide policy agenda.

While the report stops short of labeling the entity it proposes, the responsibilities and powers it describes are those of a strong coordinating board. Such boards are accountable to the public interest in higher education, while providing independent advice to political leaders, and receiving from them either delegated powers or implicit authority bestowed on trusted advisors.

Regardless of whether a state has a coordinating or governing board, all governors can employ common strategies to strengthen innovation, performance, and accountability in higher education governance. Four key steps (based on a dialogue involving the staff of the National Governors Association and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges) include:

- Establish a shared set of state priorities through a broad agenda-setting conversation with legislators, presidents, governing boards and other stakeholders;
- Show that competence and stature trump politics in the selection of the citizen volunteers who serve on public college and university governing boards;
- Embrace accountability and transparency by ensuring that governing and coordinating board members understand their fundamental fiduciary responsibility and conduct their business according to the highest standards of public service; and
- Invest limited resources effectively by encouraging public higher education institutions to examine their cost structures, market conditions, and methods of delivering educational services.

These steps, coupled with a persistent resolve, will advance a higher education system to higher levels of innovation and effectiveness.

The vital role of trusteeship in achieving excellence at scale

Nine years ago, the Education Commission of the States published *Transforming Postsecondary Education for the 21st Century: The Nuts and Bolts of Policy Leadership*, an excellent, in-depth consideration of the issues addressed in this paper. In many respects the ECS study and the initiatives it described make a strong case for political leadership in advancing the quality and scope of higher education in the United States. But the experience of the past decade also illustrates the importance of broadening reform and embedding necessary changes deeply into the fabric of higher education. Many initiatives have fallen short of their aspirations and objectives because they have not achieved the support of faculty and institutional leaders. Others have lost momentum or been set aside when states encountered fiscal problems or the next generation of leaders had different priorities.

The challenges facing higher education here and elsewhere require a long term vision, sustained focus, and deeply embedded commitment within colleges and universities. The members of state coordinating boards and governing boards, whether they oversee all, some, or just a single institution, have an indispensable role to play. Are they up to the task?

Perhaps chief among the many leadership challenges facing public governing boards is the inherent ambiguity arising from the constant tug between institutional aspirations and state needs and

priorities. Board members are often criticized for being in one of two camps—either too close to the appointing authority, the governor or legislature, or too close to the university administration—and many members seem unable to balance the interests of the public and the state with those of the institution or university system. Such perceptions, often accurate, arise in part because of unclear or conflicting expectations of what is required of a trustee. A clearly written set of expectations and responsibilities can help, but so would better board orientation and education programs that, in addition to offering the basics on trusteeship, would engage board members on the education challenges facing the nation, states, and ultimately, their institutions.

The board's ability to govern effectively given the inherent ambiguity in public governance requires a degree of policy independence. Policy independence is the capacity of a board to fashion reasoned, responsible policy in an environment comprised of several (often times, competing) demands from internal and external stakeholders. A board should rarely pass major policy decisions, say, for example, on costly new academic programs, up the ladder to elected leaders (or to the coordinating board if it is a governing board) or down to the faculty. While elected leaders or a coordinating board may later disagree, it is the board's responsibility to exercise due diligence and make tough decisions itself, using trust, leadership, and the availability of solid information. A willingness to address cost-effectiveness, which has risen to the top of policymakers' agendas, is another example of the board's need to make tough decisions. Political leaders have sent strong signals to institutions and governing boards that they must address cost management issues, or Congress or the statehouses will.

Since higher education means so much to states and society, elected leaders may be impatient with boards. Although not unexpected, this can be discouraging. Higher education has become too important to the civic and economic life of the states to simply be left to its own devices. But impatience can lead to unwarranted political intrusion. As noted earlier, it is both difficult and unwise for governors and legislators to control higher education directly. But when a board botches a presidential search, contributes to a fiscal crisis, or ignores an academic integrity issue, that board invites the intrusion of elected leaders and risks its independence.

Board selection poses another leadership challenge. Other than rearranging governance structures (which rarely makes much difference), appointing board members is the most direct way elected leaders can have influence. Paying more careful attention to selection is necessary for improving board performance. Often governors take this responsibility seriously and select strong candidates. But board nominees can also become pawns in a high stakes game between the legislature and the governor, both on initial appointments and re-appointments. And board seats can still be doled out to less deserving citizens on the basis of political connections or contributions. Building greater merit into the appointment process would minimize politics and help to secure stable and more effective boards.

Governors frequently and appropriately appoint individual trustees as vacancies occur, but governors should not appoint the chair of a governing board. Beginning this year, the governor of Massachusetts will have the statutory authority to appoint the chair of the University of Massachusetts System Board of Trustees, a departure from long established practice for governing boards in other states. The many duties of governing boards warrant greater board

independence, and such appointment power risks allowing too much politics into the boardroom.

While governing boards should choose their own chair, it seems less of a problem for the governor to have the power to appoint a coordinating board chair, where the principal responsibilities of the board are to provide coordination and policy advice to the governor and legislature.

The complexity of the increasingly market-driven modern public research university or the large multi-campus system is another challenge for trustees responsible for both system-wide strategy and institutional governance. Many of the boards that govern these enterprises need greater capacity, either in number or in talent, to address the many policy issues these institutions and systems face. The Moody's May 2008 "Special Comment" in *U.S. Public Finance* suggests that large public research universities have evolved into "market-driven public mission agencies that require more flexible governance and oversight to achieve their goals." Moody's calls for greater board expertise in particular areas, such as familiarity with health care and health care administration, and believes that more diverse selection processes, including allowing boards to appoint some of their own members, can bring such talent into the boardroom. Moody's, which has come under scrutiny itself because of its role in the mortgage crisis, may be on to something, although it was silent on increasing the size of boards.

In addition to dealing with these complex issues, public research university boards must also ensure that their institutions not lose sight of their indispensable contributions to state and national public needs through instruction, research, and public service.

Institutional autonomy, or the lack of it, presents a challenge to the board (and the president). As noted earlier, a substantial amount of autonomy and flexibility is permitted in American higher education as a necessary condition for the pursuit of excellence. Throughout the modern history of higher education, some of the best minds have said as much, including the Committee on Government and Higher Education chaired by Milton Eisenhower in the late 1950s and Frank Newman in *Choosing Quality* in 1987. Strong and effective governance is part of the autonomy equation—the more effective and responsive the board and the more able it is to assure institutional accountability, the less necessary the heavy hand of government. But some argue that in too many states the governing boards of some institutions have not been effective stewards—that they have embraced institutional agendas not in the best interests of their states or regions—that is, toward research, selectivity, and graduate programs, or a perceived market niche that may be more aspirational than actual. The institutions answer that they are responding to local needs and pressures.

Too often, the challenge of pursuing greater prestige (an institution-first agenda) is more exciting to a governing board than one of increasing student participation and success rates, working with K-12 on school reform, or encouraging first generation, minority, and immigrant populations to aspire to college. It is far easier to hear the calls for a new MBA program or a medical school from prominent members of the chamber of commerce than the silence of the underserved. Institutions can find sufficient allies, some in high places, to pursue lofty, even if unrealistic, goals. It's a fair question whether institutional governing boards (and public university system boards without strong and influential executives) can halt or even fully vet

such proposals before they go forward to the state coordinating board or the governor's budget office. On the other hand, there are many examples of institutional boards exercising their independence and saying no, and with their presidents, employing the institution's autonomy to develop a successful and comprehensive regional agenda within their existing mission that serves all within their communities.

The metrics for determining college and university success, and consequently for determining governance effectiveness, may be changing. Institutional successes, as determined by institution-first agendas (ambitious, competitive, and heavily resource focused), are beginning to take a back seat to a state-first or public agenda, which focuses on public needs and accountability for achieving them. All higher education boards need to balance institutional aspirations with state needs, and autonomy for excellence with accountability for results.

Characteristics of board effectiveness

Several characteristics define an effective governing board. Without question, today's effective board is significantly more engaged with issues and strategy than in years past. The following six characteristics are among the most critically important for public governing boards (and where noted, for state coordinating boards).

First, an effective board, with the president as a partner, successfully balances institutional priorities with the public good. It understands the public purposes and public mission of the institution(s) it oversees and it responsibly brings community issues to the administration and into the boardroom.

Second, effective boards show a willingness to help lead and support strategic change by engaging in statewide, systemwide, or institutional planning. Ideally, the board's key leaders are engaged in the planning process—perhaps by chairing planning committees. After a plan is finalized and agreed upon, effective boards develop a board workplan to monitor implementation and progress, including appropriate reviews of benchmarks and goals. Ideally, a statewide public agenda championed at the statewide board or office guides the subsequent development of system and institutional agendas and strategic plans. In other words, there exists a deeply embedded commitment to the public agenda—everyone can explain it, buy into it, and understand what its obligations are at the state, regional, and community level.

Third, an effective board expects accountability. Public boards are accountable to the people of the entire state. Boards serving only one campus, as noted above, can be drawn into institutional agendas, leading outsiders to question whether such agendas serve the long-term public interest. Trustees are also accountable for safeguarding public assets—ensuring that future generations benefit from all the institution has to offer. In addition, the board is accountable for the fiscal integrity of the institution; for its own performance; for ensuring that ethical policies are in place and that measurable progress is made on strategic plans; and for hiring, assessing, and setting fair compensation for the chief executive.

The fourth characteristic is assuming responsibility for results in the academic affairs of the university or the state higher education system. This mission continues to grow in importance. An effective board needs to be engaged, within acceptable boundaries, in academic issues. Peter Ewell put it best in an AGB publication, *Making the*

Grade: “Running the curriculum is the faculty’s responsibility; the board’s role is to remind them of that responsibility.” This approach gives the board appropriate leverage over quality and improvement. Boards need to know the quality of the public schools that provide the majority of the entering class, the remediation rates of entering students, how students are assessed on their progress, and how the results are used to improve the progression of students through the institution to graduation. An effective board is engaged in the accreditation process, both regional and program specific, and aware of any recommendations for institutional improvement as a result of the accreditation review.

Fifth is the ability to balance engagement with an appropriate degree of detachment. A board must understand its responsibilities as well as the range and limits of its authority. A board needs to be supportive of good, strong ideas that come not only from the chief executive and his or her staff, but from all stakeholders (including elected leaders), and be willing to challenge assumptions, ask sound questions, and probe for viable alternatives. In short, an effective board maintains a healthy skepticism and some objective distance, sustaining policy independence and responsiveness—although in reality, most boards will appropriately delegate a considerable amount of authority to the chief executive

Advancing an institutional agenda to the state, preferably one in accordance with the public agenda, will require the skills of integral leadership—a leadership style that links the president, the faculty, and the board together in a well-functioning partnership. While board members and the president are distinct entities—the board a policymaking body, the president the executer of those policies—at the end of the day, perhaps after vigorous debate, they must be on the

same page. Too many outside of higher education expect the board–president relationship to be one of checks and balances, as if the administration were the executive branch and the board the legislature. That is a prescription for conflict and failure.

Sixth, effective boards engage productively with elected leaders and work across party lines with the governor, while keeping politics, especially partisan politics, out of the boardroom. The board should not—either by the actions of its individual members or by political leaders—become a vehicle for issues playing out in the state capitol. As suggested earlier, the actions, competence, and policy independence of board members should preclude political intrusion. Nevertheless, elected officials *do* want to hear directly from the board’s chosen leaders—unfiltered by their own staffs or university administrators—and not just during the annual budget hearing. They want to have meaningful conversations about accountability, costs, and performance. Presidents and chancellors should encourage conversations between board members and political leaders that contribute positively to institutional goals and public purposes.

Public purposes and board composition

Reflecting her desire for a board with stature, a college president once remarked that she wanted no one at the board table who made less money than she did. We need experienced and influential people to lead our universities, university systems, and state higher education agencies—people who have demonstrated leadership in business or civic life and do not need an appointment to the board as means to gain stature. And as noted above, the complexities of larger

institutions and multi-campus systems require individuals with ranges of expertise.

Yet, with pressing national needs to increase educational attainment, what kind of a board is needed to ensure that the college or university addresses the needs of the underserved? In 1947, Herbert Beck wrote *Men Who Control our Universities*, in which he documented that the governance of the nation's top 30 public and private universities was composed largely of privileged white males. Beck called for these institutions to have broader public representation on their boards—more women and working class members—in part because elite institutions have “a clear lack...of intimate knowledge of the underprivileged.”

Although higher education has changed dramatically in terms of access and participation since 1947, and boards *are* more diverse, Beck's general concerns are still valid. Public boards today are comprised of, on average, 29 percent women and 21 percent minorities, with a slight gain in the percentage of minorities serving in the past decade, but a slight decrease in the percentage of women serving. So boards and policy advisors still need to add more citizens and community leaders who can relate personally to the needs and life experience of minority groups, women, adult learners, and first generation students. In addition, boards need people with greater content knowledge.

We must also remember that board members, be they from governing or coordinating boards, volunteer their time and expertise in order to give something back to society and their states and communities. Much is expected from trustees—their time, money, wisdom, connections, and encouragement. They, in turn, deserve

respect and support, and should not be discouraged from serving by over-reaching ethics and disclosure laws and unfair criticism.

Like trustees at other important social institutions, public trustees can be a powerful force for positive change. Too often, however, they are an untapped resource for making contributions to a broad-based public agenda. By recruiting dedicated and experienced citizens through improved selection processes, setting clearer expectations, and providing better orientation and education, we can have governing and coordinating boards that understand, articulate, support, and help their states achieve significant educational progress.

Conclusion

The twenty-first century will require more educational attainment, more path-breaking discoveries, and more creative applications of knowledge from America's colleges and universities. While excellence at scale in higher education has never been realized, this achievement is within the capacity of the American people and our educational system. We must begin by deciding that this is our priority.

Change is required, but not by discarding and undermining the fundamental mechanisms that have governed American higher education for more than a century. More than anything else, the pathway to success requires greater clarity of purpose, rigor of assessment, and determination to reach new heights.

While revolutionary change in creating public policy and governing higher education would likely be both difficult and counterproductive, policy and educational leaders should carefully consider how state and institutional leadership and governance

practices must change in order to achieve excellence at scale. Some of the assumptions of the past century are clearly hindering progress toward today's more urgent priorities.

What mechanisms are required to get institutions (including flagships) to be more accountable for these specific state priorities—extending instruction, research, and public service activities to underserved populations or to unmet needs? What public policy commitments are necessary to assure enough public funding for higher education? What kinds of board members are needed for boards to be effective in policy development, to exhibit strong fiscal acumen, and to shoulder successfully a new level of accountability?

This paper has suggested some responses to these questions, but the answers that matter must be developed by the citizens, policy leaders, and educators of each state.

Sources

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. *AGB Statement on Board Accountability*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, January 2007.

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. *Bridging the Gap Between State Government and Public Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1998.

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. Four Steps Governors Can Take Now to Strengthen Innovation, Performance and Accountability in Public College and University Governance. Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, April 2007.

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. *The Leadership Imperative*, The Report of the AGB Task Force on the State of the Presidency in American Higher Education. Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2006.

Breneman, David W. *Are the States and Public Higher Education Striking a New Bargain?* Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, July 2004.

Business-Higher Education Forum. *Public Accountability for Student Learning: Issues and Options*. Washington, D.C.: Business-Higher Education Forum, February 2004.

Education Commission of the States. *Transforming Postsecondary Education in the 21st Century: The Nuts and Bolts of Policy Leadership*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, June 1999.

Ewell, Peter T. *Making the Grade: How Boards Can Ensure Academic Quality*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2006.

Lingenfelter, Paul E. "The State and Higher Education: An Essential Partnership" in *Restructuring Shared Governance in Higher Education*, William G. Tierney and Vincente M. Lechuga, editors. New Directions for Higher Education, Number 127, Fall 2004. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

MacTaggart, Terrence J. and James R. Mingle. *Pursing the Public's Agenda: Trustees in Partnership with State Leaders*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2002.

Moody's Investors Service. "Special Comment: Public University Governance Faces New Challenges as U.S. Higher Education Becomes Increasingly Market-Driven," in *U.S. Public Finance*. New York, NY: Moody's Investors Service, May 2008.

National Academies Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century. *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2007.

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. *State Capacity for Higher Education Policy*. San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, July 2005.

National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education. *Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for*

Higher Education. Denver, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers, March 2005.

National Commission on the Future of Higher Education in America. *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2006.

National Conference of State Legislatures, Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education. *Transforming Higher Education: National Imperative—State Responsibility*. Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures, October 2006.

National Governors Association. *Innovation America, A Compact for Postsecondary Education*. Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association, 2006.