



# **GREAT EXPECTATIONS:**

*A Longitudinal Study of New University Trustees*

First Phase Report

Michael J. Zeig, Roger G. Baldwin, & Kathleen M. Wilbur  
Center for Higher and Adult Education  
College of Education  
Michigan State University

**> MARCH 2014**

## > ABOUT

# THE CENTER FOR HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION

The Center for Higher and Adult Education mission is to further policy and international work in post-secondary education for the 21st century. Our mission is advanced by:

- » Supporting academic and cultural exchange at the postsecondary level through a fellows and visiting scholar program as well as an intern program for graduate students seeking international or domestic, policy-related experiences studying higher education at Michigan State University;
- » Hosting programs and events dedicated to providing forums for intellectual discussions about issues related to both higher education policy and higher education in the global context;
- » Helping to transform the HALE curricula in line with more international, comparative and domestic policy experiences; and
- » Assisting HALE faculty with their post-secondary research and outreach as related to higher education policy both domestically and across the globe.

For additional information please visit: <http://education.msu.edu/ead/hale/center/>

## > ABOUT

# THE AUTHORS

**Michael J. Zeig** ([zeigmich@msu.edu](mailto:zeigmich@msu.edu)) is a graduate research assistant in the higher, adult, and lifelong education program at Michigan State University. He was previously employed in the Michigan Governor's Office (2008-10) where he worked with university trustee appointments.

**Roger G. Baldwin** ([rbaldwin@msu.edu](mailto:rbaldwin@msu.edu)) is a professor of higher, adult, and lifelong education at Michigan State University. Additionally, he is a trustee at Hiram College, serving since 1994.

**Kathleen M. Wilbur** ([wilbu1km@cmich.edu](mailto:wilbu1km@cmich.edu)) is the vice president of development and external relations at Central Michigan University and a graduate student in the higher, adult, and lifelong education program at Michigan State University. She previously served on the Michigan State University Board of Trustees from 1985 to 1991.

*Please address comments and questions to the study authors via their emails listed above or by mail:*

Center for Higher and Adult Education  
Michigan State University  
Erickson Hall, Rm 418  
620 Farm Lane  
East Lansing, MI 48824



**MICHIGAN STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

College of Education



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

University trustees serve an important fiduciary and strategic role for the institutions they serve. This report highlights the initial findings from a 2-year longitudinal study of the expectations and experiences of 12 newly appointed public university trustees in the State of Michigan. Based on interview and survey data, we provide findings about trustees' expectations concerning the roles and responsibilities of a board, the issues board members will engage in, and sources of information they will rely upon to learn about their roles and make decisions during their tenure as trustees. Findings include:

- The three areas trustees expect to be the most involved in are: (1) evaluating the chief executive, (2) budgetary and financial oversight, and (3) strategic planning.
- The four areas trustees expect to be the least involved in are: (1) athletics, (2) university communications and media relations, (3) enrollment management, and (4) student learning outcomes.
- Several trustees strongly indicated an interest in engaging in discussions about the competitive advantage of their institutions compared to peers.
- Trustees indicated they would rely most upon the university president, senior-level administrators, and fellow board members for information about issues and making decisions. They expect to rely least upon news media (e.g., newspapers, tv networks), legislators and/or staff, and industry media (e.g., *Chronicle*, AGB) as sources of information.
- Trustees indicated a desire for universities to create more comprehensive and continuing orientation and education processes to help them acquire the necessary information and understanding to fulfill their duties effectively.



# INTRODUCTION

Controversial events during the past two years at higher education institutions such as the University of Virginia, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Texas have raised important questions about the proper role of boards of trustees in the governance and management of their institutions. Following these instances, attention centered on examining how boards can fulfill their fiduciary and oversight responsibilities without micromanaging their institutions (Legon, 2012; Novak, 2012). However, another issue to examine is how individual board members come to know and understand their roles and responsibilities and decide how involved to become in executing their duties. Accordingly, our research team has embarked on a two-year longitudinal study examining the expectations and experiences of newly appointed public university trustees. Our goal is to help inform policies and practices to orient and support the development of new trustees. During the next two years we will release periodic reports about our findings at successive stages of the research study. We believe sharing preliminary findings in a timely manner is important to encourage thoughtful consideration of the roles, responsibilities, and orientation processes of trustees.

# BACKGROUND

Higher education institutions have always faced a myriad of challenges, but with increasing calls from the public for greater assessment, accountability, and productivity placed on institutions (Ewell, 2006; Field, 2013), the work and influence of boards of trustees is increasingly important. This is especially true given the rapidity at which decisions must be made (Duderstadt, 2001). In today's fast-paced environment, board members must be aware of



their responsibilities and cognizant of the landscape they are operating within in order to ask well-informed and critical questions of presidents and other senior administrators and provide sound oversight of the institutions they serve (Baldwin, 2005, 2012; Kezar, 2006). Despite the vital role boards play at higher education institutions, trustee governance is often not given the same amount of attention in higher education literature as other topics such as faculty roles or student development (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Most of the literature on boards examines their history, structures, and general fiduciary responsibilities with less attention focused on the actual workings of boards or board members' perceptions of their roles (Schwartz, 1998). Thus, little is known about how trustees view or come to understand their roles in tackling the increasing number of issues facing institutions.

An Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2010) survey found that almost half of public university board members have professional backgrounds in business. Only 15.5% have professional experiences in the education sector. Although boards benefit from having members with a diverse range of experiences (Zeig & Rao, 2012), board members with experience outside the education sector may be unfamiliar with what issues properly fall within the board's purview and how involved boards should be in the oversight and management of the institutions they serve. Therefore, it is vital to understand who and what may influence trustees' understanding of their roles and responsibilities and decision-making processes. Although some scholarship explores the influence of external entities (e.g., political parties, private industry) on boards (Bastedo, 2009; Pusser, Slaughter, & Thomas, 2006), these studies do not consider the perceptions of individual trustees. Given the important role trustees play at their institutions, it is important to gain a better understanding of trustees' expectations, experiences, and learning processes from their vantage point.



## METHODS

We invited trustees of 10 Michigan public universities appointed by the governor to their positions with terms commencing in 2013 to participate in this study. We limited participation to trustees from the State of Michigan due to the unique nature of public higher education in Michigan, where there is no centralized state coordinating authority. This means that institutions and the boards that oversee them have a large degree of flexibility in making decisions, and trustees at these institutions may have different experiences than trustees at public institutions subject to greater centralized state control. Eighteen individuals were asked to participate and 12 agreed, representing eight different universities. Each trustee who agreed to participate was asked to complete an electronic survey and participate in an individual interview. Eleven of the 12 participants completed the survey. All 12 participated in an individual interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. Survey and interview questions focused on the expectations and initial experiences of the trustees. The full set of survey and interview questions can be found in Appendices A and B respectively.

Surveys were tabulated to provide descriptive data about trustees' expectations regarding issues boards would face and sources of information they would rely upon in making decisions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim (one participant asked not to be recorded and detailed notes were taken instead). The research team individually reviewed one of the interviews to identify emerging themes and then discussed their findings to develop a joint understanding of the interview data. With an initial set of themes established, one researcher analyzed the remaining interviews, followed by the entire research team reviewing and agreeing on the final listing of initial themes and findings.



# INITIAL FINDINGS

The data collected revealed findings related to new trustees' expected level of involvement on their individual boards, prior knowledge of higher education issues, and expected reliance on various sources of information.

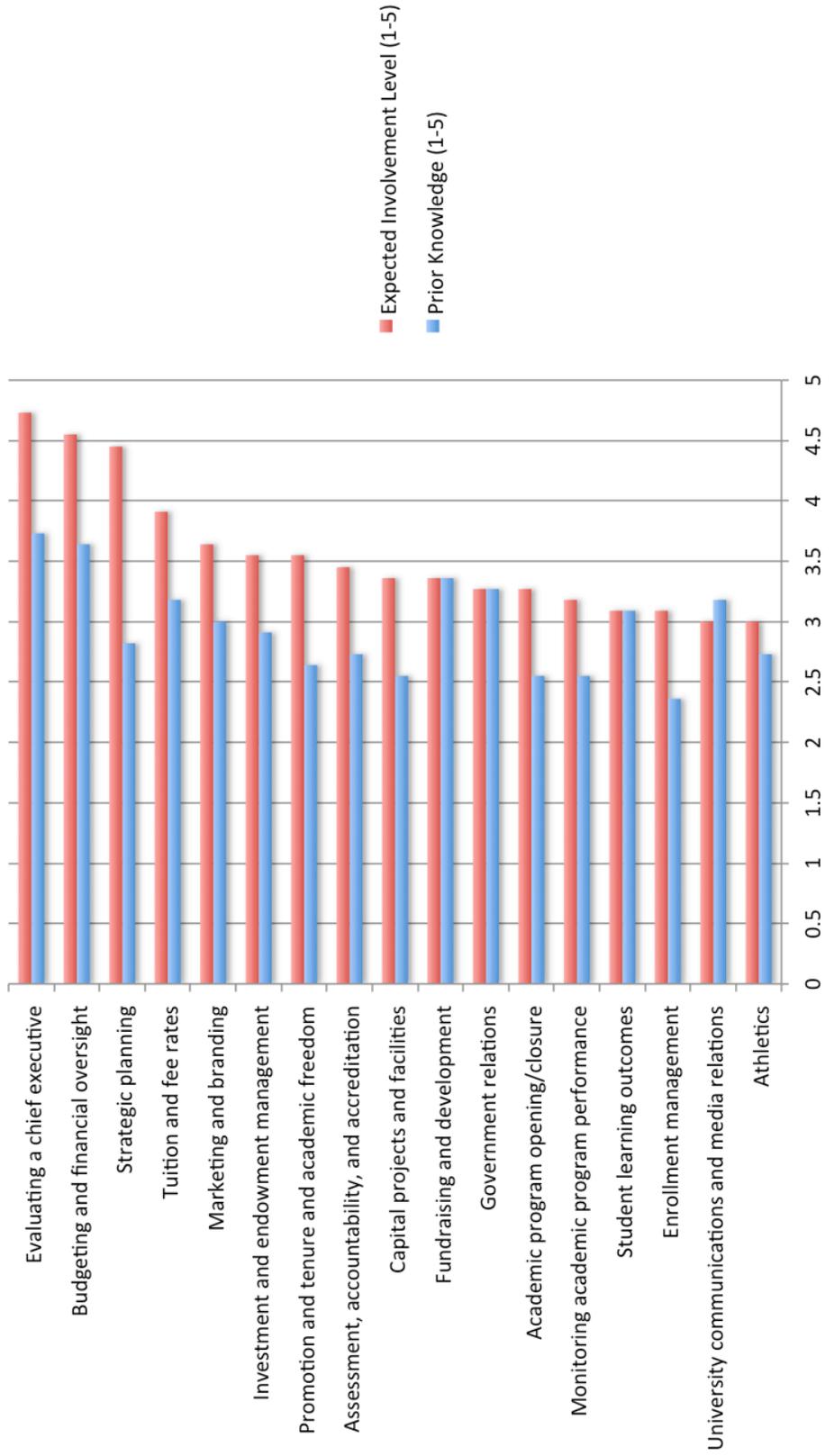
## Level of Involvement

Through a survey, trustees assessed their prior knowledge of a wide variety of higher education issues and indicated how involved they expect to be as a trustee with regard to the same set of issues. Full results are shown in *Figure 1*. Participants expect to be involved in most of the issues raised in the survey. Each issue yielded an average response of 3 or higher on a scale of 1-5, with 1 representing the lowest level of involvement and 5 the highest level of involvement. The three issues trustees expect to be the most involved in, all averaging above 4, were: (1) evaluating the chief executive, (2) budgetary and financial oversight, and (3) strategic planning for their institution. Although the average expected involvement levels of trustees was at 3 or above for all issues, there was disagreement among respondents on individual issues. In regards to athletics and enrollment management, there were responses ranging from an involvement level of 1 to an involvement level of 4. On the issue of academic program opening and closure there were responses ranging from an involvement level of 1 to an involvement level of 5. This variation indicates that board members do not always have a monolithic view concerning the issues in which they should engage.

Interview responses regarding the role of the board yielded two main themes: (1) fulfilling a fiduciary responsibility through strong oversight at a strategic and policy level, and (2) hiring, setting standards for, evaluating, and possibly replacing the president. One trustee



**Figure 1: Trustee Responses About Higher Education Issues**





succinctly captured the first theme in stating that the board’s role is to “help drive strategy and have deep knowledge of the strategy for the school in a fiscally-viable sense.” Trustees also indicated their involvement needed to stay at a high, 30,000-foot level to avoid managing the minutiae of daily campus operations.

Relative to the second theme, it was evident that new trustees take seriously their relationship with the president. This includes not only overseeing the work of the president, but also working with and supporting the president when needed. For example, one trustee thought it was important to be a sounding board for the president and another indicated the importance of supporting the president because “his success means our success.”

One additional issue, not explicitly listed on the survey, was mentioned in several interviews. Several participants indicated a strong desire to engage in discussions about the competitive advantage of their institutions compared to peer institutions. Trustees specifically mentioned an expectation for their institutions to maintain a relevant curriculum and respond to the rise of online education options. “These next eight years, I think, are very, very critical to the financial future as well as just the future of universities, especially public ones . . . People are going to be able to get online Harvard degrees [referring to massive open online courses]. How do we compete with that?” one trustee questioned. Another trustee added that the leadership of the university should ensure the curriculum focuses “on jobs that will be in demand.”

## Prior Knowledge

Due to the varied backgrounds trustees bring with them to their appointed positions, participants acknowledged there are a number of higher education issues where they lack expertise. This includes a number of the academic-oriented issues, including: promotion and tenure and academic freedom; assessment, accountability, and accreditation; academic program opening and closure; and monitoring academic program performance. On the prior knowledge



question, each of these areas had an average rating on the survey below 3 on a scale of 1-5, with 1 representing very limited knowledge and 5 representing expert knowledge.

The top two issues trustees expected to be engaged in, evaluating the chief executive and budgetary and financial oversight, are also the two areas trustees indicated they have the most prior knowledge about. However, strategic planning, the third highest issue trustees expected to be involved with, was an area where participants indicated they had more limited knowledge. This issue yielded an average score of less than 3 on the prior knowledge question.

Besides the macro higher education issues trustees indicated they wanted to learn more about, they also expressed, in their interviews, a desire to learn more about their particular institutions. Several trustees wanted to know more about their institution's business model, priorities, and as one trustee called it, their "product." Another trustee stated they need to know more about the "university's needs, wants, and desires and what can really be accomplished."

Trustees also indicated wanting to learn more about the general roles of a university board. One trustee said, "the institution needs to define the role for board members . . . because a lot of boards are different." Another trustee added, "I guess I honestly feel that it may be unclear to members of the board what their real role and responsibility is." In the absence of the university defining the role of the board, this same trustee said, "I just basically equated my role and responsibility to that of how I served on other boards . . . whether that was right I don't know." Many of the new trustees have prior experience serving on other non-profit and corporate boards. However, since the expectations of different boards vary greatly, new trustees thought it was important for the university and current board members to help them understand the general expectations of serving on a university board.



## Information Sources

Trustees expect to rely upon a variety of sources for information, both to learn more about their roles and, when called upon, to make decisions. *Table 1* shows the average scores on a scale of 1-5 (1 = lowest reliance, 5 = highest reliance) that trustees gave to each of the sources of information they might rely upon during their tenure as a board member.

**Table 1: Trustees' Expected Reliance on Sources of Information**

Source of Information	Expected Reliance Upon (1-5)
University president	4.45
Senior-level administrators	4.09
Fellow board members	4.00
Faculty leaders	3.27
Student leaders	3.00
Governor and/or Executive Branch staff	2.73
Industry media (e.g., <i>Chronicle</i> , AGB)	2.55
Legislators and/or staff	2.27
News media (e.g., newspapers, tv networks)	2.00

The university president, senior-level administrators, and fellow board members had the highest averages, each above 4. News media (e.g., *Wall Street Journal*), legislators and/or legislative staff, industry media (e.g., *Chronicle of Higher Education*), and the governor and/or Executive Branch staff scored the lowest, each below 3. Given the option to identify sources of information not listed, respondents also cited former board members and other colleges and universities as additional sources of information they may rely upon in learning about issues and making decisions. News media, industry media, and the governor and/or Executive Branch



staff revealed the greatest disagreement among respondents, with expected reliance scores ranging from 1 to 4.

During the interviews, it became clear not just who and what trustees expected to rely upon for information, but also how they would utilize these sources of information. All but one of the trustees indicated their institution provided or was going to provide a one or two-day orientation to acquaint them with the top executives and the key issues facing the institution. The breadth and depth of orientations, however, differed among institutions. One trustee was particularly pleased that at her orientation the two new members were able to have a conversation about issues as opposed to just being “immersed in all this data and information.” Other trustees indicated they were loaded with boxes full of binders and reports on numerous topics with less two-way dialogue on the issues. One trustee stated, “I feel like I’m walking through a line at a smorgasbord cafeteria and people just say, oh, you need one of these, one of these, one of these, but I’m like, where’s the overall vision?”

For some trustees, orientation was limited to a formal process. For other trustees, orientation included dinner with the president and each of their spouses. One trustee thought this was important “to get to know each other on a personal level . . . [since] eight years (the length of appointment) is going to be a long marriage for all of us.” However, following the formal orientation from university leaders, we learned many trustees are largely left on their own. As one trustee noted, “I’m submerged in the water now and I’m expected to get going.” Some new trustees indicated that administrators and fellow board members occasionally pull them to the side to see if they have any lingering questions that have not yet been addressed. However, this practice varied greatly by institution. For example, one trustee noted mild frustration that their board chair was not more communicative with new trustees in sharing their expertise.



After the initial orientation period, trustees expect to rely upon a wide variety of sources of information when faced with a decision. Externally, trustees indicated they wanted to hear from the local community and state policymakers about their expectations for the university. One trustee commented, “I was appointed by a governor; I expect to call up the governor if I’m not happy.” Another trustee viewed relationships with the external community as a way to provide benefit to the university. “I’m not a Republican, but I was appointed by one. That means I have access. I fully intend to use that access on behalf of the university.” Internally, trustees expect to interact with administrators, faculty, staff, and students and want to hear their ideas for how the university can be run better and how decisions will impact their areas of the university. One trustee specifically mentioned wanting to hear from students because “at the end of the day, they’re our clients.”

Additionally, trustees indicated a desire to take a proactive approach to learning about their roles and the institutions they serve. To the trustees we interviewed this means attending meetings, asking questions, communicating with the president and administration, learning about the culture of the institution, staying abreast of national trends in higher education, and attending university events outside of formal board activities. Several trustees felt particularly strongly in favor of spending time on campus outside of board meetings. One trustee stated, “I hope to be over there enough that I would be able to connect with people . . . not to critique the administration or anything like that, but just to listen and hear what people are saying.” Being engaged, however, comes with some complexities. Individuals were cognizant of needing to navigate an appropriate balance between engagement and micromanagement. Finding this balance differed among trustees as one individual described a desire to become engaged in pet projects on campus and another felt it was important not to have a specific agenda while on the board. Although there were disagreements about the appropriate level of engagement, there



was widespread agreement that in some capacity trustees should utilize their professional expertise in ways that may benefit the institution.

## Summary

It is clear that new trustees expect to engage in a variety of matters ranging from financial issues to academic issues and even fundraising and development activities. Most participants indicated that involvement in these areas should remain at a strategic and policy level to avoid micromanagement of their institutions. However, trustees indicated a need to learn more about how to navigate this appropriate level of engagement. Given participants' acknowledgement that they lack expertise in each area of university operations, it is important for new board members to have educational opportunities to learn about their general roles and the specific issues they will encounter during their tenure. New trustees expect to rely on a variety of sources to gain this information and most universities offer orientation sessions for new board members. However, it is clear that orientations differ across institutions and that the information new trustees are seeking is not always the information that is shared during orientation sessions.

This section summarized the findings we believe to be most salient to our study. Appendix C has an overview of some additional findings regarding: reasons for joining a board, expectations of how issues will be identified and brought before the board, expectations about the role of the board chair and the role of the president, and initial surprises since being appointed.



## OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although our study continues, this initial set of data allowed us to make some initial observations and provide some recommendations based on our findings. It is clear there is a strong interest among board members in the future of their institutions and higher education more generally. Several trustees discussed the issues of technology, online learning, the relevance of academic programs, and the strength of the product (i.e., graduates) produced. Trustees felt strongly that institutions should stay on the forefront of these trends and be an active player in shaping the future of their institutions as opposed to simply reacting to emerging trends. At the same time, the nature of these trustees serving an eight-year term means that they will likely encounter significant ebb and flow among the types of issues that arise throughout their tenures, especially with the rapidity of change in today's global society.

Given the concerns of trustees surrounding the future of higher education, it was interesting that participants rarely mentioned the issue of enrollment. In the survey question about issues trustees would be engaged in, enrollment management had the third lowest average rating for expected level of involvement. We believe the combination of a decrease in state appropriations to public institutions during the past decade (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2013) and the ongoing decline in high school graduates through the next decade (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2012) will elevate enrollment management as a critical issue for public universities. We would expect that as the trustees in this study become more acquainted with this set of facts, they might find themselves more involved in monitoring and discussing enrollment management issues than originally expected. The size and makeup of an institution's student body has large financial implications for institutions. Presidents and senior-level administrators should work with their boards to make



them aware of how enrollment trends impact their institutions in order to arm trustees with the best information available as they help shape the future direction of their institutions.

Another area that yielded interesting discussion among trustees was regarding orientation processes. Most of the newly-appointed board members came to their positions with a self-described limited expertise in higher education matters. Each attended college and some have multiple degrees. Some previously served on alumni boards, program advisory boards, or as trustees at other types of institutions. Still, many of the intricacies of university operations and policies were foreign to the new trustees. As serious stewards of their institutions, the participants in this study expressed a strong desire to learn more about their roles and responsibilities. However, it was not always clear how this could best be accomplished.

Most of the universities in this study planned to hold orientation sessions for new board members as soon as possible following their appointments, typically prior to their first official board meeting. Although most institutions provide orientation sessions, it is how the orientations are organized and managed that makes the difference between an effective and ineffective session with new board members. A fire-hose approach to share as much information as possible at one time led to some frustration among board members who experienced this approach. The information provided was valuable, but there was too much to absorb and make sense of in a limited timeframe.

In addition to a formal orientation provided by the university, many of the trustees indicated they received congratulatory phone calls or emails from current board members upon hearing of their appointment. In some instances current board members provided insights and advice about the role of the board. In most instances these communications ended after exchanging pleasantries. We learned from the trustees we spoke with that there was an interest



in current members interacting with new members in greater depth upon their appointment to help acclimate new members to their roles.

Based on this set of experiences relayed to us from new trustees, we offer the following recommendations for board orientations.

- Organize an orientation session on the university's campus as soon as possible after the announcement of board appointments, preferably prior to a new trustee's first official board meeting.
- The orientation should include: introducing new members to administrators, faculty, staff, and students in leadership roles; providing a campus history and physical campus tour; and identifying key issues and challenges facing the university.
- The orientation should also include a discussion of the overall role of a trustee. What does the board discuss? What does the board vote on? How do board members interact with one another and the president? It would be useful to utilize resources from the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges to facilitate these discussions.
- A current board member, the chair if possible, should engage in the formal orientation process or reach out separately to new members to discuss key issues facing the board.
- Throughout the orientation there should be ample time for questions and discussion to prevent new trustees from feeling overwhelmed with information. New trustees should also be given an opportunity to express their opinions on issues of interest to them.

While it is important to provide new trustees with an overview of how the board currently operates, it is also important to acknowledge and integrate the viewpoints of new trustees.

- 
- Finally, board orientations should not end after an initial session on campus; trustee education needs to continue throughout their time on the board. Throughout the year there should be educational sessions scheduled for board members on far-reaching higher education topics such as the growth of online teaching and learning, the increasingly global nature of education, a review of academic program offerings and graduate success, and other appropriate topics. A yearly board retreat is a particularly valuable time for trustees to discuss key issues and challenges and how these impact their institution. Additionally, universities should direct trustees to resources such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *Trusteeship Magazine* as valuable sources of information for learning more about current issues and challenges facing institutions nationally.

## NEXT STEPS

Our intention is to track the experiences of this group of new trustees over a two-year period. We will follow-up with each trustee for an additional individual interview approximately one year and two years after their appointment. In these follow-up interviews we plan to explore, among other topics, how trustees' experiences match their initial expectations and how their viewpoints have or have not changed regarding the types of issues they are involved in and the sources of information they rely upon in their role as a trustee. We will also seek to identify what caused changes in opinions or perceptions if such changes occur among the participants. We hope this information will provide an understanding of the expectations and experiences of new public university trustees and yield useful insights for boards, presidents, government officials, and academics studying university governance.

# APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_  
Occupational Background (e.g., banking, education, public relations): \_\_\_\_\_  
Highest level of educational attainment: \_\_\_\_\_  
Are you an alumnus of the institution where you now serve on the Board? \_\_\_\_\_

Questions 1 and 2 refer to the same list of issues (a-q) listed below.

1. Entering your role as a university trustee, how much knowledge do you feel you have on the following issues on a scale of 1-5 (1-very limited knowledge, 2-limited knowledge, 3-moderate knowledge, 4-strong understanding of the issue, 5-subject-matter expert):
2. During your tenure as a university trustee, how involved do you expect to be in regards to the following issues on a scale of 1-5 (1-rare involvement, 2-minimal involvement, 3-moderate involvement at an oversight and accountability level, 4-moderate involvement at a policy-making level, 5-provide significant input in university policy/direction):
  - a. Tuition, room and board, and other fee rates
  - b. Annual and long-term budgeting / financial stability
  - c. Investment and endowment management
  - d. Facilities management, construction projects, and deferred maintenance
  - e. Institutional strategic planning
  - f. Institutional assessment, accountability, and accreditation
  - g. Student learning outcomes
  - h. Monitoring academic program performance
  - i. Academic program opening and closure
  - j. Promotion and tenure policy and academic freedom
  - k. Enrollment management, admissions, and financial aid
  - l. Fundraising and development
  - m. Government relations and lobbying
  - n. University communications and media relations
  - o. Organizational branding and marketing
  - p. Collegiate athletics
  - q. Evaluating a chief executive
3. In executing your role as a university trustee, how likely are you to rely upon the following sources of information in learning about issues and making decisions on a scale of 1-5 (1-will rarely rely upon, 2-will rely upon for limited issues, 3-will rely upon occasionally, 4-will rely upon regularly, 5-will rely upon in all or almost all cases):
  - a. Fellow board members
  - b. University president
  - c. Senior-level university administrators
  - d. Faculty leaders
  - e. Student leaders
  - f. Governor and/or Executive Office staff
  - g. Legislators and/or staff
  - h. News media (e.g., *WSJ*, tv networks)
  - i. Industry media (e.g., *Chronicle*, *AGB*)
  - j. Other (please fill-in)



## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why were you interested in joining the \_\_\_\_\_ Board of Trustees?
2. What background, knowledge, or experiences with higher education institutions did you have prior to joining the Board?
3. What is your understanding of the role of a university Board of Trustees?
4. What types of issues do you expect to fall under the purview of the Board?
5. What is your understanding of how issues are identified and brought to the Board's attention?
6. What is your understanding of the roles and responsibilities of an individual Board member?
7. What do you think is required of you to fulfill these roles/responsibilities?
8. What is your understanding of the role of the Board chair in comparison to the role of an individual trustee?
9. What do you believe the role of the Board is in relation to the president?
10. Are there certain areas where you feel you need to gain more knowledge in order to effectively fulfill your responsibilities as a trustee?
11. What do you plan to do individually to learn about your role as a trustee?
12. How do you expect the university and/or fellow board members to help you learn about your role as a trustee?
13. When confronted with a choice or decision as a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ Board of Trustees, please describe the process you are likely to follow in making that decision.
14. In your role as a trustee, what individuals or other sources of information do you expect to rely upon in learning about issues and making decisions?
15. Since you were appointed as a trustee, what, if anything, has surprised you about your experience thus far?
16. Please share any additional comments you have about the role of a public university trustee.



## APPENDIX C: OVERVIEW OF ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

### Reasons for Joining a University Board

The majority of new trustees indicated an interest in joining a university board because of their alumni status at a particular institution. Another common reason provided was an interest in public service and giving back to the community. “I think with what we're trying to do with the state from a reinvention standpoint, I think education is a key piece to that and being part of an institution that seeks to move that forward . . . is really exciting,” one trustee stated. A more surprising finding was that several individuals indicated they were not originally interested in joining a university board until they received a call directly from the governor.

### Identification of Issues

One of the areas new trustees were most uncertain of was how issues are identified and brought before the board. Despite some uncertainty, there are clear expectations of how the process should operate. Most trustees thought any individual board member should have the right to raise any issue they want to discuss either through the board chair or the president. However, most also felt that the majority of issues should be identified through communication between the president and chair and then discussed with the entire board.

### Role of the Board Chair

The title of board chair appears to come with different expectations at different institutions. Some new trustees viewed the chair as the organizer and convener of the board, who may have greater interaction with the president, but should not exercise greater influence



in making strategic and policy decisions. Other members viewed the chair as a strong leader who could be a trusted confidant of the president and provide a vision for the board itself.

## Role of the President

Expectations for the role between the president and the board can be summarized in one word: communication. Members thought it is important for the president to make proposals to the board and manage the daily operations of the university, but the most important duty is communication. Trustees felt that strong two-way communication was the key to developing a strong working relationship with the president. This often includes the president providing regular briefings to the board. At one institution the president sends updates to the board 5-7 days per week, although it was more commonly indicated that updates are provided on a weekly or monthly basis. Regardless of the frequency of communication, trustees indicated it is essential that the president is transparent with the board and always keeps the board abreast of major issues, including challenges and potentially troublesome situations.

## Surprises

A number of individuals were surprised at the high profile nature of being a trustee at a public university. This manifested in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, trustees mentioned being given a “red carpet” or “rock star” treatment while on campus. On the negative side, this included one trustee mentioning the board receiving threats over a particularly contentious labor issue. Another common surprise was the time commitment required of the position. Most trustees were cognizant of the time commitment required of them and all expressed a willingness to devote whatever time their role requires. Some did mention, however, their surprise at the number of meetings, committee meetings, and work in between meetings required of them.

## REFERENCES

- Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (2010). *Policies, practices, and composition of governing boards of public colleges, universities, and systems*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.
- Baldwin, R. G. (2005, January/February). Trespassers in the grove of academe? *Trusteeship*, 13(1), 19-22.
- Baldwin, R. G. (2012, September/October). Bridging the different worlds of faculty and boards. *Trusteeship*, 20(5), 28-29.
- Bastedo, M. N. (2009). Conflicts, commitments, and cliques in the university: Moral seduction as a threat to trustee independence. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(2), 354-386.
- Duderstadt, J. J. (2001). *A university for the twenty-first century*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Ewell, P. T. (2006). Do we make the grade? *Trusteeship*, 14(6), 8-13.
- Field, K. (2013, February 12). Obama puts federal weight behind calls for college affordability. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com>
- Kezar, A. J. (2006). Rethinking public higher education governing boards performance: Results of a national study of governing boards in the United States. *Journal of Higher Education*, 77(6), 968-1008.
- Kezar, A. J., & Eckel, P. D. (2004). Meeting today's governance challenges: A synthesis of the literature and examination of a future agenda for scholarship. *Journal of Higher Education*, 75(4), 371-400.
- Legon, R. D. (2012, July/August). Governance in the spotlight: Lessons from the University of Virginia crisis. *Trusteeship*, 20(4), 8-11.
- Novak, R. (2012, September/October). State policies and practices to improve board Governance. *Trusteeship*, 20(5), 31-35.
- Pusser, B., Slaughter, S., & Thomas, S. L. (2006). Playing the board game: An empirical analysis of university trustee and corporate board interlocks. *Journal of Higher Education*, 77(5), 747-775.
- Schwartz, M. (1998). *A national survey of board performance assessment policies and practices* (AGB Occasional Paper No. 35). Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.
- State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (2013). *State higher education finance FY 2012*. Retrieved from <http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/publications/SHEF%20FY%2012-20130322rev.pdf>
- Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. (2012). *Knocking at the college door: Projections of high school graduates*. Retrieved from <http://www.wiche.edu/info/publications/knocking-8th/knocking-8th.pdf>
- Zeig, M. Z., & Rao, M. (2012, September/October). A strategic approach to shaping effective boards. *Trusteeship*, 20(5), 35.



**MICHIGAN STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

College of Education

---

Center for Higher and Adult Education  
Michigan State University  
Erickson Hall, Rm 418  
620 Farm Lane  
East Lansing, MI 48824