

A Great Collection of Minds:

Maximizing the Strategic Engagement of
New University Trustees

Final Report

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



College of Education
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

> March 2017



➤ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“These boards are a great collection of very strong backgrounds, minds, etc., and they’re not utilized. Why not tap into it?” This quote from a trustee in our two-year study of newly appointed public university trustees demonstrates a common sentiment among many of the participants in our study. Board members want to utilize their time, talent, and expertise to the benefit of the universities they serve, but they often feel under-utilized as strategic partners with their institution’s senior leadership team. In our third and final report of this study, we provide new insights from trustees following their second year of board service and our final takeaways on how to promote effective trustee engagement during turbulent times.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Many trustees indicated they want to spend more time discussing key strategic issues facing their institutions with less routine reporting that limits opportunities for substantive dialogue with the president and senior leadership team. Areas trustees mentioned wanting to spend more time considering included: finances, academic programs, online education, and risk management.
- There is a delicate balance between giving trustees sufficient information to keep them well informed without overloading them. The key appears to lie in working with trustees to understand what they want to know, how they want to receive information, and when they want to receive it.
- A mutually respectful, honest, and transparent relationship between presidents and boards builds trust and helps foster effective working partnerships to the benefit of the institutions both groups serve.
- Trustees should approach their roles from a position of good faith. While appropriate and beneficial to ask questions and provide suggestions, board members should avoid delving into the micromanagement of day-to-day university activities.
- More comprehensive orientation and continuing education opportunities were prominently mentioned across all three rounds of interviews. An annual board retreat was specifically raised as a vital opportunity to discuss the university’s key challenges and future direction.

A table summarizing additional findings from this study is provided on pages 22-23.

➤ BACKGROUND

Growing attention in recent years to the appropriate roles and responsibilities of university trustees (AGB, 2014, 2016; Legon, 2012; Novak, 2012), combined with a lack of research about the experiences of trustees (Kezar & Eckel, 2004) led us to pursue a longitudinal study of new gubernatorial appointed public university trustees. From 2013 through 2015, we tracked the initial expectations and ongoing experiences of 12 trustees across eight institutions. We interviewed each participant closely following the beginning of their term, approximately one year later, and finally around two years into their term. During these interviews we explored issues related to board roles, individual trustee roles, the types of issues discussed and not discussed during meetings, relationships among trustees and between presidents and trustees, how trustees learned about their roles and their institutions, and how information was shared with trustees. The overarching purpose across each topical area was to better understand the evolving experiences of new trustees to gain insights for enhancing the work of individual trustees, full boards, and the larger institutions they serve.

During the course of this study, we released preliminary reports in March 2014 and July 2015 after the first two rounds of interviews. Both are available through the Michigan State University College of Education Center for Higher and Adult Education website (education.msu.edu/ead/hale/center). During the first round of interviews, we found a group of trustees eager to engage in their roles, albeit with some uncertainty about their exact duties and an admittedly limited knowledge of some of the intricacies of academia. Still, participants were clear that they expected to be engaged in helping tackle the most pressing strategic challenges facing their institutions. Although each participant had varying degrees of orientation at the time of the first interviews, most were pleased with these initial opportunities. However, many also indicated the need for continuing education to help them effectively execute their duties.

The second round of interviews showed trustees becoming more comfortable and confident in their positions, but some individuals expressed they were still adjusting to a few surprising elements of their roles. These surprises included: (1) a greater time commitment than anticipated, with one trustee counting 47 meetings related to hiring a new president; (2) widely varying degrees of engagement among fellow trustees ranging from colleagues who are uninvolved and withdrawn to those who attempt to micromanage detailed operational minutia; and (3) an adjustment to the public nature of board activities and occasional “local celebrity” status of being a public university trustee.

Individuals indicated they were generally pleased with the types of topics brought before the board, but wanted deeper discussions and reviews of certain key issues such as tuition and fee rates, student debt levels, the institution's long-term financial sustainability, online and distance education offerings, and post-graduation student outcomes. While most thought they were provided sufficient information from the president, some felt information was not always shared in a timely manner and/or that too much information was shared in the form of reports with little time left for questions and discussion. This mild frustration dovetailed into a continuing feeling

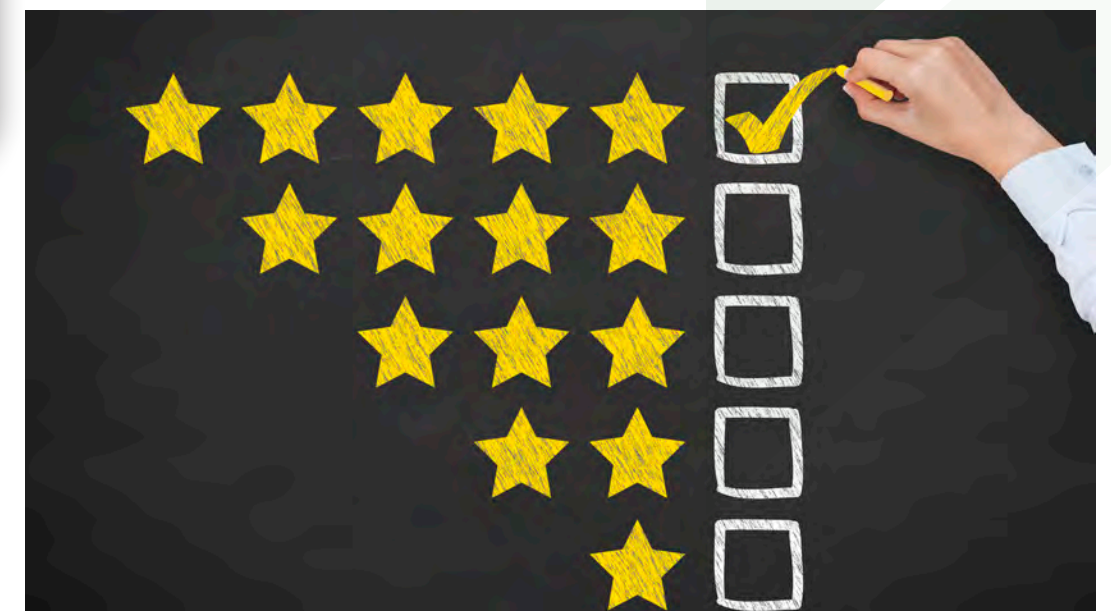
that it would be beneficial for the university to provide more opportunities beyond an initial orientation to learn about important aspects of the university.

In the third round of interviews, we dug deeper with trustees to hear stories about successes and areas for improvement within their boards and glean insights for improving trustee governance. In this report we highlight: (1) the general views and personal assessments trustees had of their boards following two years of service, (2) the continuing desire to be more deeply engaged on certain strategic matters, but also examples of areas where trustees felt they were making a positive impact, (3) ideas on how to form effective relationships between presidents and boards, and (4) recommendations from participants on how to engage effectively as individual trustees, how to improve orientation and continuing education opportunities, and how governors should consider and determine trustee appointments.

➤ BOARD ASSESSMENT

From the Trustees:
“The board is always a work in progress, almost by definition because you get two (new) members every two years or so.”

Generally, board members had a balanced appraisal of board performance. Most participants viewed the work of their board positively but also acknowledged room for improvement. As one board member observed, “The board is always a work in progress, almost by definition because you get two [new] members every two years or so. Basically, what happens is you create a new board.” Another board member also shared an insightful perspective on board performance. This trustee commented, “The world is run by those who show up . . . The people who show up and are committed are trying to move policy and do things, and then there are those who aren't . . . There is kind of the inner circle of people who are engaged [and] are really committed to the university.” One can infer from this comment that other trustees may be less committed and less involved in the work of their board.



EFFECTIVENESS

From the Trustees:
“I’m a firm believer you don’t have to have unanimous (agreement). It’s better to have the dialogue, and if one or two people dissent, that’s ok.”

Numerous trustees commented favorably on the work of their board. One noted, “I’ve been very impressed with how the board operates. I actually think that the board of trustees operates very, very effectively and very efficient[ly].” A board colleague from a different institution noted how well the board they belonged to performed during a difficult presidential transition, explaining, “The interactions with the board were really positive . . . the board actually was a positive factor in the entire process.”

Several trustees observed their board maintained a united front even when they did not fully agree on a topic or issue. One trustee commented, “We have to come united. Whatever the majority’s going to be, that’s where we need to be, and we can’t look or appear as a divided board.” A trustee at a different institution made a similar point. “It’s like a marriage. We’re not always going to agree but once we’ve made a decision as a board for the most part, we just need to go out there and go in unison so it doesn’t create any further distress and disharmony.”

Complete unanimity, however, was not a goal most trustees aspired to achieve. “Not everybody is unanimous, agrees on any particular topic,” one trustee explained, “which I think is actually good because I think the worst thing you want is a rubber stamp board.” A board colleague at another institution echoed the same view. “I’m a firm believer you don’t have to have unanimous [agreement]. It’s better to have the dialogue, and if one or two people dissent, that’s ok.” If not unanimous agreement, one trustee described what may be a more important board goal, “at least [having] consensus on a way to move forward.”

Respectful communication appears to be essential to effective board performance. Numerous trustees described the value of thoughtful, open, and respectful discussion of important issues before their board. Talking about a challenging board issue, one trustee reported, “We did a good job of discussing it throughout the committee for a number of months and then taking it to the whole board and discussing it. So I was pleased with the discussions and I was very pleased with the end result.” Similarly, another trustee acknowledged:

“All eight board members are strong personalities. They’re strong personalities who understand the chain of command of the board so nobody takes charge but nobody is afraid to talk. So the issues that concern people are always brought up and they are always respected . . . It’s just a very well-functioning board . . . We talk about the things that are important.”

A trustee speaking on the value of good dialogue explained, “You provide your input, but you also hear other people’s input, which makes you think.”

The setting or context for board dialogue may be important too. One trustee explained the value of board discussion at an informal meeting where no decisions were made and thus not subject to open meeting laws. “We just sat down for three hours and talked about issues . . . We just wanted some time to spend with each other without administrators or anybody else there so that we could have open discussion among ourselves about where we’re going and what we’re doing . . . That was a very good process. I was pleased.” Our interviews indicated that board members sometimes want opportunities for conversation not constrained by public scrutiny, formal meeting rules, or the presence of parties who are not board members.

From the Trustees:
“Do not use meetings to give information that people can read on their own.”



performance

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Although many board members spoke favorably about their experiences, they still had substantive suggestions for improving board functions. For instance, study participants expressed clear views on the structure and content of board meetings. Several argued for less reporting and more discussion of important issues confronting their institution. For example, one trustee stated bluntly, “If I can read it before [the board meeting], make me read it before.” Similarly, another member asserted, “Do not use meetings to give information that people can read on their own.” One individual elaborated, noting, “We have to introduce more content into our board meetings and our committee meetings. [They] are a series of reports from administrators. I want to change that up, at least in the committee that I chair.” It appears some administrators have received the message about incorporating more substantive content and discussion into board meetings. As one study participant reported:

“What we’ve tried to do is change the composition of the public board meeting . . . They used to be, basically, a bunch of people looking at the board, talking at us. Not a lot of time for conversation or questions. We’ve changed that and I give the board chair credit here. We now [at] each public board meeting, one of the deans comes in and presents a deeper dive into the School of Business, School of Nursing . . . I like that practice.”

The comments we heard about the nature of board meetings sent a consistent message. Board members want meetings to be more than one-way information dissemination sessions. They want the opportunity to process the information they receive in advance and then discuss important issues with administrators, other key stakeholders, and, especially, their board colleagues.

From the Trustees:
“Frankly, the biggest thing that could impact the effectiveness of our board is that we had all eight people actively engaged and we don’t have that.”

From the Trustees:
“We have not addressed issues that are emerging in an aggressive enough fashion . . . We’re just not fast enough.”

Some trustees argued for greater board member participation and interaction. They criticized members who come to meetings unprepared. One trustee complained:

“They’re not showing up having read all the materials. And so we’re wasting time because we go over slides that everybody [else] already read . . . Some are there to try to help but really don’t put the time, effort, and energy into it . . . On our board of eight, there are probably four of us that really influence the direction of topics that we feel are important to the university.”

A board member from a different institution described a similar situation with uneven member participation. This individual reported, “We have an inside group that kind of runs the board, is committed, and spends a lot of time, and there are a couple others who are just kind of on the board and have less than stellar attendance or participation at even mandatory events.” Arguing for full participation, this member observed, “Frankly, the biggest thing that could impact the effectiveness of our board is that we had all eight people actively engaged and we don’t have that.”

Some board members argued effective board membership involves more than participation in formal board activities. It also involves building relationships with fellow board members. For example, one concerned board member asked, “How can you really be effective at building consensus and building coalitions on the board if you have no relationship outside of the finite period of time [when the board meets] four to six times a year?” This member reasoned, “board members should be interacting outside of the board meetings so they get to know each other, so we know how one another thinks. How can you build consensus without really knowing each other?” However, several trustees indicated they felt their opportunities to engage with their board colleagues outside of formal board meetings is constrained since the state’s open meetings law limits the types of activities public boards can engage in privately.

Another concern board members voiced was the “glacier-like speed with which the university moves.” One trustee expanded on this concern explaining, “That’s the part that is just so unnerving to all of us that are not in academics, [it] is how slow, slow, slower, slower [things move]. I mean, these people measure things in years.” Criticism was not limited just to academics, however. Some trustees also complained their board was not sufficiently fast in addressing important issues or trends. As one trustee reported, “We have not addressed issues that are emerging in an aggressive enough fashion. So the issues grow bigger because of that. Or more negative, if you want, because of that . . . We’re just not fast enough.”

Each of the boards in our study is comprised of eight individuals, each with unique backgrounds and perspectives. Hence, it is no surprise that the board members we interviewed, though generally satisfied with their board’s performance, had suggestions for improvement. Board members, their leaders, and the institutions board members serve would be wise to reflect on the insights our study participants shared. Collectively, these recommendations provide guidance intended to enhance the work of boards and the institutions they support.

➤ ENGAGING ON STRATEGIC MATTERS

Our second report revealed a major trustee priority. Board members indicated a strong desire to engage in regular and meaningful discussion of strategic issues facing their institutions. In our third wave of interviews, trustees identified specific areas they wish to examine in greater depth, including: strategic planning, succession planning, finances, academic programs, online education, and risk management.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

An overarching consensus among trustees in this study was that regardless of particular issues of interest to any individual trustee, the board of trustees as a whole should be engaged in the

university’s broader strategic planning process. Some mentioned the need to develop a “broader vision” or a “strategic vision . . . [that in the] short term and long term is something that we can achieve or strive for each year.” Others cited topics like succession planning, determining “who your customer is,” and developing metrics to measure what the university is doing. Some argued these are concepts right out of the business world that seem foreign or unfamiliar in a university setting. As one participant explained, “doing strategic planning from a business perspective, embedding some of those principles of measuring or

[developing a] dashboard, call it what you want, it’s a long way to go. There is just a culture of how people run their departments, how they think their colleges are doing . . . It’s just different.”



Commenting on the need for trustee engagement in strategic planning, one knowledgeable, but disappointed, trustee asserted, “It’s more than just signing off on the vision . . . You’ve got to have some time [working together on the plan] so the trustees feel like they own this plan.” This individual added that she believed the university’s plan should be focused and aspirational, but felt her institution’s plan was neither. Ultimately, trustees want to feel confident in the direction their institution is headed. Most of the board members we interviewed did not wish to micromanage the exact details of a strategic plan, but certainly wanted to sign off on the broad strategy and ensure the administration had an intentional process for establishing goals and executing plans.

SUCCESSION PLANNING

A focus on strategy included attention to succession planning in the opinion of some trustees. One made the case that a succession plan “is something that we should have and should continuously look at as an overall strategy.” Supporting this idea, a different trustee argued that one of the most difficult tasks for a board is trying to hire a president, an increasingly likely task for boards as many presidents get older. Several trustees also mentioned the hiring of a new president as a ripe opportunity to examine the institution’s direction and consider the best leader for the institution moving forward. As we will discuss in a later section of this report, strong president-board relationships are important, making it crucial to view succession planning in the larger context of developing institutional strategy.



FINANCES

Coming from the business world, several trustees advocated more scrutiny of their institution’s financial situation. One concluded, “I think we are very weak on finance.” Similarly, a board colleague from a different university observed, “We didn’t have enough financial expertise. I just really felt there was not enough scrutiny [compared to] other board activities.” Trustees shared numerous observations to back up their case for more attention to their institution’s finances. One explained, “Coming from a business background, we start the fiscal year at zero. Universities don’t. They start where they were last year and say where can we build or where can we defund?” Another trustee made a case for new revenue streams. “I don’t think we have very

many public-private partnerships in terms of what we operate . . . Are there new revenue pods that we should be looking at?”

How institutional finances relate to other university issues was also a theme emerging from our interviews. As one trustee explained his concern, “I worry about not just the enrollment in isolation. I worry about it as part of the financial engine.” Together, these comments suggest that trustees are concerned about more than just keeping their institution’s budget balanced. Clearly, financial matters are a strategic issue trustees wish to address systematically.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Academic programs also were a subject participants argued deserved trustees’ careful attention. Several expressed concern about competition, duplication, and cost effectiveness. For example, a trustee reported:

“We really need to address the degrees that we’re offering and whether or not a university down the road or a community college is offering the same degree . . . Let’s team up and partner on some of these things. It’s foolish for any higher education [institution] to be duplicating efforts within a 100-mile radius . . . I think we haven’t done the job to eliminate those programs, partner up where we need to partner up, and that all has a financial impact.”

Another trustee raised concern about growing competition. Citing Arizona State University and the University of Phoenix, she noted, “Those are two huge threats to a university that has a great reputation, but [is susceptible to competitors] when cost is an issue, when convenience is an issue.” A colleague from a different institution raised a related concern. “Our programs cost us an awful lot of money, and there are other universities in the state that provide those programs . . . We’re just ‘me-tooing’ what they did . . . We don’t have to be all things to all people. I think we need to take a longer, deeper look at the kind of programs we have.”

ONLINE EDUCATION

Online education is one of the academic issues trustees concluded deserved their close attention. As one trustee explained, “One of the things that we provided a lot of input to our administration on is the move towards online [education]. Not that we provided specifics, but more in terms



From the Trustees:
 “We don’t have to be all things to all people. I think we need to take a longer, deeper look at the kind of programs we have.”

From the Trustees:
 “We all know, with technology and online universities that are out there, they are stealing away the public university students.”

of really driving that [topic] a lot. It was really just through a lot of different meetings and discussions.” Some trustees felt their institution was not moving fast enough in this area and pushed their administration for action. One trustee reported, “There may be topics the president doesn’t necessarily have on a particular agenda . . . but when the board met as a group we said, ‘what are the things that we feel are important to the university?’ For example, online education.” Board initiative in this area was driven to some extent by fear of losing competitive advantage. One concerned trustee observed, “We all know, with technology and online universities that are out there, they are stealing away the public university students.”

Many trustees acknowledged the delicate balance of engaging on academic matters typically reserved for faculty oversight. However, board members also expressed feeling a fiduciary responsibility to ensure academic programs are successful. “We were holding their feet to the fire a little more than we have in the past,” one trustee acknowledged while discussing academic programs. “I think we need to be a little more involved or forceful when it comes to guidance, make sure they [students] get degrees that will help them find a job in their field.” A colleague from a different school echoed a similar sentiment. “Managing the institution means nothing if you’re not going to the further goal, which is student success . . . I think it is really key to make sure that we don’t lose [sight of] that overarching mission.”

RISK MANAGEMENT

In a time marked by global uncertainty, natural disasters, and other threats to well-being, risk management is another matter where trustees wish to have an influential voice. One participant reported his board colleagues wanted a more comprehensive approach to enterprise risk management and a process for identifying key threats and risks to the university. “We wanted the president to come up with a plan around how they [risks] would be addressed . . . and tasked him with coming back to us around what’s going to happen relative to those [threats].” A similar concern at a different institution led a trustee we interviewed to push for an enterprise risk report, wanting the university to focus on its top 10 to 15 threats. This trustee also stressed the importance of boards taking a comprehensive view of threats inclusive of financial, academic, student, and operational risks. A third trustee explained, “One of the biggest worries that I have about being a trustee is what I would call business resiliency or really good updated emergency plans.” Ultimately, being cognizant of and protecting an institution from potential threats is one of the primary responsibilities of a board of trustees.



KEEPING TRUSTEES INFORMED



Key to trustees engaging on strategic matters is being well informed. This includes both receiving an appropriate amount of information as well as receiving it in a timely manner. Some trustees raised concerns about the sufficiency of information they receive. One trustee explained his frustration when he sought more information on an academic program embroiled in a controversy, but was met with resistance from the administration. “I basically got stonewalled,” he reported. Subsequently, he used his position as the chair of a board committee to focus attention on the issue that concerned him. “I basically told him [the president] that I will not run a single other vote on [this program] through academic affairs before we have a discussion.” According to this trustee, “They [the administration] hated it. They felt like we were pushing them around, but the point is, it was needed.” Another trustee, when asked if she felt sufficiently informed on topics relative to the university, bluntly answered, “No.” She continued to explain that she will often hear about issues impacting the university through her own professional networks or through the news. When she asks the university’s administration for a response, she indicated she sometimes does not hear back from them.

Dueling Opinions:

“We have room for improvement for the communications from the president’s office.”

“The president does a very good job of communicating issues via email to keep board members up to date on what’s happening at the university.”

The timing of providing information to the board was an additional issue that emerged. One trustee argued, “It’s important that the board receive information well in advance of a board meeting. I mean a minimum of a week to give them a chance to digest it . . . I think that creates for good karma between the two entities [board and administration].” Timing was also an important issue for a different trustee participant who recommended, “Probably the optimum is to try to get something to the board of trustees at least a week in advance, two weeks is even better just to make sure people have enough opportunity to look at it and read it so they can be productive so meetings are more discussion rather than trying to read through presentations.”

The flow of information between the board and administration is particularly important during crises or emergencies. One trustee observed, “We have room for improvement for the communications from the president’s office . . . If there are protesters . . . I want to know that the protesters are out there.” Expressing a similar concern, a fellow trustee argued, “I don’t like to hear about this [assault incident on campus] for the first time on the news.” Perhaps the bottom line with respect to communication was captured by a trustee who observed, “I think it is the president’s responsibility to keep the board of trustees up to date on what’s going on in the university.”

Not all trustees were troubled by trustee-board communication. As one remarked, “I actually don’t think information/communication flow is a big issue.” Another trustee acknowledged, “The president does a very good job of communicating issues via email to keep board members up-to-date on what’s happening at the university.” A third individual argued that she did not want to hear from the president more often because it is “more rah, rah stuff instead of substantive.” She continued, “I don’t think there should be communication for the sake of communication.”

The key takeaway is that trustees want to be well informed on the major issues facing their university and provided with information in a timely and responsive manner. Each individual may desire different levels of information and responsiveness, but the key is for the board and administration to establish a communication flow that is mutually beneficial.

➤ BUILDING STRONG PRESIDENT-BOARD RELATIONS



Study participants consistently stressed the importance of the president-board relationship. When this relationship was built with both parties understanding and respecting the other’s role, individuals indicated governance was smooth and effective. However, when trustees felt stonewalled or not appropriately engaged on key matters, conflicts sometimes arose. This led to some trustees questioning, who’s the boss? Is it the board that is the official legal and fiduciary entity of the institution that also hires and evaluates the president? The trustees in this study would indicate, yes. On the other hand, some board members indicated feeling like the president as the day-to-day leader and operator of the university maintained a great deal of authority vis-à-vis the board and could utilize their more intimate knowledge of the institution to push their agenda with little input and feedback from the board.

While it was rare for participants to mention anything resembling an all-out toxic relationship between the president and the board, participants still noted several areas of frustration. This included, as mentioned previously in this report, a general desire to be more deeply engaged on key strategic issues facing the university, and for meetings to be centered on more discussion between the president and the board, with less one-way reporting. Given these frustrations and recognizing the importance of president-board relationships, participants provided several recommendations for building effective relationships between the two.

- **Be Open to Working Together.** One participant mentioned that presidents and trustees often have strong personalities. He suggested that “both sides put their guard down a little bit and say, ‘Hey, let’s be open-minded and listen to each other.’” Another trustee revealed that in prior years he heard the president was not open to candid dialogue with the board out of constant fear of being fired. Recognizing this as problematic, the board and president worked together to repair their relationship and the president now freely shares plans with and asks for feedback from the board.
- **Set Clear Expectations with Regular Review.** Several trustees mentioned the importance of providing direction to the president in areas of significant concern to the board, but ultimately trusting and empowering the president to execute his or her duties. One trustee indicated their board works with the president to set strategic goals each year, but that “our [the board’s] job is to empower the president to manage that [achieving the goals].” Other people mentioned that the president does not always heed the board’s suggestions but that they try not to micromanage individual decisions. Ultimately, most trustees believed the best venue for resolving persistent tensions with the president was through a formal performance review process, conducted at least annually, with the potential for a more comprehensive review every few years.
- **Communicate Transparently.** Both parties benefit by openly communicating with each other and being transparent in their actions. One trustee said, “I think the president comes to the board with exceptional openness and so it’s my intention to not destroy that trust by . . . being flippant on issues.” Another individual added, “I think it’s a mistake for board members to surprise the president at a public meeting with something he or she is not prepared to answer without having some forewarning that I’m going to bring this up.”

It is also vital that both sides feel they can trust one another and not fear retribution for sharing the troubling news along with the good. “The president, if he worries, he can tell us if he worries. We won’t just fall off the chair because he dares to do this and the other thing,” said one trustee. Another individual noted that not everything is going to be perfect at the institution, “so even if some of the things that I say sound critical, it’s only because of positive intent of wanting to improve them as opposed to being horribly critical.”

Another aspect of communicating transparently that participants highlighted as important is for the president to share information equally with all trustees. Although most trustees recognized that a board chair or executive committee may be in greater

communication with the president than regular board members, individuals also indicated that presidents should limit instances of selectively choosing who they communicate with. “I think the president needs to communicate across the board and not to certain pockets or people that they are aligned with more,” said one person.

Being transparent, trustees said, largely boiled down to keeping a two-way communication flow. Presidents should keep boards informed of their activities and boards should keep presidents informed of their wishes and opinions.

- **Build Relationships Outside of Formal Meetings.** Multiple individuals mentioned the value in presidents and trustees getting to know each other personally and building more of a relationship than just interacting in formal meetings a handful of times each year. One trustee indicated the president tries to host occasional social events for the board, vice presidents, and deans. Another board member acknowledged that it can be difficult for the president to have regular one-on-one meetings with board members, but that one-on-one conversations, particularly with new board members, can help build relationships. These one-on-one meetings should, of course, not turn into times of selectively sharing information unequally across trustees, but instead remain focused on building relationships.

➤ INDIVIDUAL ENGAGEMENT

Over the course of this study, trustees often described how they approached their role as an individual board member. In the final round of interviews, clear themes emerged for how all trustees, but specifically new trustees, can effectively approach their position.

- **Be Present.** Although this seems obvious, trustees cannot effectively engage in their roles unless they are present at meetings, and not just physically present but also well-prepared and mentally engaged. One trustee commented that engaged trustees believe in “a commitment to the university.” Many board members indicated it is important to attend ceremonial functions outside of formal board meetings to demonstrate support for the broader university. While individuals were quick to point out that it would be impossible to attend every university function they are invited to, they also believed that attending several events each year sends a positive message to the university community and also helps them learn more about the institution they serve.
- **Focus on the Macro Role.** An explanation from one trustee illustrates a sentiment of many others. “I always go back to what my task is . . . I’m supposed to be, as a board member, cognizant of the strategic context. I’m in charge of hiring the president. I’m in charge of the financial piece; the key decisions that go into it like the tuition setting. I am not in charge of the annual evaluation of everybody below the president . . . I’m a strong believer in staying in your lane.” Another individual added that she regularly

steps back and asks herself to what extent it is appropriate to get involved as issues arise. Additionally, a couple trustees mentioned that if there is an issue that arises that falls into a gray zone of whether the board should engage or not, these individuals seek out the advice and counsel of their fellow trustees before jumping to action. “When something gets close to kind of operational versus strategic boundary, I check with other board

members, typically with the board chair directly. I might even check with the president, just call him up,” one trustee said.

- **Ask Questions.** The power of effective questioning was a recurrent theme among trustees. This was specifically mentioned when discussing how boards decide to raise tuition. Several participants talked about using questions to push the administration to consider alternative solutions and develop a stronger rationale for their positions. Some individuals argued that when they question different projects it is not

because they want to micromanage the details, but because they want to hear from the experts the rationale behind decisions to ensure there is an explicit strategy. One trustee argued, “I’m not micromanaging, I’m just asking, give me a business case why we’re doing these things and if the business case makes sense, ok.” Still, one trustee stressed that, “it is incumbent on trustees not to ask for information that makes it look like they’re running the university . . . And I think there’s that tendency by some trustees.”

- **Provide Feedback and Suggestions.** Many of the trustees we spoke with believed that effective board members should raise issues of concern directly to the administration as well as offer feedback and suggestions when issues are presented to them. They emphasized that this should be done in a polite and respectful manner, but that it is also appropriate for trustees to be persistent if their voices are ignored. One trustee indicated this is particularly important because board members “bring the external point of view into the university world.” Trustee feedback can also be valuable in circumstances where a board member maintains expertise in an area of concern for the university. Several participants indicated they utilized their business acumen to help their institutions navigate complex financial challenges.

- **Engage Nationally.** Many trustees mentioned the benefits of attending conferences of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) as an opportunity to network and learn from other trustees and stay abreast of national issues. Additionally, individuals indicated the value of staying current on higher education news through outlets such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, but also reading key articles on higher education from other national sources such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, or *The Economist*.
- **Connect with Trustees at Different Institutions.** Attending conferences such as ones from the AGB can provide this opportunity, but many trustees also pointed to the value of leveraging their own personal and professional networks to connect with trustees from other institutions in the state. Board members argued it is helpful to be able to share ideas with other trustees on topics such as searching for a president or how to conduct a presidential review. Although there may be some topics such as enrollment strategies that trustees would not want to discuss openly for competitive reasons, there are many operational and policy matters every board must deal with that are appropriate to discuss with trustees at other institutions.

➤ BOARD ORIENTATION AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

The topics of orientation and continuing education were covered extensively in our first two reports. During our third set of interviews we focused on ways these processes could be improved. Several trustees argued that no amount of orientation and education can replace simply attending meetings, getting involved, and learning as you go along. “It just seems like it’s almost your first two years is your orientation,” said one trustee. Another added, “It takes probably close to two years before you really feel like you know the university, the issues.” Despite a recognition that some learning may need to occur simply through direct experience, participants also provided insightful recommendations for improving trustee orientation and education.

- **Greater Involvement from Fellow Trustees in the Onboarding Process.** Several individuals mentioned that they would have liked their fellow board members to be more involved in their orientation. This was viewed as having the potential to be particularly beneficial in terms of helping new trustees learn some of the politics and personalities of the university and to provide a safe avenue for new members to ask the “stupid” questions they might not want to ask publicly. The board chair or another veteran member of the board were highlighted as best able to fulfill these duties. One trustee argued that there does not necessarily need to be a formal board mentoring program, but that board



they wanted more opportunities to ask questions and discuss important issues. “The discussion was far more about what they [senior administrators] do on a daily basis rather than the strategy of what the university is facing.”

- **Trustee Education on an Ongoing Basis.** Most trustees indicated they believe trustee education needs to extend beyond a single orientation following their initial appointment. Many viewed this as a good first step, but only a first step in learning about their roles and the many issues facing the university. A number of individuals argued they would ask different questions at an orientation if they knew then what they know after serving on the board for two years. This led some trustees to suggest that revisiting key issues with board members periodically allows for more relevant questioning and learning instead of only covering certain issues one time at an orientation. Not revisiting key issues during an interim period made some participants feel less knowledgeable on important topics than they would like to be. Some suggested that there should be a portion of every board meeting dedicated to examining an important university issue in-depth. Even if a direct action from the board is not required, this regular in-depth review of key issues keeps the board informed in advance of more serious issues arising.
- **Utilizing a Retreat for a Deep Dive on Key Issues.** A common theme among most of the trustees was the value of hosting a yearly retreat for the president and board. This type of gathering, outside the formal confines of a typical business meeting, provides an opportunity for board members to explore key challenges in greater depth, without needing to vote on or act upon certain items (which is strictly forbidden in a non-public setting). One trustee described how this process works particularly well for their board. This trustee explained that the board chair solicits topic ideas from the full board and president, those topics are prioritized among the board to narrow down to a top five, and then the board spends two full days in “good open dialogue” with the administration about the challenges facing the university.

outreach to new trustees should extend beyond a quick phone call welcoming them to their position.

- **More Time for Open Discussion during Orientation.** “Board orientation is a bunch of people on the staff of the president talking at you. Talking at you and basically trying to tell you what they want you to hear,” opined one participant. Instead of an orientation focused on one-way communication, many trustees indicated

➤ RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNOR ON BOARD APPOINTMENTS

As trustees of public university boards, the participants in this study offered recommendations they believe governors should consider in making trustee appointments.

- **Focus on Skillsets.** Current trustees indicated it is important for a governor to consider the types of skillsets that could add value to a university board. “Now you don’t need to be top-heavy with six of the eight board members with a business background . . . but I think you would need a couple CPA-type minded people. Or business owner/banking type people,” suggested one trustee. One person recommended that appointees help “round out the provost and president’s skillset.” If the president is strong in one area, they might benefit from board members who can provide insights in another area. Another individual believes that appointees should have a track record, “they’ve been on a task force. They’ve been on a workforce development thing. Their company is known for x, y, and z.”
- **Seek Diversity in Membership.** Participants argued that the right composition of membership was important for a board. This includes gender and ethnic diversity, but goes beyond that in their opinion. A few individuals mentioned the importance of geographic diversity on the board because students come from all different areas. This was viewed as a way to garner an outsider’s perspective that may differ from a board composed of all members living in the same community especially if they all reside in the same region where the university is located. Additionally, some pointed out the benefit of having a mix of board members who are and are not alumni of the university. “On one hand, the positive is you probably have an allegiance to the university [if you are alumni], but I don’t think it’s necessary . . . it’s probably beneficial to have people from different backgrounds,” said one participant.
- **Identify Individuals with a Passion.** Being passionate members themselves, the trustees in this study thought it was important for governors to appoint equally passionate individuals willing to make the time commitment to the position. “I’d also make sure that the person has the time and inclination to really recognize that you’re making a commitment of a number of hours during the year . . . It’s just not attending eight board meetings a year that last two or three hours each . . . No, you’re talking 100 hours because then it’s commencement, it’s the other gatherings,” stated one board member. Finding individuals willing to make this commitment is easier if they are passionate about the topic. “There needs to be some type of a tie or an interest at least in higher ed or something so people engage,” said one person. “Not a maverick but somebody who has an appreciation for education,” another added.

- **Provide Opportunities for Cross-Board Interaction.** Several trustees expressed their surprise that once appointed they had limited interaction with the governor’s office and with other trustees across the state. One individual thought the state should provide an orientation for trustees to discuss their legal obligations and responsibilities as board members since they oversee public institutions. Although that sentiment was not reinforced by other trustees, several individuals thought it would be beneficial for there to be an annual gathering of public university trustees to discuss key issues and challenges in higher education. During the third set of interviews, we learned that such a gathering including the state universities’ trustees, presidents, and representatives from state government was soon going to occur. A couple participants even indicated that they helped advocate for and plan the event.

➤ FINAL TAKEAWAYS

From the Authors: “Colleges and universities should engage trustees as strategic partners instead of viewing them as an inconvenient necessity whose activities should be tightly controlled.”

During the past few years higher education governance gained increased attention as controversies at institutions such as Penn State, the University of Virginia (UVA), the University of Texas System, and Sweet Briar College brought boards, and in some instances, individual trustees into the limelight (Lubrano, 2015; Kolowich, 2015; Stripling, 2015). The situations at UVA and Texas highlight activist trustees, drawing criticism from many who viewed such behavior as overly meddlesome and intrusive. On the opposite end of the spectrum, trustees face criticism if they are too passive and disengaged, neglecting their important fiduciary and oversight responsibilities. We believe most trustees are neither rogue activists nor “out-to-lunch” figureheads. Instead, they are devoted volunteers who have professional backgrounds and expertise that can greatly benefit the institutions they serve. At a time when higher education institutions face mounting challenges and increasing pressure from many external forces, colleges and universities should engage trustees as strategic partners instead of viewing them as an inconvenient necessity whose activities should be tightly controlled.

One concern we routinely heard from trustees is that they feel their input is devalued because they are only on campus a handful of times each year, leading to an unequal power dynamic between the president and the board. Over the course of our study we heard participants comment that the president “schools” trustees on the important issues and that the board simply does “whatever the president tells us.” This reminds us of a quote Zemsky, Shannon, and Shapiro (2001) shared from a consultant who later served on a university board. This individual, in reflecting upon their contrasting experiences, observed, “When I was your consultant, you told me everything I needed to know about the college, and paid me, to boot. Now that I am a trustee, you tell me as little as possible, and expect me to pay you (Zemsky, Shannon, & Shapiro, 2001, p. 25).

While it may be more convenient for presidents to engage with trustees in a limited manner, institutions can benefit from proactively engaging with their trustees on strategic issues. For example, well-connected trustees may be able to link administrators and

From the Authors: “An in-depth review of an important university issue should not become a platform for trustees to take over the day-to-day operations of the institution.”

From the Authors: “Strong relationships and collaborative problem-solving between presidents and boards are essential as higher education grapples with increasingly complex problems and rapid change.”

faculty with key external stakeholders such as community and business leaders who could benefit the institution. Additionally, trustees with finance backgrounds are often able to provide keen insights when institutions face audit issues, debt financing, or complex real estate transactions. Trustees offering input and guidance should not dictate exact details to presidents and senior administrators. However, boards are often a great collection of talented individuals who can offer sage advice and serve as a valuable sounding board for institutional leaders.

When presidents and boards develop strong working relationships they can address the most important strategic challenges facing their institution. We heard time and again that trustees want to engage beyond routine, consent agenda matters and consider the most pertinent issues facing their institutions. Trustees want to discuss tuition and its impact on student debt, their institutions’ range of academic program offerings and students’ post-graduation outcomes, the future of distance and online education, and demographic shifts and the relationship of these shifts to future student enrollment. Many trustees are concerned about the future of higher education and the sustainability of current operating models in light of growing public criticism and competition from new providers. It is perfectly reasonable for trustees to engage in conversations on these matters at a policy level. They should not micromanage individual programmatic decisions or dictate specific new student recruitment strategies, but a high-level discussion of academic offerings or the institution’s student profile may reveal important implications for institutional finances and policies.

In order to engage on strategic matters, boards need to be well informed about the challenges facing their institutions. This can occur by providing comprehensive and robust trustee orientation and continuing education opportunities. Regular reviews of key university topics can help ensure boards and the institutions they serve remain on the same page on key policy matters, which can help limit the potential for misunderstanding and conflict. For example, one board meeting may be spent reviewing in-depth the university’s financial health and sustainability; another may examine campus infrastructure issues. These reviews should not simply become a “data dump” of information from the administration. Instead, they should spark a conversation among the board, president, and other pertinent stakeholders. In the limited time trustees spend on campus for meetings, the focus should be on substantive discussions and not simply rehashing reports that could be sent and read ahead of time.

At the same time, an in-depth review of an important university issue should not become a platform for trustees to take over the day-to-day operations of the institution. Instead, it should serve as an opportunity to learn more about a particular area of the institution, ask better questions in an oversight capacity, and ultimately enhance the board’s ability to make more informed decisions. There may be a fear among administrators that holding deeper strategic conversations could cause trustees to slowly slip into micromanagement. However, trustees that feel stonewalled by the administration could turn to pursuing their own agendas and become overly activist in their roles if they are not first provided an opportunity to work in partnership with the administration.

To aid in producing effective strategic action at the board level, presidents and trustees should work together to establish a framework and expectations for regular and deep strategic discussions to help ensure a mutual understanding of trustees’ roles in institutional governance. It is best for each party to view such dialogue, not as a chance to dictate to the other what their role should be, but to determine how the two parties can work together and fulfill their responsibilities most effectively. It often seems to take a controversy to spark such conversations, but we believe such communication should occur more proactively and more frequently. When these dialogues occur in an open, transparent, and collaborative environment, it is more likely shared understanding and productive action will occur.

There are widely divergent viewpoints on the matter of trustee governance. Personal experiences often frame one’s opinion about the proper role of trustees. We conclude from our two-year study that the best practice is to keep trustees fully informed, engage them in meaningful dialogue on important strategic issues facing the institution, and take full advantage of the knowledge and experience each trustee brings to the board room. Fear of a single activist trustee should not prevent universities from engaging any trustees. An institution that fails to engage its trustees on strategic matters is wasting talent and jeopardizing the institution’s future. Strong relationships and collaborative problem-solving between presidents and boards are essential as higher education grapples with increasingly complex problems and rapid change.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THIRD ROUND OF TRUSTEE INTERVIEWS

AREAS OF BOARD EFFECTIVENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Stability of board operations and activities even through presidential transitions.● Presenting a united front even if not unanimous on a decision.● Respectful communication among board members.
AREAS FOR BOARD IMPROVEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● More focus on substantive discussion instead of routine reporting.● Greater participation by all board members.● Quicker response to emerging higher education challenges.
ENGAGING ON STRATEGIC MATTERS	<p>Trustees want to spend their time together with the administration tackling the most pressing challenges facing their institutions, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Strategic Planning – reviewing the university’s overall vision/direction.● Succession Planning – identifying the right leaders for the institution moving forward.● Finances – long-term sustainability, specifically how enrollment impacts the university’s budget.● Academic Programs – the proper mix and cost structure of programs.● Online Education – changing landscape/competition and the university’s strategy for online courses/programs.● Risk Management – comprehensive approach for identifying and preparing for threats and risks to the university.

KEEPING TRUSTEES INFORMED	<p>Key factors trustees identified to keep them well-informed included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● The administration providing sufficient background information to fully understand and grasp the issues presented to them.● Information provided one to two weeks prior to a board meeting.● The president keeping trustees informed of crises and emergencies before they become public.● Board members and the administration working together to develop a mutually beneficial communication flow in terms of both content and timeliness.
BUILDING STRONG PRESIDENT-BOARD RELATIONS	<p>Trustees stressed the importance of this relationship and offered suggestions for working together effectively.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Be Open to Working Together – set egos aside and recognize the value of building a partnership.● Set Clear Expectations with Regular Review – boards should be clear and upfront with the president about their expectations and then empower the president to do the job.● Communicate Transparently – open and candid communication builds trust. Presidents should freely share information with their boards, and trustees should share their opinions with the president before jumping to conclusions.● Build Relationships Outside of Formal Meetings – trustees and presidents developing rapport through regular interactions can help strengthen their working relationship.
ENGAGING AS AN INDIVIDUAL TRUSTEE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Be Present – physically present, well-prepared, and mentally engaged at meetings and board-related activities.● Focus on the Macro Role – recognize where trustees can offer guidance without slipping into micromanagement.● Ask Questions – this ensures there is a sound rationale before decisions are made.● Provide Feedback and Suggestions – trustees bring value to their boards when they utilize their expertise to bring alternative viewpoints to university discussions.● Engage Nationally – many trustees found attending Association of Governing Boards (AGB) meetings extremely beneficial.● Connect with Trustees at Different Institutions – provides opportunities to discuss similar issues/challenges.
IMPROVING BOARD ORIENTATION AND CONTINUING EDUCATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Greater involvement from fellow trustees in onboarding new trustees.● Reserve more time for open discussion during the initial orientation sessions to complement the factual information provided and enhance understanding of complex issues.● Provide more regular opportunities for learning about and reviewing in-depth key challenges facing the university. An annual retreat provides a good opportunity for this to occur.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNOR ON BOARD APPOINTMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Focus on appointing individuals with a broad range of skillsets that complement one another.● Seek diversity in membership including gender and ethnic diversity, but also diversity of geographic regions and prior affiliations with the university.● Find individuals with a passion for education.● Provide opportunities for cross-board interaction to facilitate the sharing of ideas on effective governance across universities.

➤ REFERENCES

- Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities. (2014). *Consequential boards adding value where it matters most: Report of the national commission on college and university board governance*. Washington DC, Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities.
- Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities. (2016). *Shared governance: Is ok good enough?* Washington DC, Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities.
- 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.
- Kolowich, S. (2015, March 28). How Sweet Briar's board decided to close the college. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com>
- Legon, R. D. (2012, July/August). Governance in the spotlight: Lessons from the University of Virginia crisis. *Trusteeship*, 20(4), 8-11.
- Lubrano, A. P. (2015, March 9). One trustee's view from the trenches. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com>
- Novak, R. (2012, September/October). State policies and practices to improve board governance. *Trusteeship*, 20(5), 31-35.
- Stripling, J. (2015, March 9). Board battles. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com>
- Zemsky, R., Shannon, S., & Shapiro, D. B. (2001). *Higher education as a competitive enterprise: When markets matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

» ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION

The Center for Higher and Adult Education's mission is to further policy and international work in postsecondary 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 postsecondary research and outreach as related to higher education policy both domestically and across the globe.

For additional information please visit: chae.msu.edu

» ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael J. Zeig, Ph.D. (zeigmich@msu.edu) is the University Planning Coordinator in the Office of Planning and Budgets 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, Ph.D. (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) is the vice president of government and external relations at Central Michigan University and a doctoral candidate 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



College of Education
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY



An electronic version of this report is available at chae.msu.edu



College of Education
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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