

Higher Education Governance:

A Short Primer with Resources

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October 20, 2022

In the United States, non-profit and public institutions of higher education operate under a system of “shared governance.” Shared governance means that decision making and responsibility to guide institutions in a productive and appropriate direction is shared among a variety of stakeholders. While the governing board is almost always that last and ultimate authority, boards typically act with restraint and avoid day-to-day involvement. According to Sondra Barringer, a sociologist who studies governance in higher education, general academic and operational management “[is not their purview](#),” because boards’ appropriate role is long-range planning and fiscal oversight.

Governance observers note that in recent years boards have become increasingly active in daily management and academic affairs, leading to intensified conflict between governance partners. As [David Rosowsky](#), Vice President of Research at Kansas State University, put it:

“Now, more than ever, it would seem an ideal time to look carefully at this dynamic [of shared governance] and commit to its improvement. This will not only give the institution the best possible chance for successfully navigating the current crisis and emerging securely on the other side, but also can elevate the entire model of shared governance – its function, its capacity for making the best decisions for the university, and ultimately its success. In this way, shared governance can continue to define and advance US higher educational institutions and ensure US colleges and universities remain among the best in the world.”

To accomplish this work of restoration and rejuvenation, faculty, students, staff, and members of college and university boards should build a collective understanding of what academic shared governance is, how it can work, and what it should do. This document is intended to provide a set of resources that constitute a primer on academic governance. Below, you will find a set of links to websites and reports that contain helpful information, and sometimes short summaries of their contents. The document, developed in conjunction with the [HALE/CHAE teach-in on academic governance](#), is intended as a set of resources that remain available for your perusal.

What is Shared Governance?

Shared governance refers to the method of decision making and division of responsibility that allows higher education institutions to pursue their missions and accomplish goals. The [1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities](#), by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), in conjunction with the American Council on Education (ACE), and Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities (AGB) lays out the basic tenets of shared governance. The report outlines why shared governance is necessary for higher education institutions:

“The variety and complexity of the tasks performed by institutions of higher education produce an inescapable interdependence among governing board, administration, faculty, students, and others. The relationship calls for adequate communication among these components, and full opportunity for appropriate joint planning and effort.”

The 1966 shared governance statement also broadly describes the roles of various campus groups. **Governing boards** operate “as the as the final institutional authority,” but “while maintaining a general overview [the board], entrusts the conduct of administration to the administrative officers...and the conduct of teaching and research to the faculty.” As in the case of public research universities in Michigan, “Where public law calls for election of governing board members, means should be found to ensure the nomination of fully suited persons, and the electorate should be informed of the relevant criteria for board membership.” Governing board responsibilities include:

- Preserving the institutional mission and ensuring that it is imprinted on future endeavors.
- Planning for future needs of the institution and management of the endowment.
- Approving a strategic plan and “insist[ing] upon the development of long-range planning by the administration and faculty.”
- Championing and supporting the institution, especially “when ignorance or ill will threatens the institution or any part of it.”
- Attending to personnel policy only “in the broadest sense.”

The college or university **president** is the institution’s chief executive officer who is responsible for managing existing institutional resources and generating new ones. The president, and the administrative offices the president oversees, manage the institution’s day-to-day affairs and execute institutional policy. As put in the 1966 statement:

“It is the duty of the president to see to it that the standards and procedures in operational use within the college or university conform to the policy established by the governing board and to the standards of sound academic practice.”

The **faculty** have primary control over academic matters and should govern institutional academic affairs.

“The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process.”

Additionally, according to the 1966 report, the faculty should:

- Determine the criteria for faculty hiring and promotion.
- Participate in establishing the guidelines for faculty salary adjustments.
- Establish the criteria for degree completion.
- And “participate in the government of the college or university” through established vehicles such as committees and the faculty senate.

Students have a role in shared governance because:

“Students expect, and have a right to expect, that the educational process will be structured, that they will be stimulated by it to become independent adults ...”

The students enrolled at a college or university are entitled to participation in at least the following ways:

- By the right to be listened to without the fear of reprisal.
- The freedom to discuss the ways their institution is managed by faculty, administration, and the board.
- Have due process when charged with violations of institutional policy.

- By freely contribute to the intellectual debates and discussions on campus, including inviting campus speakers.

As with the faculty, administration, and the board, students are an essential party to shared governance. The student role is often formalized through the structures of student government.

National and State Resources on Academic Governance and Accreditation

[The Higher Learning Commission](#) (MSU's accreditor)

- [Guidelines for governing boards](#). See especially:
 - "2.C. The governing board of the institution is autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the institution in compliance with board policies and to ensure the institution's integrity.*
 - 1. The governing board is trained and knowledgeable so that it makes informed decisions with respect to the institution's financial and academic policies and practices; the board meets its legal and fiduciary responsibilities.*
 - 2. The governing board's deliberations reflect priorities to preserve and enhance the institution.*
 - 3. The governing board reviews the reasonable and relevant interests of the institution's internal and external constituencies during its decision-making deliberations.*
 - 4. The governing board preserves its independence from undue influence on the part of donors, elected officials, ownership interests or other external parties.*
 - 5. The governing board delegates day-to-day management of the institution to the institution's administration and expects the institution's faculty to oversee academic matters."*

[Association of Governing Boards](#)

- [Principles of Trusteeship](#)

State Constitution of Michigan (1963)

- [Article VIII Education](#)
 - See especially: [Article VIII, Sec. 5, relating to Michigan State University, University of Michigan, and Wayne State University.](#)

[Michigan Association of State Universities](#) (MASU)

- Excerpt from MASU's Michigan Higher Education Public Policy Agenda, "[Context: Governance and Policy Development and Oversight Among Michigan's Public Universities:](#)"
 - *"Constitutional autonomy enables Michigan's public universities to be governed in a manner that allows individuals who are well versed in higher education policy issues to make governance decisions for the institutions."*

Federated Publications, Inc. v. Board of Trustees of Michigan State University (1999), [470 Mich. 75](#):

- Michigan Supreme Court decision affirming university governing board authority over presidential selection beyond the scope of Michigan's Open Meetings Act.

At Michigan State University

[MSU Board of Trustees](#)

- Board [Code of Conduct](#)

Campus governance bodies

- [MSU Academic Governance](#)
- [Associated Students of Michigan State University \(ASMSU\)](#)
- [Council of Graduate Students \(COGS\)](#)

Research and Writing About Boards

Mary Fulton, "[An Analysis of State Postsecondary Governance Structures.](#)" Education Commission of the States.

Michael J. Zeig, Roger G. Baldwin, and Kathleen M. Wilbur, "[Great Expectations: A Longitudinal Study of New Trustees.](#)" MSU Center for Higher and Adult Education.

Michael J. Zeig, Roger G. Baldwin, Kathleen M. Wilbur, "[A Great Collection of Minds: Maximizing the Strategic Engagement of New University Trustees \(final report\).](#)" MSU Center for Higher and Adult Education

Michael J. Zeig, Roger G. Baldwin, Kathleen M. Wilbur, "[Intrepid Explorers: The Critical First Years of Trusteeship.](#)" Trusteeship.

Michael N. Bastedo. "[Conflicts, commitments, and cliques in the university: Moral seduction as a threat to trustee independence.](#)" *American Educational Research Journal*.

Maya Weilundemo Ott and Kiernan Mathews, "[Effective Academic Governance: Five Ingredients for CAOs and Faculty.](#)" The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education.