

### Can board members be effective higher education advocates?

Yes, board members can play an important role to institution, system, or foundation advocacy efforts. As corporate and community leaders, board members are uniquely positioned to engage in advocacy with their professional, social, and personal networks, as well as with policymakers and the public, to strengthen higher education.

More specifically, board members should play an active and supporting role as ambassadors on behalf of their institution—active in terms of being ready, willing, and able to reach out to individuals and supporting in terms of following the administration’s lead on issues, messages, and timing.

**Source:** *Principles of Trusteeship: How to Become a Highly Effective Board Member for Colleges, Universities, and Foundations*, AGB 2021

### How do boards organize and initiate their advocacy efforts?

Led by the chief executive and senior staff, boards should regularly discuss a public policy or advocacy strategy that includes short- and long-term priorities. This overarching strategy can include a list of priority issues (which may change throughout the year in response to new developments) and share how often the board will be informed about policy issue updates, as well how these issues will be addressed by particular board members or specific committees.

During the discussion, board members and staff may identify board leaders who can speak to and connect with a broad cross section of constituencies in support of the policy priorities. The strategy may also include a process by which board members can participate in outside coalitions and organizations that support the institution’s advocacy goals. The board should talk with the president and senior staff about appropriate opportunities for education or professional development that will enable its members to effectively represent the organization.

Typically, the government relations staff will organize any strategy to lobby policymakers. Other kinds of advocacy, such as advocating the institution’s value proposition, may go through external relations or communications staff. The chief executive and staff will decide how to best leverage board member voices as part of the strategy for maximum effect.

### What is the role of foundation and/or alumni boards in advocacy?

Similar to their institutional board counterparts, foundation and alumni boards can be valuable partners when engaging in advocacy. Foundation board members can inform lawmakers about endowments or fundraising or reinforce the benefits of education for students. Alumni board members can pair with a recent graduate to demonstrate the longevity and long-term success of the institution. Administrative staff coordinate messaging among the institution and affiliated organizations to avoid confusion and promote key priorities.

### On what issues should a board member advocate?

Traditionally, “advocacy” is often used in a public policy context. Board members can leverage their networks, volunteer status, and passion to sway policymakers. In concert with government relations staff, they focus on the federal and state, and oftentimes local issues, that have the greatest impact on student success and institutional vitality.

Beyond the policy arena, board members can also communicate and promote the value of post-secondary education for their communities, regions, and beyond. As volunteer leaders, board members have credibility with constituencies that other advocates may lack.

**Sources:** *Principles of Trusteeship: How to Become a Highly Effective Board Member for Colleges, Universities, and Foundations*, AGB 2021

*Top Public Policy Issues for Higher Education 2021–2022*, AGB 2021

*AGB Statement on External Influences on Universities and Colleges*, AGB 2012

## What can board members do to make good advocates? What should they avoid?

### Board members *should*

- Advise and support crafting an advocacy agenda and strategy.
- Collaborate and coordinate with the chief executive and senior administrative staff as part of a larger advocacy effort.
- Identify who on the board can connect with a broad cross-section of communities and constituencies in support of the advocacy strategy.
- Work with senior administrators and staff to affiliate with coalitions and organizations that may help to advance public policy priorities.

### Board members *should not*

- Create a personal agenda and act on it independently. Doing so is likely to dilute or harm the institution's strategy.
- Act in any way that isn't congruent with the needs of the institution or its students.

## Is board member advocacy common?

According to the **2018 Trustee Index**, board member respondents engaged in advocacy with federal lawmakers, but also with community and business leaders about an issue affecting higher education.

CONTACTED A MEMBER OF CONGRESS ABOUT AN ISSUE FACING HIGHER EDUCATION	25%
CONTACTED LOCAL COMMUNITY LEADERS ABOUT AN ISSUE FACING HIGHER EDUCATION	34%
CONTACTED LOCAL BUSINESS LEADERS ABOUT AN ISSUE FACING HIGHER EDUCATION	34%
WRITTEN AN OP-ED ABOUT AN ISSUE HIGHER EDUCATION	5%

The index also revealed that board members' political ideologies are distributed fairly and evenly.

VERY CONSERVATIVE	4%
CONSERVATIVE	24%
MODERATE	41%
LIBERAL	24%
VERY LIBERAL	7%
DON'T KNOW	1%

**Source:** *The AGB 2018 Trustee Index*, AGB 2018

What are some examples of board members engaging in advocacy on behalf of their institutions, foundations, or higher education broadly?

Consider these examples of institutional advocacy that include board member engagement:

- The **Colorado Trustee Network** (CTN) is a coalition of board members working together to elevate the issues of greatest impact to higher education in Colorado. The founding committee of trustees has one board member from every public institution or system in the state. Find out more on the **AGB blog** and the **AGB podcast**.
- Susan Jandernoa, the vice chair of the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Board of Trustees, **provided testimony** before the higher education appropriations subcommittee in the Michigan House of Representatives. Joined by the GVSU president and vice president of the student Senate, Jandernoa emphasized her expertise as both a fiduciary and as an elementary school teacher to build credibility with lawmakers. GVSU's bid in 2021 for additional support **was ultimately successful**.
- The **Regional College & University Presidents' Alliance of Philadelphia** takes advantage of relationships among public and private higher education leaders and the business community to provide opportunities for collaboration and advocacy. While primarily a vehicle for presidential collaboration, board member engagement is welcome and encouraged. Find out more in this **AGB video**.
- The **Beaver Caucus** and **Now-4 OSU-Cascades** are advocacy organizations committed to supporting Oregon State University and its branch campus in Bend. Both have worked closely with the OSU Foundation and the institution to champion Oregon's students and institutional priorities. In fact, board members of the foundation also serve on the board of the Beaver Caucus. Hear more about how Now-4 OSU-Cascades and the Beaver Caucus secured capital funding for a new building in this **AGB video**.

Why is board independence important in relation to your institution's advocacy efforts?

While boards should respect, encourage, and welcome all stakeholders' involvement, they must also ensure that their decision-making procedures are free of undue external stakeholder pressure, including public officials, policymakers, donors, alumni, and others. Governing boards are legal entities and have oversight responsibility for ensuring the purpose, priorities, reputation, and viability of their institutions, foundations, and systems. It is imperative that boards and the colleges, universities, and foundations they serve remain aligned and operate independently from external influences.

**Sources:** "External Influences" FAQ, AGB 2021

*AGB Statement on External Influences on Universities and Colleges*, AGB 2012

## Related Resources

### AGB Statement on External Influences on Universities and Colleges

#### AGB

As the overseers of a public trust, boards have an obligation to remain open to external input and ensure the institutions they govern are responsive to societal needs. They have the responsibility to link the colleges, universities, and systems they serve to the interests of the public. This statement addresses the importance of board independence from outside the boardrooms of our institutions. It also serves as a reminder to the nation's 50,000 board members that theirs is a sacred trust that requires awareness, engagement, and independence.

2012 • 16 pages

### AGB Board of Directors' Statement on Justice, Equity, and Inclusion and Guidance for Implementation

#### AGB

The AGB Board of Directors recognizes the urgency for governing boards to examine and address barriers to justice, equity, and inclusion (JEI) in their own work, at all levels of the institution, and beyond the borders of the campus. Undertaking this work will be challenging and complex and the *AGB Board of Directors' Statement on Justice, Equity and Inclusion* serves as a critical resource for boards in their efforts to implement this important governance work.

2021 • 48 pages

### Top Public Policy Issues for Higher Education 2021–2022

#### AGB

This biennial publication is designed to help higher education governing boards understand the most pressing federal and state public policy issues affecting higher education. Today's policy landscape is shaped by a confluence of powerful, even disruptive trends—including but not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic, declining government funding, piecemeal approaches to higher education policymaking, extreme partisan polarization, and debates over college affordability. *Top Public Policy Issues for Higher Education 2021–2022* captures policy experts' best thinking on these issues and provides board members and campus leaders with invaluable guidance on public policy decisions most likely to affect higher education over the next two years.

2021 • 52 pages

### Trusteeship Podcast Episode 22: The Colorado Trustee Network

#### AGB

In this podcast, **Morgan Alexander**, AGB's associate director of public policy and strategic communications, speaks with three founding members of CTN: **Alison Griffin**, the chair of the board of trustees of Colorado Mesa University; **Russell Noles**, the vice chair of the Metropolitan State University of Denver Board of Trustees; and **Chris Romer**, a trustee of Colorado Mountain College. Learn more: **Colorado Trustee Network website**.

2021 • 19 minutes