

What are the primary responsibilities of governing boards of colleges, universities, and systems?

The Essential Responsibilities of Governing Boards

The governing board of a college, university, or system is accountable for fulfilling fiduciary responsibilities in several essential areas. The board is responsible for:

1. Establishing, disseminating, and keeping current the mission of the institution.
2. Selecting and supporting the president of the institution.
3. Periodically assessing the president's performance and reviewing his or her compensation.
4. Charging the president with the task of leading a strategic planning process, participating in that process, approving the strategic plan, and monitoring its progress.
5. Ensuring the institution's fiscal integrity, preserving and protecting its assets for posterity, and engaging directly in fundraising and philanthropy.
6. Ensuring the quality of the education provided by the institution.
7. Safeguarding both the autonomy of the institution and the related tradition of academic freedom.
8. Ensuring that the policies and processes of the institution remain current and are properly implemented.
9. Engaging regularly with the institution's major constituencies.
10. Ensuring that its business is conducted in an exemplary fashion, that its governance policies and practices are kept current, and that the performance of the board, its committees, and its members are periodically assessed.

Source: *Higher Education Governing Boards: An Introductory Guide for Members of College, University, and System Boards*, AGB 2019

What are the fiduciary responsibilities of board members?

The Governing Board Member as Fiduciary

While governing boards act as a body, the fiduciary duties applied by law and best practice fall on individual board members. Board members must be more than names on a masthead. They must be fully engaged. They must attend meetings, read and evaluate the materials, ask questions and get answers, honor confidentiality, avoid conflicts of interest, demonstrate loyalty, understand and uphold mission, and ensure legal and ethical compliance. Those who cannot do so must step down and allow others to take their place.

The particular duties owed by a fiduciary to the institution he or she serves are commonly known, as described above, as the fiduciary duties of

- **Care:** Officers and governing board members must carry out their responsibilities in good faith.
- **Loyalty:** Officers and board members must act strictly in the interests of their institutions.
- **Obedience:** Board members must ensure that their institutions are operating in furtherance of their stated purposes.

Board members and officers must understand that while they hold fiduciary duties, individually, they act collectively as a board. No single board member or officer has authority to bind the institution or determine its course of action.

Source: *Higher Education Governing Boards: An Introductory Guide for Members of College, University, and System Boards*, AGB 2019

What is the average number of board members for a public institution?

The average board size among public institutions was essentially the same in 2020 as in 2015. Overall, the boards of public colleges and universities were composed of about 12 voting board members.

AVERAGE PUBLIC BOARD SIZE

2015	11.9
2020	11.8

Source: *Policies, Practices, and Composition of Governing Boards of Colleges, Universities, and Institutionally Related Foundation Boards 2021*, AGB 2021

Does board size vary by Carnegie classification?

There were differences in average board size by Carnegie classification. Public system boards averaged 12 voting members, while public associate's institutions averaged nearly 10 voting board members.

AVERAGE PUBLIC BOARD SIZE BY CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION

CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION	AVERAGE NUMBER OF VOTING BOARD MEMBERS
ASSOCIATE'S	9.8
BACCALAUREATE	12.4
MASTER'S	10.2
DOCTORAL/RESEARCH	13.0
SPECIALIZED	14.0
SYSTEM	12.4

Source: *Policies, Practices, and Composition of Governing Boards of Colleges, Universities, and Institutionally Related Foundation Boards 2021*, AGB 2021

What are the averages for gender, age ranges, and race and ethnicity of board members on public boards?

As of 2020, 61.1 percent of board members at public institutions were between the ages of 50 and 69. Minorities made up 30.1 percent of public board members. Women accounted for a little over one-third (37 percent) of board members at public institutions.

PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN ON PUBLIC BOARDS, 1969–2020

12%	18%	23%	30%	29%	28%	32%	37%
1969	1977	1985	1997	2004	2010	2015	2020

Answer continues on next page...

PUBLIC BOARD MEMBERS BY AGE, 1977–2020

AGE	1977	1985	1997	2004	2010	2015	2020
UNDER 30	2.2%	1.8%	2.3%	2.9%	5.1%	4.6%	4.0%
30–49	42.5%	37.2%	29.8%	20.8%	14.3%	15.0%	19.5%
50–69	50.6%	55.5%	60.0%	65.0%	69.0%	66.2%	61.1%
70 AND OVER	4.6%	5.5%	7.9%	11.4%	11.6%	14.2%	15.4%

PUBLIC BOARD MEMBERS BY RACE/ETHNICITY

RACE/ETHNICITY	PERCENTAGE
WHITE (NON-HISPANIC)	64.7%
TOTAL MINORITIES*	30.1%
AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKAN NATIVE	1.7%
ASIAN	3.1%
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN (NON-HISPANIC)	20.3%
HISPANIC/LATIN	4.0%
NATIVE HAWAIIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	0.9%
MULTIRACIAL	0.3%
UNKNOWN	4.9%

*Does not include “multiracial” or “unknown” categories; “multiracial” introduced in 2020 so no data available for prior years

Source: *Policies, Practices, and Composition of Governing Boards of Colleges, Universities, and Institutionally Related Foundation Boards 2021*, AGB 2021

Related Resources

Higher Education Governing Boards: An Introductory Guide for Members of College, University, and System Boards

AGB

Intended both to orient and to guide, Higher Education Governing Boards provides a detailed overview of the essential responsibilities of governing boards—public and independent—and the fiduciary duties of board members.

2019 • 44 pages

Policies, Practices, and Composition of Governing Boards of Colleges, Universities, and Institutionally Related Foundation Boards

AGB

This survey report and those that preceded it are intended to spark dialogue about the future of higher education governance, including board capacity and functionality. The report offers a comprehensive picture of independent, public, and institutionally affiliated foundation governing boards.

2021

The Governance Committee (Public Institutions)

By Carol Cartwright

This publication provides advice on how to select new trustees and manage the composition of the board, orientation, continuing board education programs, mentorship of new board members, and trustee self-assessment.

2019 • 52 pages

AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for Institutional Governance

AGB

This statement encourages all governing boards and presidents to examine the clarity, coherence, and appropriateness of their institutions' governance structures, policies, and practices, and recommends best practices related to institutional governance.

2010 • 12 pages