

A GUIDE TO: MISSION-CENTRIC GOVERNANCE

These guiding questions help focus board discussions on the critical issues at the intersection of governance and mission. They encourage boards to take proactive, transparent, and accountable actions in support of justice and institutional inclusivity while also addressing potential pushback and offering solutions for maintaining a strong mission focus. The actionable strategies should be utilized as starting points that can be further developed to best fit the context of each institution.

BOARD RESPONSIBILITIES

1 Establish, disseminate, and keep current the mission of the institution



2 Select, support, and assess the Chief Executive Officer of the institution



3 Co-create, approve, and monitor the progress of the strategic plan



4 Engage directly in fundraising and philanthropy to ensure fiscal integrity



5 Ensure the quality of education provided by the institution



6 Safeguard the autonomy of the institution and the related tradition of academic freedom



7 Ensure that the policies and processes of the institution remain current and are properly implemented



8 Engage regularly with the institution's major constituencies



9 Uphold the highest standards of strategy, transparency, and accountability





ESTABLISH, DISSEMINATE, AND KEEP CURRENT THE MISSION OF THE INSTITUTION

1

Boards are responsible for critically examining the institution's mission to ensure it explicitly addresses equity for all of their members. In a climate where deliberate efforts to support all campus stakeholders' success and well-being are under scrutiny or attack, it is essential that the enactment of

the institution's mission demonstrates a firm commitment to dismantling or combating policies, processes, and procedures that facilitate disparate opportunities for success. If the current mission does not prioritize systematic and intentional efforts to support opportunities for the campus community to realize safety and success, the board must facilitate senior leaders' efforts to realign incentives and outcomes with these values.

- **GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- Does our institution's mission explicitly reflect a commitment to the well-being of all stakeholders?
- Is the mission broadly understood, lived, and evaluated through an equity lens?
- What steps can we take to ensure our mission is not only aspirational but actively guides decision-making and resource allocation toward equity?
- How can we strengthen this commitment in light of national debates on diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- If there is pushback against aligning the mission with diversity, equity, and inclusion, how can we communicate the long-term benefits of an equity-centered mission to our stakeholders?

- **ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES:**

- Boards may consider conducting regular reviews of the mission and holding listening sessions to gather input on how it can better address stakeholder equity. Engaging external consultants on diversity, equity, and inclusion and mission alignment, or creating a "mission alignment" rubric, can help balance pushback while demonstrating institutional leadership on these issues. Boards can also host annual forums or establish a committee to assess how the mission translates into institutional practices and outcomes.





SELECT, SUPPORT, AND ASSESS THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE INSTITUTION

2

Boards must actively support institutional leaders who advance strategies to identify and mitigate harmful experiences felt by any campus stakeholder. This includes publicly backing presidents and senior leaders who take principled stands to protect stakeholder well-being and success. Boards should ensure that leadership evaluations include not only traditional performance metrics, but also demonstrated progress in expanding equitable pathways to opportunity. Even in the face of external resistance, boards should advocate for transparent reporting on these efforts and their measurable outcomes.

- **GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- Does the CEO demonstrate clear, values-aligned leadership on equity and inclusion?
- How can the board more effectively support the CEO or president when they face internal or external resistance to equity-focused work?
- What metrics should we use to evaluate the CEO's progress in advancing equitable outcomes and improving campus climate?
- Are we publicly and materially backing mission-focused leadership? If so, how can we ensure our statements and actions convey unwavering support for equity, inclusion, and well-being, even in politically challenging contexts?

- **ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES:**

- Boards can strengthen accountability by incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion performance indicators into leadership evaluations and publicly affirming the importance of inclusive leadership. Creating space for the CEO to advance this work without fear of political or public retribution helps cultivate a culture of equity-driven leadership. Even amid external pressure, boards should make clear, through statements and actions, that they support leaders who advance mission-centered commitments to equity and stakeholder well-being.



CO-CREATE, APPROVE, AND MONITOR THE PROGRESS OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN

3

In an environment where systematic efforts to support all campus stakeholders is being politicized, embedding efforts to facilitate opportunities for the success and well-being of all campus stakeholders into the strategic plan is non-negotiable. Boards must ensure that deliberate efforts are not just an aspirational goal but a core component with measurable outcomes. This includes establishing clear metrics that are disaggregated across different dimensions of the campus community and holding the institution accountable for reporting and making visible progress, despite external pressures to roll back such initiatives.

CONTINUED: CO-CREATE, APPROVE, AND MONITOR THE PROGRESS OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN

3

• GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How are equity and stakeholder success explicit, measurable pillars of our strategic plan? What metrics or milestones can we use to track progress?
- In the face of political pressure, how can we ensure that our goals remain non-negotiable in our institution's long-term strategic vision?
- What resources are needed to ensure that strategic goals are not deprioritized, even in periods of fiscal or political pressure?
- Are progress metrics disaggregated to identify disparities?

• ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES

- Boards can create clear benchmarks in the strategic plan and require annual or biannual reporting on these goals, perhaps through the establishment of a Strategic Plan Success Oversight Committee. Boards can further support strategic plans by creating goals that are tied to disaggregated success metrics. If resistance emerges, boards can refocus discussions on the institution's responsibility to all students, demonstrating that equitable initiatives foster a stronger, more inclusive institution.

ENGAGE DIRECTLY IN FUNDRAISING AND PHILANTHROPY TO ENSURE FISCAL INTEGRITY

4

Financial decisions must reflect the institution's commitment to deliberate efforts to support opportunities for the success and well-being of all campus stakeholders, especially as economic and social disparities disproportionately impact certain communities. Boards should scrutinize

budgets, fundraising strategies, and financial policies to ensure they do not perpetuate barriers to opportunities for success and well-being. Boards must also ensure that institutional investments demonstrably support stakeholder communities in need of additional support and align with long-term goals for opportunity for all, even if such decisions face external criticism.

• GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Do our budgeting and investments reflect a commitment to equitable outcomes, both internally and externally?
- What financial decisions or strategies have we made that may unintentionally reinforce inequities, and how can we address them?
- Are we allocating resources to mitigate disparities in student success and well-being?
- How do our fundraising efforts advance—not just maintain—access and inclusion?

• ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES:

- Boards can direct financial audits to include equity assessments, ensuring that funds and resources are distributed to ensure the success of all stakeholders. Boards can engage in dialogue with donors to educate them on the importance of mission-centric work and align donor relations with institutional values. In turn, boards can help sustain equity-driven funding streams.



5

ENSURE THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION PROVIDED BY THE INSTITUTION

Boards must ensure that the quality of education is grounded in principles of reliable pathways to success and opportunity for all students. This means promoting curricula and practices that address disparities in learning outcomes and access to resources. As national debates on critical race theory and inclusive curricula intensify, boards should advocate for educational programs that are unapologetically inclusive and designed to empower all students, particularly those from groups the institution has not always served consistently well.

- **GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- Do students from all backgrounds have equitable access to high-quality learning experiences?
- How do we ensure that curriculum and pedagogy reflect the lived experiences of all students, despite external pressures to avoid addressing controversial topics?
- How can we prepare our students to thrive in an increasingly diverse society?

- **ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES:**

- Boards can advocate for curriculum reviews that ensure representation of diverse voices and perspectives. Boards should support faculty in the development of inclusive pedagogy and curricula even when those topics are politically charged. Boards should publicly defend academic freedom and high-quality, inclusive learning environments.

SAFEGUARD THE AUTONOMY OF THE INSTITUTION AND THE RELATED TRADITION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

6

Protecting academic freedom is essential, particularly as scholarship and teaching on so-called “divisive concepts” come under increasing scrutiny. Boards must stand firm in defending faculty and academic leaders who engage in this work. Upholding academic freedom is fundamental to maintaining a healthy, inclusive, and intellectually vibrant institution.

- **GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- How do we ensure that our institution remains autonomous in its commitment to academic freedom?
- Are we protecting scholars engaging in equity-focused research and teaching, even amid external political pressures to curtail diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives?
- Do faculty feel supported in advancing their academic inquiry and scholarly dissemination?
- How should we respond to political or public attempts to censor or limit discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion or other topics?

- **ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES:**

- Boards can establish formal protections for faculty who teach sensitive topics, as well as reaffirm the institution’s commitment to academic freedom through public statements and partnerships with national academic organizations that defend diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Academic freedom should also be included as part of board training.



ENSURE THAT THE POLICIES AND PROCESSES OF THE INSTITUTION REMAIN CURRENT AND ARE PROPERLY IMPLEMENTED

7

Boards must regularly review and update institutional policies through a lens that is concerned with how opportunities for success are made accessible. In the current climate, it is critical for boards to ensure that all institutional practices—hiring, admissions, promotions, and campus climate policies—are designed to foster success and well-being. Boards must also ensure that policies are understood and enacted consistently so that success and well-being are not just a policy statement but a lived reality on campus.

- **GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- Do our institution's policies, including admissions, hiring, and disciplinary actions, actively reduce disparities and promote access to opportunity for all stakeholders?
- How can we ensure that mission-centric policies are kept current and that implementation is rigorously enforced, understood, and monitored?
- How can we address any gaps or inconsistencies in the enforcement of mission-centric policies, particularly when faced with external pressure to weaken them?
- How are stakeholders involved in shaping institutional policy?

- **ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES:**

- Boards should conduct regular policy audits and establish transparent mechanisms to enforce mission-centric policies across all institutional functions. Boards can partner with external experts to guide policy development, create feedback loops with stakeholders, and tie policy implementation to measurable improvements in campus climate.



ENGAGE REGULARLY WITH THE INSTITUTION'S MAJOR CONSTITUENCIES

8

In a contentious climate, boards should actively engage with all constituencies, particularly those who the institution/system does not have a history of serving well. This means fostering open, honest, and ongoing dialogues with groups of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members about deliberate efforts to facilitate opportunities for success and well-being. Boards must ensure that voices advocating for contentious issues are heard and that their concerns are addressed, even when doing so may generate external resistance.

- **GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- How are we ensuring that all constituencies have a voice in the institutional decision-making process?
- In what ways can we engage in meaningful dialogue with stakeholders who may be resistant to mission-centric efforts, and how can we build understanding around the importance of these initiatives?
- How do we ensure that communication channels remain open, even in highly polarized environments? What mechanisms exist to sustain trust and dialogue?
- How transparent are our efforts to address stakeholder concerns?



CONTINUED: ENGAGE REGULARLY WITH THE INSTITUTION'S MAJOR CONSTITUENCIES

• ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES

- Boards can convene diverse groups of stakeholders regularly to foster dialogue and build trust. Constituency engagement can involve creating spaces for difficult conversations to occur and establishing advisory

groups comprising diverse stakeholders. Boards can also develop constituency reports, survey the campus population for feedback, and summarize board engagement and outcomes. These actions help build more inclusive communities and can also play a crucial role in maintaining transparency.



UPHOLD THE HIGHEST STANDARDS OF STRATEGY, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

9

Boards must uphold the highest standards of strategy, transparency, and accountability. Regular assessments of board performance should include a focus on how well the board has supported and advanced deliberate efforts to facilitate the success and well-being of all campus stakeholders, even when these initiatives are politically fraught. Boards should ensure that their own composition reflects the necessary dimensions of difference and that they model inclusive governance practices that demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the success and well-being of everyone.

• GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- How are we assessing the board's effectiveness in promoting and sustaining mission-centric goals, and are we holding ourselves accountable to equitable and inclusive leadership standards?
- How can we diversify board membership to better reflect the diversity of our stakeholders?
- In the face of national pushback against diversity, equity, and inclusion, how can we ensure that our governance practices remain steadfastly focused on mission-centric goals?

• ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES:

- Boards should conduct annual self-assessments on their own governance practices that advance mission-centric goals. Boards should lead by example, actively recruiting diverse board members who represent a wide range of communities. Boards can also implement inclusive leadership training in new member orientations and with existing board members so that they can be prepared to navigate challenges and pushback on equity in higher education.

These nine board roles and responsibilities were adapted from AGB's Board Responsibilities for Equitable Student Success curriculum created by Rall, Morgan, Schwartz, & Brown. These revisions emphasize the importance of boards proactively supporting and defending diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts amid growing national challenges, positioning equity as a guiding principle in all aspects of governance. (The Center for Strategic and Inclusive Governance, 2024)