

# A GUIDE TO: INSTITUTIONAL INDEPENDENCE

Safeguarding institutional autonomy is a core responsibility of higher education boards. This autonomy ensures institutions can operate free from excessive external influence—whether governmental, religious, or otherwise. Boards must protect this independence, allowing campus leaders to assert their values and uphold the institution's mission, integrity, and resistance to political, financial, or ideological pressures.

## ACTIONABLE STEPS FOR BOARDS

1

### LOOK TO THE MISSION

Align decisions with the institution's mission and values to justify actions protecting autonomy.



2

### LOOK TO ACCREDITATION STANDARDS

Utilize accreditation to reinforce institutional independence and governance integrity.



3

### LOOK TO STRENGTHEN FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

Reduce dependency on politically influenced funding to safeguard institutional autonomy.



4

### LOOK TO EXAMPLES OF PRECEDENT AND INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

Justify governance and spending decisions by referencing historical consistency and peer institution experiences.



5

### LOOK TO FORTIFY RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Advocate for institutional autonomy while maintaining boundaries to avoid political influence.



6

### LOOK TO PREPARE FOR AND RESPOND TO EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Build crisis resilience and proactively defend against political interference.



SEE PAGES 2 - 4 FOR ADDITIONAL DETAILS ON THESE STEPS

## LOOK TO THE MISSION



1

- **Review and Reaffirm Mission Statements**

- **Action:** Schedule annual reviews of the mission statement to ensure it reflects evolving educational needs while maintaining core principles
- **Timeline:** Annually, preferably at the start of the academic year

- **Outcome:** Updated mission statement that reinforces commitments to academic freedom, shared governance, and student success

- **Align Strategic Decisions with Mission**

- **Action:** Implement a review process requiring all new policies and strategic decisions to include a justification of how they align with the mission
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with each policy proposal
- **Outcome:** Consistent alignment of decisions with institutional values, supporting autonomy against external pressures

- **Communicate Commitment to Core Values**

- **Action:** Support the issuance of public statements and reports by the president/chancellor that reaffirm the institution's commitment to academic freedom and student success.
- **Timeline:** Semi-annually or as needed during high-stakes political debates
- **Outcome:** Increased public trust and stakeholder buy-in, justifying actions taken to defend institutional independence

## LOOK TO ACCREDITATION STANDARDS



2

- **Stay Informed on Accreditation Requirements**

- **Action:** Assign a liaison to regularly engage with accrediting bodies, attend accreditation workshops, and report back to the Board
- **Timeline:** Quarterly updates, annual workshops
- **Outcome:** Up-to-date knowledge of accreditation standards to support autonomous governance

- **Align Policies with Accreditation Standards**

- **Action:** Conduct policy audits to ensure alignment with standards related to governance, academic integrity, and financial management
- **Timeline:** Annually, ahead of accreditation reviews
- **Outcome:** Strengthened governance policies that are defensible under accreditation guidelines

- **Leverage Accreditation for Autonomy Defense**

- **Action:** Cite compliance with accreditation standards when justifying governance decisions to policymakers or critics
- **Timeline:** As needed, during public debates or legislative challenges
- **Outcome:** Enhanced credibility and justification for autonomous decision-making

## LOOK TO STRENGTHEN FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE



3

- **Diversify Revenue Streams**

- **Action:** Develop strategic plans for fundraising, endowment growth, and pursuing grants
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with annual goals and reviews
- **Outcome:** Increased financial independence, reducing vulnerability to political pressures

- **Implement Financial Policies for Sustainability**

- **Action:** Establish financial policies prioritizing long-term sustainability over short-term gains
- **Timeline:** Annual budget planning and policy review cycles
- **Outcome:** Financial stability supporting autonomous governance

- **Enhance Transparency and Accountability**

- **Action:** Publish detailed financial reports and hold open forums to explain budget decisions
- **Timeline:** Quarterly reporting, annual public forum
- **Outcome:** Enhanced stakeholder trust and reduced political scrutiny

## LOOK TO EXAMPLES OF PRECEDENT AND INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY



4

- **Document Decision-Making Processes**

- **Action:** Maintain comprehensive records of board decisions and rationales to demonstrate consistency
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with quarterly archiving
- **Outcome:** Clear precedents to defend against claims of political bias or inconsistency

- **Learn from Peer Institutions**

- **Action:** Establish networks with boards at peer institutions to share challenges and strategies
- **Timeline:** Bi-annual meetings and conferences
- **Outcome:** Informed decision-making processes reflecting sector-wide best practices

- **Reflect on Institutional History**

- **Action:** Reference historical decisions and policies when facing contemporary political pressures
- **Timeline:** As needed during political challenges
- **Outcome:** Reinforced governance consistency and credibility



5

### LOOK TO FORTIFY RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS



- **Communicate the Value of Autonomy**
  - **Action:** Develop communication campaigns to highlight the public benefits of institutional autonomy
  - **Timeline:** As needed, aligned with legislative cycles
  - **Outcome:** Increased public and policymaker support for governance independence
- **Engage Strategically with Legislators**
  - **Action:** Schedule regular meetings with key legislators to discuss the importance of higher education autonomy
  - **Timeline:** Quarterly or as needed for policy advocacy
  - **Outcome:** Stronger legislative alliances without compromising governance integrity
- **Promote Policy Initiatives Supporting Autonomy**
  - **Action:** Collaborate with state and national higher education associations to advocate for autonomy-supportive policies
  - **Timeline:** Ongoing, coordinated with policy windows
  - **Outcome:** Policy environments more favorable to institutional independence



6

### LOOK TO PREPARE FOR AND RESPOND TO EXTERNAL CHALLENGES



- **Develop Crisis Management Plans**
  - **Action:** Create detailed contingency plans to address political or funding challenges
  - **Timeline:** Annually, with updates after significant events
  - **Outcome:** Proactive risk mitigation to safeguard institutional autonomy
- **Train Boards on Controversial Issue Navigation**
  - **Action:** Include modules on political sensitivity and crisis response in board orientation and training
  - **Timeline:** Annually, during board retreats or onboarding
  - **Outcome:** Improved preparedness and strategic response to political pressures
- **Monitor Legal and Policy Developments**
  - **Action:** Designate a team to track relevant legal and political changes affecting institutional autonomy
  - **Timeline:** Ongoing monitoring with quarterly reports
  - **Outcome:** Timely responses to external challenges, protecting governance integrity