

# Centering Strategic and Inclusive Governance

In an era of rapid social, economic, and demographic change, boards of higher education face the critical challenge of remaining true to their institutional missions while safeguarding their autonomy. A key aspect of this responsibility is the commitment to their foundational values and ensuring that their institutions remain relevant and impactful in a complex and evolving landscape.

Protecting institutional autonomy involves making deliberate, strategic choices that reflect the unique needs of their communities and uphold the educational values they espouse. In this context, inclusive governance is not just an ethical imperative but also a strategic necessity. It empowers boards to enhance their institutions' educational mission, attract and retain diverse talent, and prepare students for a global workforce. With this approach, boards can lead their institutions toward a future that is not only more inclusive but also more innovative and resilient. In this resource, we share a few compelling rationale that may resonate with your board. Try one or all of them or decide on others that speak to your specific institution, community, and board.



# Compelling Reasons to Center Strategic and Inclusive Governance

## **Business Imperative**

Inclusive decision making is essential for fostering innovation and creativity. Leveraging varied perspectives that enhance problem-solving and drive better decision-making. Colleges and universities must prepare students to thrive in diverse workplaces, making DEI initiatives a strategic necessity.

## **The Public Good**

Higher education institutions have a responsibility to serve the public good rooted in history. This commitment helps bridge societal divides and empowers marginalized groups, ultimately benefiting society as a whole.

## **Mission-Centric Rationale**

Many institutions have mission statements emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and social responsibility. Upholding these values through concrete decision making not only aligns with their mission but also strengthens their brand and reputation, attracting students, staff, and faculty who share those values.

## **Long-Term Sustainability**

Mission-centric and inclusive decision making will help your institution ensure their long-term sustainability. Strategic and inclusive decision making will lead to campuses that are more adaptable to change and can better respond to the evolving needs of society and the workforce.

## **Future-Ready Preparedness**

The demographic landscape of future student populations is shifting towards being more representative in the ways of gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc. Institutions can better prepare themselves today for tomorrow's students, ensuring they provide an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all learners, and thus remain competitive in attracting a diverse applicant pool.

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## Stakeholder Trust and Legitimacy

Boards that model inclusive and mission-centered governance strengthen the legitimacy of their institutions in the eyes of students, families, alumni, policymakers, and the broader public. Transparent, participatory decision-making fosters trust, enhances institutional credibility, and reduces conflict during times of crisis or change. As higher education faces increasing scrutiny, this trust becomes a powerful asset—reinforcing the institution’s role as a steward of the public good.

## Peer Competition

Institutional rankings. Enrollment numbers. Graduation rates. Endowments and more. Colleges and universities are constantly comparing themselves to and striving to surpass peer institutions. Without making strategic decisions rooted in mission, boards risk falling behind other institutions who have committed to such priorities. Boards cannot afford to delay in supporting initiatives to maintain relevance and appeal to prospective students and faculty.

## Legal and Ethical Obligations

Many institutions face legal mandates to promote equity and prevent discrimination. Accreditation agencies often consider issues related to inclusion when evaluating institutions and programs. Such standards help ensure that colleges and universities pursue such initiatives in ways that align with their mission and educational goals.

## Resource Needs

A diverse student body attracts a wider range of funding sources, including grants and donations aimed at supporting underrepresented populations. Institutions known for their commitment to DEI inclusivity are often more competitive for these resources, which can enhance program offerings and student support services.

## Improved Student, Staff, and Faculty Outcomes

Research shows that inclusive educational environments lead to higher retention and graduation rates among students and improves retention and job satisfaction for faculty and staff. A board that centers inclusive governance to guide decision making can provide better support systems that enhance academic achievement and well-being.