



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Higher Education

Boards of Trustees, Systems

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Higher Education

Chapter Title: "Boards of Trustees, Systems"

Pub. Date: 2020

Access Date: June 26, 2020

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781473942912

Online ISBN: 9781529714395

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529714395.n66>

Print pages: 166-170

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The university system board of trustees, the ultimate decision-making entity charged with maintaining accountability within the university, has been one of the important issues in the governance of universities worldwide. Higher education systems across the globe are under pressure to transform and improve in response to a variety of economic, political, social, cultural, demographic, and environmental forces. These pressures are both global and domestic in origin. The boards entrusted to address such pressures assume myriad shapes, sizes, and titles (university councils, administrative councils, university senates, university assemblies, university syndicates, university courts, and boards of trustees). Regardless of title and with rare exception, all institutions of higher education have some sort of university system board of trustees. These system boards are responsible for clarifying the duties of institutional boards and the heads of both the system and the institution.

While there are similarities that span higher education systems worldwide, each system is rooted in country-specific control-related policies and procedures, which reflect historical and national influence. Countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and the United States all feel such pressures, yet there does not appear to be one clear trend of system control that characterizes every country. In fact, no two systems are alike. The examples and perspective in this entry concentrate primarily on systems within the United States and, therefore, do not represent an exhaustive, worldwide overview of the topic.

System Boards of Trustees Across the World

In numerous countries, the control of higher education institutions by a board of trustees is considered integral for accountability and connections with society. Elsewhere in the world, alternate models of control exist. For example, universities have been controlled by ministries of education in France and faculty guilds in the United Kingdom. The majority of higher education systems, however (e.g., in Europe and the United States), are publicly funded and admit the highest number of students. A *public system of higher education* is a collection of two or more postsecondary institutions under a single governing board. The system is led by a chief executive officer whose title is not the same as that of the chief executive officer of the institutions within the system. Segmental (also referred to as *homogeneous*) state systems encompass colleges and universities that have similar histories and missions. Consolidated (also referred to as *heterogeneous*) systems comprise a wider range of institutions that typically include doctoral/research institutions as well as predominantly undergraduate/teaching institutions. In a *heterogeneous system*, all of the state's postsecondary institutions are included (e.g., the State University of New York system), while a *homogeneous system* keeps similar types of institutions together (e.g., University of California, California State University, and California Community College systems). A *comprehensive system* incorporates all of the state's public postsecondary institutions and may or may not include community colleges and vocational/technical schools.

A multicampus *system board of trustees* is a corporate entity that governs more than one, but not all, of the senior public institutions in the state. *Boards of trustees for systems of higher education* govern all public institutions or those of a particular type (e.g., teaching institutions) within a state. Each institution within the system has its own mission, academic and other programs, internal governing policies and procedures, and chief executive officer (either president or chancellor) but governed by a single board with a systemwide chief executive officer, generally called *chancellor* or *president*—whichever term is not used for the campus heads. The University of California system is one of the earliest and best known examples of a multicampus system. The 26-member Board of Regents governs the University of California system. A chancellor leads each of the 10 campuses within the system. The system itself is led by a president.

Examples of other names of governing bodies across the globe are councils or courts. University councils have a range of authority across institutions—some serve in an advisory role to the university chief executive officer, others serve as the executive entity of the university's system of governance, and others fall somewhere in between these two roles. These councils make pivotal decisions regarding finances, hiring, moni-

toring, and firing of the institution head and infrastructure. University courts are governing bodies popular in countries such as Scotland. The Universities (Scotland) Act of 1858 first established university courts for the ancient universities. The university court is in charge of the mission, vision, and strategy of the institution; regulates staff salaries; and has responsibility over senior management and financial systems among other duties. Similar to the board of trustees, the university court has a chair who is responsible for the overall leadership and effectiveness of the university court.

University boards can also differ in the manner of appointment. Like governing boards in the United States, university council members are often appointed by government officials and are individuals from outside of the university. In some cases, board composition can be exclusively external from the university and government (e.g., Spain, Denmark, Singapore). In others, board service is reserved for individuals from particular constituencies such as alumni (Colombia, Australia), donors (South Africa), women (Tanzania), or geographic location (Malaysia, Chile). Across the world, there are typically four methods of university board appointment following some pure or mixed form of the following: (1) election (e.g., Argentina, Brazil), (2) direct selection by the prime minister or head of state (e.g., Thailand), (3) minister of higher education has appointing authority (Zimbabwe, Malaysia), and (4) self-perpetuation (e.g., Colombia, United States).

Board sizes also vary by nation. Malaysia, Cambodia, and Austria tend to have fewer than 10 members while Argentina, Spain, and Brazil all have more than 50 members. Countries such as the United States have a combination with private boards averaging 30 members, while public boards average 10 members. Board size influences efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness, and flexibility among other characteristics.

The Origin of System Boards of Trustees

Just over 60 years ago, system boards of trustees were nonexistent in the higher education context. Though funded by the states, institutions of higher education enjoyed relative freedom to behave as they wanted until approximately 1950. Institutions were freestanding with neither need nor obligation to arrange and work in concert with other institutions or coordinating entities. Halfway through the 20th century, however, institution relations with the states took on a more formal role and public higher education systems in the United States emerged and adopted centralized governance patterns with strong state control over public postsecondary education.

Although some statewide boards were established prior to 1950, during this time there was a revolutionary shift in higher education governance from individual campuses to large, complex, and heterogeneous multicampus systems. In 1959, Lyman Glenny reported that some 17 states had formed either a statewide governing board or a state coordinating board for higher education. Between 1950 and 1970, many public postsecondary institutions reorganized to form multicampus systems with a sole governing board. Near the end of the 1960s, the adoption of centralized governing boards became more popular. The consolidated board in North Carolina is given credit for extending the use of systems.

In the 1970s, the importance of efficiency grew so that governance in higher education focused on functions of centralization and operation effectiveness. Public higher education systems emerged and adopted centralized governance patterns with strong state control over public postsecondary education midway through the 20th century. By 1972, a total of 47 states had established either a coordinating board or a consolidated governing board. This year was important because the 1972 amendments to the Higher Education Act initiated the disbursement of large amounts of federal aid directly to students instead of colleges. All states that received this aid were required to establish statewide coordinating agencies for higher education. This was but one motivation for the establishment of systems.

The genesis of systems in other countries followed a similar chronology as the United States. In 1956, the Indian Parliament established the University Grants Commission. The University Grants Commission is a statutory body responsible for the coordination, evaluation, and maintenance of standards of higher education. Much as was the case within the United States, the expansion of the system of higher education in India also seemed rapid and unstoppable after independence. Along the same timeline, in 1949, Chinese higher education entered a period of enormous development. In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union influenced the restructuring of Chinese higher education to strengthen comprehensive institutions. Following World War II, there was an enormous expansion in the demand for higher education in the United Kingdom as well. The Mexican higher education system mimics the American model in large part with major increases in demand spurring the expansion of programs and enrollment.

Rationale

Initially, the first state structures were organized to address and exchange perspectives about common problems. The Great Depression initiated a need for state and higher education leaders to better understand how states governed and funded postsecondary education. There was a need for state-level coordination in order to maximize institutional autonomy. Consequently, governors and state legislators were the first to suggest systems as a way of carrying out state plans for higher education. Higher education system boards generated coherence and oversight for public institutions, with one board and one chief executive officer accountable instead of multiple entities.

Some additional impetuses for the development of higher education systems include (a) the need for coordination of specialized institutions, (b) increased costs and expansion of academic enterprises, (c) increased reliance on public funding, (d) heightened involvement of authorities outside of the university, and (e) growth in size and complexity of both the state government and higher education. In terms of history, the 1972 amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the creation of a single consolidated governing board for all senior public institutions in North Carolina were also precursors to the system board of trustees for higher education.

Overall, it was believed that greater postsecondary coherence would better serve public priorities, reduce deleterious competition among institutions, make better use of state resources, and establish an atmosphere in which a heterogeneous collection of schools could thrive. System boards of trustees were thought to improve efficiency, diversity, and equitable distribution of programs. The premise of system formation and use is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Role of System Boards of Trustees

The directives of university boards vary across countries. Overwhelmingly, these boards maintain the general responsibilities to set and abide by the strategic mission, monitor institutional performance, oversee stewardship of university assets, and establish university policies and procedures. As the chief regulators, coordinators, and allocators within the system, boards have two primary responsibilities—to act as a buffer between higher education institutions and the government and to commit to the public purpose of higher education. Overarching these responsibilities, boards must maintain (a) duty of care (commitment to exercise reasonable care to make informed decisions), (b) duty of obedience (dedication to the mission of the system), and (c) duty of loyalty (putting institutional needs above personal needs).

The three chief areas the board deals with are (1) policy formation, (2) choosing long-term objectives, and

(3) long-range strategic planning. Within these primary roles, system boards perform various secondary functions. The system board of trustees oversees areas such as academic programs, tuition rates, faculty tenure, and operating budgets. The board is the head of the system's decision-making. Systems are also uniquely positioned to execute goals related to synergy, strategy, efficiency, accountability, integrity, and advocacy. Donald Bruce Johnstone offers a comprehensive overview of nine functions of public higher education system boards: (1) to establish and ensure adherence to the mission of the system and all affiliated campuses; (2) to select, support, supervise, and hold accountable the chief executive; (3) to advocate to key constituencies on behalf of the system; (4) to convey the needs of the system and state to the individual institutions; (5) to manage and allocate funds and resources of the institutions; (6) to serve as an intermediary between the chief executive officer, state affiliates, and individual institutions; (7) to arbitrate any mission-related and programmatic disputes between constituent institutions; (8) to prioritize the system (e.g., reducing costs and increasing options for students) through campus collaboration and cooperation; and (9) to oversee and evaluate programs and resources.

Boards of trustees of higher education systems are unlike other boards in that they consist of a membership defined by perpetual efflux and influx that has minimal contact throughout any given year, but individual board members are expected to be socialized to perform a specific role.

System Board Advantages

Improved institutional planning is a key feature of multicampus systems. Systems were designed to reduce program duplication and utilize a centralized governing board to serve as a unified voice to the legislature. Diversity, specialization, cooperation, effective use of resources, and advance planning are all advantages of multicampus systems. Systems of higher education benefit from the flexibility of the internal budget and facilitate personnel interchange between campuses. Newer campuses within the system are able to benefit from the prestige of older campuses and comparable educational programs can be created across institutions. Last, systems can protect against or facilitate political intrusion.

Challenges to System Boards of Trustees

Boards of trustees for college and university systems have their role complicated because of the oversight for multiple institutions. In fact, governing boards that serve only a single higher education institution are often found to be more effective than their system board counterparts. The model of system board governance was thought to protect against legislative interference. In reality, these system boards are more problematic and less effective than boards for singular institutions of higher education. A lack of understanding and expertise by board members of the system can result in blanket policies that are applied across the system without regard for institutional diversity. The challenges for system boards stem from the range of institutional type within one system—consisting of the flagship research university, comprehensive regional institutions, and others.

Some trustees may prioritize certain institutions to the detriment of others when trying to allocate resources, time, support, and so on. Because of such favoritism, the largest research institutions might have more allies on that board and so these institutional types will be prioritized over others. System boards of trustees are thought to be more bureaucratic than singular institution boards and be highly influenced by politics. In general, the governance of a system of institutions as compared to the governance of just one institution is more complicated. Public systems of higher education increase bureaucratization and complicate shared governance.

Within postsecondary education, public systems of higher education and flagship institutions oftentimes have contradictory interests. Preoccupied with system concerns, the board of trustees often finds itself with minimal time for the concerns of individual campuses. A fundamental tension between the desire of universities to internally regulate their own affairs and the authority and responsibility vested in the state to externally regulate these same institutions has developed.

The Future of System Board of Trustees

Postsecondary multicampus systems are in the majority of governance structures in higher education. How multicampus boards govern the affiliated institutions affects the types of choices institutions face and the decisions they ultimately make. The rise of the multicampus system is an organizational change that has greatly affected higher education over the last 50 years. The governing bodies that represent the ultimate authority for these institutions have an extremely important role to play with respect to overall policy and direction. In *Statewide Coordination of Higher Education*, Robert Berdahl and colleagues explain that having a governing board that oversees multiple higher education institutions is not uncommon within the United States. Similar structures are also found across the world. Regardless of location, new challenges coupled with growth prompt an overhaul in structure in the systems of higher education.

See also [Governance of Higher Education](#); [Higher Education Governance Systems](#); [Higher Education Institution Governing Boards](#)

Websites

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- boards of trustees
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- chief executives
- higher education

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