BOARD ACTION FOR STUDENT BELONGING:
An Integrated Approach Using Relational and Structural Governance Levers

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE:

This research shows student belonging depends on governance's relational and structural levers. Amid political pressures, fiscal limits, and changing demographics, equity-centered governance is both urgent and strategic. Embedding belonging in policy, budgeting, and engagement strengthens retention, upholds institutional values, and prepares boards to lead with integrity through higher education's evolving challenges.

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⌄ BOARD INSIGHTS:

Board members strengthen student belonging through relational and structural governance. They build trust, engage authentically, and align policies, agendas, and resources with equity goals, embedding belonging into board culture and decision-making so all students feel valued and supported.

⌄ BOARD ACTION: RELATIONAL & STRUCTURAL

1 Build Trust
Engage regularly and meaningfully with the president. Create space for authentic, in-person dialogue beyond formal transactions.

2 Stay Curious
Approach your role as a learner. Participate in trainings, review campus climate data, and ask reflective questions.

3 Listen to Students
Invite and value student voices. Attend campus events and engage with student leaders directly.

4 Lead With Care
Navigate disagreement with openness and kindness. Center care and belonging in all trustee interactions.

5 Share Responsibility
Integrate equity considerations into every discussion—from finance to facilities.

1 Center Equity
In presidential hiring and evaluation, highlight the leader's role in fostering student belonging and review progress annually.

2 Ask Equity-Centered Strategic Questions
During planning and budgeting, ask which students benefit or may be left behind.

3 Embed Equity
Ensure each committee's charge includes advancing equity and inclusion.

4 Request the Right Data
Review dashboards with disaggregated and qualitative data, including student climate feedback.

5 Diversify with Purpose
Recruit trustees with lived experience aligned to the mission and provide equity training for all new members.

BOARD QUESTIONS:

Relational levers

Questions:

- How are we building authentic relationships across campus that inform our governance work?
- In what ways are we modeling inclusive and equity-centered communication?

Metrics:

- Number and diversity of stakeholders engaged by trustees.
- Qualitative feedback on trust, respect, and connection with the board.

Considerations:

- Commit to ongoing, trust-building engagement, not just symbolic gestures.
- Center student and faculty voices in board conversations.
- Model cultural humility and active listening.

Structural levers

Questions:

- How are equity and belonging embedded in bylaws and decision-making?
- What resources and outcomes demonstrate commitment to belonging?

Metrics:

- Disaggregated climate, retention, and graduation data viewed through an equity lens.
- Policy and budget decisions aligned with belonging goals.

Considerations:

- Integrate belonging into committee charters, strategic plans, and reports.
- Set measurable goals and review progress regularly.
- Adjust strategies based on evidence and stakeholder feedback.

PAPER SUMMARY:

A qualitative case study of a private nonprofit college found that while trustees valued belonging, connections with students of color were limited. Governance has untapped potential to foster belonging through stronger relationships and embedded equity practices. The study offers tools to help boards create ecosystems that advance inclusion meaningfully.

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STAKEHOLDERS:

- Private college/ university boards
- Presidents and senior leaders
- Students and families

KEY WORDS:

- Board composition and diversity
- Strategic planning and oversight
- Student success and equity

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