



# RESEARCH 2 PRACTICE

Bridging cutting-edge higher education governance research  
with effective board practice

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## THE POLITICAL APPOINTMENT AND DEMOGRAPHIC DISCONNECT PARADOX:

The Challenge of Connecting Community Voice and Board Composition



### RESEARCH TO PRACTICE:

This research explores how politics intersects with board governance and whether boards serve primarily as institutional representatives or as extensions of state authority. While politically appointed, boards often demonstrate genuine concern for students and faculty, reflected in their bylaws and meeting priorities. Though members' affiliations and backgrounds inevitably shape their perspectives, boards can uphold independence by acknowledging political influences, diversifying the viewpoints they engage, and creating formal mechanisms to elevate nonpartisan, mission-driven voices in governance.

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### ✓ BOARD INSIGHTS:



Board members should recognize that political processes influence their appointment, even if politics does not guide their day-to-day decisions. Awareness of this context invites humility and accountability in governance. By intentionally centering students, faculty, and the institution's mission rather than political interests, boards can strengthen trust, uphold integrity, and demonstrate independence. Grounding their work in inclusive dialogue and evidence-based decision-making enables boards to fulfill their responsibility as stewards of the institution's long-term success and public purpose.

### ✓ BOARD ACTION:



1

#### **Require Representation**

Include students, faculty, alumni, and other stakeholders in board decisions, amending bylaws if needed to ensure their representation.

2

#### **Value Voices**

Provide dedicated speaking time for student and faculty leaders at board meetings, and meet regularly with student, faculty, and alumni representatives.

3

#### **Confirm Commitments**

As a board, publicly reaffirm your commitment to governing the institution for the benefit of students, staff, faculty, and alumni.

4

#### **Balance Bylaws**

If your bylaws do not include a statement on nonpartisanship, consider proposing and adding one.

✓ **BOARD QUESTIONS:**



Ask Senior Leadership:

- In what ways do you include other voices in decision-making, and how can the board serve as a platform for those voices to be heard?
- What can the board do to reduce attention on any partisan appointment or issues, and focus on institutional governance?

✓ **BOARD RESOURCES:**



- The process for amending bylaws varies by state and institution but can typically be completed within an academic year.
- Other recommendations, such as hosting meetings or issuing nonpartisan commitments, can be implemented in the short term.

✓ **PAPER SUMMARY:**



This paper introduces a novel dataset of individual-level details about members on public 4-year higher education boards nationwide. Using this dataset and the text of bylaws of boards, the paper shows that while boards focus attention on faculty and students in their formal documents, the composition of many boards is starkly misaligned with the demography of these populations. Using multivariate analyses, the work demonstrates that state politics strongly relate to whether a board aligns well with its target populations.

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✓ **STAKEHOLDERS:**



- Public university boards
- System-level boards
- Faculty governance bodies
- Students and families

✓ **KEY WORDS:**



- Board composition and diversity
- Stakeholder engagement
- Governance structures and processes



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Isabel is an Institute of Education Sciences pre-doctoral fellow. Her research explores how state politics shape the relationship between government and educational institutions, particularly in higher education and the dynamics of public university governing boards. She also conducts program evaluations on college-access programs, and studies the decisions that lead to education policy at the state level.



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