

The Five Roles of Governing Boards in Advancing the Mission

Modeling Mission-Centric Decision-Making

Boards hold ultimate institutional authority, and in moments of disruption or crisis, your leadership is especially essential.

Crises don't create inequity in higher education, but they expose and amplify it.

Trustees must actively engage in governance that is responsive to context and accountability-driven.

Boards must ask themselves: "What role are we playing in ensuring the mission of our institution is upheld?"

The Five Board Roles in Mission-Centric Work



INITIATOR

WHAT IT MEANS

The board leads mission-centered efforts, proposes or adopts new policies, reallocates resources, or institutionalizes inclusive practices.

IMPACT ON EQUITY

Shows a bold, proactive stance. Establishes core values, not trends. Builds credibility and accountability.



CATALYZER

WHAT IT MEANS

The board enhances efforts initiated by presidents, faculty, students, or community leaders by approving and publicly advocating for initiatives.

IMPACT ON EQUITY

Helps scale efforts with board-level visibility and influence. Adds legitimacy and sustainability to campus actions.



BYSTANDER

WHAT IT MEANS

The board is uninvolved, neutral, or silent; neither obstructing nor supporting mission progress.

IMPACT ON EQUITY

Misses key opportunities. Creates confusion or stagnation. Perceived indifference can demoralize stakeholders.



INHIBITOR

WHAT IT MEANS

The board questions, delays, or redirects mission-centered work due to discomfort, political pressure, or lack of understanding.

IMPACT ON EQUITY

Undermines trust. Can stall critical efforts and reinforce existing disparities, even if unintentionally.



BARRIER

WHAT IT MEANS

The board intentionally obstructs or rolls back certain policies or programs. This may include banning topics, eliminating offices, or cutting funding.

IMPACT ON EQUITY

Actively harms campus climate, damages reputation, and signals a rejection of inclusive values.

From Symbolism to Action:

Being on a board is more than oversight; it's leadership. Boards are no longer expected to oversee from a distance; instead, they must model mission-centered decision-making, set the tone at the top, ensure policies are inclusive and accountable, and hold themselves and campus leaders responsible for the success of the institution. To support the institutional mission of serving all students, boards must focus on equity-centered policy or change.

Trustees Should:



Regularly assess the board's role using the 5-role framework.



Audit policies through an equity, mission-centric lens.



Lead with transparency.



Prioritize community-informed decision-making.



Shift from symbolic commitments to measurable action.

Boards can be agents of transformation through:

- ☐ **Reflection:** Ask yourself, “Which role do we currently play? Which should we be playing? Does the role we are currently playing help to advance our mission?”
- ☐ **Engagement:** Center mission-centered work as an institutional priority, build the board's equity muscle, and incorporate an equity lens into your decision-making. Develop your mission fluency.
- ☐ **Alignment:** Ensure institutional mission, policies, and outcomes reflect mission priorities.
- ☐ **Leadership:** Speak clearly and act swiftly based on comprehensive data provided. Ensure that key campus collaborators are aware of board actions. Avoid silence. Inaction is also a decision.

These five types of roles were adapted from “Modeling Equity-Minded Leadership amid Crises: The call for higher education governing boards to lead the way” by Raquel M. Rall (2021). These revisions align with the Center’s mission of engaging boards in mission-centric governance.

