



## Research Brief

# A DIFFICULT BALANCE

## Trustees Speak About the Challenges Facing Comprehensive Universities

A project by  
Public Agenda with  
support from The  
Kresge Foundation  
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## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The financial health of institutions topped the list of priorities for trustees, but many said they do not understand higher education finances well enough to help their institutions address budgetary challenges.
- Trustees said they set goals for improved retention and graduation, but leave the details of student success to administrators, staff and faculty. Most knew little about student success initiatives or pedagogical innovations.
- Some trustees felt they rely too much on administrators and staff to set agendas, frame problems, provide data and propose solutions. Many feel overwhelmed by information and do not always trust the information they get from administrators and staff.
- Nearly all trustees stressed the difficulty of securing funding from states and private giving. Many said they want help developing skills and connections to engage elected officials and to fundraise effectively.
- Trustees said comprehensive universities should be engines of regional economic development, but few are actively helping their institutions connect to regional employers.
- Presidents of comprehensive universities said they contend with both disengagement and micromanagement by trustees. Some said trustees do not fully understand their institutions' missions and therefore struggle to add value.

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# BACKGROUND

Comprehensive universities—public institutions offering four-year degrees to students drawn mostly from their regions—are crucial to meeting the nation’s need for a more educated workforce. These institutions enroll 69 percent of all students attending four-year public universities and an even larger proportion of the nation’s African-American and Hispanic undergraduates.<sup>1</sup>

But comprehensive universities face serious challenges in the form of less public funding as they work to increase graduation rates among a changing student population. Higher education appropriations per full-time equivalent student at public institutions were down 13 percent between 2009 and 2014.<sup>2</sup> The average graduation rate at comprehensive universities is 43 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>3</sup> From 1997 to 2011, enrollment of students ages 25 to 34 in all postsecondary degree-granting institutions increased by 51 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Trustees of comprehensive universities are in a tough spot. Most are volunteers appointed to govern universities and, in many cases, entire statewide systems of universities. They must help their institutions address challenges related to finances, student success and regional economic development without getting involved in day-to-day management and despite limited expertise in higher education. Finding the right ways to support their institutions’ efforts to make big changes without overstepping requires a difficult balancing act.

## How can, should and do boards of trustees help comprehensive universities address critical challenges?

Our research provides insights into how trustees themselves think about these challenges and their roles in addressing them. It also provides insights into how presidents of comprehensive universities view trustees’ capacities to serve their institutions. And it discusses what trustees and presidents say could help boards serve comprehensive universities better.

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# METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

This brief summarizes findings from confidential in-depth interviews with 42 trustees, representing 29 boards responsible for a total of 143 public comprehensive universities, and confidential in-depth interviews with 45 presidents of public comprehensive universities. The interviews with trustees were conducted between August 2014 and January 2015, and those with presidents were conducted between September 2014 and January 2015.

Interview participants were invited through a process that combined random selection with selective targeting of governing boards and schools.

This research was conducted by Public Agenda with support from The Kresge Foundation. For the full report on these interviews, details on the methodology and sample characteristics, please go to <http://publicagenda.org/pages/a-difficult-balance>.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Schneider and K. C. Deane, eds., *The University Next Door: What Is a Comprehensive University, Who Does It Educate, and Can It Survive?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, “State Higher Education Finance” (Boulder, CO: SHEEO, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Michelle Lu Yin, “Rethinking Student Outcomes: Constructing Predicted and Adjusted Graduation and Retention Rates for Comprehensive Universities,” in Schneider and Deane, *The University Next Door*, 121–48.

<sup>4</sup>William J. Hussar and Tabitha M. Bailey, “Projections of Education Statistics to 2022” (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).



# MAIN FINDINGS



## Finding 1: Finances

Trustees said finances are their top priority. But many trustees said they do not understand higher education finances well enough to help their institutions address budgetary challenges.

Nearly all the trustees we interviewed said their comprehensive universities are struggling with rising costs and declining state funding. Many said raising tuition is politically difficult and would contravene their institutions' missions by making them less accessible. But they also worried a lack of revenue is putting the quality of education at their institutions at risk. Many trustees wanted their institutions to operate more efficiently but said they do not understand higher education finances well enough to help accomplish that. They often felt overwhelmed by the volume of complex information given to them by administration and staff. Furthermore, some trustees worried they rely too much on administrators and staff to set agendas, frame problems, provide data and propose solutions. Some felt open meeting rules inhibit discussions about cost cutting. While many comprehensive universities are trying to fundraise, trustees said they need skills and training to help their institutions do so effectively.







## Finding 2: Student Success



Trustees said they want their institutions to improve retention and graduation rates. But few trustees prioritized understanding the details of innovations that can support student success.

The trustees we interviewed were nearly unanimous in their view that comprehensive universities must focus on student success by helping students stay in college and earn their degrees. In practical terms, trustees typically saw their role as setting goals for improved retention and graduation, while leaving the details of how to achieve those goals to administrators, faculty and staff. They were not especially familiar with recent pedagogical innovations, such as competency-based education, that may require resource reallocation, new financial models and different roles for faculty and staff. Trustees of systems recognized that improving transfer for students between and across institutions is important and something they should be positioned to facilitate. But some expressed frustration with their limited ability to foster improved transfer and other forms of collaboration across institutions.



## Finding 3: Political Advocacy



Trustees emphasized the importance of advocating with elected officials and other policymakers on behalf of their institutions. But many wanted help advocating more effectively and many criticized governors' appointments to boards.

Although the trustees we interviewed saw advocating for their institutions with elected officials and other policymakers as important parts of their role, nearly all stressed the difficulty of securing more funding in an era of overall lower budgets across state functions. Moreover, many trustees said they lack the skills and connections necessary to engage elected officials and policymakers effectively. Many maintained that governors and legislators do not choose wisely when appointing trustees and exert too much influence over those they do appoint.



## Finding 4: Workforce

Trustees said comprehensive universities should be engines of regional economic development. But few trustees said they are actively helping their institutions connect to regional employers.

Preparing students for careers and meeting regional workforce needs are core aspects of comprehensive universities' missions, according to the trustees we interviewed. Most, however, seemed to let presidents and administrators take the lead on building workforce connections. Trustees of standalone institutions appeared more ready to facilitate connections between their institutions and regional employers than trustees of larger systems. Some trustees questioned whether their institutions are too focused on getting students jobs in the near term instead of considering the bigger picture of regional workforce planning. Several pointed out that comprehensive universities are themselves vital employers for their regions, making mergers or closures politically unfeasible.



## Finding 5: Presidents' Perspectives on Trustees

Presidents of comprehensive universities said they contend with both disengagement and micromanagement by trustees. Some presidents said trustees do not fully understand their institutions' missions and therefore struggle to add value.

Presidents of standalone comprehensive universities seemed more able to find value in their boards and spoke about ways their boards have helped their institutions achieve goals, although at the risk of micromanagement. Presidents of comprehensive universities within systems talked about struggling to get their boards' attention and said trustees do not understand their institutions' missions well enough. Generally, presidents felt trustees need a better understanding of financial information, and administrators and staff can do a better job of presenting that information to trustees.





# IMPLICATIONS

Trustees, board chairs, university and system presidents, senior administrators, policymakers, associations of trustees and associations of higher education institutions all have roles to play in strengthening trustees' capacities to serve comprehensive universities. The following implications include what trustees told us could help them work more effectively and some of the key challenges they identified. They can be used to start discussions among the many stakeholders who seek to ensure the future of America's comprehensive universities:

- **Address gaps in trust as well as gaps in information.**

Effectively supporting trustees of comprehensive universities is about more than providing them with information to fill knowledge gaps. Our research found trustees do not always trust the information they get from administrators and staff. Creating regular opportunities for trustees to engage in collaborative dialogue with institutional leadership and carefully framing and facilitating that dialogue can help to build trust. Many trustees emphasized the value of one-on-one communication with chancellors, presidents and senior administrators, but they recommended such communication be purposeful and coordinated by board chairs, not ad hoc.



- **Provide trustees with orientations and peer-learning opportunities to help them understand and ask good questions about finances and other issues.** Trustees are typically busy professionals volunteering to serve large, complex organizations. Their backgrounds do not necessarily prepare them to understand higher education finances. The ones we interviewed told us they often feel overwhelmed by complex information and uncomfortable asking for help. Providing trustees with targeted information and creating time and space for them to ask questions could help them understand and serve their institutions better. Many said learning from peers on their boards is the best way to learn about substantive issues. Several said more interaction with trustees from other institutions—at conferences, through campus visits and via peer-to-peer exchanges—would help them share best practices and understand that their institutions’ problems are unique.
- **Empower trustees to engage in student success issues without overstepping.** Trustees care about student success but know they should not micromanage academics. Presidents and senior administrators can do more, however, to educate trustees about innovations in teaching and learning so they can better understand why new models of academic delivery may require resource reallocation, new financial models and different roles for faculty and staff. Moreover, associations of trustees and of higher education institutions can do more to help trustees understand pedagogical innovations, placing them in a better position to guide comprehensive universities through conversations with internal and external stakeholders about student success.
- **Support trustees in advocating for their institutions with elected officials and policymakers.** Whether or not they are able to secure more funding, trustees need to be able to advocate for their institutions with respect to transfer, financial aid and funding. This means they must be sufficiently informed about those policy priorities to discuss them with elected officials and policymakers. Trustees can build relationships with elected officials and policymakers in ways that make the most of their role as the public face and the “ears” of their institutions, listening for potential opportunities and challenges. Several trustees emphasized the value of bringing state legislators to campuses to forge connections, demonstrate needs and share successes. Those who said they received advocacy training from their institutions valued it.
- **Guide governors and legislators in appointing strong and capable trustees.** Both trustees and presidents told us that choosing the right trustees is one of the most important ways policymakers can ensure comprehensive universities fulfill their missions. They said if boards develop mechanisms to identify gaps in their own skills and connections, they can be better positioned to advocate for new appointees who meet their institutions’ needs.
- **Clarify for trustees how to help their institutions serve as engines of regional economic development.** Trustees, who sometimes have significant business connections, could be positioned to help their institutions understand and meet regional workforce needs. But their roles should be specified and formalized as part of a broader institutional workforce strategy. Trustees at all types of institutions would benefit greatly from having more opportunities to learn about promising practices in fostering regional economic development. For boards governing systems of institutions, attending to regional needs pertaining to workforce and other issues can be particularly challenging. While trustees in some systems are assigned responsibility for specific institutions, in others this is considered favoritism and inimical to governing the entire system.
- **Grapple with the implications of discussing controversial issues in public.** Having thoughtful, honest conversations about tough issues while ensuring the transparency of public institutions represents a challenge for higher education governance. Many trustees described the difficulties of discussing tough issues in front of media, faculty and students in open meetings. Yet open meeting rules serve a vital role in ensuring the transparency of public higher education governance. Public universities, and the policymakers who determine how they will be governed, need to assess the effectiveness of current approaches to board deliberation and grapple with the implications of discussing controversial issues in public.

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#### About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on higher education affordability, achievement gaps, community college completion, use of technology and innovation, and other higher education issues.

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#### About The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation is a \$3.5 billion private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development in Detroit. In 2014, the Board of Trustees approved 408 awards totaling \$242.5 million. That included a \$100 million award to the Foundation for Detroit's Future, a fund created to soften the impact of the city's bankruptcy on pensioners and safeguard cultural assets at the Detroit Institute of Arts. A total of \$138.1 million was paid out to grantees over the course of the year. In addition, our Social Investment Practice made commitments totaling \$20.4 million in 2014.

*For more information, visit [kresge.org](http://kresge.org).*

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For more information about this study, visit:  
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