

An Equity-minded Governance Framework for Boards of Trustees, Presidents, Faculty and Staff in Higher Education

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Boards of trustees are uniquely positioned to protect and advance equity in higher education. A board focus on equitable student success is not merely a moral choice, but a fiduciary duty and strategic imperative directly linked to institutional sustainability. The Equitable Student Success (ESS) Model provides a practical framework for connecting equity-mindedness to the nine core roles and responsibilities that trustees already carry. This is not a separate agenda.

Equitable student success is not the board's work alone. The ESS Model is grounded in shared equity leadership (Kezar & Holcombe, 2024). Trustees, presidents, faculty, and staff must work in concert, each contributing from within their respective roles. Trustees govern, advocate, and hold institutions accountable. Presidents and chancellors operationalize strategy. Faculty and staff implement, assess, and adapt practices on the ground. When all three function collaboratively, the institution is better positioned to eliminate racialized and other disparate student outcomes and support the success of all students.

Questions Every Board Should Be Asking

- Who are our students, and what do the data tell us about which students we are and are not effectively serving?
- What barriers to persistence and graduation exist within our institution's own policies and practices?
- How are we ensuring that equity-minded efforts are institutionalized and not dependent on individual champions?
- What resources are we directing toward closing disparities in student outcomes?
- How are we holding ourselves accountable for this work?

Equitable Student Success (ESS) in Action: Shared Roles Across All Nine Board Responsibilities

The table below applies the ESS Model to each of the nine core trustee responsibilities, showing how trustees, presidents, faculty and staff senior staff each contribute to equity-minded governance.

Board Role & Responsibility	Trustees	President/CEO	Faculty and Staff Campus-wide
1. Mission	Ensure the mission explicitly embraces equitable student success; review and update language through an equity lens; publicly communicate this commitment to all stakeholders.	Translate mission language into institutional strategy; make ESS a visible organizing principle across all divisions.	Embed mission language in program goals, syllabi, hiring criteria, and student-facing communications.
2. Chief Executive	Prioritize equity competency in CEO selection; include equity-related performance metrics in annual evaluations; tie compensation to measurable ESS progress.	Model equity-minded leadership publicly; build a cabinet committed to shared equity leadership; provide transparent progress reporting to the board.	Support the CEO's equity agenda operationally; translate leadership commitments into policies, trainings, and day-to-day practice.
3. Strategic Plan	Co-create a plan with equity-centered goals; require disaggregated outcome metrics; monitor implementation at every board meeting.	Lead the inclusive planning process; ensure equity goals are integrated across all pillars—not isolated in a single section.	Develop action plans aligned to equity goals; track and report disaggregated data; engage faculty, staff, and students in continuous improvement.
4. Fiscal Integrity & Philanthropy	Allocate resources intentionally toward underrepresented student populations; direct fundraising toward scholarships and support services that close equity gaps.	Request equity-informed budget reports; champion resource decisions that reflect ESS priorities; engage philanthropic networks on behalf of marginalized students.	Administer funds transparently; identify where resources are needed most and communicate gaps to leadership; support grant-writing for equity initiatives.
5. Quality of Education	Request student outcome data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, income, and other identities; hold the institution accountable for eliminating racialized disparities.	Partner with academic leadership to ensure high-impact practices are equitably available; create structures for faculty accountability around student outcomes.	Review and adapt curriculum, pedagogy, and support services to reflect equity-minded practices; use data to identify and address barriers in real time.
6. Academic Freedom & Autonomy	Protect the institution's right to pursue diverse and inclusive curricula; champion diversity of thought as essential to academic excellence.	Articulate clearly that inclusive pedagogy and academic freedom are mutually reinforcing; protect equity-focused faculty and programs.	Integrate diverse perspectives into course design and scholarship; support inclusive dialogue within and across disciplines.
7. Policies & Processes	Review institutional policies through an equity lens; require policy audits that assess racial and socioeconomic impact; ensure equity is built into governance practice.	Lead policy review processes; ensure equitable hiring, admissions, and student support practices are formally adopted and monitored.	Implement approved policies consistently; surface inequities in existing processes and recommend revisions; document outcomes for board reporting.
8. Engaging Constituencies	Actively seek input from diverse students, faculty, alumni, and communities; create meaningful channels for underrepresented voices in board decisions.	Build institutional infrastructure for ongoing community engagement; ensure feedback from marginalized populations reaches the board.	Facilitate listening sessions and focus groups; compile and communicate what diverse stakeholders are saying about equity and success.
9. Board Governance	Evaluate board composition, culture, and processes through an equity lens; commit to ongoing education; assess board performance in advancing ESS annually.	Partner with the board chair on trustee development; recommend professional learning opportunities; support accountability structures for the board.	Prepare equity-focused reports and briefings for the board; connect trustees with campus practitioners leading equity-minded work.