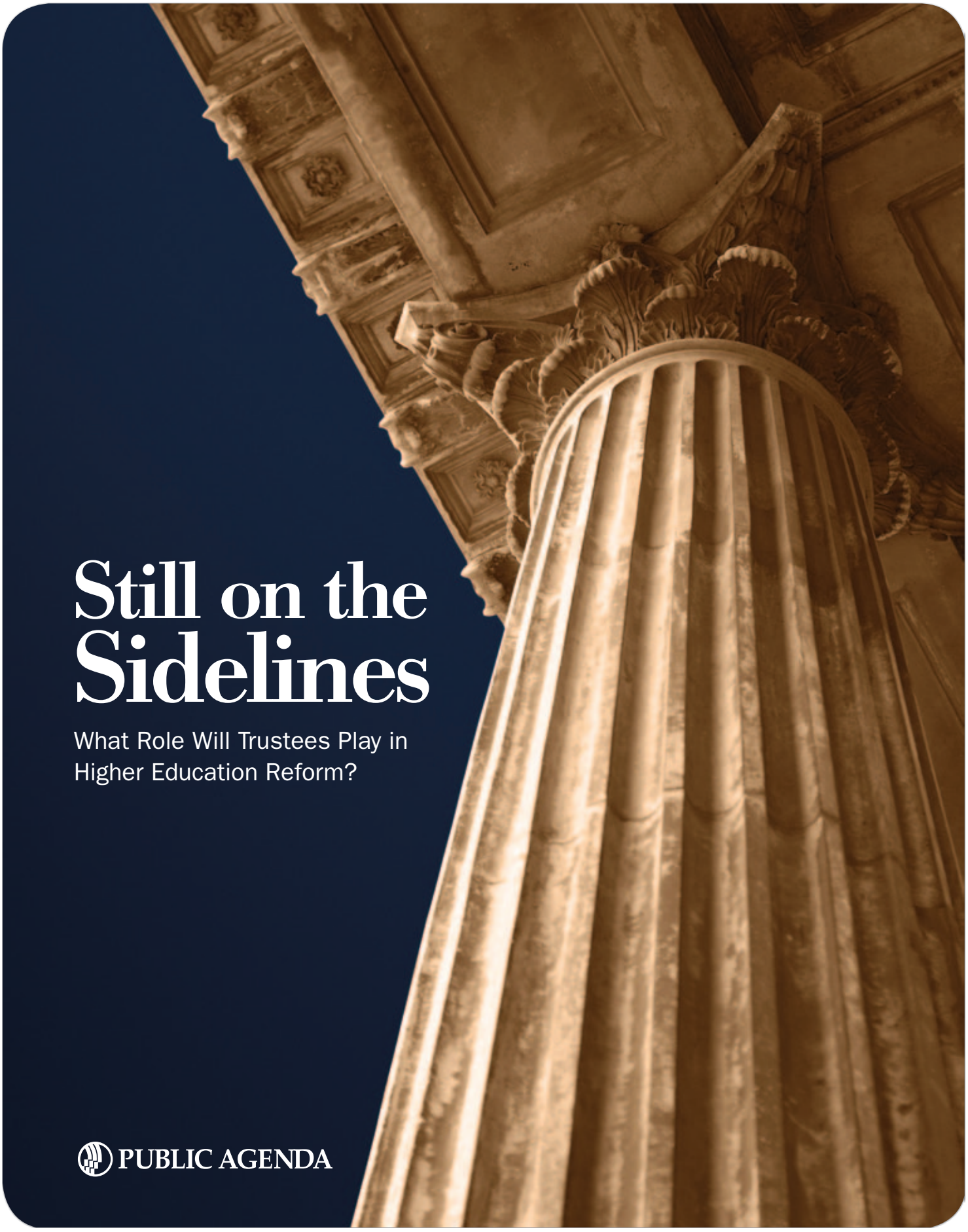

Still on the Sidelines

What Role Will Trustees Play in Higher Education Reform?

PUBLIC AGENDA

Still On the Sidelines

A Public Agenda report for the Lumina Foundation

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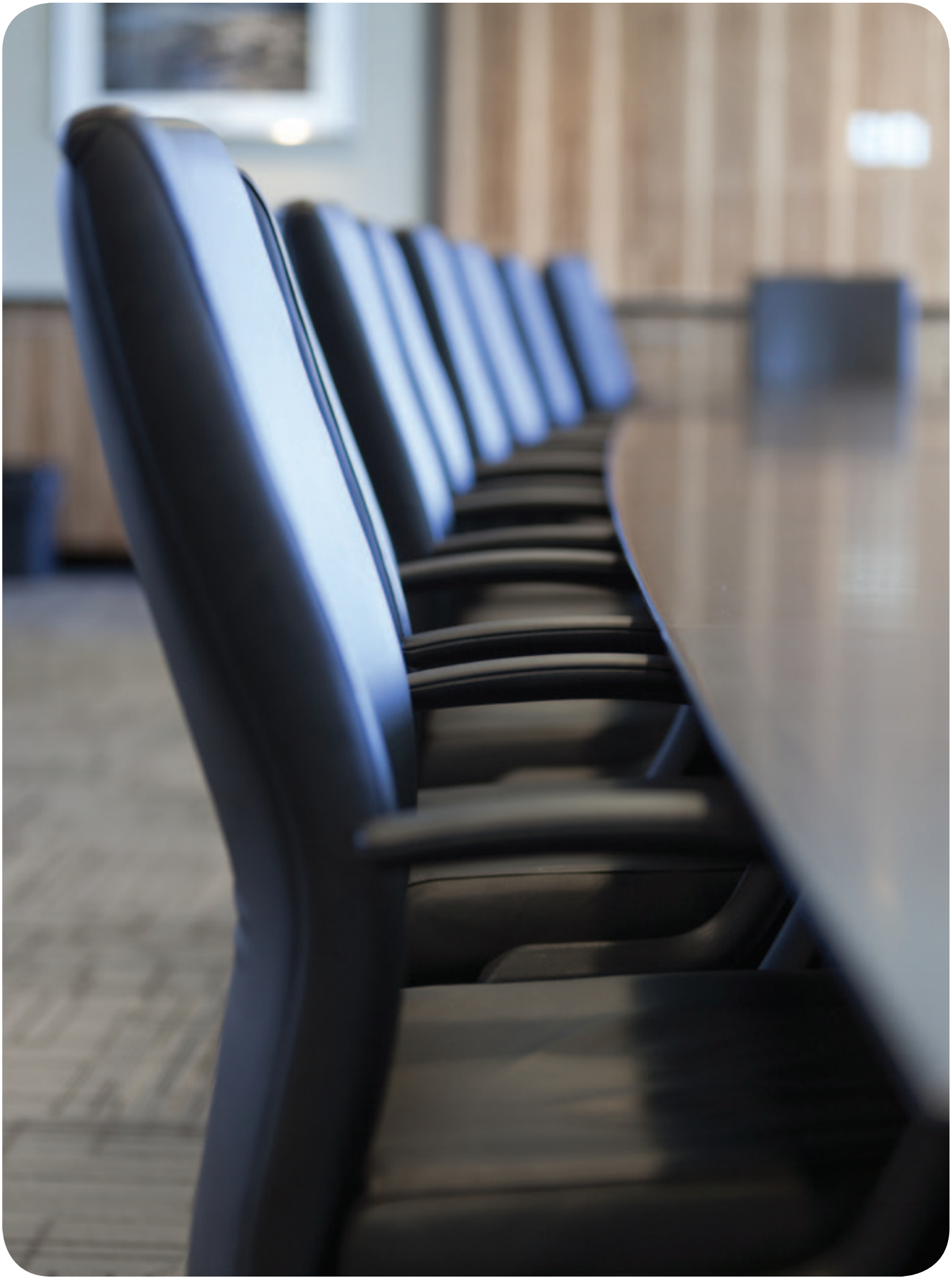

Nearly all observers agree that America's system of higher education is facing what Daniel Yankelovich has described as "a far different world than the one that existed in even the recent past."[1] The new normal seems to be defined by escalating operating costs and declining funding and by more students seeking higher education with less preparation for college-level work. While the demand for an educated workforce has never been greater, America is falling behind some of our international competitors in post-secondary education. While critics (and many legislators) call for greater productivity and innovative uses of new technologies, many higher education leaders argue that the approaches that have worked in other industries will not produce comparable savings in higher education.[2]

Clearly the trustees of higher education institutions will play a role in responding to these challenges. In a few states—such as Texas and Arizona—higher education trustees and directors, who for years have been outside of the spotlight of public attention, are now on the front lines of controversial higher education reform programs. But where do the majority of trustees stand on these issues? What are the main problems that they see for their own institutions, and what responses do they think are appropriate? And above all, what do they see as their role? Do they see themselves as pushing the institutions they serve in new directions, or do they see their role as a more supportive one, giving their best advice on the questions presented to them, but letting college and university presidents and other institutional executives define the parameters of the discussion?

[1] See *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "College Presidents Are Too Complacent" (May 15, 2011), by Daniel Yankelovich.

[2] Many of the presidents interviewed in "The Iron Triangle" (2008), for example, stressed that the personal and labor-intensive nature of higher education made it much more resistant to cost savings generated by new technology.

The Current Study

To answer these questions, Public Agenda (with support from Lumina Foundation) held detailed and off-the-record conversations with thirty-nine directors and trustees from a wide range of higher education institutions. Assured that they and their institutions would not be identified, they spoke candidly about their perception of the issues their institutions face, the leadership capacities of their presidents and chancellors, the knowledge level and abilities of their fellow board members, and their own role in decision making. This study thus adds an important new voice to Public Agenda's studies of other essential higher education stakeholders, including college and university presidents ("The Iron Triangle," 2008), business and legislative leaders ("Taking Responsibility," 1999), faculty and chief financial officers ("Campus Commons," 2009), the general public ("Squeeze Play," 2010), and young adults—including those with experience in higher education and those without ("With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them," 2010, and "One Degree of Separation," 2011).

Prevailing views and dissenting voices

Our overall conclusion is that most trustees are currently focused on the short-term challenges facing their institutions and that most have not yet fully engaged with broader issues of higher education reform. The prevailing view that emerges in this series of interviews is that trustees generally feel that they can support the institutions best by working within the framework presented to them by administration rather than questioning it.

At the same time we see a number of signs that trustees may yet play a more central role in the broader debates about higher education. First, there is nearly universal agreement among the trustees we interviewed that higher education is facing unprecedented challenges, as colleges and universities try to maintain the quality of their programs in the face of rising costs, declining state support, and an influx of unevenly prepared students. Second, the trustees are deeply concerned about the retention and success of students, and often differentiate between the needs and challenges of "traditional" undergraduates (those who enroll in a college right after high school) and "non-traditional" students (such as adult learners returning to college after years in the workforce). They are also ready to consider a broad range of cost-cutting and efficiency measures. In this sense, then, they are ripe for new approaches and new solutions.

Furthermore, a small group of the trustees we interviewed are calling for much broader reforms in higher education. In contrast to the majority, who are at the moment primarily concerned with protecting the traditional programs that they view as outstanding, this group wants to replace existing programs with new modes of education. They are responding not only to rising costs and cutbacks in state support but to what they perceive as fundamental flaws in the structure of higher education.

Areas of agreement

The trustees expressed a wide body of views, often depending on their own background and the type of institution that they were associated with. However, we found broad areas of agreement on a number of items, including:

- A need to provide access to a new generation of students so that they can take their place as productive members of the community, and a commitment to serve older learners seeking new skills.
- A need to provide a trained workforce for the region that they serve.
- A need to help their existing students succeed and complete their programs.
- A need to maintain the quality of their institutions in the face of rising costs and declining financial resources.

Areas of controversy

The interviews suggest an emerging debate between the perspectives shared by a large number of the trustees versus an alternative vision held by comparatively few. Their disagreements concern the cause of the problem that their institutions face, the solution, the role of technology, and their own role as board members. These differences were largely a matter of emphasis—most of our respondents would probably concede that there is some truth to both sides of the argument. Nonetheless we heard a real tension between these two perspectives (see page 6 for a table summarizing these viewpoints).

Other findings

Although this study centered on exploring how the trustees define the major challenges to their own institutions and higher education overall, the research also tried to capture the trustees' perspective on two controversies roiling the field—the role of for-profits and the relevance of the concept of productivity in discussions of higher education reform.

- **For-profits.** Many of our respondents criticized for-profit higher education institutions for their high prices, problems with loan defaults, inadequate programs, and, as one person said, for "being better at getting students in than getting them out." Others, however, saw them as pushing higher education in productive ways by experimenting with new modes of education and creative uses of technology.
- **Productivity.** Many outside critics are calling for greater productivity from higher education institutions. While virtually all of the trustees support the idea of greater efficiency, the idea of applying the concept of productivity to higher education was new and unfamiliar to many of our respondents. We hypothesize that there is more than a semantic debate here. Many of those calling for greater productivity in higher education are in fact calling for fundamental changes that would allow colleges and universities to produce a higher standard of education at the same or lower cost. Most of our trustees are much more preoccupied with streamlining their operations to protect existing programs in the face of what they see as unprecedented challenges.

	THE VIEW OF MOST OF OUR RESPONDENTS	AN OPPOSING PERSPECTIVE
Nature of the problem facing their institutions	The main problems facing higher education are external, including: » Declining state support » Rising costs of a labor-intensive industry » Inadequate preparation from K-12 institutions	The main problems are internal; higher education is suffering the usual problems of a mature industry, including: » Reluctance to make major changes » Obsolete models of education » Unresponsive systems of governance
Solution	Ideally the favored response would be a reinvestment of public funding, coupled with improvements in K-12 education. Since few trustees think these are likely given the current economic and political environment, the typical responses are: » Cost cutting (especially of administrative functions) » Larger classes, more adjuncts, salary freezes while still trying to maintain quality—"cutting fat, without cutting muscle or bone" » New sources of revenue » Mentorship programs for disadvantaged students	Cutting costs and ramping up efficiency is just the first step. Much broader, fundamental changes are needed, for example, moving away from "seat time" to individualized learning that allows students learn at their own pace. A few even go so far as to say that the current challenges are good for higher education, if they can precipitate a crisis that forces radical changes in the way education is delivered.
Role of technology	Technology is a given, and nearly all trustees say their institutions are incorporating new technologies, especially distance education, but many also have reservations about the effectiveness of technology-based education. The main goal in using technology is to improve access, especially for non-traditional students.	Technology should be used to radically reform and improve the delivery of education—not just to extend the reach of existing courses/ curricula.
Role of boards	Primary job is to choose strong presidents and senior leaders and advise and support them in making good decisions in challenging times.	Existing boards are part of the problem: they are often captive to their administrations, lacking extensive knowledge, and needing a broader perspective and a willingness to lead.

Characteristics of interviewees

In total, thirty-nine board members representing thirty-seven different boards were interviewed. Ten of our interviewees were officers or chairmen of their respective boards. Except as noted below, attributions identifying quotations in this report follow the format: (Institution Type, Board Type).

- Twenty-one trustees came from boards that served a single institution (in our report, cited as "Institutional"). Two trustees represented boards for districts or geographic regions ("District"—overseeing more than one institution in a specific area). Finally, fourteen trustees sat on boards that served large, multi-campus institutions ("System").
- Thirty of our trustees came from publicly funded institutions or systems:
  - Among these, sixteen trustees represented institutions, districts, or systems that offer some combination of two-year associate degrees and professional or technical degrees and certificates (in attributions, labeled as "2-yr").
  - Nine represented institutions or systems that offered a mix of two-year, four-year (bachelors') programs, and/or graduate programs, including one institution that is entirely online. These are labeled "Comprehensive" in attributions.
  - Nine came from either minority-serving institutions (MSI) or from districts and systems with at least one minority-serving institution.
  - Eight represented public universities or systems with "very high research activity."[3] These are identified as "Public Research" in the report.
- Six trustees represented privately funded institutions:
  - Three trustees came from "Comprehensive" private institutions.
  - One trustee came from an institution that granted undergraduate degrees only.
  - Two trustees represented private universities with "very high research activity." These are identified as "Private Research" in the report.

[3] As defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (see: http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/basic.php)

Part I. Areas of Agreement and Consensus

Commitment and service: Almost all of our respondents were deeply committed to their institutions and the needs of their region. Many have a history of commitment and service to education, and more than a few are graduates of the institutions that they serve.

- *I was drawn to the board because of my interest in public service, my interest in public education—being a former educator myself—and my belief that a vibrant higher education system is a cornerstone of both the state economy and our national economy.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *I worked for the district for ten years. I wanted to run for the board because the community and the students had been expressing concerns to board members about the lack of diversity in hiring and…in programs that were relevant to students. The university's response was always, "We are supportive of diversity," but then internally nothing would happen. That's why, when I was able to, I decided to run for the board.* (Public 2-yr, District Board)
- *I serve on some volunteer boards at my alma mater, which is our state's public institution. I have an interest in higher education; I'm aware of some of the funding challenges they have as well as some of the academic issues associated with that. What spurred my application was truly a desire to learn more and hopefully bring some different thinking to the board.* (Public 2-yr, System Board)

"...A vibrant higher education system is a cornerstone of both the state economy and our national economy..."

TRUSTEE OF A PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

Serving the needs of the region and the individuals: Most of our interviewees placed a great deal of emphasis on enhancing the ability of local residents to thrive and prosper in a changing economy, with many stressing the need for individual job training.

Job training is especially important, especially for trustees from two-year institutions.

- *Our mission is preparing our students for the jobs of today and tomorrow.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of Institutional Board)
- *The key mission of the institution is to prepare the students for their vocation, and we try to do it at an affordable cost to the student and their parents.* (Public 2-yr, Officer of Institutional Board)
- *One primary purpose [of the college] under state law is career or job training. If you look at who uses our colleges and the goal for our students, job training is a big component.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of District Board)

Most of the trustees are also equally concerned with the resources and economic competitiveness of their region.

- *I think our byline is, "We make the state work." More people go to college [than] actually secure employment. Because our system has a lot of two-year institutions, both technical and community colleges, that have very successful placement rates—and to some degree that's true even with our four-year institutions—we tend to train more people that go directly into the workforce.* (Public Comprehensive, Officer of System Board)
- *We focus on those jobs and skills that are not necessarily going to be found in a four-year college curriculum but that are instrumental to our students as well as to the community and employers in the county.* (Public 2-yr, System Board)
- *Why do I want to spend all that money on somebody that's going to move to another state? At some point, if you're going to use tax dollars, you're going to have to tie it back to what it does for the state. If you're going to tax my grandma for money to send some guy or lady to school, is that guy or lady going to be able to pay back the tax payer in future earnings, in future taxes, and job production?* (Public 2-yr, Institutional Board)

Common Worries. Virtually all of the trustees were worried about providing affordable access to students who could benefit from higher education. They were also deeply concerned about supporting and retaining existing students, especially those with inadequate preparation or with challenges of family and jobs.

Access to higher education, especially for disadvantaged students, is a common concern.

- *The state university is turning away thousands of students right now. When they're asked by the media, "Well, what about these students?" The university very glibly says, "Oh, they can go to community college." Nobody asks us in the community colleges whether we have room for them. We don't, but we are taking in as many students as we can.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of District Board)
- *Access generally is a problem for the lower socioeconomic folks because there's this increasing debt that they have to take on. It is not equal access.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)
- *We know we're going to have to do much more around the area of cultural diversity. That involves reaching out to former students, as well as significantly increasing the number of students of color that are already within the system, and working much more closely with high schools, since that is where the growth is right now with regards to students of color.* (Public Research, System Board)

Especially among trustees of community colleges, retention and graduation rates are also a major concern.

- *We figured out how to recruit and bring the students in. We haven't totally figured out how to keep them and that goes again to retention, to a faculty and staff that they can…relate to the quality of student programs that you have, the courses that you're giving, et cetera.* (Public 2-yr, District Board)
- *An issue at the national level is the issue of graduation rates. The graduation rates within a six-year period and retention, because you're dealing with students who come from everywhere—a huge percentage of them are first-generation Americans, not even that. In some cases, they are the first of their family to go to college. You have all the social issues, and single parenting, the costs, and the retention rate. How do we keep our retention rate above 60% or 70%?* (Public Research, System Board)
- *The other phenomena that we are dealing with—probably much more than other types of institutions—is that most of our students are working, going to school part-time or working full-time and going to school full-time or some mix of that. They are under enormous pressure because of the need that they have to survive and earn an income. Many of them may have families to support. That whole structure of supporting students to be able to go to college has to change before you're going to see much larger numbers of people graduating college.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of District Board)

Part II. An Emerging Debate

Although our respondents tended to share a view of the mission of higher education, we found a division about the nature of the problems facing higher education, the optimal response, the role of technology, and the function of boards and trustees.

The majority view on the problems facing higher education: For the majority of the trustees interviewed in this study, the most serious problems facing higher education come from outside the higher education system itself. Colleges and universities are caught in a cruel crossfire. Nearly all public higher education institutions are experiencing cutbacks in state funding, at precisely the same time they are facing rising costs and being asked to provide more and more services to students, many of whom are not adequately prepared for higher education. This complex of challenges, for most trustees, is the defining issue that they face.

In the majority camp, the most commonly cited threat to higher education is a loss (or decline) of state funding.

- *I jokingly refer to the top three issues facing the university as funding, funding, and funding. It's absolutely that—trying to manage in an area where we have less and less revenues and trying to recognize the efficiencies we have to make, but also not compromise our commitment to excellence.*
  (Public Research, System Board)
- *The issue right now, and across the board, is the finances. We have exploding enrollment at the same time that funding from the state is being cut. We've had to raise tuition. I'm not sure if we're going to have to raise our tax rate, but it's a real challenge.*
  (Public 2-yr, District Board)
- *Even if we have great improvements, I don't think it's going to bring us back to what we had in the past. Five years ago, well over 60% of our funding came from the state, and now it's in the 35%–38% range. That's pretty dramatic, and there are quite a few cutbacks you've got to make. When you significantly increase your enrollment, there's always going to be a myriad of challenges, everything from providing classes to offering adequate financial aid.*
  (Public 2-yr, Chair of Institutional Board)

There is a pervasive concern that cutbacks will threaten both access and quality.

- *When enrollment [increases], there's always going to be challenges, everything from providing classes to offering adequate financial aid.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *In the last two years, we've cut 50 million dollars in costs and eliminated jobs to try to drive our efficiencies even more. It's reached the point where the fat is long since gone, and we are cutting muscle.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *If you've cut resources as much as every state has cut resources and then you expect more people to get college degrees, you have a situation that is totally unrealistic.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of Institutional Board)
- *Our funding will be cut. Just how much, I can't tell you today, but we will be cut [while having] increasing enrollments, so you know the result. Class sizes are going to get bigger. There'll be more one-year appointments to the faculty and adjunct appointments to the faculty. Course offerings will diminish, which means the length of time it takes a kid to get his or her undergraduate degree is going to increase. Many of these things won't be instantly visible or traceable, but they will be there because those are the inevitable consequences of budget cuts.* (Public Comprehensive, System Board)
- *Our peer universities tend to spend about an average of 6% on administrative costs. We're at 4%, so we're a full third lower. That's nice to brag about, but it has real implications where students cannot get in to see the student advisor to make sure they're taking the right courses to qualify for graduation.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *I think we've found ways to maintain high quality to some extent, but I do believe that funding cuts are affecting the quality of education. If you have larger class sizes, you have more stress on employees and that can impact their ability to do their job. We haven't given raises in three years, and morale has suffered around that. All of that somehow impacts the quality.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of Institutional Board)

Rising personnel and operational costs put even more pressure on stretched budgets.

- *Like most institutions, you look at the bulk of your costs and it tends to be in salaries. That is present, but also the cost of delivery is changing with a number of overhead influences, [for example,] building maintenance and all those other things that tend to be part of it.* (Public Comprehensive, Officer of System Board)
- *A lot of the ways to carry out the university's mission have become more challenging in terms of the rising price of higher education, the increasing size of the institutions, and rising cost. Every decision that we've made has had to keep a trade-off in mind between the degree to which we carry out different things that we do [and] finances.* (Public Research, System Board)

Many of our respondents spoke of an influx of students who have not been adequately prepared by K-12 schools.

- *The biggest issue lies with K-12. If the students are not sent to us ready for college then they're not going to complete.* (Public 2-yr, System Board)
- *Because we take all comers, our success ratio for graduation is about 50%. I think that's a big challenge. I think the pipeline that feeds our institution, the K-12 system, is flawed. Among our two-year students, 44% of them require remediation, and about 38% need remediation in our four-year institution. In these tight fiscal times, we shouldn't be educating these kids twice.* (Public Comprehensive, Officer of System Board)
- *It'd go a long way if students could get better education in the earlier years. I'm talking about what we're turning out of the K-12 districts. We should improve the quality of what's coming in. I'm sure that the "high quality student" that would go on to college work is better, say, in China than what we get in this country.* (Public 2-yr, Institutional Board)
- *There is a question of the capability of the students coming in, both at the two-year and the four-year colleges. That's a national problem—what are our high schools doing, what's going on in secondary education?* (Public Research, System Board)
- *There are clearly limitations in our K-12 educational system. Those limitations include lack of qualified teachers, lack of curricular focus, outdated teaching methods, and generally a lack of focus on science and math education.* (Private Research, Institutional Board)

"...The pipeline that feeds our institution, the K-12 system, is flawed..." TRUSTEE OF A COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

The minority view on the problems of higher education: A few trustees, while agreeing with the problems noted above, thought that the major problems facing higher education were internal and more fundamental than declining financial support and inadequate K-12 preparation.

Colleges and universities are wedded to an antiquated model for educating students.

- *Our nation has an education model whose calendar was based on the 19th-century agricultural calendar, whose classroom is based on the 20th-century industrial model, trying to produce a high quality product in a 21st-century, global, technology-infused environment. We're never going to be successful until we can completely disrupt the model of our classroom, and our model of teaching, that has been pervasive in the entire continuum from kindergarten through graduate degree program.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)
- *The model that the university [in general] has deployed to deliver its product, education, is 600 years old. It is the same broadcast model that's always been used where people go to a specified location and wander into the classroom. They sit there, and information is broadcast to them, so the progress at which they are achieving the desired product is uniform instead of individualized. Seat time in class counts for about as much as accomplishment. If you're a whiz kid, you can't move fast. If you're having trouble and you get left behind, you've got problems unless somebody's willing to spend extra time with you.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *It seems to me that there could be more of a fluid delivery system. But again, I think that education has fallen victim to a lot of what government delivery is, and it's become so supply-driven that we're really not taking care of the customer. We don't say, "What do they need?" We say, "Here's what we sell. They're Model Ts, and they're all black."* (Public Comprehensive, Officer of System Board)

The rising costs are partially the result of a flawed model of finance and governance.

- *The issues facing higher education are no different from the problems in health care. The issues are an uncontrollable system with escalating costs, a disconnect between the price [that's]…charged and the payers—so the customer is removed from the process—and it allows for some very bizarre cross subsidization within the system. So you're really never sure who is paying what to what. It also has a very interesting relationship of power between the administration and the faculty. It almost puts the two into confrontational roles, like in health care between physicians and insurance companies.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)
- *Chancellors and presidents are always afraid of the votes of no confidence, so a lot of times they will cater to faculty. That's one of the barriers to reform.* (Public 2-yr, District Board)

The majority view on the best solutions: Nearly all trustees say that increasing financial support would be desirable, but the main solution being proposed by virtually all is a spectrum of cost-cutting measures, such as increasing class sizes, hiring more adjunct professors, and salary freezes. The institutions are struggling to maintain quality in the face of these cuts. Many are also pursuing new sources of revenue.

- *Our faculty and staff have not had a general raise in the last four to five years and yet our enrollment is skyrocketing.* (Public 2-yr, Officer of Institutional Board)
- *We've said as a board that we're going to do our best not to cut anything academic until we have to. Most of our budget cuts and efficiencies have been done from an administrative side, from a system side, and less on the classroom side. At the same time, we have not given the faculty raises in about three years, and we've been hearing some grumblings about that too. It's not just about cutting. We also have to keep our faculty happy, and we have yet to figure out ways to do that.* (Public Comprehensive, Chair of System Board)
- *We could cut wages and benefits and then say, "Oh, we've got extra money," but, of course, we don't want to do that, and there would be huge resistance to that.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of District Board)
- *We've been looking at faculty teaching loads, for example. Should we have adjunct instructors teaching large introductory sections with tenured professors only teaching small specialty courses?* (Public Research, System Board)
- *I think currently we're at about 25% full-time faculty to 75% adjunct. That's probably the lowest of the low. You can't get much lower than that without putting our accreditation into jeopardy.* (Public 2-yr, District Board)
- *I think the thing that we would look at is, when people retire, just not replacing them.* (Public 2-yr, Institutional Board)

Many trustees say their institutions and systems are seeking other sources of revenue.

- *In looking for a new president, we would be looking for someone who is creative in the entrepreneurial sense, [who] knows how to handle the finances, and can come up with creative ways of finding financing for education beyond governmental financing.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of Institutional Board)
- *We are creating foundations for each independent unit. These are private foundations within the college, and they normally consist of a handful of very prominent alumni who never lost their interest. They are in the business of raising money every way they can, including helping the college get grants from various government agencies, but mostly from the private sector side. Then those monies can be used for the colleges and universities.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *[The state university] has a presence on our campus. They're renting some space from us, and then they're also renting another building that belongs to the city that adjoins the campus. [Another community college] also has a presence on our campus. We are sharing the cafeteria and the library with these other two institutions. That's what we're doing to save money, not just for our own institution, but the other two institutions as well, which ultimately is saving money for the taxpayers.* (Public 2-yr, Officer of Institutional Board)
- *We got approval from the legislature last year to admit more international students and not have that count towards our cap of nonresident students. It essentially allowed us to raise several million dollars more in tuition revenue and increase our enrollment a little bit, because we make a profit off nonresident students, national and international, whereas we tend to lose money off resident students.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *We have had significant recruiting efforts for out-of-state students, who in some ways subsidize some of the things that we're not able to do with our tax structure in-state.* (Public Research, System Board)

Rather than expecting better preparation from K-12, many are hoping to increase retention by implementing mentorship programs for disadvantaged students.

- *We think that it is very important to have some type of a mentor that can guide the student. This should not be just for academics, but should provide an individual that a student can discuss things with on a social level if they have any needs… We think that's very important to have—some type of peer network, when making important decisions about disciplines and so forth in school.* (Public Comprehensive, Chair of System Board)
- *We have this wonderfully successful program that would be one of the first things I'd put more dollars into. It's called a pre-collegiate program, and it identifies students starting in the eighth grade that come from first-generation families, and other students at risk who may not be headed for college, and allows them to enroll in programs that will mentor them and counsel them through the whole college process, and 95% of them end up in college.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *Each college has retention strategies, but the one that we have found to be most effective is a case management system where we assess the needs of individual students. But for that you need a lot of staff to meet with small groups of students, and you can't really do it across the board for all students.* (Public 2-yr, District Board)

The minority view on the best solutions: A few trustees call for a drastic reorientation of the way higher education performs its core functions. Some even argue that the current financial crisis may be advantageous if it spurs radical restructuring.

To some trustees within this minority camp, the challenge may be an opportunity for the future.

- *I've worked with CEOs of large companies, and they will tell you the worst thing that ever happens to them is good times, because they start to see this expansion of their company, number of employees, and all those things. Then when the downswing hits, they see that as an opportunity. It's not pleasant, but it forces them to really streamline, really focus in on the customer, and to really give value. We have as trustees, or as higher education, got caught up in the cost, and the price, tuition, and all of these other things, but you very seldom hear a discussion about value.*
  (Public Comprehensive, Officer of System Board)
- *The boards are going to have to do more with less, and they're going to have to make sure that the quality is maintained or even enhanced. We can't use less money as an excuse. As a board member, I think it's a challenge. It's an opportunity for achievement.* (Public Research, System Board)

A few trustees think the first priority should be a radical restructuring.

- *The colleges are not looking at the future and saying, "If this were new today, and we were trying to provide the same quality education, how could we do it differently to make sure that our costs were considerably less than they are today?" You have all the different departments, and they always say, "You can cut your costs, but I can't cut mine."*
  (Private Comprehensive, Chair of Institutional Board)
- *The emerging norm is to be able to measure accomplishments for each course, particularly undergraduate courses. If I master Anthropology 101 at Podunk U or Harvard, either way I should be able to demonstrate my mastery on some objective testing which the computer delivers, supervisor verifies, and which has a sort of national imprimatur.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *The structure of traditional higher education is broken or at least is not adapting rapidly enough to the changes in the public's expectation for what our institutions ought to be able to accomplish. I think that I hear too, and everywhere I go, [that] the conversation internal to higher education is about what kind of changes you can make at the margin, not at the core.*
  (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)

The majority view on technology: Virtually all of the respondents say their institutions are using technology, especially for distance learning. Generally, they see this as a way to reach non-traditional students, and they see its advantage primarily as a way to improve access, rather than as a productivity enhancement. Many have concerns and questions about technology-based instruction.

- *Our students are able to totally get their degree online. They don't necessarily have to sit in the classroom. It just depends on the maturity of the student. I keep urging to make it easier for adults wanting to return to college to get the four-year degree online.* (Public 2-yr, District Board)
- *I think in order to compete you're going to have to keep doing more online education, which, in itself, creates a problem because accountability, accreditation, and, especially with online courses, integrity becomes a real issue. We're not there yet. I think when you start throwing courses online to compete with the Phoenix colleges of the nation, what happens is that maybe sometimes we forget quality for quantity.* (Public 2-yr, Officer of Institutional Board)
- *We're trying to offer a much higher percentage of our classes online, so that we have a real kind of mixture, so it's not all traditional and students can mix and match. But let me be a devil's advocate: we have found that the most [likely courses to be] dropped—out of all of our courses—are the online courses.* (Public 2-yr, Institutional Board)
- *I recently read that approximately 25% of the instruction is being done online. It conjures up the image of the mass lecture hall, and the use of a teaching assistant. My daughter said to me, "Dad, do you know I didn't have a single one-on-one conversation with one of my professors in the whole four years I was at [the state university]?" When I was a student I knew every professor I had. I visited their homes. I had multiple mentors and coaches. It's a fundamentally different experience, but [that] is a costly and inefficient model. It's a parenting model. It's not a high production productivity model.* (Private Undergraduate, Officer of Institutional Board)
- *All of our campuses have online programs. I think that you're reading about some where they have more online than they have in the classroom. I think that's a problem, because the university experience is too important for it to be in your home watching a computer.* (Public Research, System Board)

The minority view on technology: For a smaller number of trustees, there are enormous, untapped benefits to technology, with the greatest benefits coming to younger students who are more comfortable in a digital universe.

- *You are not going to get dramatic change, and greater efficiency, and lower cost if you simply take the manual system you're using now and digitize it. You've got to reinvent it, and that is not being done because the system is so deep and embedded, and there are so many people with such vested interests that they're protecting the status quo.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)

- *Right now the universities that I speak with—and they are in many respects top-tier universities—say, "Well, we have our online campus." But it is generally their lecture slides online. They really haven't explored the power and potential of learning communities, developed access to online resources that supplement instruction, or [transitioned to] teaching styles that are more in line, quite frankly, with the cognitive learning styles of the younger generation.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)

- *If we're not set up so that new courses are evaluated and structured in order to take advantage of the new technology, and if we don't have the technology in place, we're going to have trouble achieving any kind of national ranking for people who want to become educated, because they are going to want to have the ability to move at their own pace, and parents are going to want it to be possible for a bright kid to get through undergraduate in two and a half years or two years or whatever, get credit for achieving competence in a course even before they show up at college.* (Public Research, Institutional Board)

For these trustees, technology is appropriate not just for older, working adults, but also for younger students and students who need remediation.

- *To younger people, online stuff is pretty simple. They ask: "Why can't I get that online? Why can't I take that course at midnight?" Again, for higher education to say that online education is inferior reinforces to me that we're supply driven. It's not what the customer is saying. The customer is saying, "I want to be treated like I am in all these other experiences." It's an electronic relationship, and I don't pretend to understand it. But I don't think we should ignore what they are saying just because we're older than they are.* (Public Comprehensive, Officer of System Board)

- *There is a lot of just remedial education going on at the college level that needs to be and should be addressed with much more use of computers to measure and verify… I'm not saying that this is going to replace teachers. It's going to allow teachers, instead of standing up there like a robot and repeating things over and over again, [to] move immediately to the issues that the students are having trouble with because we'll be able to tell in a flash by looking at that student's computer performance where they're having trouble and work on that as opposed to generically explaining everything.* (Public Research, Institutional Board)


Time

The majority view on the role of trustees: Generally, most trustees see their role as relatively limited. Their most important function is hiring the president and overseeing policy at the broadest level. Many say they are careful not to micromanage and that they usually support the administration's recommendations.

- *We hear a definition of what the challenge is by our president and his team, and we also provide him with our feedback on the remedies that he's come up with, and then we have to approve of them.* (Public 2-yr, Institutional Board)
- *There's probably some micromanagement things that a lot of people would like you to get into, but we strictly are charged, at our level, with hiring the president. We aren't charged with hiring directors, deans, [et cetera], but we set general policy, and we debate on program information. We do land purchases, et cetera. We do things at a level which is probably one step above, and we try not to get involved in day-to-day decision making at the community college level. We just try to stay out of that.* (Public 2-yr, Officer of Institutional Board)
- *I think the primary ideas have to come from your executive with support from your trustees, and with ideas coming from the trustees. Frankly, I can't think of too many ideas that have come from the trustees that were not first proposed by the administration.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of Institutional Board)
- *We are a policy board. We don't get involved in the day-to-day operations. Our president comes to us with different proposals and ideas, which we discuss and if appropriate, approve or deny.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of Institutional Board)
- *Our president and vice presidents are in the trenches, and they know where they can cut or move monies around. We've got a great provost who has really a wonderful entrepreneurial spirit, and [he's] extended that entrepreneurial spirit to each of his departments where they look for opportunities and ways to be self-funding. That's kind of what the board has done—just given them the room to do that.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)
- *I think the trustees have to be supportive of the president of the university and back him or her to where they can get comfortable dealing with the faculty and the administration. When you're the president of the university, that's a title only. The faculty and the long-term administrators have been there a lot longer than you're going to be there, and they'd just as soon wait you out. The boards really have to be supportive of the president.* (Private Comprehensive, Chair of Institutional Board)

The minority view on the role of trustees: Trustees who limit their roles to fundraising and supporting institutional leadership are not fulfilling their responsibilities. A minority of respondents complained that trustees lack the knowledge and the willingness to take a significant leadership role and, as a result, mostly act as a "rubber stamp" for the president and higher administration. Often enough, a major function of the board is fundraising.

- *I think what trustees need to do these days is to force the institution to deal with the realities as trustees perceive it from outside, not just the internal dynamic of "shared governance."* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)
- *If you raise questions that other board members or administrators are uncomfortable with, then they throw out the idea that "you are micromanaging." No, I am just asking a question to help me determine whether we need to change our policy.* (Public 2-yr, District Board)
- *It's an honor to be on the public board, but it's an honor that tends to accrue to people in the later stages of life, after they've already achieved some kind of prominence at some usually unrelated discipline. Trustees don't really want to spend the substantial amount of time it takes to get up to speed on issues to [the point] where they can actually debate with an officer at the college.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *What's tragically wrong with a lot of higher education is that initiative by board members is severely restricted. This isn't a case of bad people, but the system is set up to crush individual initiative [so that trustees]…defer that initiative to the board chairman, and the board chairman's led around the nose by the chancellor. You have to fight your way through to be able to do anything in terms of real policy development other than rubber stamp what's presented to you.* (Public Comprehensive, System Board)
- *The false premise is that trustees who are volunteers and have a distant or arms-length relationship [with the college] are somehow going to make a difference… The university trusteeships are sought-after positions because there are benefits that go along with it, and so you've got people there for all the wrong reasons. You don't have people sitting on these boards that are really interested and engaged in making change.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)

"This isn't a case of bad people, but the system is set up to crush individual initiative..." TRUSTEE OF A COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY


UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
E PLURIBUS UNUM
ONE DOLLAR

THE ROLE OF PRIVATE FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS

Trustees' attitudes toward private for-profits are also diverse. Many trustees criticize the for-profits, especially for the recently publicized abuses involving aggressive recruiting and massive loan defaults. Some typical responses are as follows.

- *I am greatly disturbed by the for-profits that I'm familiar with. It bothers me because I see these young people that are paying four times as much to get a certificate of some type [that] they could have gotten at the community college level or state college. That bothers me greatly. The students get finished with huge debts, and then they can't even get their certification.* (Public 2-yr, Chair of Institutional Board)
- *They are a total rip off. I actually attended one back in my earlier years and walked out of there. The quality of the instruction was very poor, but I know students that have gone, and they walk out with a huge amount of debt and a degree or a diploma or something that's not worth anything.* (Public 2-yr, District Board)
- *The University of Phoenix wanted to do a different model, to have greater access. They had all the right intentions. I applaud the idea behind their initial start. Then, if you stop there, and take a look at it today, it's turned into almost an ugly monster because…[of] its marketing techniques, and the way that it has gone about its pricing, and putting people into debt. And the percentage of the federal Pell money that they take is disproportionate. They have become so focused on profitability and growth, and all the rest, that they've long ago lost sight of their mission of creating an alternative model for education.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)

While virtually everyone shared some of the concerns mentioned above, some trustees applauded the for-profits for their willingness to explore new modes of delivery and for their use of technology. Indeed, a few saw the for-profits as offering a challenge that traditional institutions would have to meet.

- *I would like to see them succeed because they are providing an opportunity to implement technological advances in providing instruction. I don't think there's a lot of good research yet on the impact of for-profit institutions on learning outcomes. They appear to be free of this kind of cultural preference we've described for slow change and for keeping things the same, which may not be the right way to do things in the financial environment that we have for ourselves. Also, keeping in mind that they serve typically under-represented students who have the biggest access challenges, I think they have a lot of potential.* (Public Research, System Board)
- *I don't think the for-profit model is the solution, but I think the for-profits tell the non-profits that the way they've been going is not going to work in the future. If they don't change, the for-profits [will] take over. Therefore, the non-profits have to figure out more cost-effective ways to give the same quality of education they're giving today.* (Private Comprehensive, Chair of Institutional Board)
- *There is no institution in society that can't be improved. Any institution, if it doesn't have competition, gets to be a little lazy and self-perpetuating and self-deluding. I'm not sure that the for-profit sector hasn't given the more traditional public institutions, in particular, a good shot in the butt….the jury is out. As far as I'm concerned, if they meet the same accreditation rules—the regional accreditation agencies, the state licensing boards, and all the rest of it—bring it on. I don't think there's anything wrong with that.* (Public Comprehensive, System Board)

PRODUCTIVITY

Although the concept of increasing productivity in higher education has gained traction among national policy elites, many of the trustees interviewed in this study said they had never heard this term used in discussions of higher education and asked us what we meant by it. Several respondents echoed the sentiments of the trustees who said:

- *Productivity? Truthfully, it's not personally been on my radar, no. I'd have to think about that, but I don't have an answer for that.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)
- *Well, I'm not sure what "productivity" means in this context. The only time that we use the term is from a facilities point of view as opposed to an educational point of view. If I have a brick-and-mortar classroom that is going to have a teacher with five students in it, it's far more productive in that sense of that word for the same cost to have twenty-two students.* (Public 2-yr, System Board)

Others rejected the concept as essentially inappropriate or unhelpful in a higher education context.

- *I don't think it's a useful concept. First, it feels mechanical. Also I don't think it really translates to most higher education institutions. Productivity should be student based, where there is no assumption that a class is fifty minutes or a semester is X number of days…so the productivity of the institution is embedded in the capacity of the institution to help the student move at a pace that he or she wants to. Now, how do you translate that concept of productivity into a course credit–based higher ed institution? I don't know. I don't know what the people mean when they say, "The traditional place should become more productive," unless they're willing to really see student need and student pace as what drives completion.* (Public Comprehensive, Institutional Board)
- *As an educational institution, there are certain efficiencies you can look for, but then you can't really push that too far. It's not like a production line that you can say, "Well, it's just as cheap if we make ten, to make one hundred, to make two thousand widgets with some efficiencies." I think that we are looking for those kinds of efficiencies, but at some point, you do have to have a certain number of either professors or TAs, or others for a certain percentage of students, so that students can receive a meaningful education.* (Public Research, System Board)

"I don't know what the people mean when they say, 'The traditional place should become more productive,' unless they're willing to really see student need and student pace as what drives completion."

TRUSTEE OF A COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

At the same time, all of our trustees understood the concept of striving for greater efficiency. Many described the steps they had already taken to reduce overhead, to consolidate programs, and to try to do more with less. Our conclusion would be that if productivity is defined as producing more well-qualified graduates without a corresponding increase in the cost, almost all of the public institutions that we talked to are aggressively pursuing this goal.

- *We've had to raise the property taxes slightly [and gotten] less money from the state, but we've pulled together and cut corners wherever we could. We've hired a number of adjunct professors. We've doubled [up], where we didn't have classroom space, we've put in some portables. We've doubled up on having some classes at night. You can have three professors using the same classroom at different times of the day, and that kind of thing.*
  (Public 2-yr, Officer of Institutional Board)

- *We've tried to figure out what we could do that would be more effective. That can mean raising quality, or it can mean saving money. We've [redesigned] the core courses in the first two years, where we found many students can't get through... We found that many more passed. Even more interesting, our costs were dramatically lower. We increased the throughput in terms of getting people through college.*
  (Public Research, System Board)

However, based on our analysis of the interviews conducted for this and other projects, our belief is that the difference between higher education leaders and those pointing to the need for greater productivity is more than just semantics. When the critics call for greater productivity in higher education, they are typically encouraging something more than just greater efficiency and cost cutting—they are calling for changes in higher education that will not only save money but also produce better educated students to meet the needs of a more competitive and technologically oriented international economy. Our conversation with observers who talk about productivity suggests that they are seeking new educational delivery systems that will simultaneously cost less and also produce students who are significantly better educated. Most of the trustees we interviewed are so beleaguered by the day-to-day problems that their institutions are facing that they are primarily focusing on maintaining the existing quality of the institution. To put it another way, if we are right, the critics are concerned with something more than cost saving. They want much more significant changes in higher education itself, using new technology to create more flexible and innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

In past studies, Public Agenda has found a somewhat splintered dialogue among some of the main higher education stakeholders. In earlier reports, we have tried to capture the discussion with versions of this chart.

	PROBLEM	SOLUTION
Presidents	Caught between rising costs, declining state support, and endangered quality	Marginal increases in productivity, supplemented by public reinvestment in higher education
Business and legislators	Need a better educated workforce and citizenry	Greater productivity (new modes of delivery)
Faculty	Deteriorating quality of entering students, declining standards in higher education	Raise standards, improve preparation, focus on student learning
Public	Caught between growing importance and threatened access	Protect access

How do the trustees in our study fit into this picture? The short answer is that they don't fit neatly into one of our boxes. They neither line up with any particular group, nor do they have a clear independent voice of their own. This is hardly surprising since, unlike the other groups—most of whom represent a specific profession—trustees come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Instead, we find three main strands of thought.

1. In many ways, our trustee respondents mirror the views of college presidents. Most of those we interviewed define the problems facing higher education in a very similar way to the presidents. They are disturbed by repeated budget cuts from state governments, and they seek ways to protect the quality of the programs and access in the face of declining resources. The similarity between the trustees and the presidents is hardly surprising since, as the trustees themselves tell us, most of their information comes from their presidents.
2. The trustees also share some of the perspectives that we found in our surveys of the general public. They are intensely focused on job training and deeply worried about access. Given that many trustees are elected, or come from other organizations with a wide public base, it is again hardly surprising that they share the public's concerns with access and vocational training.
3. Finally, as we have seen, some of our trustees align more closely with businesses and legislators, who tend to be much more critical of higher education and focus on the idea of increasing the productivity of higher education by employing new and different methods of education. And, of course, many of our trustees have a business background.

We began this report by asking where trustees might be likely to stand in a debate about a reform agenda for higher education. Our hypothesis, based on a limited number of interviews, is that there is no single answer to this question. On the one hand, there is no evidence that trustees would be categorically opposed to structural changes in the way higher education is delivered. They are deeply aware of and concerned by the problems that face higher education today and would seriously consider any measures that they feel would allow their institutions to enhance student learning and success.

At the same time, our interviews suggest that most trustees are unlikely at the moment to take a leadership role as drivers of higher education reform. The message we heard from most of our respondents is that the most helpful role they can play is to support their presidents and chancellors rather than to challenge them. They see their role as giving wise counsel, asking challenging questions, and providing valuable links to the community, to the legislature, and to additional funding, rather than initiating changes outside of the frameworks that are presented to them. Furthermore, many seemed surprisingly unfamiliar with some of the more fundamental debates roiling the higher education policy community.

Their perspective on reform, in other words, does not grow out of a strong ideology, but from the nature of their function and relation to their administration. While there are exceptions, many are volunteers who meet only a few times a year and do not necessarily have a deep knowledge of their institution or system. On the whole, they are more likely to play a supporting role rather than a proactive one in promoting or resisting change. The trustees' strength is their commitment to their institutions and the diverse blend of experience and skills that they bring. But for the most part (recent developments in some states notwithstanding), their contributions at this time are more likely to be advisory and supportive rather than challenging and radical.

Methodology

"Still on the Sidelines" synthesizes findings from one-on-one phone interviews conducted with thirty-nine college and university trustees across the country. With the assurance that their remarks would be anonymous—cited only with reference to their institution and board types—trustees were guided through questions that sought their opinions on the challenges in higher education and the boards' role in meeting these challenges. Continuing Public Agenda's work from "The Iron Triangle" (2008), the interviews specifically gauged board members' perceptions of quality, access, and cost, as well as productivity and the role of technology as solutions.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted from February through August 2011. Funding for the study was generously provided by Lumina Foundation.

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and public engagement organization. We work to ensure that the public has the best possible conditions and opportunities to engage thoughtfully in public life and that decision-making by leaders is well-informed by people's values, ideas, and aspirations. Our programs aim to inform public policy, strengthen communities, and empower citizens.

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