A Comparison of Community and State College Leader Perceptions of Trustee Involvement in Decision-Making

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Abstract

Trustees play an important role in determining the direction, priorities, and future of higher education institutions, and as such, are critical actors in the decision-making and policy formation process. Numerous anecdotal reports have concluded that there are often competing interests in the use and structure of trustees throughout higher education, and the current study sought to identify the perceptions of college leaders about how trustees are currently implementing their roles. Using a national sample of 250 community college leaders and 250 state comprehensive university leaders, study findings found moderately consistent perceptions about what trustees are doing. As a group, all respondents agreed most strongly that their trustees were engaged in approving senior administrative appointments and determining financial priorities. Comprehensive university leaders reported that trustees were most engaged in strategic mission development, and community college leaders agreed most strongly that trustees were engaged in raising money for their institutions.

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Introduction

Trustees play a critical role in how colleges and universities operate. Whether appointed or elected, trustees are in the position to provide the overarching vision for an institution or college system, and represent the needs, desires, and wants of the larger constituent base as decisions are made about the direction and activities of an institution (Davis, 2003). Critical to the operation of an institution, trustees typically work through a process of shared authority, distributing the authority and formal power to make decisions to college leaders (Birnbaum, 1991). For this process of governance to work, therefore, college leaders and trustees must have some common understanding of how they are to collaborate and conduct business (Smith & Miller, 2013).

Higher education, as an industry, is uniquely facing challenges from private providers and technology that are challenging how the business of education is taking place. Some prognosticator's suggest that the brick-and-mortar campus will disappear and learning will all be online, others predict the demise of the college bachelor's degree and its replacement with competency based portfolios. Similarly, state and civic entities are struggling to support public higher education, and as the college experience has been individualized and praised as something for individual gain, as opposed to public contribution, support for higher education has declined (Hersh & Merrow, 2006).

Additional challenges to the academy relate to accountability, student learning, faculty qualifications and protections, such as tenure, and even student preparedness. The forecast for higher education has been described as 'the perfect storm,' and it is critical, for the survival of higher education as individual institutions and as an industry, that leaders can communicate

effectively about their roles and functions, and how their collaboration can benefit higher education, and how higher education can benefit students.

The most basic direction for higher education comes from the trustees, and it is this connection between trustees and college leaders that is critical to examine and understand. If the connection is effective, trustees can be valuable decision-makers in charting a course for the institution. But, if trustees have disagreement about the role, scope, and authority of the college president, friction, instability, and immobility of an institution are likely outcomes. Therefore, the current study was designed to explore how college leaders perceive their trustees roles and actions. By identifying this baseline data, college leaders can have a better understanding of how they are working with trustees, and perhaps more importantly, where there is a disconnect between roles practiced and those desired.

Background of the Study

The evolution of trustee management in higher education has changed from strong caretaking roles that oversaw the every operation of an institution, to in many cases in modern higher education, fund raising roles. In the spectrum of board involvement, virtually every imaginable role for trustees has been experienced, and at times, a situational heightened involvement has been beneficial. At other times, board apathy or failure to engage in an institution's operation has contributed to institutional closure. As with other non-profit boards, however, trustees must be maximized in terms of their potential contributions to institutional performance.

Literature related to higher education trustees has ranged from individual characteristics and descriptions to assessments of board performance and the need for orientation strategies (Davis, 2003). A common theme that runs throughout all of the literature is that boards of

trustees are a resource that can greatly assist an institution in moving forward, or, can be detrimental to an institution. In most instances, an institution's leadership critically defines the role of the board (Bastedo, 2009), and unless strong personalities or certain issues arise, the board is reliant on the college leadership.

The relationship between the board and college leadership often incorporates two distinct, sometimes competing perspectives. The perspective of the board is that they are anointed to their positions by one of several methods (such as an appointment or election), and that they have the responsibility of representing constituent interests to institution; they are legally responsible for the institution. This might mean that they think about and consider the general public's need for higher education as they determine funding or staffing requests. Institutional leaders, however, are often focused on advancing the institution with an agenda that they develop based on their interpretation of constituent needs. When college leaders perceive a need for specific job training, for example, the leaders might develop new programs and short –term contracts to provide such training, but must also consider and try and represent the needs of existing students and faculty. If these two perspectives are in alignment, then institutional balance is achieved. If, however, they are not, the competing interests can lead to administrator termination, board member resignation, and institutional stagnation (Bastedo, 2009; Baliles, 1997).

There are multiple examples of how boards have grown in conflict with college leaders. At times this conflict can be cause-based, such as a college leader doing or saying something that embarrasses the board or the institution (see, for example, Jones, 2011; Lopez, 2011; and Mangan, 2010). Such was the case with the president of Des Moines Area Community College in Iowa where the President, David England, was arrested for selling marijuana. In these

situations, the board has the right, and possibly the responsibility, of making a personnel change such as terminating the individual. Similar, but decidedly different, is the interpretation or content based challenge in collaboration between administrators and trustees. This might be based on priority setting, financial management, resource allocation, or even willingness to accommodate or give special preference to a student, faculty member, or other constituent (such as athletics).

The role definition of trustees is increasingly critical as higher education faces multiple challenges about core functions and how it provides a service to a population (Morris, Smith, & Miller, 2012). The trend, as outlined by Hersh and Merrow (2006), holds that higher education has become an increasingly individualistic benefit, and that pricing and behaviors of institutions have correspondingly evolved to focus on individual satisfaction. The result, they claim, are lower standards for student matriculation and a more occupational focus on skill enhancement rather than intellectual growth. This must mean that college leaders and trustees, those legally responsible for the welfare and state of higher education, must learn to align their thinking to respond to the state of higher education and assure its role and purpose within a democratic society (Smith & Miller, 2013). The current study, then, provides an initial outline of how these two forces work together, that is, how college leaders see their role working with trustees, and subsequently, whether there is symmetry between what trustees should be and currently are doing. Findings of this nature will be crucial to the study of trustee behavior, and ultimately, how higher education can respond to the challenges it faces.

Research Methods

Data were collected from both state comprehensive university academic leaders as well as community college academic leaders. For both elements of the sample, using a table of

random numbers, 250 institutions were selected in each category and administered either a paper or electronic survey. A prominent higher education directory was used as the primary repository of institutional names. As the institutions were identified, each individual campus website was subsequently identified with the college's president or chancellor recorded and sent an email asking for participation. The email allowed the participant to either obtain a hard copy of the survey (either as a Word document, a mailed copy, or a faxed copy) or an electronic version of the survey. If the president was not interested in participating, the individual was given the opportunity to forward the survey participation request to another leader at the institution.

Data were collected in the winter and spring of 2013. For each respondent, three attempted follow up email messages were sent to non-respondents.

The survey was constructed from related literature, and provided respondents an opportunity to rate their agreement that trustees currently have the roles identified on the survey. The instrument was pilot tested with a panel of 12 college leaders, with multiple revisions to clarify the intent of each role. The instrument also included a brief respondent characteristic section, asking for information on the size of the institution, how trustees were appointed, title of respondent, and perception of trustee performance.

Findings

There was an even distribution of institutional size represented in the respondents, with the majority of respondents representing institutions enrolling under 5,000 students (n=99; 39%). The respondents were, however, inverted when looking at responding type of institution, as the majority of community college respondents were from institutions with under 5,000 students (n=86; 60%), and the comprehensive university respondents were primarily from institutions with over 10,000 students (n=62; 55%). Respondents were asked to identify the primary way in

which trustees were named to their governing board, with the majority of both comprehensive university and community college respondents indicating that trustees were elected in some form (n=140; 55%). As a caution, as several surveys indicated, being elected could mean a political election from a local community or on a state-wide level.

The most popular respondent held the title of president or chancellor (n=96; 38%), and a similar number of respondents held the title of vice president/chancellor (n=82; 32%). These respondents indicated that trustees were performing *excellent* or *pretty good* (n=174; 68%), and fewer than one in five indicated that trustees were *generally not very good* or *horrible* (n=43; 17%).

Respondents were asked to describe the extent that various trustee roles were currently being engaged in, rating the extent of this engagement on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with a "5" rating indicating that the respondent perceived that trustees very much were engaged in that role. Overall, the most agreed upon role that trustees currently have was approving senior administrator appointments (mean 4.63), followed by determining financial priorities (mean 4.60) and engaging in strategic mission development (mean 4.39). State comprehensive university leaders had the highest mean rating on engaging in strategic mission development (4.839), followed by assessing board member performance (mean 4.77) and approving senior administrative appointments (mean 4.629). Community college leaders had the highest mean rating of raising money for the institution (mean 4.634), followed by approving senior administrator appointments (mean 4.633) and determining financial priorities (mean 4.617).

The role that trustees assumed the least was working to influence state legislatures (mean 3.36), and this was also the lowest mean rating for state comprehensive university leaders (mean

3.404). Community college leaders, however, had the lowest mean rating of overseeing athletic administration (mean 3.322) for their trustees.

Discussion and Conclusions

These findings offer a brief, descriptive insight into the roles that trustees play in higher education. Although there is some consistency in how these leaders perceive the roles trustees have, further research is needed to compare these perceptions and structure research in such a way that would allow for comparisons between perceived and desired roles. Additionally, further research is needed to identify the impact of mis-aligned board expectations. Casual commentary and anecdotal reporting does indicate the importance of effective board involvement, but specific data on decision-making outcomes that can be attributed to board involvement would be helpful in determining the real importance a board can have on institutional performance.

In addition to offering directions for research, the current study did identify that for the most part state and community college leaders see largely the same kinds of roles being assumed by board members. This might mean that there is some generalizability among sectors of higher education in working with boards, and, it might suggest that boards also have some common tendencies (or that board members have some commonalities).

As both institutions types are public, this may account for the similarities in trustee roles, and when considered together, they provide an insight into how and why public higher education agendas and policies are set as they are. The agreement seen as to the implementation of these roles may also provide insight for governance decisions made for public higher education. In-depth qualitative research on how governance and policy decision making influences public higher education should also be considered. This awareness will serve scholars and practitioners

alike in establishing ways to create appropriate goals and agendas to gain or strategically maintain a competitive edge for public higher education, something in which trustees can be instrumental.

The selection process for trustees should be continuously scrutinized as well in order to promote transparency of and accountability for behavior in and out of the board room. Stricter regulation on appointments or elections of trustees that serve, lead, or are deeply connected to private sector industries that substantially support competitors of state public higher education should be considered because there can be an inherent conflict of interest that can negatively affect policy and governance decisions made for institutions.

Broadly, US higher education is successful largely because of the wide range of perspectives and ideas that are brought to decision-making, and trustees are critical in that process. Only in assuring some alignment in determining roles and responsibilities can the future of US higher education be assured.

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Table 1.
Description of Survey Respondents

Characteristic	SC Frequency n=112	CC Frequency n=142	Combined Frequency N=254
Institutional			
Approximate full-time enrollment			
Under 5,000 students	13	86	99
5,001 to 10,000 students	37	43	80
Over 10,000 students	62	13	75
Trustee appointment method			
Political appointment	9	17	26
Appointed by existing trustees	17	10	27
Elected	46	94	140
Other	40	21	61
Individual			
Title			
Chancellor/president	28	68	96
Assistant/assistant to chancellor/president	14	25	39
Vice president	39	43	82
Assistant/deputy vice president	22	1	23
Dean	9	5	14
Perception of trustee performance			
Excellent	29	61	90
Pretty good	36	48	84
Sometimes they do well/sometimes not	19	18	37
Generally, not very good	20	11	31
Horrible	8	4	12

Table 2.
Currently Perceived Trustee Roles

Role	SC Mean (SD) n=112	CC Mean (SD) n=142	Overall Mean N=254
Engage in strategic mission development	4.839 (.5445)	4.000 (.2664)	4.39
Assess board member performance/self or peers	4.777 (.6297)	3.999 (.3589)	4.33
Approve senior administrator appointments	4.629 (.5301)	4.633 (.4297)	4.63
Determine financial priorities	4.588 (.7700)	4.617 (.4359)	4.60
Approve personnel matters	4.512 (.6266)	3.654 (.9991)	4.03
Raise money for the institution	4.162 (.8920)	4.634 (.5416)	4.42
Make decisions on programs of study	4.156 (.9909)	4.200 (.5999)	4.18
Oversee athletic administration	4.011 (.8413)	3.322 (1.347)	3.62
Determine transfer of credit guidelines	4.001 (.4379)	4.133 (1.240)	4.07
Change senior administrative structure	4.000 (.7838)	3.540 (.9232)	3.74
Be involved in new board member orientation	3.999 (1.027)	3.500 (.6555)	3.72
Determine teaching methods (including online)	3.910 (.8001)	4.189 (1.134)	4.06
Have a voice in curricular requirements	3.867 (.6291)	4.199 (.8125)	4.05
Determine elements of faculty contracts	3.840 (.8113)	3.782 (.4276)	3.80
Negotiate auxiliary contract language	3.643 (.8659)	3.425 (.7002)	3.65
Set enrollment targets and qualifications	3.617 (.9786)	3.998 (1.520)	3.82
Evaluate administrators	3.503 (1.044)	3.425 (.7002)	3.45
Work to influence state legislative decisions	3.404 (.5445)	3.330 (.7733)	3.36