



## Political Appointees vs. Elected Officials: Examining How the Selection Mechanism for State Governing Agency Board Members Influences Responsiveness to Stakeholders in Higher Education Policy-Making

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**Abstract:** Through an exploratory comparative case study of two U.S. states (Georgia and Nevada), this study investigates how the selection mechanism to state higher education governing agency boards influences the responsiveness of board members to stakeholders and their role in the policy-making process. Framed around the recent national policy agenda to improve postsecondary degree attainment and college completion, findings suggest that state agency board members in both states prioritized the opinions, insights, and goals of the state governor and governing agency staff, regardless of selection mechanism. However, for more localized issues and on-the-ground decision-making, stakeholders formally involved in the day-to-day operation of higher education, such as administrators, faculty, and students, serve a larger role, though this influence can be mediated by the selection mechanism of board members.

**Keywords:** higher education; governing boards; board members; policy process; stakeholders; stakeholder salience; United States

**Designados políticos vs. funcionarios electos: Examinar la selección de los miembros del consejo de las agencias estatales y su influencia en su capacidad de respuesta a los líderes en la formulación de políticas de educación superior**

**Resumen:** A través de un estudio de caso comparativo exploratorio de dos estados de EE. UU. (Georgia y Nevada), este estudio investiga cómo el mecanismo de selección del consejo de las agencias estatales de educación superior influye en la capacidad de respuesta de los miembros del consejo a las partes interesadas y su papel en el proceso de formulación de políticas. Enmarcados en la reciente agenda de política nacional para mejorar la obtención de títulos postsecundarios y la finalización de estudios universitarios, los hallazgos sugieren que los miembros del consejo de agencias estatales en ambos estados priorizaron las opiniones, conocimientos y objetivos del gobernador estatal y el personal de la agencia gobernante, independientemente del mecanismo de selección. Sin embargo, para cuestiones más localizadas y toma de decisiones sobre el terreno, las partes interesadas que participan formalmente en el funcionamiento diario de la educación superior, como administradores, profesores y estudiantes, desempeñan un papel más importante, aunque esta influencia puede verse afectada. mediada por el mecanismo de selección de consejeros.

**Palabras-clave:** educación superior; consejos directivos; miembros del consejo; proceso de políticas; partes interesadas; prominencia de las partes interesadas; Estados Unidos

**Nomeados políticos vs. funcionários eleitos: Examinando a seleção dos membros do conselho da agência governamental estadual e sua influência em sua capacidade de resposta aos líderes na formulação de políticas de ensino superior**

**Resumo:** Por meio de um estudo de caso comparativo exploratório de dois Estados Unidos (Geórgia e Nevada), este estudo investiga como o mecanismo de seleção para os conselhos de agências governamentais de ensino superior influencia a capacidade de resposta dos membros do conselho às partes interessadas e seu papel no processo de formulação de políticas. Enquadrado em torno da recente agenda de política nacional para melhorar a obtenção do diploma pós-secundário e a conclusão da faculdade, os resultados sugerem que os membros do conselho da agência estadual em ambos os estados priorizaram as opiniões, percepções e objetivos do governador do estado e funcionários da agência governante, independentemente do mecanismo de seleção. No entanto, para questões mais localizadas e tomadas de decisão no local, as partes interessadas formalmente envolvidas na operação do dia-a-dia do ensino superior, como administradores, professores e alunos, desempenham um papel mais amplo, embora esta influência possa ser mediada pelo mecanismo de seleção de conselheiros.

**Palavras-chave:** ensino superior; conselhos de administração; membros do conselho; processo de política; partes interessadas; saliência das partes interessadas; Estados Unidos

## Political Appointees vs. Elected Officials: Examining How the Selection Mechanism for State Governing Agency Board Members Influences Responsiveness to Stakeholders in Higher Education Policy-Making

Governance of the public higher education sector in the US is highly decentralized when compared to other countries. Unlike nationalized structures, where oversight and management of higher education is conducted by a single governmental agency (Berdahl & Millett, 1991; Glenny & Schmidlein, 1983; Schmidlein & Berdahl, 1992), the federalized U.S. government reserves oversight and policy decision-making for higher education to the 50 states. Consequently, each state maintains independent arrangements to govern their public postsecondary education sector through entities referred to in this study as *state governing agencies*. These organizations are “charged with statewide policy for higher education” (McGuinness, 2005, p. 207) and are often discussed as factoring into disparate policy decisions across the country (Hearn & McLendon, 2012). In particular, previous research suggests differences in characteristics of state governing agencies, including organizational structure, fiduciary responsibilities, and level of autonomy from the state government all can influence the state policy process (Hearn & McLendon, 2012; Tandberg, 2013; Tandberg et al., 2017). However, an organizational feature often ignored in these analyses centers on the state governing agency boards overseeing these agencies and, relatedly, the individuals comprising these boards (“board members”; Morgan et al., 2021). As board members serve in oversight and decision-making capacities, including being charged with approving statewide policy agendas and setting policy, better understanding their influence in the policy process is crucial.

Complicating our understanding of state governing agency board members, however, are the varied mechanisms utilized for their selection. Most often, board members are appointed directly or through a combination of decisions made by the state governor and state legislature, with Nevada representing the sole instance where the voting public elect board members (Longanecker, 2006; Pusser & Ordorika, 2001). These mechanisms differ state-by-state but are usually outlined in a state’s constitution or higher education law. Variation in selection mechanism has previously been researched regarding whether appointment moderates the independence and decision-making of board members from the government. For example, citing Pusser and Ordorika’s (2001) comparative case study of the University of California and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Longanecker (2006) proposes that the elected boards at UNAM “clearly have a reflection of the public good as defined by the public” (p. 107) while the governor-appointed board at the University of California often reflects the perspectives of the state executive. This work suggests that governmental officials may be utilizing political appointments as a way to extend their influence in public higher education decision-making beyond limits established by law through the selection of individuals willing to enact their agenda.

This reality is in stark contrast to the original intent of state governing agencies, which were established to limit the influence and power of politics and government on higher education policy-making (McGuinness, 2005). Given the range of stakeholders with interests in how higher education operates, including those directly involved in the higher education sector (e.g., students, staff, faculty, and administrators) and those indirectly impacted (e.g., government entities and workforce organizations; Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010; Burrows, 1999; Jongbloed et al., 2008), state governing agency board members can also serve as arbiters of which stakeholders are directly and indirectly considered in decision-making processes and which are not. This prioritization can guide the perspectives influencing policy-making, potentially politicizing decisions guiding higher education in a given state and contributing to the growing political partisanship facing U.S. higher education (Ellis et al., 2020; Parker, 2019). Ultimately, understanding whether selection mechanisms

influences the association of board members with stakeholders can be critical for researchers examining policy adoption and implementation processes as well as higher education constituents seeking policy change.

Drawing on previous literature on higher education board member appointment in the US and the concept of stakeholder salience, the following research questions motivate the current study:

- 1) What has been the role of board members in the state policy process aimed at improving college completion and degree attainment?
- 2) How do different selection mechanisms for board members influence responsiveness to stakeholders in the policy-making process?

These questions will be considered through an exploratory comparative case study of two state governing agencies (the University System of Georgia (USG) and the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE)) and their decision-making in response to a policy agenda aimed at improving postsecondary degree attainment and rates of college completion. These state governing agencies were established by their respective state constitutions and are structured as the primary organization overseeing all of public higher education in their state. Both states are also members of Complete College America, which has served as an influential policy advocate associated with improving college completion rates nationally. A key difference, however, between the case study sites centers on the selection mechanism for board members, where the Georgia Governor appoints USG board members while the voting public elect NSHE board members. Notably, while USG's association with and responsiveness to the governor's office has been previously highlighted (Rubin & Hearn, 2018), NSHE represents the only state higher education governing agency where the voting public select board members. To this end, an underlying purpose of this study is to gauge whether different selection mechanisms of board members ultimately influence responsiveness and consideration of stakeholders in the policy process.

## Literature Review

Research exploring connections between board selection mechanisms and decision-making in the US is often discussed in broader terms related to state governance characteristics. For example, Lowry's (2001) study examines the influence of board characteristics on financial policy including the structure of the governing agency, number of oversight boards, and the selection mechanism of board members. His most significant finding for the current study suggests that institutions in states where board members are selected by external, nonacademic, stakeholders tend to charge less than those institutions in states with self-perpetuating boards, where current board members select new individuals, or where board members were selected by academics or other internal stakeholders. Lowry argues these findings indicate board members are held accountable to the concerns of their appointing constituency, with stakeholders internal to the institution having a better likelihood of benefitting from an increase in institutional financial gains than those situated externally. Similarly, Kaplan (2004) suggests the inclusion of faculty on boards increases the likelihood of the institution having an academic as president and reduces the likelihood of academic programs being shut down, which aligns with the goals of faculty stakeholders. Notably, Kaplan's analysis also examines the influence of the selection mechanism of board members on policy decisions but finds mostly inconclusive results.

Despite the mixed findings, Minor (2008) considered the appointment mechanism of board members as a potential lever for policy change. He examines the relationship between various characteristics of state governing agency boards and state higher education performance, as defined by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's 2004 *Measuring Up* report

(participation, affordability, completion, and benefits). Through a comparison of five top performing states (Minnesota, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Utah, and Colorado) and five bottom performing states (Arkansas, West Virginia, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Nevada), he uses a typological analysis to identify patterns around board membership selection across the two groups of states. Minor (2008) determines that lower performing states had fewer qualification requirements and less evidence of scrutiny for individuals serving on an overseeing board. He ultimately questions whether a more rigorous appointment process, akin to top performing states, might be able to help lower performing states improve their higher education performance metrics.

More recently, Tandberg et al. (2017) explored a similar organizational characteristic through an examination of the institutionalized relationship between state governors and the state higher education executive officer (SHEEO), who serve as the day-to-day executive overseeing the state's higher education governing agency. Specifically, this study focuses on two aspects of this association—whether the governor has the ability to independently appoint the SHEEO and whether the governor has the ability to independently dismiss the SHEEO—and how this relationship impacts state higher education financing. Using a fixed-effects model, the authors find that unilateral gubernatorial appointment of the SHEEO results in increased spending towards higher education, while unilateral gubernatorial dismissal power results in decreased spending towards higher education. They explain their findings by theorizing that gubernatorial appointment power bolsters a SHEEO's ability to advocate for higher education funding from the state legislature by empowering the executive to action and influencing state legislators to support the governor's indirect goals and agenda. On the other hand, gubernatorial dismissal power strengthens the governor's monitoring ability of a SHEEO's actions, which, in turn, result in the executive aligning their decisions to support the governor and state rather than greater monetary funding for their higher education sector and institutions. Although the Tandberg et al. (2017) study focused on a different actor within state higher education governing agencies, their findings remain compelling for the current study regarding how responsiveness to stakeholders may be influenced by selection mechanisms.

Underlying these studies are an understanding of the structural position of state governing agencies as operating between the state government and higher education sector. Previous research has characterized these organizations as “buffers” (Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 1992, pp. 32-33), “boundary-spanning organizations” (Tandberg, 2013, p. 507), “multi-facing organizations” (Rubin & Ness, 2021), and “intermediaries” (Morgan et al., 2021, p. 573), underscoring that they must be responsive to and are also held accountable by two different types of actors that often have different goals and ideals. Consequently, individuals in leadership roles in these agencies, such as board members and SHEEOs, must prioritize one audience over others in decision-making processes. To this end, the current study will expand on the extant literature by focusing on board members and considering whether selection mechanism influences the responsiveness of these individuals to stakeholders regarding a common state-level policy agenda. Moreover, as many of the previous studies focusing on board members are framed by highly partisan topics, such as tuition setting and institutional spending, which may conflate the influence of appointment by not considering potential alignment between a board member's personal bias and their appointing agent, the policy context for the current study centers on a non-partisan policy agenda in the US—improving college completion and postsecondary degree attainment—that has been a priority nationally for over a decade.

## Policy Context: Improving College Completion and Postsecondary Degree Attainment

Following reports indicating that the U.S. fell in international standing regarding educational attainment and that postsecondary degree completion rates would not meet national workforce needs in the near future (Carnevale & Rose, 2011), improving these metrics became a national policy focus across the nation (Rubin & Hearn, 2018). Notably, President Barack Obama (2009) proclaimed to the U.S. Congress that “by 2020, American will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world,” which was subsequently supported by several philanthropic, advocacy, and policy-oriented organizations. Consequently, many policy solutions began to emerge shortly after these public commitments. For example, a survey conducted by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities highlighted thirteen different initiatives implemented across the US within two years of President Obama’s speech (Russell, 2011). The programs presented in this document vary in policy solutions and level of implementation (state-level versus institutional-level), with several initiatives focusing on students of particular socioeconomic and racial backgrounds or institutions in specific higher education sectors (two-year institutions versus four-year institutions). Despite these underlying differences, all of these initiatives focused on the single goal of improving postsecondary degree completion in the country and showcases the various options available for states to consider for implementation.

Nevertheless, state-level commitment towards improving college completion rates has varied across the US. In particular, previous research noted political and economic factors as well as state governing agency leadership and structure as influencing state policy responses (Perna & Finney, 2014; Rubin & Hearn, 2018). For instance, Perna and Finney (2014) consider five states (Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Washington) in their examination of responses to the national movement to improve college completion. They conceptualize a model for understanding how state public policy can improve higher education performance, structuring their framework around and emphasizing the importance of “state-specific context” (Perna & Finney, 2014, p. 204). In addition to mentioning several of the previously mentioned characteristics, they also emphasize the critical role of state leadership in regards to steering the higher education sector to reach its goals. Specifically, Perna and Finney (2014) suggest that without effective leadership guiding statewide higher education policy, “colleges and universities [will] respond to other incentives and act (rationally) to advance their own priorities” (p. 206). Considering board members are responsible for the oversight of the state governing agency’s leadership, individuals in these leadership roles are more likely to be influenced by the opinions of the board. It is, therefore, important to better understand the role of board members in these policy processes and what potential influences may alter their opinions and decision-making.

## Conceptual Framework

Developed in organizational management and ethics, stakeholder salience seeks to understand the conditions that influence stakeholder involvement in processes and decision-making (Mitchell et al., 1997; Phillips, 2003). Extending Freeman’s (1984) work defining stakeholders and their involvement in organizational management, Mitchell et al. (1997) examined why managers of an organization prioritize the opinions of certain groups over others. They argue that three criteria determine the “stakeholder salience” of a group: “(1) the stakeholder’s *power* to influence the firm, (2) the *legitimacy* of the stakeholder’s relationship with the firm, and (3) the *urgency* of the stakeholder’s claim on the firm” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 854). Based on these measures, Mitchell et al. (1997) create a typology ranging from *latent stakeholders*, who may only possess one of these

attributes, to *expectant stakeholders*, who exhibit two attributes, to *definitive stakeholders*, who are the highest category and have all three attributes. It is expected that as a party develops more of these attributes that their interests are more likely to be considered by the organization, increasing the likelihood for influence by those stakeholders.

Although Mitchell et al. (1997) focused primarily on for-profit firms in their examination of salience, its utility has also been considered in the higher education context (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010; Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2021; Powell & Walsh, 2018). In particular, stakeholder salience can provide insights into how an entity navigates the multiple, and potentially competing, perspectives of the varied constituents to the sector. For example, Benneworth and Jongbloed (2010) considered stakeholder salience through a comparative case analysis of three national programs aimed at enhancing the status of humanities, arts, and social sciences (HASS) as fields of study. Comparing policies in Canada, Scotland, and the United Kingdom, the authors highlighted the role of stakeholders internal and external to higher education institutions noting both play a role in the promotion of HASS programs (e.g., the government through funding and faculty and staff through research and support). They also concluded that non-governmental community representatives were secondary stakeholders but generally were not involved in policy processes, with the exception of occasionally working with institutional researchers and those with other roles connected to university decision-making. In part, the authors suggested the limited role of community stakeholders was due to only “short periods” of salience (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010, p. 582) courtesy of added pressure directed by the main stakeholders that ultimately impacted their role.

Two more recent studies by Powell and Walsh (2018) and Gonzalez-Perez et al. (2021) considered stakeholder salience within change efforts in the UK and Latin America, respectively. Powell and Walsh (2018) examined the 2017 introduction by the U.K. government of a new degree apprenticeship model in England, which “combines vocational and academic learning and is delivered to employees rather than students” (p. 93). The authors argued that this shift represented an on-going goal of the government to be “more responsive to the needs of industry” (p. 93), while offering minimal new support for non-apprentice students. Meanwhile, Gonzalez-Perez et al. (2021) explored how eight private higher education institutions in Latin America reoriented decision-making and actions to align with various stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although previous research would suggest that institutions would prioritize stakeholders that could in-return provide resources, the researchers found social responsibility guided institutional decision-making as evidenced by institutions supporting national and local efforts to combat the pandemic as well as their students and current employees. Both studies underscored the many stakeholders impacted by these decisions but, through considering stakeholder salience, explained factors influencing the prioritization and responsiveness towards certain groups over others.

For purposes of the current study, stakeholder salience can offer insights into how different selection processes may impact state governing agency board members’ level of responsiveness to certain parties throughout the policy process. Based on the criteria discussed by Mitchell et al. (1997), the appointing party would have similar levels of *legitimacy* with the organization due to their involvement in shaping board membership. Therefore, any variation in the influence of these parties should center on differences in levels of *power* to influence the organization and *urgency* of the stakeholder’s claim to impact action. Utilizing stakeholder saliency for the current study also extends the use of the framework by considering it within the federalized U.S. higher education system.

## Research Design

This study employs a comparative case study (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2017), where two cases will be analyzed and compared to gain a more complete understanding of an underlying question. Further, as an exploratory study, the goal of this analysis is not to create generalizable findings but to identify potential research questions to be considered in subsequent studies (Yin, 2017). Case selection followed purposive sampling (Yin, 2017) and considered a set of three primary conditions: 1) membership in Complete College America (CCA), 2) retention of a consolidated governing board, and 3) variation in the way individuals join the state agency board. Given that the study is framed by the policy issue of improving postsecondary degree attainment and college completion rates, the inclusion of CCA membership as a sampling strategy served two goals: 1) signifying a state-level commitment to the college completion agenda, which suggests governing agencies and board members were informed and making decisions around the policy agenda, and 2) ensuring an influential voice in the policy process around this context was equally impactful across cases. In particular, CCA serves as one of the largest single-issue membership organizations focused on improving college completion rates in the US and recent studies discuss the effectiveness of this specific organization in influencing decision-making and the policy process among member states, through its messaging, publishing, and advocacy (Hammond et al., 2019; Ness et al., 2021; Russell, 2011). Considering only states that retain a consolidated governing board ensures the state examined maintain a similar level of responsibility over policy direction, while retaining a comparable level of autonomy from the state government and over the higher education sector (Hearn & McLendon, 2012; McGuinness, 2005). Lastly, considering states that varied regarding board appointment mechanism was critical as it served as the primary state characteristic in question for this study and offers different models to compare results.

Based on the selection criteria, two state governing agencies were selected: the University System of Georgia (USG) and the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE). Georgia and Nevada both became members of CCA's network of states within the first two years of the organization's existence, with Georgia joining in August 2011 and Nevada joining as one of the original member states in February 2010. Since joining, Georgia and Nevada have been involved in CCA's annual convenings and workshops suggesting greater participation beyond merely being a member (Ness et al., 2021). Both states govern their public higher education sector through state governing agencies classified as consolidated governing boards (McGuinness, 2005), which were established by their respective state constitutions and explicitly created to be autonomous entities from the state government. Finally, USG selects its 19 board members via a common appointment mechanism—nomination by the state governor and approval by the state senate—while NSHE's 13 board members are elected by the general citizenry. Notably, Nevada is the only state in the U.S. where state governing agency board members are selected in this manner. More information about each state's fulfillment of these conditions, as well as additional comparative characteristics, are presented in Table 1.



**Table 1***Dimensions of Sample States*

Case Criteria	Georgia	Nevada
State Higher Education Agency	University System of Georgia (USG)	Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE)
Constitutionally Established Agency	✓	✓
Institutions Reporting to Board of Regents	28 <sup>a</sup>	8
No. of Voting Members on Board of Regents	19	13
Board Appointment Mechanism	Governor Appointed and Confirmed by Georgia Senate	Publicly-Elected <sup>b</sup>
Board Member Term Length	7 Years	6 Years
Member of Complete College America	✓	✓

<sup>a</sup>There were over 30 USG institutions reporting to the board when the state initially joined Complete College America in 2009. Several institutions were subsequently consolidated or closed due to previously planned efforts.

<sup>b</sup>The Nevada Governor appoints members to the NSHE board when there is an unexpected vacancy due to death or retirement. However, all board members are subject to reelection via public election regardless of whether their initial appointment was made by the state executive.

The data for this paper include 16 interviews with state governing agency board members and state governing agency officials, including chancellors, vice chancellors, and associate vice chancellors who oversaw pertinent areas (academic affairs, students affairs, government relations, data and research, etc.). The interviews occurred between September 2016 and March 2017, after receiving IRB approval, with each conversation lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol with relevant probes (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), including questions about the evolution of statewide college completion policy activity starting in 2009 (aligning with President Obama's call to action), the role of state governing agency board members, preferred sources of information, and the relationship between board members and stakeholder groups. A selection of key questions from the interview protocol are included as Appendix A. Interview data was supplemented with the analysis of 358 documents, including state governing agency meeting agenda and meeting minutes, statewide strategic plans, reports created by non-governmental organizations regarding statewide policies, and local and national media articles. These documents provided background information, names of potential informants for the study, and served as a resource when developing the interview protocol and to understand the overarching timeline and major events in the early stages of developing each case. As the study developed further, the document analysis was also considered to verify findings and emergent themes. Table 2 provides a distribution of the data collected.

**Table 2**  
*Distribution of Data Collected*

	<u>Georgia</u>	<u>Nevada</u>
Total Interviews Conducted	8	8
State Governing Agency Board Members	4	5
State Governing Agency Officials	4	3
Total Documents Reviewed	182	176

Data analysis included coding transcriptions of the interviews and archival data using the qualitative data analysis program Dedoose with *a priori* codes based on an analytical framework that included: the role of state governing board members, research utilization, stakeholder group involvement, stages of the policy process, characteristics of the education sector (e.g., higher education attainment, higher education financing, higher education governance, K-12 education sector), and state-level features (e.g., political ideology, state economy and workforce, demographics of citizenry). I also induced emergent themes from the data collected by capturing local language (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, I employed several techniques to maximize trustworthiness throughout the analysis, including triangulation of data sources, member checking by conducting multiple interviews, peer debriefing with individuals familiar with the topic, and rival explanations analysis (Yin, 2017).

### Limitations

Before discussing the cases and analysis of findings, there are a few limitations to note. First, the response rate among informants was lower than anticipated. The 16 individuals who participated represent approximately 38% of the 42 originally contacted, which was particularly lower among board members (nine of a potential 32), possibly due to the prestigious and political nature of serving as a board member. Despite this constraint, though, data saturation was achieved across interview and archival data collected (Yin, 2017), and I am confident on the themes and findings presented in this manuscript. Additionally, as this study primarily focused on a state-level characteristic's influence on statewide policy-making, I did not consider institutional-level or community-level characteristics in case selection. The interview protocol did, however, request insights regarding local-level policy decision-making as a comparison point with the statewide college completion agenda, which ultimately emerged as a thematic finding and will be discussed in greater detail. Relatedly, as this study focused on state responses to improving postsecondary degree attainment and college completion, results may be limited to this specific context given the national focus and expansive support towards this agenda. Finally, while I utilized several techniques to increase validity and reliability outlined by methodologists (Yin, 2017), the accuracy of the study is entirely reliant upon what respondents could remember and were willing to share.

### Case Narratives

This section will offer separate narratives for the two states examined. These overviews will focus on the development and implementation of the statewide college completion agendas in each state and the role of board members in these processes.

### **Georgia: A Board of Political Appointees**

In Georgia, the college completion agenda pre-dated President Obama's 2009 proclamation and was developed originally through actions by the Board of Regents. A University System of Georgia (USG) official explained:

The Board of Regents was already involved with a project they called 'RPG.' It was 'Retention, Progression, Graduation rates'... there was no sexy name to it, they just nicknamed it RPG, and there were probably two, three, maybe even four cycles into making that a point of emphasis. The campuses were reporting a little more regularly about what they were doing with regard to retention and graduation rates, and the Board was making it a center piece of their meeting schedule and to have regular conversations around that.

This respondent continued by mentioning that the "University of Georgia and [Georgia] Tech were already involved with their own unique plan with what they were doing about RPG," and that board members believed this should be a policy goal for all system institutions. Although there was not a system-wide policy outlining what RPG should include, several individuals mentioned this early goal promoted by board members as a stepping stone to a formal system-level initiative concerning degree completion.

In particular, respondents focused on 2011 when Complete College America (CCA) approached Governor Nathan Deal regarding joining their Alliance of States as a key event in the development of broader completion policy. Appealing to Deal's prioritization of workforce development, as well as USG's established action around RPG, Georgia joined CCA in August of that year. In announcing the state's commitment to improving postsecondary degree completion, Deal discussed the "Complete College Georgia Initiative" (CCG), which focused on five policy areas: 1) college readiness, 2) improving access and completion for underserved students, 3) shortening time to degree, 4) restructuring instructional delivery, and 5) transforming remediation. As part of CCG, USG institutions would also be required to submit institutional plans outlining institutional-level goals, implemented policies, and various additional metrics to inform the statewide completion goal. Discussing this system-wide policy shift, USG Regents suggested that the development of CCG and joining CCA was generally a governor-led process with additional insights from the USG Chancellor. One board member explained:

The way I remember it is it was really the Governor's initiative, that he had done some background work and came to the Chancellor, said "you know, we've got to be a more efficient operation," and "we've got to get more children – more young people in Georgia through our system graduated to meet the needs of what our economy is going to be, and, of course, we're preparing people for jobs right now that we don't know if they're going to be there in the future."

This perspective aligns with how CCA recruited member states, specifically through the governor's office and in partnership with the higher education sector head. Moreover, the USG board's involvement in the development of the previous RPG initiative was also central to ease and speed at which CCG was adopted as several respondents mentioned this suggested improving degree completion "was already a priority in Georgia."

A USG official offered a more nuanced perspective. Specifically, they noted that improving degree completion "meant everything to the governor's office in terms of relaying their priorities for Governor Deal's first term, and then... a more educated Georgia became the centerpiece of his agenda." This individual continued by suggesting, "I don't know that I've observed too many

governing boards getting too far out of step with the governor that appointed them” and argued Governor Deal’s vocal support of the initiative was sufficient for the board and agency to commit.

Once the agenda was in place, respondents suggested the constitutionally-granted autonomy of USG and its board from the state became a key factor in its implementation and proliferation across institutions. A USG official explained:

One thing that’s not been as important for Georgia’s completion agenda was to have SREB or Lumina or Gates or even CCA coming in and vouching for the importance of this to constituencies... We don’t have to persuade the House, and the State, and the Governor for this to be a priority. [USG] controls its agenda from the Board of Regents. We can do what we want to do. If this is a priority, we’ll pursue it.

Ultimately, there was limited need for the USG agency or board to consider perspectives outside of the system when gauging whether a focus on completion was worthwhile. Although board members did not serve a central role in the decision or creation of CCG, they did make decisions pre-dating this initiative that contributed to college completion becoming a statewide policy priority. Moreover, as a board member noted, “We monitor the metrics for Complete College Georgia – progression, retention, and graduation rates – the different metrics that we need to make sure that we have a high functioning system.” Through these monitoring efforts, this respondent noted board members’ roles in “identifying best practices and really praising those best practices, and facilitating knowledge transfer to and between institutions.” Consequently, while board members may not have been as central in the policy development process of CCG, they still served an important role in the oversight of policies.

Respondents from Georgia also argued that the focus on college completion was a unique instance of policy-making and not necessarily reflective of the involvement by USG board members traditionally in these processes. A USG official explained:

I think [college] completion is unusual in that they’re generally different programs or approaches that have to be tried out... it’s based on what we’re hearing from our sister states, what we’re hearing at national meetings through Complete College America, the Gates Foundation, Lumina, and others about best practices... It takes moving forward and giving this a go and seeing what the data might say, whereas in other situation... when [board members are] involved with fiscal policy or capital projects, it might be a little more straight forward in manner regarding the way they act... We have a little more room in academic affairs to truly develop a hypothesis and a treatment that we run through our campuses and see what the outcome is.

This official also suggested that board members perceive system staff to be the “content experts” in academic affairs and, therefore, rely on them to drive decision-making in this area. Other USG officials made similar assertions with one noting, “board members feel like they’re on the hook in terms of legal and fiduciary risk and responsibilities” and that their expertise is not on the “academic side of the house.” As a board member explained, “Our staff, we have a remarkable staff... They’ll give us very concise reports ... with maybe fifteen bullet points on a [policy solution], and how it could serve students... the staff drives so much of [decision-making] with the information that they give us.” Consequently, because the USG staff were viewed as the experts on the topic, respondents argued that the board members were less involved than they would in other topical areas.

While discussing the development and implementation of CCG and statewide college completion policy, respondents offered counter narratives of board members’ actions with local and narrower issues as a comparison point regarding their involvement in the policy process. For

instance, a board member explained that “being a [board member] is a very high visibility position, so you get a lot of calls.” A different board member provided a related anecdote:

When I go to a Rotary meeting... I'll have probably, on average, five or six people come up and tell me something about education, either a success story of their children or a need of their children, maybe where [the system is] failing or where we're succeeding, and I think all board members take that into account, but we get bombarded with it.

This respondent did not discuss the outcome of these interactions, namely if these conversations resulted in any change, but a different board member suggested these conversations often focus on voicing an opinion, especially “if we're dealing with a controversial decision... the name change [of a university] or, you know, undocumented students.” This respondent continued by noting:

If it's something that's really controversial that needs to be aired, we want to hear their concerns and let everyone know we're listening... I know where they're coming from, but you also can't let those types of things drive your decisions. You've got to look at the big picture, what's best for the students, what's best for the institution.

Several board members noted instances when these personal communications resulted in action on behalf of individual students, such as regarding financial aid, or served as an introduction into a broader issue that required examination, such as transferring course credit between institutions, which led to board members discussing these concerns or requesting information from USG staff.

However, USG board members acknowledged that these personal conversations with the community rarely influenced significant decision-making or directly informed system-wide action. As one board member explained, “I do think it's our responsibility to hear parents' concerns and the community's concerns, but really that is the role of the institution and their town and gown [relationship]. That's the role of the [institution's] president to make sure he has that relationship with the community.” In other words, this individual argued that the USG board overseeing system-wide decision-making may be too far removed from institutions to warrant a focus on community relationships and issues. This perspective was furthered by a different board member, who noted, “We recognize students' concerns, but then again, I don't feel the tail should be wagging the dog.” Ultimately, while USG board members discussed their role in bringing attention to certain issues and serving in an oversight role of policies after their adoption, as a USG official explained, “They're a policy board. They're a governing board. They're not an implementation board.”

### **Nevada: A Board of Elected Officials**

College completion was an often-discussed topic during the Nevada System of Higher Education's (NSHE) board meetings, though mostly as an explanatory factor or justification for decisions. For example, during an April 2009 meeting, NSHE officials discussed summer course offerings and available instructor summer salaries as a means to aid students complete their degrees in a reasonable time. Similarly, in a June 2009 meeting, board members discussed the potential use of distance education as a cost-saving strategy, but considered poor completion rates of these programs as an important factor in determining whether to pursue it as a policy across the system. However, it was not until the board's September 2010 meeting, which announced Complete College America's (CCA) inclusion of Nevada in a pilot completion academy, that improving college completion was discussed directly as a statewide policy focus. In addition to serving as a focusing event around college completion, respondents noted that CCA's completion academy also advocated their “game changer” policies solutions that later were considered for Nevada's policy plan, including

performance-based funding, changes to academic remediation, course delivery methods, and considerations around time to degree.

Two events in 2011 furthered the statewide emphasis on improving NSHE degree completion rates. First, following the election of Brian Sandoval as Governor, he made several speeches and statements connecting the success of the higher education sector with economic development of the state. One board member suggested that Governor Sandoval aimed to “focus on, in a very public way... that we want [current and prospective students] to finish their degree and then stay in Nevada and be long-term contributing vital members of the workforce.” The second event that year was NSHE released a new strategic plan, entitled *The State and the System: NSHE Plan for Nevada's College and Universities, Combining Excellence and Austerity to Attain Success*, which similarly argued that a successful higher education sector was necessary for the future of the state. The strategic plan also included all four policy areas emphasized by CCA during their completion academy (performance funding, remediation, course delivery methods, and reducing time to degree). Remarking on the inclusion of CCA policy solutions in the 2011 strategic plan, NSHE officials spoke highly of the intermediary organization’s role in influencing the policy agenda and discussion in the state. One respondent even explained, “We often give credit to CCA [for non-CCA related policies] because CCA has name recognition in the state, so when we go forward and say ‘hey, this is something that’s recommended by CCA’ they listen.”

In discussing board members’ role in the development and prioritization of improving college completion, opinions from respondents were mixed but generally connected to the system’s decision to join CCA. For example, one board member suggested that they played an integral role from the beginning:

The [NSHE] Chancellor’s Office, at our direction, started providing data to the board on what it would take for us to be able to implement or develop and implement a [college completion] program. And the board directed the Chancellor’s Office to become a member of the CCA and to report back to us as to what that meant and what that would entail for our institutions. Then, the Chancellor’s Office... put together the data for us to take a look at, so that we would be able to come up with a policy.

A different board member recalled the completion initiative “was presented to [the board] by the Chancellor” and then the board members’ made official decisions whether to join CCA and adopt a focus degree attainment as a priority. A third perspective came from an NSHE official, who stated, “Our involvement in CCA did not come from the board, it came from the governor.” Although these accounts appear to be contradictory regarding the board’s involvement and consideration of working with CCA, there was agreement across all respondents that the board’s job is to “set policy” for the system and, therefore, college completion was not deemed a priority until it was formally adopted by the board.

When discussing policy solution development, respondents suggested board members were influential prior to policy implementation. For example, two of the main policies adopted by the system was an outcomes-focused funding model and “15 to Finish,” which aimed to shorten time to degree by increasing baseline credit requirements for full-time enrollment. Although both of these policies were advocated by CCA, which helped expedite interest in these solutions by the board, respondents noted board members were consulted with requests for their input in the development of metrics included in the funding formula and direction of the credit requirement program. Nevertheless, as an NSHE official explained, board members “are not very engaged in the nitty-gritty of policy except from the perspective that they often decide that there’s something that they’ve heard about or encountered that really ought to be taken up.”

In particular, as described by one board member, board members rely on the Chancellor's Office to determine potential system-wide policies to consider and research possible changes to current policy, including the college completion agenda:

I think in many instances, [the Chancellor's Office] were the ones that were up on the latest literature and latest initiatives throughout the nation. So, I think the Chancellor's Office and the Vice Chancellors were the ones that really brought [policies] to [the board's] attention. And, you know, told us about things like Complete College America and "15 to Finish"... but when they brought it forward to us, they encouraged us to embrace it and we did, so I think we work in concert together on ways to make it all work.

NSHE officials held a similar stance, with one noting a caveat that "for academic affairs [issues]... a lot of the policy changes are born out of the Chancellor's Office because we have a research team that is using data to continuously look at ways that we can be better, do better, serve our students better." Put differently, because NSHE has a team focused on researching academic affairs issues, board members do not need to take a lead in this functional area and can focus on other issues and concerns. Respondents did, however, mention the academic affairs committee of the system, which includes a "smaller committee of board members that is sort of an offshoot of the larger board," as a location where "a lot of policy decisions are coming from." Therefore, although the Chancellor's Office may drive academic affairs policies, such as those connected to improving degree attainment, board members are still intimately involved in the process prior to decisions around whether implementation occurs.

In comparison, respondents noted a greater role by board members in more localized policies and specific cases. An NSHE official explained a possible reason why:

Our board members are all accessible, and you know, they can be emailed or called... do they get ideas from the folks that are either disgruntled or even have just good ideas that they want to, you know, share and hopefully that will rise to the top to be an actual policy change? I think that happens. And then sometimes... they have a neighbor or a friend or someone that has a problem that is, you know, trying to understand why does this happen. Why don't we do it this way or a student transferring from another state and what issues they might have? But people are pretty savvy and if they don't like the answers that they get from the provost or their advisor, and it rises on up and they don't get the resolution that they want, they email board members and then the board member are like, "oh, well, why do we do it this way?"

Underlying this perspective, is the reality that NSHE board members are publicly elected by congressional district. Specifically, as a board member explained, "they're all your constituents besides being, you know, educators or students and so you have to listen and take it all into account." While one respondent suggested the focus on constituents may be a function of the "newly competitive environment... being brought to campuses" due to an increasingly crowded higher education marketplace, there was general agreement that board members, as one NSHE official noted, face greater "pressure for customer service improvements than in most systems." In fact, one board member even viewed their role to be akin to serving as a "state representative" because they are elected by congressional district and must be "accessible to our constituency." This individual continued by explaining that "it's up to you to get yourself reelected... it's not up to the governor... they don't endorse you or anything like that." Ultimately, because board members in Nevada are not politically appointed, there is much greater need for them to appeal to their voting

constituency to retain their position and, by consequence, to listen and act according to the needs of the individuals in contact with them.

## **Emergent Themes**

The Georgia and Nevada cases discussing the development and implementation of a statewide college completion policy agenda provide insights into the role of state governing agency board members in the policy process and influential stakeholders guiding their decision-making. Respondents offered insights suggesting factors that made the college completion framing unique as well as areas where board members and certain stakeholders are more likely to directly influence the policy process. This section will discuss two themes that emerged across the cases: 1) board member roles depend on policy agenda, and 2) statewide versus local policy issues.

### **Board Member Roles Can Depend on Policy Agenda**

Respondents in both states noted that the college completion agenda was anomalous in many ways when compared with other policy initiatives undertaken by state governing agencies, which ultimately limited the role of board members. In particular, because of the national attention directed towards improving degree attainment from President Obama and national organizations, there was a noticeable interest to enact solutions at the state-level that could serve the broader agenda. This was shown in Georgia, where an established USG board's focus on retention, progression, and graduation rates quickly became the foundation for a significantly larger and broader system-wide initiative, and in Nevada, where tangentially-related conversations on the topic was succeeded by a much more concise and focused agenda.

Furthermore, as both states were early members of CCA, a variety of policy solutions were promoted to state policymakers and the state governing agency absent of board member involvement or intervention. Relatedly, since CCA membership was contingent on the involvement of the state governor, the success of a college completion agenda became of greater importance to the state executive than traditionally seen around other higher education policy issues, which led several respondents to suggest that their state's college completion agenda was primarily a governor-driven initiative. Collectively, these factors suggest a more limited direct role for board members in the early stages of the completion agenda, regardless of selection mechanism, but instead a reliance on the state executive and policy advocacy organizations, like CCA, for focusing attention on the issue and presenting possible solutions for enactment.

Once college completion was established as a priority, the role of board members and stakeholders influencing their decisions shifted but remained framed by the policy agenda. In particular, board members in both states noted that improving degree attainment was viewed as an academic affairs-related concern and, unlike other policy areas that are within board members' portfolio (e.g., hiring officials or financial decisions), policy areas related to academics are considered to be outside of their expertise. Although respondents, particularly in Nevada, noted some board members were more involved in these processes due to their role on the academic affairs committee, there was general agreement that agency staff served in a central role in gauging the potential utility and value of policy solutions. Board members suggested there was greater reliance on governing agency staff and other "content experts" who better understand the academic side of higher education. Moreover, given that many of the policies under consideration in both states were advocated by CCA, much of the decision-making centered on adapting these solutions to the state's context rather than determining whether they were best practices or would be successful, which



eliminated a significant role for board members in this process and mechanisms for individuals to influence policy adoption.

Ultimately, respondents highlighted unique traits to the current college completion agenda that impacted the board members' responsibilities, such as it being in the domain of academics and being influenced by CCA and other national organizations, but it is worth noting that neither of these factors are exclusive to this policy agenda. Policies associated with curriculum and majors may similarly be characterized as academic affairs-related, and the increasing role of intermediary and advocacy organizations in the U.S. higher education sector suggest this limited role of board members is not exclusive to the completion agenda. Therefore, based on the current analysis, the role of board members in the state policy process as well as the stakeholders considered in these processes may be contingent on the policy agenda and policy context itself.

### **Statewide Versus Local Policy Issues**

A second theme emerged through comparisons made by respondents between state and more localized policy issues. For example, individuals in Georgia and Nevada suggested local policy issues, including those at single institutions or those impacting single or groups of students, are often introduced and influenced by board members. Because of the public nature of the role, board members suggested these concerns are often brought to their attention at community activities, such as the Georgia respondent who heard stories of accomplishments and barriers to success at a Rotary meeting, as well as respondents in Nevada who noted the availability of emails and phone numbers of NSHE board members. These anecdotal interactions were discussed as a mechanism for institutional policy change or to serve as a catalyst for board members to seek additional information to inform their perspective. However, these discussions also alluded to the true influence of appointment mechanism on how board members in the two states interact and view these constituents.

For example, as the broader Nevada citizenry double as their electing population, NSHE board members discussed paying close attention to these individuals needs and were willing to find answers or solve issues as best they could. To this end, multiple board members viewed their role to be akin to serving as a state representative because they are elected based on congressional district and believed they needed to be "accessible to out constituency." On the other hand, although USG board members stated that they would be willing to help individuals in the public, there was significant reservation with one board member suggesting the "tail should not wag the dog" and that their primary responsibility was to the state and to consider the broader agency's plan and goals. In fact, rather than considering the role to be similar to a state official, respondents in Georgia suggested board members often aimed to align decisions with the governor and not be "far out of step" with the state executive.

One important caveat to this distinction was the role of governing agency staff, who were the most often cited source of information for board members regardless of policy issue or appointment mechanism. These individuals were highlighted as offering "concise reports," being "up on the latest literature and latest initiatives throughout the nation," and handling a lot of the research informing decision-making. Some respondents even suggested that the provision of data and research to board members was a primary responsibility of agency staff, solidifying the important role these staff members play in providing information.

## **Discussion**

A primary finding in this study was the overall limited involvement of board members in the policy process around improving postsecondary degree attainment statewide. Given previous

research suggesting board member training and appointment could serve as a potential mechanism to improve various student metrics, including completion (Minor, 2008), this common narrative in both states around board member involvement was striking. Respondents suggested this reality was due, in part, to the nature of goals of improving degree attainment—namely that it is considered an academic affairs-related issue—which falls outside of the expertise of board members, but also emphasized the integral role of Complete College America and other intermediary organizations in the introduction and advocacy of policy solutions. Relatedly, there was an acknowledgement of ownership of the initiative by the state governor that supplanted traditional duties and responsibilities of board members. This was evident through remarks by respondents regarding other policy issues that suggested board members are often responsible in introducing new policy concerns, questioning potential policy solutions for different agenda areas, and monitoring the outcomes of implemented policies more directly than was evident with degree attainment.

However, through these discussions of the role of board members in different issue areas, the influence of selection mechanism on responsiveness to stakeholders became increasingly evident. More specifically, as board members discussed their role and consideration of state-level versus local-level policy concerns differences between the Georgia and Nevada cases emerged. Respondents in Nevada emphasized the importance of helping all constituents and being willing to speak with these individuals to work through any issues faced. Board members even suggested their position was akin to serving as a state representative and emphasized their role in being “accessible to our constituency.” On the other hand, although respondents in Georgia mentioned receiving similar calls to action from stakeholders, there was notably less willingness for these individual to drive policy decisions, with one board member stating that the “tail should not wag the dog” and another suggested their role was entirely “apolitical.” Nevertheless, underlying many of the comments by Georgia board members was a goal of aligning decision-making with the state’s governor and serving as a means to help the state executive’s agenda become realized.

In order to make sense of the similarities and differences between cases, I return to the guiding conceptual framework of this study. Based on the work on stakeholder salience by Mitchell et al. (1997) and Phillips (2003), the common responses to the state-level college completion agenda and divergent responses to local policy issues can be attributed to the levels of legitimacy, power, and urgency represented by each stakeholder and each situation. Specifically, within the college completion agenda, the state’s governor maintained significant legitimacy and power in both states due to their position as the state executive and presented significant urgency through their desire to implement policy from the involvement of Complete College America and other external pressures. Although the governor has less legitimacy among board members in Nevada because of less direct involvement in shaping the governing agency, the overall power of the position and role in selecting board members due to sudden openings on the board likely trumped this differential. Conversely, when considering the smaller and more local policy issues, concerns from internal higher education stakeholders (e.g., students and their parents, faculty, alumni) were much more effective in Nevada than Georgia because these individuals maintain more direct legitimacy and power from their ability to influence board member selection through public elections. Ultimately, an important narrative develops from this study that suggests the public election of board members increases the influence of the general citizenry in policy decision-making without changing the potential influence of the state governor, due to existing power derived from the position. These findings align with other research on the association between the state governor and higher education officials (Tandberg et al., 2017), which may suggest that U.S. state executives maintain significant power over higher education due to institutionalized powers through appointment and, more generally, due to their position within the state.

## Conclusion and Future Research

Despite state governing agency boards' central role in the operation and oversight of public higher education in the US (Longanecker, 2006; McGuinness, 2005; Morgan et al., 2021), their responsibilities regarding policy-making are not as well researched or understood as other key actors. Moreover, the limited research addressing this question focus on more partisan topics such as higher education finances and tuition setting. The current study aimed to contribute to this gap in the literature by examining the role of board members in the policy-making process around improving postsecondary degree attainment, and questioning whether board members would be more beholden to the state officials in charge of appointment (University System of Georgia) when compared to similarly positioned individuals selected by the voting public of the state (Nevada System of Higher Education) regarding responsiveness and prioritization to stakeholders. Although respondents from both cases suggested board members had a limited direct role in the policy process around this issue, insights were gained regarding the policy role of these individuals and the influence of their selection mechanism on their preferred sources of information. Moreover, considering the emergent themes within the framing of stakeholder salience offers additional academic purchase to this study and line of research.

Given the exploratory nature of the current study, there remain areas for future research. Researchers could reconstruct the current study around a policy area that board members are more centrally involved, such as personnel hiring, which may provide greater insight into specific roles of board members in decision-making. Additionally, although the two cases investigated were selected through purposive sampling, there remain characteristics among state governing agency board membership that were not addressed in this study, including the influence of having mixed appointment mechanisms, retaining members of the faculty or student body on the board, and the inclusion of *ex-officio* state officials among board members. Finally, given the significant attention afforded to state governors by board members in the current study, there would also be value in examining this direct relationship further regarding appointment mechanism and membership makeup of state governing agency boards. Ultimately, considering the central role state agency board members serve in governing public postsecondary education in the US, it is critical that more research is conducted around how they operate and ways in which various constituencies inform and influence their policy and oversight decision-making.

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## **Appendix A**

### *Select Questions from Interview Protocol*

1. How would you characterize the role of [state governing board] in [state]?
  - a. What do you consider to be your primary responsibilities as a member of [state governing board]?
2. How does the [state governing board] and its members navigate the various stakeholder perspectives interested in the operation of higher education?
3. As increasing postsecondary degree attainment rates has become a central policy concern nationally, how did college completion become part of the state's policy agenda?
  - a. Who brought the idea to the state's attention?
  - b. Were there any additional influential actors in the early stages of the completion agenda?
  - c. [State] is a member of Complete College America, has their involvement influenced the development of the completion agenda?
4. How similar or different has the development and implementation of the college completion agenda been to other policy issues?
5. How would you characterize the role of [state governing board] in the process of adopting [college completion policy]?
  - a. From your perspective, would you characterize this as a standard example of your role as a member of the [state governing board]?
6. What is the role of [state governor] in the policy process at [state governing agency]?
7. Given the public facing role of [state governing board], does the general citizenry play a role in policy decisions?
  - a. Did they play a role in the college completion agenda?
  - b. Is there a time when they have played a key role from your perspective?
8. When a policy arrives at [state governing agency/board], what is the process that you take to inform yourself about the merits of the initiative?
9. Are there any sources that stood out for the completion-related agenda?
10. Can you name a time that research changed your mind on a policy decision?

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