



University Governing Boards Must Protect the Mission of the Institution

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Over the last four years, a wave of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion bills, lawsuits, and complaints have inundated the higher education landscape. These developments have created uncertainty for institutional leaders and intensified political scrutiny of colleges and universities. Innovative strategies are urgently needed to support university decision-makers in safeguarding institutional missions amid political intrusion.

Protecting institutional autonomy is a core responsibility of college and university boards. With questions swirling regarding the purpose and value of higher education, whether higher education is public good, and who is welcome on our campuses, it is important to know what university governing boards need to do to ensure institutions stay true to their missions.

Governance in the Face of Anti-DEI Legislation

Threats to academic freedom and institutional independence carry ramifications for students, staff, faculty, and the community.

Our research on higher education governance finds that boards can help institutions preserve their core identities and missions despite the onslaught of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion attacks by serving as buffers rather than defaulting to overly restrictive interpretations of new legal requirements

Boards have commonly held roles and responsibilities that when enacted help ensure colleges and universities stay true to their mission and center student success. Equity is an integral part of the core responsibilities of boards.

Universities handle new anti-DEI legislation by doing two things at once: exploring new ways to follow the law and using their past experience to guide staff and students through the transition. When boards ask tough questions, they are simply making sure the school is using both of these strengths. When boards leverage established routines, expertise, and institutional memory, they help their institutions remain nimble through transitions.

Governance That Centers Equity and Student Success

Boards should work with presidents to:

- Allocate the necessary resources to support diverse groups on campuses and create inclusive environments.
 - For example, when public funds for DEI are restricted, boards can help by exploring private alternatives. They might suggest building a DEI endowment funded by alumni, who are often eager to support these causes. This is not a new idea; universities already do this for sports and other areas. The board's role is to protect the institution's mission by asking how these proven fundraising tactics can be applied to DEI efforts to keep them compliant and well-funded.
- Explore equity-preserving, legally compliant, and mission-centric pathways.
 - Boards don't have to just "go through the motions." They can make a real impact by asking the right questions. For example, instead of settling for one training program, they should ask HR to present several options for maintaining a workplace free from harassment. By comparing these bids, the board acts as a buffer, ensuring the training is both legally resilient and effective. This process uses the board's power of inquiry to find the best way forward within the law, rather than simply giving up on DEI efforts.
- Enable other actors to advance commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion in ways that are also compliant with the law amid mounting pressures from external forces.
 - For example, "Boards should exercise due diligence to allow for thoughtful and strategic responses. One way to implement this is for boards to request legal reviews or impact assessments before making sweeping changes to diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or programs." When boards do their job well, they can make sure other institutional actors are able to maximize their roles.

When faced with external pressures to change, boards should:

- Ensure the changes align with the mission of the institution and the roles and responsibilities of the board.
 - Boards must ensure the university's mission clearly includes a focus on equity and social justice. When these values are under attack, the board acts as a shield, protecting the school's commitments by finding legally sound ways to maintain them. The institution should actively work to remove any policies that create unfair barriers to success. If the current mission does not prioritize the safety and success of everyone on campus, the board must help leaders update their goals and incentives to reflect these core values.
- Not proactively make changes that are anti diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 - Boards need to do more than just react to changes —they need to stay ahead of them and work with institutional leaders to research what the implications of such changes would be for their campus. This means making sure diversity and inclusion are part of the school's DNA, not just something done to satisfy external requirements. If DEI is treated as essential to a good education and student success, it becomes much easier to defend. Ultimately, a board's best strategy is to show that the school cannot fulfill its primary purpose of teaching and supporting students without these core values.

Board action should demonstrate to students and the community that they are fully committed to the mission and vision of the institution regardless of political pressures. Student success is central to decision making.

Read more in Rall, R. M., Morgan, D. L., Dominguez, V., Morgan, J., & Hall, N. D. (2025).

Governing Boards as Institutional Umbrellas: A Framework for Strategic Governance Amid Legislative Challenges.

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