

## Why is the board chair-president relationship so important?

Here are two AGB consultants' responses to this question:

**Douglas Orr:** It is arguably the most important partnership in higher education because, in tandem, the board chair and the president lead the board in defining its responsibilities, in setting the institution's strategic direction, and in ensuring that the board operates on a policy level. Also, the board chair and the president help set the tone and culture for the entire board, which allows the board discussion to be much more interactive and candid than it might be otherwise—thereby maximizing the board's potential. Working together, they help get at the essence of board governance in this challenging and volatile environment.

**Sheila Stearns:** A good relationship between a chair and a president spreads confidence all through the rest of the board and the entire institution. And we all know how much more empowered we are in an organization that has confidence. You're willing to take more risks. The board chair and the president, other board members, and senior administrators are more energized and willing to bring up sticky issues or to confront bad news. It's like building a solid foundation to a structure: It makes the whole university stronger.

**Source:** "The President-Board Chair Relationship: Making It Work, Making It Count" by AGB, *Trusteeship* November/December 2014

## How can the board chair and president strengthen their relationship?

**Trust and respect are the building blocks of a strong board chair-president relationship.** Every board chair-president team will decide on the best way to sustain the clear, open communication that is so critical to their relationship.

Success in the presidential role is not easy, and the chair provides great value as a coach and confidant, helping the president understand the institution's culture and shared governance, as well as its landmines. Likewise, the board chair should be open to guidance from the president who has been in office long enough to provide perspective and thoughtful recommendations. The wise board chair will make a priority of establishing the respectful relationship with the president that will benefit them both.

**Source:** *Effective Board Chairs: A Guide for University and College Chairs* by Jeffrey B. Trammell, AGB 2016

## What are indicators of a troubled relationship between the board chair and the president?

- 1. Decisions are made at the last minute.** The president and board chair rush to make decisions and don't want to slow things down by convening the executive or other committee or waiting for a board meeting.
- 2. Even the board chair is surprised by actions taken by the president** and isn't informed in advance about key personnel changes, new partnerships, or other significant decisions.
- 3. The board chair inserts himself or herself into decisions** that are clearly the president's to make, calls the president too often, or demands information other board members or committee chairs do not receive. (The chair is not the president's boss.)

**Source:** "Board Chair-Presidential Relations: Strong and Balanced, But Not Exclusive" AGB Blog Post by Merrill P. Schwartz, August 29, 2017

What are indicators of a healthy relationship between the board chair and the president?

1. **The president and board chair have a routine time to talk**—weekly, monthly, or some other interval. This makes it easy to keep up to date, test ideas, and plan. Conversations also happen as needed, when issues arise, and the president and board chair make an effort to take each other's call.
2. **The president adheres to the treaty of no surprises** when it comes to the board chair and the board. If the board would want to know first, the president makes sure the chair and all board members are informed directly and don't read about emerging issues in the newspaper. There's a plan in place for sharing information quickly if the need arises.
3. **The board chair serves as wise counsel for the president**, but not decision-maker for the board. The president and chair confer about when and how to bring matters to the board in a timely way.

**Source:** "Board Chair-President Relations: Strong and Balanced, But Not Exclusive" AGB Blog Post by Merrill P. Schwartz, August 29, 2017

What percent of presidents serve as an ex officio board member?

**In many independent institutions—78 percent, according to AGB research— the president is an ex officio board member;** 56 percent are voting members, while 22 percent do not have voting status. (In contrast, just 32 percent of public institution presidents are ex officio board members— 6 percent with a vote and 26 percent without.)

**Source:** *Effective Board Chairs: A Guide for University and College Chairs* by Jeffrey B. Trammell, AGB 2016

What is the board chair's role in a presidential transition?

**In a presidential transition, the chair provides the continuity** from one president to the next and the communication link between board and president. Ideally, the president views the chair as coach and confidant. It is the chair's responsibility to prepare the board for a different relationship with the incoming presidents.

New presidents rarely have all the attributes that the institution sought, and many are first-time college presidents. The board chair eases the transition by working with the new leader to determine where development, training, or coaching makes sense. No matter how the two leaders decide to work together, the board chair's role is to support success— for the new president and ultimately for the institution.

**Source:** *Effective Board Chairs: A Guide for University and College Chairs* by Jeffrey B. Trammell, AGB 2016

## Related Resources

### Effective Board Chairs: A Guide for University and College Chairs

**Jeffrey B. Trammell**

This publication looks at the responsibilities of both public and independent board chairs. To do the job well, each needs a dedicated focus on institutional mission and a sophisticated understanding of how to leverage the power of the board. The position also demands the right leadership skills and the capacity to anticipate change and generate solutions.

**2016 • 56 pages**

### Board Chair-President Relations: Strong and Balanced, But Not Exclusive

**Merrill P. Schwartz**

Managing communication in a world of instant messaging is a challenge, especially in colleges and universities; shared governance brings expectations about sharing information and decision-making. When it comes to the president and board, the board chair is the linchpin. Regular communication allows for meaningful feedback and input on pressing decisions. What are the indicators that this crucial relationship is working smoothly, and what are the signs that something isn't right?

**2017 • Blog Post**

### The President-Board Chair Relationship: Making It Work, Making It Count

**AGB**

AGB asked Theodore E. Long, the president emeritus of Elizabethtown College, trustee of Capital University, and a senior consultant with AGB, to discuss the topic with other AGB consultants and several members of AGB's board. Together, they have decades of firsthand experience when it comes to the board chair-president relationship, as well as insights gained as advisers to dozens of different institutions. They explored why the relationship is so important and what makes it work best.

**2014 • Trusteeship November/December**