



# The Guardians Initiative

Reclaiming the Public Trust

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AGB is pleased to introduce a new initiative to engage trustees of the nation's colleges and universities as advocates for the enduring societal value of higher education.

America's higher education system is recognized around the world for its creativity, its educational diversity and quality, its research excellence, and its foundational role as a vehicle of opportunity for students to improve themselves and society.

**A**nd yet, in recent years we have witnessed a marked decline in higher education's standing in the eyes of the American public. Fifty-five percent of parents now doubt the value of a college degree relative to its cost. Recent focus groups indicate heightened public concern that college degrees do not lead directly to employment and that the sector's contributions to important research achievements are unclear.

Growing public skepticism toward higher education—informed by concerns over rising costs, uncertain employment prospects, freedom of speech and civil discourse, campus sexual assaults, incidents of racial, ethnic and identity discord, and other challenges facing higher education—have put America's colleges and universities on the defensive. While the problems are real and must be addressed, a lack of effective,

university trustees should take note of the risks associated with these trends.

AGB's new project, "The Guardians Initiative: Reclaiming the Public Trust," seeks to mobilize the individual and collective voices of our nation's college and university board members so that we might share our views about the value proposition of our diverse higher education system and, through that effort, begin to reclaim the public's trust. There may not be a more essential priority than turning the dial on the public's perceptions about higher education; and there may be no voices more persuasive on this subject than those of our nation's college and university trustees.

American higher education isn't perfect. Tuition levels are becoming unaffordable for a growing number of our students, student debt levels are at record levels, rates of degree attainment are too low, and our

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non-partisan advocacy for the overarching value of higher education places at risk the nation's long-standing commitment to our institutions, with consequences to the country's economic and civic vitality, as well as its standing in the world.

What was once accepted as the most reliable and available avenue to a successful future is today seen in a far different light by too many of those whose opinions shape public attitudes. Too many public officials and opinion leaders are uninformed about or actually hostile to the underlying value of America's higher education institutions. And, too many respected academic voices have been unwilling to challenge public sentiment when it comes to higher education. Our institutions are increasingly losing the battle for the hearts and minds of our citizens. College and

campuses are insufficiently safe. Higher education's critics voice legitimate concerns that deserve to be taken seriously and responded to appropriately. Our colleges and universities need to change with the times.

We must welcome constructive debate. But valid critiques should not be allowed to cast a fog over the overarching value of our institutions. There is so much more to the higher education story. The nation's colleges and universities remain essential to the future of the country, and American higher education is an unrivaled engine of opportunity for our citizens. It stimulates local, state, and national economies in vital ways, forms the backbone of our nation's world-leading research and development infrastructure, and enriches the cultural and social lives of individuals and communities. That's the story that needs to be told.

## IT IS TIME FOR HIGHER EDUCATION'S CITIZEN BOARD MEMBERS TO ASSUME A MORE PUBLIC ROLE

### A Role for Board Members

Focused as we appropriately are on the success of our individual institutions, college and university trustees have not traditionally been engaged in the national discourse about the enduring contributions of higher education to our nation's prosperity writ large and to the advancement of individual citizens. AGB believes that the circumstances demand a change. The time has come for the 50,000 college and university trustees—both as fiduciaries and as citizens—to begin to play a more active role as advocates for the value of higher education broadly.

The Guardians Initiative is born out of two complementary notions about the nature of contemporary trusteeship in the United States. First, board members can be more effective, both within their own institution and beyond, if they develop an appreciation for and a sense of belonging to higher education as a whole.

Second, educating trustees on national challenges to higher education—even if not all of those issues impacts their specific institution—enriches trustee service and makes trusteeship more personally rewarding.

Now is the time for trustees to see themselves both as fiduciaries of their institutions and as stewards for all of higher education; as advocates for higher education's values and contributions.

It is time for higher education's citizen board members to assume a more public role; not to supplant the voice of institution leadership but to raise their own level of accountability for the public trust.

To launch this effort, AGB has begun to develop and disseminate a series of white papers to our member trustees and institution leaders about higher education and the complex challenges before us. The initial paper will be shared with AGB members in spring 2017. Each paper will address issues that animate national discussions about higher education and ensure that board members are fully informed and able to engage in national and local conversations about the sector.

### Among the Topics to be Addressed

- The Business of Higher Education
- Undergraduate Return on Investment
- The College as Citizen
- Graduate and Professional Education, Research, and Intellectual Property
- International Education and Globalization
- 21st Century Teaching and Learning

Collectively, these white papers will prepare trustees to effectively communicate the enduring value of higher education to society at large.

### Telling the Story

As AGB develops and disseminates its series of white papers, it does so knowing that they are supported by compelling stories about higher education in the United States that need to be told. So, in addition to publishing these white papers, AGB will work with institution leaders and others to actively engage board members in a national dialogue on the value of higher education. By initiating and sustaining these important conversations, we will enable governing board members to become more forceful and effective public advocates in support of higher education's most fundamental purposes.

Trustee voices have too long been absent from the public discourse around the value of higher education. Trustees need to become more visible and more vocal in support of higher education. The fundamental contributions of our colleges and universities to individuals and to society need to be recognized and championed. It is time for higher education's guardians to begin the process of reclaiming the public's trust.

**We look forward to your engagement  
in this national effort.**

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This essay is the first in a series of periodic papers to be issued by the Association of Governing Boards for Universities and Colleges, providing governing board members with information and context to foster understanding of critical issues facing higher education today, to stimulate conversation, and to empower them to serve as advocates for the sector within the academy and in the broader community.