

Institutions within Systems Governance Guide

Overview

Rationale

The focus of the accreditation process followed by WSCUC, and indeed by accreditation as a whole, is centered on the individual college or university. The Commission accredits individual institutions, and attention is properly focused on the quality of the education experienced by the student at that institution. The act of accrediting an institution means that WSCUC is warranting the quality of the education the student will receive at that institution, which in turn is essential to the federal Department of Education authorizing such a student to receive a student loan in order to pursue a degree at that college or university.

Nonetheless, most public higher education institutions and an increasing number of private higher education institutions (both non-profit and for profit) are not stand-alone institutions but rather are part of systems of higher education. These systems have institutional chancellors or presidents reporting to a president or chancellor of the system or parent company and a complex and varying pattern of differentiated responsibilities and functions between the individual institutions and systems. Most students in WSCUC-accredited institutions attend institutions that are part of systems, and system-institution relations have a direct effect on many of the institution-specific issues that accreditation teams consider and need to evaluate.

The Commission cannot and does not wish to prescribe a model for how institutions and systems work together any more than it wishes to prescribe in institution-specific matters. But the Commission recognizes that system-institution relations ineluctably affect the quality of the education students receive, and therefore aspects of those relations are properly of concern. The purpose of this document is to describe what are seen as best practices in institution-system relations, both in terms of how boards govern in this environment and how systems and individual institutions interact. Much of what is said about board-institution relations automatically applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to system-institution relations and therefore is not repeated in that section of this guide. The board section of the document draws freely on an Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) report entitled “Consequential Board Governance in Public Higher Education Systems (AGB, 2016),” and the Commission thanks AGB for agreeing to this utilization of much of its work. Where there are clear links between the best practices described here and CFRs (Criteria for Review) under the 2023 WSCUC Standards of Accreditation, those connections are indicated for informational purposes only. This document offers guidelines, not a set of requirements.

This document provides system leaders with guidance on ways to navigate governance within systems, demonstrate strength to their constituencies, and advance the mission of their institutions in terms of all stakeholder needs. In a system environment, leaders do these things in a manner that supports each individual institution within the context of the whole. The guide can also be used by WSCUC member institution leaders, system board members, and peer evaluators reviewing institutions that are part of systems.

Governance and the Nature of Academic Culture

How boards govern institutions in a system and how systems interact with institutions is unique to the nature of academic culture. The organizational structure of colleges and universities is a linear one, in which the governing board delegates authority to the administration, which runs the institution. But that model co-exists in complex ways with the culture of academe, in which principles of faculty governance play a central role. How faculty governance is instantiated varies from institution to institution and from type of institution to type of institution, but both boards and systems need to understand the culture of the institutions they are legally charged with governing and managing and to respect the tradition of faculty governance. They need to work productively with the particular institutional forms that faculty governance may take and to understand that shared governance is an important value that conditions the environment in which boards and systems alike do their work. Unionization also plays a role in this environment, with collective bargaining providing another source of authority and responsibility. The governance authority of boards is therefore not absolute in a way that may confuse and frustrate board members who come from other worlds in which authority is less distributed and employees are less self-determining. This document is intended to provide system leaders with assistance in navigating these issues of responsibility and authority.

Related Policies and Guides

This guide complements several WSCUC policies including the Governing Board Policy, Accreditation Reviews for Institutions within a System Policy, Related Entities Policy, and Agreements with Unaccredited Entities Policy. It provides more specific guidance about the roles and relationships between system board members and institution leaders. Several of the expectations of system boards listed below are also expectations of institution boards and are also found in the Governing Board Policy or the Governing Board Policy Implementation Guide.

The System Governing Board

Scope of Responsibility and Limitations

1. The strategic direction, goals and agenda of a system board are aligned with the mission and purpose of the system (CFR 1.1). The board's work reflects the educational, economic and social aspirations of the communities the institutions serve (CFR 4.8).
2. There are certain specific and highly visible areas of oversight on which system boards focus special attention. System boards need to ensure that they exercise fiduciary responsibility over compensation of senior administration at each member institution. System boards are accountable for ethical and illegal misconduct occurring at member institutions (CFR 3.7-3.9).
3. It is incumbent upon the board to understand the scope of its authority and responsibilities to the system. It needs to ensure that governing documents and policies accurately reflect practice and that it exercises its authority to the advantage of the institutions it serves, balancing the needs of individual member institutions and the overall needs of the system (CFR 3.7).

4. Where appropriate, there are explicit operating agreements delineating roles and scope of authority among the system board, any institution-level boards that may exist, and boards for auxiliary organizations at both the system and institution level. While multiple organizations can often exist in a system, there can be only one governing board that has fiduciary authority for any system or institution.
5. Board members have a thorough understanding of the limits of their authority to act as an individual member of the board. In general, while each board member is an ambassador of the board, no board member has the authority to act on behalf of the board. Even if the board has delegated authority to an individual member to enter into conversations on behalf of the board, ultimately the entire board acts as a whole.
6. System boards have policies for removal of board members for cause. In a system where removal of board members for cause requires action by the appointing authority, the system policy is explicit about the circumstances under which the board will request such action by the appointing authority.
7. The system board understands and honors the delegated authority to faculty over academic policy and those areas in which faculty expertise is paramount (CFRs 3.1-3.3). Although there may be some variation among institutions regarding what are considered areas of faculty governance, areas of shared governance, and areas where the administration has clear authority, the faculty are generally seen to be academically responsible for the design of the curriculum, including what is taught in the classroom, what classes are required, how students are assessed, and the criteria for graduation (in short, most of what falls under WSCUC Standard 2, i.e., CFRs 2.1-2.8).
8. The system board considers revisions to individual institution missions only with great care, diligence and deliberation. Changes consider the expectations of public and institutional trust, the community, capacity of the system, and benefits and impact to all constituencies. Boards also consider the history and culture of an individual institution, which may have preceded the existence of the system, and the specific needs and interests of which may be tied to a specific locale, stakeholder, or community group served. The academic mission of a campus is foundational to its existence and may even be codified in law (CFRs 1.1, 3.7).

Ethics

9. Board actions and processes are transparent and demonstrate the board's nonpartisanship and independence (CFRs 1.2, 1.3, 1.7, 3.7). Board members remain non-partisan and independent, both from external audiences (state officials) and internal stakeholder groups (faculty, staff, students) and are committed to the overall independence of the board.
10. Processes to appropriately handle conflicts of interest must be in place. Personal finances and/or other personal benefits do not play a role in any Board member's decision to join a Board or any Board member's involvement in a decision made by Board.
11. The public and institutional trust requires unwavering allegiance to ensuring that decisions are made in a fair and equitable way, reflecting multiple missions and audiences, addressing both current needs and the capacity of the system to be sustained for the future. In particular, paying

primary attention to the needs of the students at the individual institutions, as grounded in student success data and evidence, serves as a core and unquestioned value (CFRs 2.9-2.14, 4.2, 4.3).

12. While system boards are responsible for the sustainability and welfare of the entire system, they are responsible for each individual institution as well, even in those cases where the individual institutions have their own board. As such, they act in the best interest of all the institutions within the system, not advantaging one at the expense of another or advantaging the needs of the system itself over its member institutions.

System Board Effectiveness

13. Effective system boards are knowledgeable about and engaged in the needs of their institutions. They remain attentive to the political and economic challenges and constraints related to their responsibilities on the board, but remain independent from influence and/or intrusion on board policy and decisions.
14. Board members are willing advocates for the system and its resource needs in order to meet its strategic goals and public agenda. Advocacy efforts are coordinated by the system head and board leadership on behalf of all system institutions.
15. To effectively achieve the public good, boards are knowledgeable about the work of the institutions, to include their research, faculty, students, programs and initiatives and unique challenges of the individual communities served.
16. Higher education systems were established to serve and advance their states and communities as economic and social engines, and it is paramount that they thrive. Boards and system leaders work with great intentionality and collaboration to ensure that their institutions have the human and financial resources they need to not only keep pace with needs of today, but create environments that foster understanding and creativity in the larger global context, through innovative and entrepreneurial approaches.
17. Boards create and engage in a process of continuous improvement as a critical aspect of the system ecosystem (CFRs 3.10, 4.5, 4.8). The process includes the identification of board member expectations, some form of confidential assessment of board performance, and evidence of meeting any required regional accreditations standards, as well as reports of board professional development (CFR 4.7).

The System

1. System offices, which operate as the administrative arms of the system boards to which they report, have a good working understanding of the interrelated roles and responsibilities of system offices and the institutions. Individual institutions and the system office agree on scope of responsibility and how work is divided between the individual institutions and the system (CFRs 3.7, 3.9).

2. Higher education systems provide the ability to create and maximize opportunities to integrate and share resources and to streamline administrative processes across multiple institutions. However, systems also have their own costs and expenses, and care needs to be taken to ensure that the theoretical benefits of system-wide approaches are realized. Quality of instruction and learning should be the most important consideration in balancing the allocation of funds among the system and individual institutions (CFR 3.4).
3. In public institutions, there are clear and shared understanding about how the system and individual institutions interact with state government, both the executive and legislative branches. There are differing approaches to this perennial challenge, but whatever approach is taken needs to be agreed upon, fair to each institution in the system, and keep the needs of the students first and foremost in all interactions.
4. Transparency and communication at all levels of the organization are essential. The individual institutions are kept informed about system deliberations and decision making, and the institution leaders from the administrative, faculty and student ranks must have meaningful input into system-level deliberations, planning processes, and decision making (CFRs 1.3, 1.5, 1.7, 4.8).
5. One clear advantage of a system is that other key partners (K-12 education, other public systems, employers, state and federal government) can have one clear point of contact to go to on matters such as ensuring common approaches to metrics for external reporting, student articulation across systems and into the workforce, and long-range planning for postsecondary education. However, good communication and a shared vision about such issues is essential so that this single point of contact speaks for all the institutions in the system (CFRs 1.7, 3.9).

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and College. (2016). Consequential Board Governance in Public Higher Education Systems. Retrieved from https://agb.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/report_2016_public_governance.pdf