

## **“A Steeper Hill to Climb”: The Role and Experience of Student Trustees in Public Higher Education Governing Boards**

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### **Abstract**

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The limited literature on student trusteeship leaves many unanswered questions regarding the role, experience, and impact of those within the governance of higher education. To counter the scant research in this area, the authors offer a background for understanding the role and experience of student trustees of public higher education institutions in the U.S. The authors use Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory to expose and highlight how student trustees experience and navigate their roles on the board. Interviews with 30 student trustees from 26 public boards in 21 states indicate that student trustees have unique board experiences influenced by (1) their identities as both student *and* trustee, (2) their limited terms and representation on the board, (3) their explicit and/or implicit attachment to the student constituency, and (4) their relative inexperience in life, education, and employment in comparison with their laymen peers. Findings have implications for how student trustees are viewed and incorporated on the board in a time when the leadership and ethics of higher education have been called into question.

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**Keywords:** Trusteeship, board of regents, governance, board of trustees

### **1. Introduction**

A governing board—sometimes referred to as a board of governors, regents, supervisors, trustees, or visitors—is “an organized group of people with the authority collectively to control and foster an institution that is usually administered by a qualified executive and staff” (Houle, 1989, p. 6). The board typically maintains the formal legal authority to govern all facets of the institution (Martorana, 1963; Nason, 1982; Russock, 1974). Despite their central role and unique authority in the governance of higher education, comparatively little empirical research has been conducted on boards (Kerr & Gade, 1989; Kezar, 2006; Tierney, 2008). One subgroup of board members is particularly abstruse to researchers—student trustees.

Student involvement in institutional leadership is not new (Cowley, 1962); state statutes, state constitutions, or board bylaws often mandate the inclusion of representatives from certain groups such as students on governing boards (Schwartz, 2010). Students contribute important insights to the board about the concerns and interests of the larger student body (Alvarez-Breckenridge, 2010). For instance, an article by Rall et al., (forthcoming) illuminates how student trustees have played a pivotal role in addressing vital issues and in implementing new policies to make a meaningful impact on the board. This research further supports findings that suggest student involvement in decision making is valuable (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Lozano, 2019).

The perspectives of student trustees on these issues and challenges and their distinct and influential roles on their boards have rarely been explored even though an increasing number of students are serving on higher education governing boards (Elfreth, 2011; Lozano, 2016; Lozano & Hughes, 2017). Although students have long had some level of substantive involvement in the governance functions of colleges and universities, particularly student government, the ways that they have been involved to date on many higher education boards reflects a distinct engagement than is typical for the average student leader on campus (Statham, 2011). Our interest in conducting this study was inspired by a reflection provided by a student trustee in an earlier phase of this study:

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“You can’t necessarily just say, Oh, it’s an honor to be on this board...I’m not saying that regular board members don’t take it seriously, but I think as a student you’ve got to take it more seriously because you’ve got a steeper hill to climb.” This study is, in part, an attempt to understand what makes the hill steeper for student trustees than for other board members. We utilized Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) to examine how student trustees navigate their roles in a manner that is distinct from laymen trustees, contributing to a better understanding of this unique group of student leaders whose experiences and perspectives have largely been overlooked in the literature. We pursue two research questions to inform present knowledge of the role of students on public boards of higher education: (a) How do student trustees describe the personal, behavioral, and environmental components of their board experience? and (b) How do student trustees utilize an understanding of and convey efficacy in the knowledge, resources, attitudes, behaviors, and skills necessary to perform their role on the board?

## 2. Student Trustees

Student board members (primarily referred to as student trustees) hold important roles in the institution. Students leveraged protests in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s to achieve greater representation in campus decision making (Altbach, 1979; 1989; 2006; Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Before this movement, students did not have a formal role on governing boards (Lozano, 2016). Student trustee positions gradually became available across the nation but were concentrated in public institutions post-1970 (Randall, 1985). Since then, students have become a common fixture in public higher education governance in the U.S. despite contention as to whether students should even be allowed to serve on the board (Association of Governing Boards [AGB], 2010; Elfreth, 2011; Lozano & Hughes, 2017). Despite the commonness, we know little about the unique experiences, roles, and contributions of student trustees (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Salter, 2002).

We focus on student trustees because of their unique position to simultaneously impact and be impacted by their decisions and actions. Students are unique cases on the board; they are both consumers and products of higher education (Caires, 2002). Accordingly, it makes sense that they have a vested interest in the future of higher education. They contribute important insights to the board about the concerns and interests of the larger student body (Alvarez-Breckenridge, 2010) and they are often the closest that some board members come to hearing the student voices of the campuses they govern. These students pursue avenues to empower themselves and proactively influence their campus environments (May, 2010). Yet, too often student representation and participation are taken for granted in higher education (Bergan, 2003). Student trustees primarily possess the same authority as laymen trustees and directly influence (and are necessarily affected by) the myriad issues on which today’s boards consider and vote.

At the same time, student voice is particularly minoritized on boards. In 1971, Birnbaum and D’Heilly found that students on the board did not feel that their decisions made any meaningful impact on policy and governance. Additional scholarship identified student trustees as being devoid of power on the board (Paltridge et al., 1973). Today, it is important not to underestimate the roles of students on the board (Jacoby, 2017). Students warrant special attention because it is often these students who are tasked with representing the student voice on the board. This study pushes us to consider an influential stakeholder in higher education that is often understudied and undervalued yet has the potential to affect higher education.

## 3. Social Cognitive Theory

The attitudes and perceptions of the student trustees in this study were viewed from the framework of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). SCT is a comprehensive framework used to understand the complexity of human functioning (Miller & Dollard, 1941). In recognition of the interplay between people, their environments, and their behavior, Bandura (1982, 1986, 2001) supported a model of triadic reciprocity (see Figure 1). External environmental factors, personal attributes, and overt behavior affect each other in a bidirectional fashion (Lent et al., 1994) and individuals are simultaneously products and producers of their environment (Wood & Bandura, 1989). For example, trustees do not merely react to the previously established board environment, they also create their own support systems and use both structures to process information (George, 1980).

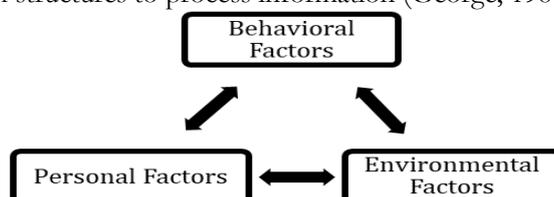


Figure 1. A model of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory

At any given time, one of the factors may predominate, but student trustees rely on all three in varying degrees to help inform board decision-making. For example, SCT transforms information about the structure of behavioral and environmental events into symbolic representations that serve as guides for student trustee action (Schunk, 2007).

### 3.1 Self-efficacy

Proficiency in the trusteeship requires not only skills but also self-belief in one's ability to use those skills well (Bandura, 1988). Trustees are more engaged and effective in performing their board-associated duties when they are confident in their ability to complete the requirements of the role. Self-efficacy is a personal belief about what an individual is capable of doing and describes trustees' beliefs about whether they will be successful at a specific task (Bandura, 1977a; 1977b; 1986; 1993; 1997). Self-efficacy is a trustee's belief in his or her ability to execute the requirements of the trusteeship and informs how and how well trustees perform the role. What trustees think, believe, and feel influences their behavior (Bandura, 1986).

Personal efficacy describes an individual's belief in their abilities to marshal the drive, actions, and cognitive resources needed to exert control over life events (Wood & Bandura, 1989). The experience of student trustees is in large part determined by their own judgments of their personal efficacy (Bandura, 1988). When applied to the student trusteeship, a strong sense of efficacy is fundamental to positioning these students to utilize their resources optimally and work towards board goals (Wood & Bandura, 1989). The sociocognitive benefits of personal efficacy of board members are not the mere result of access to key relationships; the utility of associations varies with self-efficacy levels (Bandura, 1977). Based on this, students with greater self-efficacy will portray a higher level of confidence in their ability to be efficacious in the role.

The sociocognitive perspective specifies how outside experiences can strengthen or weaken the ability of trustees to inform outcomes by focusing their efforts on relevant issues (Carpenter & Westphal, 2001). These individuals have an agency or ability to intentionally affect their personal behavior and the environment (Bandura, 2001). The self-efficacy of student trustees greatly influences how they approach the tasks of trusteeship because behaviors are often better predicted by an individual's belief in his or her capabilities than by what the individual is actually capable of accomplishing (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs strongly influence the attainment of individuals in a variety of fields (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), and its relevance to board membership was made clear in our conversations with student trustees.

## 4. Research Design and Methodology

### 4.1 Sample Selection and Recruitment

We utilized purposive sampling to determine which individuals to invite to participate in the study based on two main criteria (Creswell, 2007). First, student trustees were selected from the governing boards of public research universities and multi-campus university systems. The second criterion was that participants had to be either current or immediate past student trustees. All except four of the student trustees in the sample were serving their terms at the time they were interviewed. This helped to ensure that reflections were fresh in their minds.

To cultivate the participant sample, we generated a comprehensive list of students currently serving on the boards of public universities and university systems across the United States. We first identified those governing boards that include student representatives by searching the *Public Higher Education Boards Database*, a resource managed by the Ingram Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance of the Association of Governing Boards. Once we identified the boards with student members, we manually compiled the names and email addresses of the students by accessing and searching governing board websites, university student directories, and student government resources. Recruitment letters were distributed over two months. The data reported were drawn from interviews with 30 trustees from 26 public boards in 21 states. See Appendix A for further details on the sample.

### 4.2 Data Collection

Interviews are one of the most common and powerful ways for qualitative researchers to obtain information to understand individuals and groups (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Interviews facilitate access to the inner world of participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) because descriptive data are collected in the words of the participants. One-on-one telephone interviews were conducted with student trustees; the conversations typically ranged from 30-60 minutes. Telephone interviews are often conducted in qualitative research (Johnson, 2013). They can often provide enhanced access to participants and have been found to yield high-quality data that is comparable to face-to-face interviewing (Lechuga, 2012; Novik, 2008; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). The interviews were recorded and manually transcribed by the authors.

A semi-structured interview approach was utilized in the interviews to create a flexible set of open-ended and theoretically driven questions, which allowed researchers to access data that was grounded in the unique experience of the participant (Galletta, 2013). This approach allowed participants a greater degree of freedom in narrating their experiences, explaining their thoughts, and highlighting areas of particular interest than more structured interviews tend to permit (Horton et al., 2004). Interview techniques such as probing, asking for additional clarification, specificity, and examples were also utilized to collect more robust data (Spradley, 1979).

Though not the primary source of data for this study, we also engaged in document analysis of various board documents including, but not limited to: board meeting agendas and minutes, board bylaws and standing orders, and various popular press pieces about the board and the service of students on the board. Document analysis is a systematic procedure used to review or evaluate printed and electronic documents (Bowen, 2009); here it was used to supplement understanding of the trusteeship (Merriam, 1998). The websites of each board represented provided an overview of the board, the institution(s) governed, and board members.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

We followed a thematic analysis of the transcripts in order to keep the story intact (Riessman, 2008), and gave attention to the voices of the participants to allow major questions and topics to emerge that may not be present in the existing literature and/or addressed by existing theory. The selection of particular cases was important to limn the range and variation of general patterns after the thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). This process of careful examination to look for codes, categories, themes, and levels of information is described as “classification” (Creswell, 2007). Analysis was iterative, inductive, and constantly compared (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Coding was used to identify sections of text that were pertinent to the student trustee experience. Data analysis was guided by established modes of coding and categorization to outline broad themes and create a contextualized analysis. Three rounds of data analysis were performed. In the first round, attribute codes, provisional codes, and *in vivo* codes were used to identify general characteristics, central concepts from the literature review, and short phrases taken directly from the transcripts respectively. In the subsequent round of analysis, data was compartmentalized by subcodes to narrow examination of the major concepts. In the third round of data analysis, pattern coding revealed emergent themes by reducing and assigning data to meaningful units. Data was mined for codes such as: “challenges”, “support”, “experience”, “preparation”, “strategies for success”, “differential treatment”, etc. Document analysis, interview protocols, and research notes were grounded in a thorough literature review designed to obtain expert insights on the student trusteeship.

### 4.4 Subjectivity, Trustworthiness, and Limitations

We acknowledge our subjectivity in this research; at the time research commenced, we were both doctoral students studying boards. Our status as students may have helped us to better relate to the study participants and facilitated their candor during conversation. Trustworthiness pertains to “the degree of confidence in the ‘truth’ that the findings of a particular inquiry have for the subjects with which—and the context within which—the inquiry was carried out” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 29). Thus, a trustworthy and authentic study “rings true” to the participants in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By directly engaging stakeholders, rather than inferring their views regarding student trusteeship, we more directly accessed these perspectives. To enhance trustworthiness, all sample participants and an additional former student trustee were given the opportunity to review the data and compare their interpretations. We used data from the interviews, document analysis, and member checks to cross-reference data sources through triangulation to add rigor, depth, and complexity to this case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Study participants came into and engaged in their roles as trustees under a wide variety of circumstances—they encountered different selection or appointment processes, they had terms of varying lengths, some had voting privileges and others did not, etc. As such, the sample reflects a diversity of experience that likely mirrors the broader population of student trustees serving on other public research universities and multi-campus university systems. There was a lack of regional representation of participants from southern states and we did not focus on differences based on gender or race. Addressing these gaps should be pursued in a future study.

## 5. Findings

The analysis described here proceeds in three sections: (a) an overview of the board environment, (b) a discussion of the personal factors that contribute to the board experience, and (c) a description of the behavioral factors that influence the board experience. These three sections are attributed to SCT’s description of human behavior as uniquely determined by the interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment.

While we are cognizant of the interrelatedness of environmental, personal, and behavioral factors, in the next section we focus on these parts individually as a way to orient the reader to the fundamental components that influence the student trustee experience. Length constraints do not permit us to fully delve into all of the intricacies of these intersections and we return to this point in the implications section.

## 5.1 Environmental Factors

We discuss environmental factors because SCT suggests that trustee expectations, beliefs, abilities, and actions are developed and affected by both the physical structure and the social influences of the board environment. The environment is comprised of the totality of the situation, roles, models, and relationships on the board that can affect behavior (Bandura, 1986). Student trustees who participated in this study noted a common set of environmental factors—a combination of obstacles and formal sources of support—that affected how they approached their preparation for trusteeship and carried out their work during their terms.

### 5.1.1 Formal Sources of Support

Student trustees receive varying levels of formal support from the time they begin their terms until they conclude their service. Below, we detail the main sources of formal support that were reported by student trustees who participated in this sample. These are not all of the formal sources of support but reflect the most common-place forms of support that were provided to students directly, or without having to be sought out.

**5.1.1.1 Orientations, Trainings, and “Crash Courses.”** The amount of formal orientation provided to student trustees in this study varied significantly. At a minimum, every student received extensive sets of materials shortly after their selection to the board was confirmed. These materials often took the form of board books or packets of materials such as bylaws, past meeting agendas and minutes, and other documents pertaining to current issues (e.g. budget summaries, excerpts from strategic plans, memoranda). These materials typically amounted to several hundred pages; students commented on receiving “a large box of materials” or “a 1,000-page binder that I don’t think anyone looks at.” Because of the complexity and length of the contents, these resources were usually only marginally useful in helping students prepare. Even careful scrutiny of the material generated more questions than they answered. As a result, student trustees required additional information to fill their gaps in knowledge.

Most students were able to partially satisfy at least some of those gaps by attending a formal orientation or training provided by members of the administration or, in a few cases, the state governor’s office. The content and scope of this aspect of their preparation varied and were organized around one of two general formats, both of which represented a sort of “10,000-foot view” of the board as one student trustee described it. The first type of orientation involved brief sessions, typically with the board professional staff or chair, that covered information about responsibilities of trusteeship, information about the board structure, and rules and procedures (e.g., confidentiality, conflict of interest guidelines, and voting procedures). The second type included more detailed coverage of issues that the board deals with and involved a series of meetings with members of the administration who were responsible for those areas (e.g., vice presidents or vice chancellors of finance for budget issues, provosts for academic affairs).

In a few cases, student trustees received a little bit of both forms of orientation. Students who received one or both of these forms of orientation generally found it to be beneficial to their preparation, either by helping them to better understand the culture, mission, and composition of the board or to gain a better understanding of the complicated issues around which the board makes decisions. Ali thought the first type of orientation helped him to “figure out the historical context and political elements” and “the background of business” that the board was dealing with at the time, which proved helpful in navigating the role. Maya, who went through an orientation involving meetings with several senior administrators noted, “They talked about things in the university that I had never considered or looked at. It was pretty valuable...I didn’t understand what went into the university. I don’t think a lot of people do until they get to that point.”

So, both orientation types helped form student trustees’ perspectives about how to approach their work early on, even if they did not provide answers to all of their questions.

Although not frequently reported, being invited to a board retreat at the start of their terms was helpful for student trustees who had the chance to participate. Retreats, which are held by some boards annually or biennially, allowed the students to take their first dive into the business of the board in a less formal setting where they were less afraid to speak up and also had a better opportunity to get to know their board colleagues. For example, Noah commented:

It's great that I was involved in that. It's in a more relaxed setting. The board is more relaxed. It isn't in the boardroom. The press isn't usually there. People are funny, a little more relaxed. People aren't dressed up as much. It's a really good environment to have an introduction to how everything works and be more comfortable.

This practice seemed to mollify some of the anxiety experienced by trustees who were thrown straight into formal meetings where they were commenting and casting votes on serious issues before the board. Similarly, several participants noted that sharing an orientation process with newly selected laymen trustees helped them learn about their roles and the business of the board alongside older, more experienced colleagues. By having the opportunity to see these laymen trustees asking the same questions or voicing some of the same challenges and engaging with them outside of formal board meetings—what amounted to a sort of “bonding process” as one student put it—students developed an affinity with these other new members of the board that led to stronger relationships once their service began.

**5.1.1.2 Support from Chairs, Other Trustees, Board Staff, and Administrators.** Trustees are more likely to leverage the expertise of existing board members to help them acclimate to their roles on the board (Michael et al., 1997). New trustees were not the only members of the board who helped student trustees to feel welcome and well supported in their roles. In general, student trustees perceived that they were encouraged by their laymen colleagues to participate and felt that their opinions and views as students were respected and appreciated. Participants shared that “they are pretty receptive to the opinion of students and they are glad to have student input on the board.” On one board where the student members did not have a vote, the laymen trustees even allowed the students to cast a ceremonial vote before they cast their own vote so that the students' positions on issues could be recorded alongside the formal, official vote. Outside of the meetings, members of the board occasionally reached out to have phone calls with new student trustees or to schedule individual meetings over coffee or lunch when they were on campus. This level of interest surprised several of the students, who did not always expect the laymen members of the board to be so interested in their views.

Board chairs, in particular, offered to make themselves available whenever students needed to discuss an issue or some challenge they might be facing. They were usually the first board member with which any of the student trustees had contact. Jaden described how the board chair called two days after her appointment to “have a long conversation with [her] to make sure [she] understood” the board and its work, and that the chair arranged to have several follow-up conversations to support her throughout her term. In addition to other trustees, board secretaries, and other university or system administrators often took a direct interest in supporting student trustees and became trusted advisors whenever they needed help sorting through a problem.

### **5.1.2 Obstacles and Challenges**

The challenges most frequently described across the sample by student trustees were related to the time requirements of board service, struggling to achieve balance, and dealing with the complex issues before the board.

**5.1.2.1 The limits of time.** Limited time presented the most pervasive challenge for student trustees. Most of the students in this study served one-year terms. In a handful of cases, trustees served a two-year term; two trustees had served for three years or longer, either because they were eligible to be elected for consecutive terms or changes in board structure necessitated a term extension. The amount of time it took for students to feel somewhat comfortable in their roles varied from one meeting to a full year after their appointment. Samuel summarized the frustrations from across the sample: “By the time you get settled in, you're already out. By the time you can make a difference, your term is done.” Jessica commented: “The fact that you spend your entire...time as a student trustee just trying to figure out what you're doing...is sad.”

The time limits made it difficult for student members to feel like they accomplished anything during their terms. Aside from the time it takes to acclimate to the role and become familiar with pertinent issues, trustees noted that it took a long time to get an item on the agenda and see it through to completion. Anjali explained: “You have to be on ‘go’ from the moment you start.” However, even when trustees were able to get up to speed quickly, the process of taking any direct action on an issue usually slowed them down which frustrated trustees and left many feeling that it was, as Karen described, “unrealistic to see anything really get done.”

**5.1.2.2 Balancing board work, academics, and student life.** Much as students encountered constraints related to their limited time serving on the board, the unique requirements of time associated with board service also caused students difficulty in achieving a balance between their work as trustees, their academics, and their personal lives. Elizabeth described the “huge struggle of balancing the time commitment,” commenting later, “I, one hundred percent know that my academics have struggled because I'm either not sleeping or not studying.”

Student trustees encounter a set of obligations that are unlike those faced by the typical student on a university campus; their work not only requires them to attend consecutive days of meetings several times a year, but also involves communication, coordination of efforts with other board members and other constituencies (e.g., administrators or student groups), and other preparation in between meetings. One student commented: “In terms of my life, it was far more difficult than I had anticipated it was going to be.” Students reported having to miss several days of class throughout the year and struggling to complete assignments and maintain good grades throughout their terms. In most cases, they noted that their professors understood and accommodated their requests to miss class and makeup assignments at a later date, although not all professors were so forgiving. Friends and classmates, particularly those outside of student government, did not always understand the demands that these student leaders faced.

**5.1.2.3 The complexity of the university.** Student trustees, much like their laymen colleagues, are often thrown right into dealing with the incredibly complicated business of governing a university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Student trustees reported “dealing with much larger and more complex issues than perhaps a 22-year old should be dealing with” such as budgetary decisions, long-term strategic planning, votes to increase student tuition, and presidential search processes. They sometimes felt that they were “never going to be able to understand everything.” In several instances, students were not just expected to comprehend, but to weigh in on major issues in one of their first two meetings. As a result, the students reported having to defer to the administration’s point of view as they sought to interpret the complex issues. As Fred put it: “I’m not an expert or I don’t have a team of experts who can verify this is the best way to do it. A lot of times, you just have to trust them.” This was frustrating for student trustees, who often felt duty-bound to be sure that student opinions about major issues were voiced before the board.

## **5.2 Personal Factors**

Personal expectations, background, beliefs, and self-perceptions shape and guide students’ experience on the board. The level of influence of student trustees is influenced by personal factors. Trustees with certain personal factors useful for the trusteeship exhibited high levels of efficacy, which informed the board environment. Recognition of the knowledge trustees bring to the board is important because personal factors are comprised mainly of cognition but can also include factors such as self-efficacy, motives, and personality (Bandura, 1986).

### ***5.2.1 Prior Governance Experience***

Board members consider prior knowledge and experience just as, if not more important than, the learning trustees experience on the board. The more robust the trustee background and skill set is upon entering the board, the simpler it was to use these competencies on the board (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Past experiences of trustees combined with the opportunities for learning on the board to establish self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The stronger and more applicable the trustee’s background is to the duties of trusteeship led to an increased capacity for and rate of information processing, strategy application, and self-efficacy establishment. Some students, like Alison, expressed this experience through their major: “I’ve always been really involved with the higher education movement in the nation...because I’m a political science major and I really understand the issues.” Others have an established history in campus governance. Jocelyn shared: I started off in student government...I continued that involvement...I was the vice president of the student government of the University... I was at a real advantage...I think that probably 80% of my preparation, was my prior knowledge.

In addition to key experiences that they felt better equipped them for their board terms, student trustees also touted the importance of key individuals in their pursuit of board membership as well as sounding bounds and resources they would tap into during their board terms.

### ***5.2.2 Established Key Prior Relationships***

The relationships that board members had with key resource actors mattered. The quantity and quality of these relationships mattered more. Along these lines, it was also more beneficial for a trustee to have relationships with individuals with considerable knowledge and influence on the board than with individuals with less influence. Greater breadth and depth of relationships converted into noticeably privileged board experiences for student trustees. These relationships were vital not only once students were on the board, but also in getting appointed or elected to the board. Jocelyn told us, “I hadn’t necessarily thought about becoming a student regent...A few different people kind of bent my ear about it and asked me to put my name in the ring and I did. And so here I am.” Knowing the right people helped this student pursue and ultimately obtain one of the most powerful positions a student can hold in higher education.

### ***5.2.3 Self-efficacy***

Self-efficacy is both a proximal and distal cause of trustee inequity for student board members who experienced difficulties on the board because of embedded prejudice of constraints of time, age, profession, etc. The more competent trustees were in their abilities, the more likely they were to learn about factors that influenced their role on the board and in turn perform in a manner that will bring about the desired outcomes. Students with greater self-efficacy spoke and assumingly acted in ways that demonstrated greater confidence in enacting their roles as board members. When asked how well he performed his role, Christian told us:

I thought that I did fairly well...It was a fantastic experience. I...learned a ridiculous amount in a very short period of time...It took lots and lots of work but I came out pretty satisfied. I came out feeling like some of the decisions that I participated in, some of the ideas that I put forward, had made an actual difference...It gave me an opportunity to make a real contribution and a real impact in a state I care about on a topic I care about and on behalf of a lot of people who otherwise might not have a voice at that level.

Christian was confident in his role and influence. Another student trustee, Joann stated:

I participate in discussions; I speak at the meetings; (both at the executive and non-executive sessions) and make remarks. I have introduced pieces of legislation to the board already. I've had meetings with the individual [trustees] as I've traveled to different communities...so I'd say I feel pretty comfortable with my role...

Some student trustees like these two were able to have high levels of self-efficacy right away, others were not, depending on the initiative and effort they put into the role.

The acknowledgment of the applicability of prior experience stems from the sociocognitive perspective, which specifies how outside experiences can enhance or reduce the ability of trustees to inform outcomes (Carpenter & Westphal, 2001). There is a distinction, however, between having certain aptitudes and being able to apply them effectively (Bandura, 1988). Behavioral factors manifest via personal agency, the purposeful effort trustees exert to bring their influence to bear directly on their environment (Bandura, 2002), is discussed next.

### **5.3 Behavioral Factors**

As mentioned in the section on environmental factors, having terms at the shorter end of the spectrum, student members of the board often felt they were limited in their effectiveness when compared to their laymen counterparts. Our research supports the idea that the most efficacious trustees are intentional regarding their board role and take the requisite steps to create opportunities for their own development and influence (Chait et al., 1991). Trustees performed actions based on their own values and models they have deemed as important, influential, and successful (Schunk, 2007). Board member behavior regulated the aspects of the environment that trustees were exposed to, interacted with, and learned from.

#### ***5.3.1 Establishing Relationships***

Nowhere was board member behavior more evident than in the relationships trustees pursued, created, and sustained. However, not all trustees were given (or initiated) these opportunities to form personal connections once they were appointed to the board. Mona noted:

...I put in a lot of work to try to become knowledgeable or as knowledgeable as possible given the short time period on a broad range of topics...to build up opinions and talk to a lot of people so that I could develop my ideas...I was willing to voice those opinions at public meetings and that's how I sort of built legitimacy and I was taken seriously.

While board members could learn about trusteeship through documentation, orientations, and manuals, it was not until trustees participated in the role that learning was completed and self-efficacy was achieved (Bandura, 1986). Trustees can exert some influence over their potential impact on the board through their pursuit of certain relationships. Development of self-efficacy within the trusteeship requires some experience in fostering relationships with sustained effort and learning and applying the information gathered from these relationships. Once trustees became convinced they had what it takes to tap into said relationships, they performed in ways consistent with maximizing board behaviors. The more experiences and/or depth of experiences with utilizing interpersonal relationships (whether accumulated from present or prior board encounters), the stronger the sense of efficacy of the board member.

Once on the board, some student trustees elucidated their support structure for guidance and information. Laura illustrated the networks that help her in various capacities on the board:

I have an immediate advisor...He is the director of campus activities and he's the advisor for student government administration...He's who I see every week for...one on one meetings...I also have the vice chancellor of student affairs who...has been...there for anything and everything...

And then you know, I also have the chancellor and other cabinet members. If I really have a faculty issue, I talk with the faculty senate president and I really try to utilize the shared governance structure that's already in place... I try to make sure that I reach out to the people who are involved and are affected by any decision that might be made...so I could get more information about it.

The more efficacious trustees deem themselves to be, the better support they have at their disposal to guide board action.

### **5.3.2 Self-Initiated Preparation**

While many students conveyed that they did not know what to expect on the board or that the reality of the board was different from their expectations, many trustees commented that they took steps to prepare themselves for their terms. Jocelyn who expressed a "70-80% comfort level" on the board upon starting and a "95% comfort level" halfway through the term noted:

"I kept really up to date the two years prior to taking the position...I had about a month between...when my appointment was announced...to when I took over. So, during that time I attended a few meetings with our staff at the commissioner's office."

Justin, a student trustee from the same state explained: "...While I was applying, and after I was appointed...all of the board's materials were online...So I went back for a couple of years, scanned through the minutes...read a good portion of agenda items and really just embed[ded] myself in what's been going on...I kind of took my own initiative..."

**5.3.2.1 Overt behaviors to be noticed and heard.** Student trustees shared that the initiative did not stop once they were on the board. Students articulated the importance of establishing a presence on the board to build self-confidence and legitimacy with other members of the board. Justin captured the gist of this notion when he offered the following, "by forcing yourself to speak, you are viewed as a participant rather than you're the student who is here on the sideline and will offer opinions on student issues." Recognizing the initiative required to maximize the time on the board, Justin reflected further on not wanting to be: "...pigeonholed into a role that was less than a full role so [he] was quite cognizant of being well prepared—coming in with opinions and voicing those opinions. So [he] put a lot of effort, particularly in the first couple of meetings into doing [his] homework, reading closely, and then speaking up."

Quinn, a counterpart on the west coast echoed his words:

...When I got to the board, I realized that I was not in my happy little student affairs bubble anymore. I was on a board that was very political and had different agendas... My voice wasn't going to be valued simply because I spoke and so I had to find a different way to make myself relevant...I made myself relevant...by showing that not only do I understand the issues but that I'm...paying attention. I'm going to be asking questions that maybe you don't want me to ask. And I will say that that has gained me the respect of a few of my fellow trustees...because they told me..., 'the former student just sort of sat there and didn't say anything'... I want to implement the idea of active agreement or active disagreement instead of just being quiet on every single issue... Even if she agreed with what is happening on the board, Quinn mentioned that she was sure to verbalize her approvals. She reiterated that she owed it to the students to speak up often.

**5.3.2.2 Claiming or disclaiming the "student" title.** Another aspect of being heard was the alignment or denial of the implicit, and sometimes explicit constituency of student trustees—the students themselves. The message that reverberated from students was that in order to gain credibility on the board they either had to be the "student" trustee or the "regular" trustee. On one hand, we heard William, distancing himself from the "student" partisanship because:

To be totally frank, the student board members...have the least sway...they don't know what they are doing...and...they're a 19-year-old kid in a room full of grownups. The students tend to be...immediately discounted. Recognizing that, I really didn't want to align myself with that group and felt I could have the most impact if I didn't.

Conversely, we spoke with trustees, like Jessica, who were honored to be given the opportunity to represent and speak for a population that seldom "gets a seat at the table". She elucidated:

...my purpose on the board... is not so much to throw big events or do big initiatives but rather to make sure that I am communicating the student voice appropriately...so I've been working to try to get the student voice out there anyway that I can...As long I have the students that I represent on campus and the students that I represent at-large in the university system in mind at all times then I know that I can't mess up. So that...takes away a lot of the pressure.

Because as long as I'm constantly advocating for them... giving them opportunities to speak to me, relaying their voice and their concerns, you know, whenever they come up, when I do all of those things, I am doing my job.

There was still another category of student trustees apart from those who distanced themselves from the "student" designation and those who clung to this same designation. Some simply absorbed both portions of the role and did not run from the duality. According to Betty, being a student was embedded in their trusteeship: "It is a dual job. You have to be a [trustee] and you have to be a student...My membership on the board is a bit different. I am there both as a student and as a [trustee]. And so, for me, the most influence that I have is my direct constituencies.

Throughout their terms, students had to make active choices and consequential acknowledgments that would shape how they were viewed by other trustees and how they would view themselves and then deal with the ramifications of those choices. Unlike their laymen counterparts, the decisions they made directly impacted their lives and the lives of their fellow students.

## 6. Discussion and Implications

The paucity of research on student trusteeship and the experiences of student trustees reflects a gap in our understanding of an important and influential subset of actors who contribute in considerable ways to the governance of our public colleges and universities. At the very least, the fact that student trustees inhabit such a limited role is indicative of a broader problem in higher education where increasingly small groups of powerful people can withhold or hide information and make critical decisions without transparency or deliberate consultation and inclusion of groups that have been historically marginalized in decision making. A purposeful student presence on the board would be one step towards changing that. The lack of research on these students and their roles, though, has greater implications in that the student leaders serving in these roles and the faculty, staff, and administrators who wish to support them, often lack resources that are designed specifically to address some of the unique challenges that student trustees might expect to encounter in their work. Collecting and disseminating this information can potentially help to improve board training and preparation and overall board effectiveness by targeting one of the least understood groups serving in university governance today.

Being a student on the board is often demanding and frustrating but it can also be a distinctive and rewarding experience (Fernandez, 2016). Student trustees matter. As Mona put it:

The student's position on the board is extremely vital and it should be highlighted and broadcasted more...so that people know who they are and what they are doing and that they are there for the students...That experience is something beneficial to all universities. If universities aren't utilizing their students and aren't utilizing their voices then they are doing something wrong. The whole college experience is for the student...

Accordingly, a better understanding of the role and influence of student members of boards of higher education might help policymakers recognize the import of this role so that we no longer question if students should serve on the board but shift our questions to how many students or how long terms should be for these individuals so that their presence is maximized. Our research highlights the multiple attitudinal and structural barriers that prevent students from being fully active participants on the board. Specifically, five important implications are explicated here.

### 6.1 Limited Resources and Support

Researchers should further investigate the social capital and networks that marginalized groups, like students, on the board form to establish a voice and be more effective. Students expressed the sentiment that there was not a lot of support in place for student trustees, in particular. There was no student-specific trustee handbook for them to follow even though they were faced with numerous distinctions from their counterparts. We had a few participants talk about the need to retake classes or add an additional semester of classes in order to graduate due to the workload and requirements of the board but laymen trustees have already graduated and are typically high enough in the employment hierarchy where they might be the ones petitioned for certain requests while the student trustees have to ask to miss class, make alternate test arrangements, etc. Despite their seemingly powerful role on the board, it is difficult for student trustees to secure accommodations that would help them better balance trustee life with academic life. In some cases, the lack of structural support complicated their work. In addition to the lack of policy infrastructure to support them in their roles, student trustees do not possess any "how-to" guidebooks that speak to their duality as student and board member.

Compound the lack of applicable materials with the fact that interaction with other student board members is often impossible to maintain because a student on the board seldom has another student counterpart on the board or because predecessors graduate and move on. While some students are fortunate enough to be able to obtain some advice from their predecessor and pay it forward to share some words of wisdom with their successors, this exchange of student-pertinent information is complicated by the high turnover of student trustees. Exacerbating this problem is the fact that many student trustees (and laymen trustees) lack adequate training to aid in preparation for their service; this socialization could help to minimize ambiguity, confusion, or frustration about their roles.

## **6.2 Term and Number Limitations**

Some structural disincentives are difficult for student board members to overcome. First, many trustees expressed their frustrations with the length of their terms. Whether their concern was over having sufficient time to acclimate to the board or to see policy changes through, it was clear that the short term length left much to be desired. Those student trustees who had a year on the board to learn and observe before their one-year term as full voting members and the students with two-year terms or more expressed how valuable this extra time was. Second, the fact that there are typically only one or two voting student trustees on the board often left student trustees feeling like they were in the extreme minority where their vote could never sway decisions. While cases exist of more than two student trustees serving on a board, the additional trustees do not usually have voting powers. Trustees shared the essentially toothless influence of student trustees on boards because of short terms and low numerical representation on the board.

The most beneficial arrangements were when a student trustee had the opportunity to serve as a student trustee-designate or non-voting member for a year before transitioning into a full voting role. This created opportunities for shadowing someone who was fulfilling the full roles and expectations of a student trustee and gave ample time for the newer student to get up to speed. Boards concerned with the representation and influence of student trustees may want to evaluate the length of terms for these individuals as well as how many student trustees serve on the board to improve the sense of efficacy of trustees and ultimately their contribution to the overall function of the board. Prior scholars (e.g. Hull, 1974) have also highlighted the need to readjust the trusteeship to better enable trustees to fulfill their roles.

## **6.3 Dual Role of the Student Trustee**

Add to a milieu of shorter terms, numerical minority status, and assumed less life experience, the constraint of a clear constituent base to which to answer, and the role of the student trustee is all the more attenuated. The students of this study illuminate the strange identity formation that student trustees have to navigate as members of the board. Remember the student trustees who voiced the duality and ultimate conflict between being the “student trustee” and just a “trustee.” More research can be done regarding the specific role and performativity of the student trustee. Is their sole purpose on the board to present the student's voice? Additionally, more research can investigate how they navigate this duality to fulfill their personal trustee goals and board-specific goals. Ties could also be drawn between others on the board who find themselves representative of a specific demographic within a broader organization (e.g. faculty).

## **6.4 Further Considerations of Bidirectionality**

Additional studies on the bidirectionality of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors are warranted. A greater discussion, for example, on how behaviors of student trustees may alter or be altered by the board environment would be useful. Insight could be gained for instance by comparing examples of the experiences of student trustees on boards that have embedded a strong support framework to the experiences of student trustees serving terms on boards that are not very supportive. Additionally, it is vital to better understand student motivations for serving on the board. In this paper, we primarily focused on offering an overview of each of the vertices in the triadic model of reciprocity. Are there certain factors that carry greater weight in the student trustee experience? Subsequent research can examine the ways this bidirectionality impacts the experiences of student trustees.

## **6.5 Board Expectations and Evaluation**

We heard from numerous students, “I don’t know how well of a job I’m doing...there’s hardly anything for me to compare it to” or “There are no metrics, just more of a feeling I guess.” The uncertainty of adequately fulfilling the role on the board carries great implications not only for student trustees but also for all board members.

While we recognize that every board is different and trying to reach institution- or system-specific goals, the lack of consistent evaluation throughout what nationwide is an average of 1-2 years for student members and 4-12 years (with the possibility of extension) for layperson members is cause for concern. Checkpoints should be embedded so that board members have a sense of how they are performing in their roles and so that boards as a whole have the potential to improve and establish accountability. One example we heard that may fill this void for student trustees is a formal mentorship program that pairs the student with a layperson member who has been on the board for a few years and will remain on the board for the duration of the student's term.

Because student trustees often feel isolated, inferior, ill-prepared, undervalued, or unsupported in their roles, steps may be taken to remedy some of these perspectives. There has to be a way to examine the value of the student role on the board. In our communications with student trustees, having a term beyond a year was useful in helping students acclimate to the board and feel more prepared. Additionally, boards may consider having at least two students on the board concurrently to offer extra support and limit isolation. Enhanced board orientation before the start of the term may also help negate some of the negative feelings. Facilitating the establishment of mentorship relationships with more tenured board members can also enhance comfort levels for students. These recommendations (outside of the additional student member) may also prove effective for traditional laymen trustees as they get accustomed to board work.

### **6.6 Board Accountability**

Voices of the "other" on the board like student trustees can help us to confront the oftentimes rigid organizational culture and the governance structure embedded within it that has become the norm at our nation's institutions. The isolation that many student trustees expressed in this study shows us that rather than assume that good governance is where everyone on the board is in agreement or has similar levels of experience, we may need to change the narrative to consider how dynamic tension, disagreement, and disparate backgrounds might be beneficial to board function and efficiency (Tierney & Rall, 2018). The discomfort of student trustees on the board often pushed them to be more vocal, ask more questions, or try more earnestly to succeed in their roles. This type of proactivity may prove useful in challenging times and in challenging insular campus and board environments where cultures that prioritize silence, powerful actors, and the status quo have led to some of the most appalling missteps in higher education in the last decade. We need more, rather than fewer, minoritized voices on the board to counter groupthink (Janis, 1971) and push trustees to value the myriad differences their decision-making affects.

Future research on student trustees can benefit from longitudinal studies that follow student members of the board from the time of their appointment through the end of their term to establish a better understanding of their role and experience on the board. Examining the experiences of other board members who have similarly limited numbers such as alumni representatives, faculty representatives, or ex officio members of the board is also needed to compare their experience to their student and laymen counterparts. Rigorous analysis of boards at institutions where board oversight has been called into question is also required to better understand how board dynamics affect decision making at the individual and group level. Additionally, the use of other quantitative and qualitative approaches looking at a cross-section of institutions may prove useful in garnering a more complete understanding of the student trusteeship. Studies that also center institutional and organizational culture frameworks would also contribute to the literature in this space. Moreover, while we did not focus on the nuances created by variations in race, gender, location, and other factors of trustees because we wanted to see what were the similar challenges this group faced, the diversity of experience was something that did surface in some of our conversations with trustees. We examine that in another paper. Finally, next steps of this research might consider comparing student trustee interviews with interviews from laymen trustees on the role of students on the board. Here, we were intentional about speaking to student trustees to hear directly from them regarding their experiences.

### **7. Conclusion**

Too often individuals are excluded from the decision-making that informs various facets of their lives. Lack of representation in these pivotal roles can lead to inequality. Higher education is not immune to inequitable distribution of power. There has been an absence of inquiry that considers the viewpoints of students in leadership in higher education (Richards, 2012); the research discussed here further highlights this academic blind spot. Boards, in general, are minimally discussed in the higher education landscape and the roles of student trustees are even further ignored. Here, we did not consider the ostensible purposes of appointing student members or argue for their role on the board.

We were only concerned with learning more about the role and experience of these students. We drew upon the conceptual framework of SCT to examine how the triadic reciprocity of behaviors, environments, and people influences the experience of student trustees. SCT maintains that these three components can be explained via self-efficacy—the beliefs concerning one’s capabilities to establish and execute actions required to learn or perform behaviors at different levels. However, other frameworks, such as sensemaking and institutional culture, could add to our understanding of student trusteeship.

The role of students in governance simultaneously demonstrates the progress in and the potential for growth in increasing students’ access to political power in America (May, 2010). Empirical research on higher education governing boards has the opportunity to contribute to a better understanding of board roles by opening a window to the inner worlds of trustees, as well as the processes and experiences that influence how they approach and fulfill their responsibilities. The commentaries presented elucidate how student trustees draw upon different influences in varying degrees to establish their identity as board members. How students adapt to, perform on, and impact the board is a reflection of environmental, personal, and behavioral factors. The unique perspectives of student trustees and their influential leadership roles may give us a better sense of higher education governance. The aspiration and efforts of these individuals to lead and create change within and between spaces routinely unoccupied and uninfluenced by the very populations most impacted by their decision making may be required. Without enhanced reflection on and attention to the implications mentioned above, student trustees may continue to feel like their role on the board compared to others is indeed a steeper hill to climb. Likewise, without additional intentionality to remedy the inadequate knowledge of boards, those interested in improving the governance of higher education will too have a steeper hill to climb.

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## Appendix A

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics*

State	Trustee Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity (based on IPEDS classification)	Voting (V)/ Non-voting (NV)
AK	Joann	female	white	V
CA	Quinn	female	Black	V
CA	Maya	female	Asian	V
CA	Eva	female	Latino	V
CO	James	male	white	NV
CT	Fred	male	white	V
CT	Mitch	male	white	V
FL	Edgar	male	white	V
HI	Tiffany	female	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	V
IA	Karen	female	white	V
IL	Jessica	female	white	V
MA	Eric	male	white	V
MA	Joel	male	white	V
MA	Elizabeth	female	white	V
MD	Candace	female	white	V
MD	Noah	male	white	V
ME	Samuel	male	white	V
MN	Ali	male	Black	V
MT	Jocelyn	female	white	V
MT	Justin	male	white	V
NC	Laura	female	white	V
NE	Jaden	female	white	NV
NE	Anjili	female	white	NV
NJ	Mona	female	white	V
OH	Peter	male	white	V
OR	Christian	male	white	V
OR	William	male	white	V
SD	Daniel	male	white	V
VT	Alison	female	white	V
WA	Emma	female	white	V

\*only states (and not the actual systems) are given in order to protect the anonymity of the participants