

**Faculty Members on Boards of Trustees:
The 2012 Cornell Higher Education Research Institute Survey of
Faculty Trustees**

by

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Abstract

This study documents the roles faculty members play on academic boards of trustees based a web-based survey to which 108 faculty trustees from 26 public and 33 private institutions of higher learning responded. We report information on the length of faculty trustee terms, the roles faculty trustees most frequently play on boards, and the factors faculty trustees believe affect their the influence on board outcomes. Among our key findings is that almost two-thirds of the faculty in our sample reported serving shorter terms than other trustees at their institution. While faculty trustees are frequently members of academic affairs and student life committees, they are rarely members of governance and executive committees. Furthermore, they seldom chair committees of any kind. In spite of the latter, most respondents reported they felt they had a significant impact on the board.

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Introduction

One of us (Ehrenberg) served as an elected faculty trustee on Cornell's Board of Trustees from 2006 to 2010. He currently serves as a Gubernatorial appointed member of the SUNY Board of Trustees. The SUNY Board has two nonvoting faculty members: the presidents of the statewide 2-year and 4-year college faculty governing bodies. From his experience on these two boards, he developed a sense of the role that faculty trustees play on academic governing boards at public and private institutions.

As a social scientist, he understood that one should not draw broad conclusions based on two observations. So, during 2011-2012 a group of undergraduate and graduate research assistants at the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute (CHERI) obtained information on which public and private institutions had faculty members on boards of trustees and the names of the faculty members serving in these roles.¹ During April and May 2012 we conducted a web-based survey of the faculty members we had identified as having served as faculty trustees to learn about their experiences as board members.²

Among the issues we asked them about is how they came to their board positions, the length of their terms, the roles they played on their board, and how they related in their role as a board member to their faculty colleagues and to other board members. We also asked whether being at an institution with collective bargaining for tenured and tenure-track faculty influenced their role, and whether they were voting members of the board. If they were not voting members, we asked whether they felt the lack of a vote influenced their role on the board. Respondents were promised that their responses would

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² A copy of this survey can be downloaded from <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/cheri/surveys>

be kept confidential and that reports, such as this, would neither reveal their names nor the names of the institutions at which they were employed.

Background

Discussions of “best practices” for governing board consistently cite improved relationships with the faculty as one of the traits of highly effective boards. For example, both Wilson (2011) and MacTaggart (2011a), suggest that institutions as a whole benefit from, and are more successful with, increased dialogue between faculty and boards. Somewhat along these lines, Tierney (2005) suggests that we are in an era of increasingly “activist” boards, leading to significant mutual distrust between boards and faculty, and creating an especially large impetus for restoring faculty-board relations. Recent conflicts, such as the dispute at the University of Virginia, where the board of trustees forced the university president to resign only to unanimously reinstate the president just a few weeks later after being pressured by faculty and other constituencies, emphasize the importance of improving faculty-board relations.

While both faculty and governance groups have advocated for greater dialogue between faculty and boards of trustees, there is considerable disagreement as to whether faculty members should serve on the board of trustees. Those opposed to the inclusion of faculty on boards, such as the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (henceforth AGB), emphasize the issues of conflict of interest (Schwartz 2010). Those in favor, such as Middleton (2010), emphasize the principle of shared governance. In this study we present evidence on the roles faculty play and the influence they have when they are members of boards of trustees.

A recent survey conducted by the AGB indicated that a growing number of boards of trustees are involving faculty as either voting or non-voting members. Among respondents, 14.9% of private institutions and 13.3% of public institutions had voting faculty members on their boards of trustees. Another 14.1% of the private institutions and 9.7% of the public institutions had non-voting faculty members on their boards (Schwartz 2010).

Methods and Data

In our initial search for faculty trustees we identified 61 trustees from 52 public institutions and 142 trustees from 97 private institutions. Information about which public higher education institutions had faculty members on their boards (and the voting status of these faculty members) came directly from the AGB's Ingram Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance Public Boards Database.³ We then obtained the names and contact information for faculty trustees from institutional websites.

There is no public data source that has information on which private academic institutions have faculty trustees. To identify faculty trustees at nonprofit private institutions, undergraduate and graduate research assistants at CHERI searched institutional web pages for the names of board of trustee members and then performed subsequent web-site searches to identify which, if any, board members were also active faculty members. Not all private institutions publish information about their boards of trustees on their web pages, but using this approach we were able to find 97 private higher education institutions that had faculty members on their boards.⁴

³ www.agb1.org/s1698.html

⁴ The 2010 AGB survey of 496 private institutions identified 138 private institutions that had faculty members on their boards of trustees (Schwartz 2010), but the AGB data were collected under conditions of strict confidentiality and the AGB was not free to share the names of those institutions with us.

After a total of 203 initial faculty trustees were identified, we sent each of these faculty trustees a link to a web-based survey. This survey asked 15 multiple-choice questions and 7 core free response questions. Based upon respondents' answers to several of the multiple-choice questions, up to three additional free response questions were also asked. In the multiple choice portion of the survey, respondents were asked about their institution type, how they became a board member, their voting status, their term length, their board training, and their committee membership. In the free response portion of the survey, respondents were asked questions that dealt with their interactions with other faculty members and board members, whether they perceived themselves as equal to other board members, the areas in which they had an impact as board members, and the factors influencing their effectiveness. Free response answers were coded independently by two of the authors and then cross-validated.

In addition to the multiple choice and free response questions, our survey also asked respondents to provide us with the names and, if possible, the email addresses of other faculty colleagues who were serving, or who had recently served, as faculty trustees at their institution. Using this "snowball" sampling method, we identified 63 additional potential respondents, which lead to a sample of 266 possible respondents.

Those who did not begin to respond to the survey within one to two weeks were subsequently sent a reminder email with another link to the survey. Of the 266 total individuals to whom we sent surveys, we received 123 responses, yielding a response rate of 46.2%. However, 6 respondents identified their role on the board as one distinct from that of a faculty trustee; for example, they served on the board because of administrative positions that they held, and they were consequently excluded from our survey sample.

Nine other respondents did not complete the free response section. Finally, a review of the non-respondents to the survey identified 18 who also did not fit the criteria for inclusion in the sample. Our study was designed to focus on board members who were tenured or tenure-track and in a faculty position at the time they became trustees. These 18 non-respondents were either board members because of administrative positions they held or were adjunct or other part time faculty. With these adjustments, the overall sample was reduced to 242 and with 108 usable responses yielded an adjusted response rate of 44.6%.

To analyze whether survey responses varied by institutional characteristics, we merged survey response data with institutional level data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Data from these sources included enrollment size, institution type, test scores of enrolled applicants, and average nine-month faculty salary.

The 108 respondents to our survey came from 59 institutions (43 from 26 public institutions and 65 from 33 private institutions). Table 1 presents summary statistics for the public, private, and combined sample of institutions. Differences between the public and private institutions' boards in our sample include that public institutions have fewer faculty members on the board (average: 1.12 vs. 1.69) and fewer board members in total (15.00 vs. 29.25). Public institutions in our sample were also much more likely to have a bargaining unit for tenure-track faculty (50.0% vs. 3.0%), higher average faculty salaries (\$94,110 vs. \$79,850), and much larger enrollments.

Results

In order to gain a better understanding of faculty roles on governing boards, we sought to identify the terms of service of faculty trustees, including how they are selected, what fraction of the board membership they represent, and the length of their terms relative to other board members' terms. Table 2 indicates that 60% of the trustees in our sample were selected by a faculty election, 17% were ex-officio trustees (often via their role in the faculty's governing body), and 13% were nominated by faculty but subject to approval by the board. The remaining 10% were appointed in other ways. On average, the faculty in our sample comprised 7.1% of the boards on which they served, with faculty making up 7.9% of the members on public boards and 6.4% of the members on private boards. In related research, Ehrenberg et al. (2012) found that female faculty trustees significantly influence the rate at which academic institutions diversify their faculty across gender lines only after women make up 25% to 33% of the board's members. With faculty comprising such small percentages of total board membership, one might expect faculty board members to have relatively limited influence on board decisions.

The influence of faculty board members may also be diminished as a result of their relatively shorter term-lengths. Shorter term-lengths were the norm among respondents, 66% of whom reported shorter term-lengths than other board members. Shorter term-lengths were more common at public institutions; 86% of trustees at public institutions reported a shorter term relative to other trustees on their boards, while 52% of trustees at private institutions reported shorter term-lengths. These figures are consistent with existing research. Faculty trustees in our sample reported an average term length of

2.35 years (2.00 and 2.58 years at public and private institutions, respectively) while the Association of Governing Boards' 2010 Survey reported average non-faculty trustee term length of 6 years at public institutions and 3 to 4 years at private institutions.⁵

Although a majority of faculty trustees serve shorter terms than the other members of their boards, eligibility for re-appointment could potentially compensate for any diminished influence due to limited term lengths. Among the trustees in our sample 76.6% were eligible for re-appointment. Furthermore, it was more common for faculty to be ineligible for re-appointment due a faculty governance body policy than a board policy. In our sample 17.8% of faculty trustees were ineligible for re-appointment because of a faculty governance body policy while only 5.6% of were ineligible for re-appointment because of a board policy.

In addition to identifying the terms of service of faculty trustees, we also sought to identify the roles faculty members assume as trustees. One important issue is how faculty trustees balance obligations they may perceive to represent faculty interests and the broader interests of the institution. To address this issue, we gave respondents the prompt:

- Faculty trustees have fiduciary responsibility for the institution as a whole. However, many people believe that it is difficult for them to act in this manner because their board colleagues assume that they will always serve the role of advocating for faculty positions. Did you experience such pressures from your faculty colleagues in your role as a trustee?

In response, 10.2% of the faculty trustees indicated that they viewed their role as representing the institution as a whole, and did not specify their role as being a faculty representative. In contrast, 41.7% of the trustees indicated they viewed their role as that of a faculty representative and did not specify the larger role of representing the

⁵ <http://agb.org/node/580>

institution as a whole. Another 22% of faculty trustees indicated that they played a dual role and were able to fulfill their fiduciary responsibility to the institution while also advocating for faculty colleagues.

With a majority of faculty trustees identifying a role to represent faculty, how faculty trustees interact with other faculty may be an important component of faculty governance. To gain a better understanding of how faculty trustees interact with faculty members, we asked respondents whether faculty members approached them with concerns. Overall, 11.1% responded that they never were approached by faculty colleagues, 9.3% indicated that they were seldom approached, and 47.2% indicated that they were routinely approached. Among those who were approached, 9.8% indicated that they redirected concerned faculty to more appropriate avenues of resolution within the faculty/administration relationship, such as the faculty senate.

In addition to the relationship trustees have with faculty, another potentially large difference between faculty trustees and non-faculty trustees may be voting status. However, 85% of institutions in our sample, a much higher share than in the AGB survey cited above, granted their trustees voting privileges. Furthermore when asked whether there were any issues that they were not permitted to vote on, only 12.1% of voting faculty member indicated that they were restricted from voting on any issues.

While few faculty trustees in our sample were restricted from voting on board matters, greater differences from other board members existed in committee membership and leadership roles. Table 3 shows the frequencies across institutions in our sample of the board committee on which faculty trustees serve and of the ones that they chair; table 4 and 5 show the same statistics separately for public and private institutions in the

sample. Two patterns that emerge from these tables are that membership is not evenly distributed across different committees and that faculty trustees rarely chair committees.

Nearly all institutions with academic affairs committees had faculty trustees on the committee with 98% of institutions having faculty representation. Other committees were also well represented: 82% of student life committees had faculty trustee members, and over 70% of alumni affairs, building/properties, and finance committees had faculty trustee members on the committees. Faculty trustees were not as well represented on other committees. While there was moderate representation on compensation committees, 58%, and on board membership/governance committees, 46%, most notable was the apparent exclusion of faculty from many executive committees. Only 26% of institutions in our sample had faculty trustee members on the executive committee. Faculty representation on the executive committee was even rarer at public institutions, where only 12% of institutions had faculty trustee members.

While there was a large variance in the representation of faculty as members of different committees, boards generally excluded faculty from chairing most committees. The most common committees for faculty to be members, such as academic affairs and student life, were also the most common to allow faculty chairs, however, only slightly more than 30% of the institutions in our sample allowed faculty to chair each of these committees. Consistent with committee membership, the least commonly allowed committee for faculty trustees to chair was the executive committee, with only 6% of institutions permitting a faculty trustee to chair the executive committee. In practice, chairing committees was even rarer. In our sample of 59 institutions, respondents from only 6 institutions reported that faculty had ever served as chair for any committee.

Additionally, no faculty members reported having served as chair of the alumni affairs, compensation, student life, or executive committees.⁶

In spite of being generally excluded from committee leadership and often being excluded from being members of certain committees, many faculty identified areas where they were able to have a major impact. In the free response portion of the survey each respondent was asked:

- What is the major impact you feel you had on board decision making during your term on the board? (Please provide some specific examples). What issues did your colleagues on the board pay most attention to your views on (e.g. academic, budgetary, student life, evaluations of administrators). What were the issues that the board discussed that were most important to you?

As table 6 indicates, the most commonly mentioned area of impact and influence was academic affairs; 49% of faculty identified this as an area of influence. Whether faculty identified that they had a significant influence on academic affairs was relatively consistent across different types of institutions. The second most commonly mentioned area of influence was finance and budget, as 31% of faculty identified that they had a major impact in this area. As with academic affairs, influence in this area was not correlated with most institutional characteristics. However faculty were much less likely to influence finance matters if their board had a separate finance/budget committee.

Another commonly mentioned area of influence was faculty compensation. In our sample, 21% of the respondents identified this as an area of influence. While influencing compensation was uncorrelated with most institutional characteristics, faculty trustee influence on faculty compensation was more likely to occur if an institution had a

⁶ An area that we had hoped to delve more deeply into in this study was how the role of faculty trustees was influenced by whether their campus was one in which a collective bargaining unit for faculty was present. With only 14 institutions with bargaining units in our sample, we were unable to draw any strong inferences about the impact of faculty bargaining units on the faculty trustee role.

compensation/personnel committee. At institutions with such a committee, faculty trustee influence on faculty compensation was more likely to be expressed if the faculty trustee had served on the committee.

A final area of influence identified by respondents was presidential evaluation, search and removal. However, as table 6 indicates, very few faculty trustees reported that they had influenced the evaluation, search for, or removal of presidents.

In addition to asking faculty to identify specific areas of influence, our survey asked several questions that inquired about factors that impacted on the level of general influence faculty trustees had on the board. Respondents were asked specifically about how term length, nature of meetings (public or private), and previous board experience impacted on their effectiveness. Additionally respondents were asked to identify factors that limited their influence on the board.

In the free response portion of our survey, each respondent was asked:

- Some faculty trustees have complained that the short terms that they have (and often being ineligible to serve a second term) limits their effectiveness as a board member. Do you agree with this perception? If so, why?"

Fifty-four percent of our faculty trustees identified short term-lengths as a factor that limited their effectiveness, and 17% identified the ability to be reelected to the board as an important factor that enhanced their effectiveness. While term length was often cited as a factor limiting in trustee effectiveness, the importance of this factor was not significantly correlated with institution type, voting status, the existence of a faculty bargaining unit, average faculty salary, relative (to other trustees) term length, or institutional enrollment level. While the ability to be reelected to the board was cited as a

factor enhancing faculty trustee effectiveness, this effect was observed only at institutions where the faculty trustee was a voting member of the board.

Respondents were also asked about their perceptions of how the nature of their meetings (public or private) influenced their performance in their roles as trustees.

Specifically, faculty from public universities were asked:

- Many discussions at public boards, due to open meeting laws, are public in nature. Does the public nature of such discussions make it harder for you to take positions on issues relating to the faculty that might not be widely supported by the faculty, than if the discussions were private?

while those at private universities were asked:

- Many discussions at private boards are confidential and not open to the public. Did the privacy of such discussions allow you to take positions on issues relating to the faculty (for example size of faculty salary increase decisions) which it would have been harder for you to take if all discussions were public?

In response to these questions, 38% of faculty trustees indicated that it would be harder to take positions at public meetings than at private meetings. Response to these questions did vary by institution type, as 23% of those from public institutions and 49% of those from private institutions expressed that taking positions would be harder at public meetings relative to private meetings. Additionally, a greater share of faculty who were voting members (41%) than non-voting members (10%) expressed this sentiment.

We also asked faculty trustees who had indicated to us that they previously served on another organization's board whether this experience positively impacted on their ability to be an effective member of their institution's board. Of the 55% of faculty with previous board experience, 58% indicated that the experience had a positive impact on their ability to be an effective board member. Conditional on having previous board experience, faculty trustee with voting status were more likely to indicate (64%) that their

previous board experience enhanced their effectiveness on the board than non-voting faculty trustees did (30%).

In addition to specific questions about the importance of term lengths, the public nature of meetings, and their prior board experience, our survey asked respondents to identify the major factors that limited a faculty trustee's ability to have a substantive impact on his or her board. Although responses to this question were highly variable, table 7 summarizes some common themes that emerged. The most frequently identified factor limiting was exclusion from the executive committee as 16% faculty trustees identified this as a limiting factor. Other commonly mentioned limiting factors included strained relationships with the institution's administration (12%) and having an administration that closely controls the information that flows to board members (9%)

Although not specifically asked, many participants also frequently volunteered factors that they felt enhanced their effectiveness on their boards. The two most commonly mentioned factors are related. Almost 27% of the respondents mentioned the importance of personal relationships with other board members, while 12% mentioned communicating with other board member outside the formal board meetings (i.e. trustee luncheons or other such gatherings).

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Table 1. Summary of Institution Characteristics

Variables	Public	Private	Total
Number of Faculty Trustees	1.12 (0.33)	1.69 (0.93)	1.43 (0.78)
Total Number of Trustees	15.00 (4.84)	29.25 (12.95)	22.86 (12.35)
Faculty Term Length	2.06 (0.51)	2.37 (0.89)	2.24 (0.76)
Faculty has Bargaining Unit	0.50	0.03	0.24
Average 9 month Salary (1000s)	94.11 (21.36)	79.85 (28.00)	86.45 (25.93)
Total Institution Enrollment (1000's)	16.14 (12.89)	2.91 (3.38)	8.74 (11.04)
25 th Percentile SAT (math+reading)	923.20 (123.40)	1011.70 (134.00)	963.00 (134.20)
75 th Percentile SAT (math+reading)	1147.90 (107.60)	1228.50 (135.40)	1184.20 (126.00)
Observations	26	33	59

Table 2. Summary of Trustee Terms of Service

Variable	Mean
Appointment-Elected by Faculty	0.60
-Serve Via Dint of Position	0.17
-Faculty Nominated/Board Appointed	0.13
-Appointed by Other Means	0.10
Voting Member on Board	0.85
Length of Term	2.35 (0.85)
Term Length Shorter than Other Trustees	0.66
-Term Length about the Same	0.32
-Term Length Longer	0.02
Eligible For Re-election	0.77
-Not Eligible-Board Policy	0.06
-Not Eligible-Faculty Policy	0.18
Previously sat on another Organization Board	0.55
Training-Received Written Materials	0.69
-Formal Board Orientation Session	0.50
-Orientation at Association of Governing Boards	0.06
Observations	108

Table 3. Faculty Committee Membership*

	Institution Has	Have served	Eligible to Chair	Have Chaired
Academic Affairs	0.83	0.98	0.31	0.06
Alumni Affairs/Development	0.59	0.74	0.29	0.00
Audit	0.70	0.63	0.20	0.02
Board Membership/Governance	0.70	0.46	0.17	0.02
Building and Properties	0.63	0.73	0.27	0.08
Compensation/Personnel	0.44	0.58	0.19	0.00
Executive	0.80	0.26	0.06	0.00
Finance	0.85	0.72	0.28	0.04
Research	0.17	0.40	0.10	0.10
Student Life	0.56	0.82	0.33	0.00

*Proportions in columns 2, 3, and 4, are for institutions that have the specific committee

Table 4. Faculty Committee Membership, Public Institutions*

	Institution Has	Have served	Eligible to Chair	Have Chaired
Academic Affairs	0.81	0.95	0.38	0.14
Alumni Affairs/Development	0.35	0.78	0.22	0.00
Audit	0.62	0.69	0.19	0.06
Board Membership/Governance	0.39	0.60	0.20	0.00
Building and Properties	0.39	0.90	0.20	0.20
Compensation/Personnel	0.42	0.82	0.36	0.00
Executive	0.65	0.12	0.00	0.00
Finance	0.81	0.76	0.33	0.00
Research	0.27	0.57	0.14	0.14
Student Life	0.50	0.69	0.46	0.00

*Proportions in columns 2, 3, and 4, are for institutions that have the specific committee

Table 5. Faculty Committee Membership, Private Institutions*

	Institution Has	Have served	Eligible to Chair	Have Chaired
Academic Affairs	0.84	1.00	0.22	0.00
Alumni Affairs/Development	0.78	0.72	0.28	0.00
Audit	0.75	0.58	0.17	0.00
Board Membership/Governance	0.94	0.43	0.17	0.03
Building and Properties	0.81	0.65	0.27	0.04
Compensation/Personnel	0.44	0.43	0.07	0.00
Executive	0.91	0.31	0.10	0.00
Finance	0.88	0.68	0.21	0.04
Research	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.00
Student Life	0.59	0.90	0.21	0.00

*Proportions in columns 2, 3, and 4, are for institutions that have the specific committee

Table 6. Areas of influence

Variable	Mean
Influenced academic affairs	0.49
Influenced finances/budget	0.31
Influenced student life	0.15
Influenced faculty compensation	0.21
Influenced president evaluation	0.10
Influenced president search	0.08
Influenced president removal	0.05
Observations	108

Table 7. Factors Impacting Effectiveness

Variables	Mean
Short terms limiting	0.54
Re-electability important	0.17
Harder to conduct business in public	0.38
Previous board experience important	0.58
Excluded from exec committee	0.16
Administration adversarial	0.12
Administration controls information	0.09
Administration sets agenda	0.06
Admin external influence	0.03
Problems with political appointees	0.06
Personal relationships w/ board important	0.27
External communication important	0.12
Observations	108